



CONVERSATION GUIDE

A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT A FLAG

AND A RECKONING IN MISSISSIPPI



WELCOME

A LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

When I first began working on this film back in early 2016, I made a decision that would guide, and complicate, my approach to what turned out to be over five years of filming and editing.

To understand how one symbol can create such divergent and passionate emotional responses, I felt it was important to develop relationships with activists on both sides of the issue – people who take pride in the bravery of their ancestors who fought and died for the Confederacy, and people who carry the painful legacy of their ancestors who were subjected to the horrors of slavery and the degradations of Jim Crow and racism in Mississippi.

I told everyone I interviewed in the film that I wasn't taking sides nor was I going to judge anyone. I simply wanted to understand their perspective, and I wanted to follow the story wherever it led.

This approach required a commitment to fairness and a spirit of open-mindedness that wasn't always easy to live up to. I often experienced a kind of psychic whiplash driving from filming a Confederate heritage rally in Tupelo or Oxford on one afternoon, to an anti-flag demonstration the next day in Jackson or Ocean Springs. I felt like I was living in a split screen world, bouncing back and forth between two countries, with two distinct histories. The experience could be dispiriting, too, when I thought about the seemingly unbridgeable gap that separated them.

Though *Look Away, Look Away* sometimes ventures into disturbing territory and explores some uncomfortable truths about our nation's past, ultimately my goal is to investigate the deeply entrenched, emotional heart of the conflict over Confederate symbols in a place like Mississippi. I know this film can be difficult to watch at times, but I hope it can also open the door to empathy and help us understand and acknowledge the source of our differences. This guide, which was produced by my friends Leslie Eades and Matt Wagner, will help you pass through that door safely.

Patrick O'Connor
2021



STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This film was made to understand why Mississippians were so divided over a state flag whose purpose should be to unite. We realize that on the surface the reasons may seem obvious. But, the surface can be a stormy place and we want to dive deeper, listen carefully and watch with intention without labeling personal views of right and wrong.

The idea of parallax is a visual metaphor for the problem at the heart of the debate over Confederate symbols: that an object can appear to be different depending upon the perspective from which it's viewed. This film presented a difficult challenge to the filmmakers, and, it now presents an equally challenging task to someone facilitating a conversation, and you, the viewer. No matter what your perspective, and no matter which "side" you are on in the debate over the meaning of Confederate symbols, each of us must face our own deeply embedded beliefs and perspectives around specific truths in order to come to a place where we can truly hear and see each other.

This film will activate the deeply embedded trauma inside all of us from a divided and violent past that

is unprocessed through generations. The filmmakers intended to create a space for multiple perspectives to be brought into the light at once, while also presenting the oftentimes brutal truths at the core of these perspectives. We realize that intention is separate from impact, and we will not do this perfectly, because as human beings we have our own perspective that we cannot avoid. It's this knowledge of our own imperfections that give us the courage and compassion to work to create an intentional space for vulnerable conversations.

We invite you to this conversation about how a more resilient community can emerge from a powerful reckoning, not with THE truth, but by the multiple truths that exist and are honored simultaneously in a society and symbol. Therapist, Healer and Author Resmaa Menakem says, "Resilience is built into the cells of our bodies. Like trauma, resilience can ripple outward, changing the lives of people, families, neighborhoods and communities in positive ways. Also, like trauma, resilience can be passed down from generation to generation." **Let's work together to ask questions for more resilient and courageous answers to allow us to see multiple perspectives at once.**

COMING TO GROUND

Look Away, Look Away is a challenging film, and will activate known and unknown feelings and emotions in your body based on your lived experience. While we always recommend a guided practice from a trained professional, there are many simple practices to bring awareness to your feelings and what arises in you as you experience the film and the discussion. This is a powerfully simple grounding mantra based on the “four limitless qualities” from the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron in her book *Comfortable with Uncertainty* that can help you find compassion first for yourself and then others in preparation for self-reflection and conversation.

We encourage you to take 3 deep breaths and return to this mantra if you feel overwhelmed at any time, and to give yourself permission to disengage from the conversation at any time if you feel unsafe. For a more detailed guided practice, please refer to our Gathering Guide.

May everyone enjoy happiness and the root of happiness.

May we be free from suffering and the root of suffering.

May we not be separated from the great happiness devoid of suffering.

May we dwell in equanimity, free from passion, aggression, and prejudice.

RECOMMENDED READING

***My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Menakem**

For more learning and practice on where our instincts reside in our bodies and where we fight, flee, or freeze, and how it endures the trauma inflicted by the ills that plague society.

CORE UNDERSTANDINGS

The Conversation Guide is grounded by the following core understandings to keep in mind as you view and engage in conversation about this film.

Two things can be true at one time.

Two seemingly opposing perspectives can both be true and real at the same time. The fact that two well-intentioned (we acknowledge that all people are not well-intentioned) people can look at the same symbol or watch the same scene, and see something very different is important.

Curiosity is vital.

Dr. Edith Eger, eminent psychologist and Holocaust survivor, wrote in *The Gift* that “Curiosity is vital.” Curiosity is vital in approaching and engaging in conversation regarding perspective, it was vital in making this film, and it’s vital in viewing this film. To be curious about someone who could be seen as the “other,” allows us to see them as a person, maintain compassion, build empathy and perhaps even change our perspective.

Injustice shapes our perspective.

It’s important to understand that injustice exists and shapes the way we engage with symbols. Injustice is inherited differently and for different reasons for each person, including, but not limited to, social and economic class, skin color, education level, family history, heritage, etc. Injustice is largely defined by one’s position in relationship and access to power, which is ever changing and evolving.



KEY WORDS

Language has the power to illuminate and shape perspective. In order for a *real conversation* to take place, we must communicate clearly and define key words in context. These descriptions are derived from the core understandings of the film and communicate how we use each word in this guide.

Perspective is the position from which a person sees based on their lived experience. A person's perspective is their truth and multiple and nuanced perspectives exist with every object, idea or truth.

Parallax is an effect where an object, an idea or a truth can appear different to each individual based on their perspective. If we hold the concept of *parallax* in our hearts and minds, we can see how someone else's perspective doesn't invalidate ours. They are both true, and compromise is attainable and liberating when the truth of their lived experience is heard, seen and honored.

Conversation is an interactive communication between multiple people. More precisely, poet and philosopher David Whyte, by working within what he calls the "Conversational Nature of Reality" says, "A real conversation always contains an invitation. You are inviting another person to reveal themselves to you...who they are or what they want."

Story is how we form our identity. Brené Brown says, "When something happens that triggers strong emotions, we often immediately create a story to make sense of what happened. These stories are often one-sided worst-case scenarios, and they seldom contain the full truth." It's important to say out loud in courageous conversation "The story I'm telling myself is..." before speaking a reaction to someone else's lived experience.

Facts are indisputable events that happened or things that exist, independent of perspective or interpretation. Facts are presented in the film in the forms of documentation of events and quotes, as well as in scenes (for example, the New Orleans police roll up their windows when George approaches them asking them to diffuse the tense situation at the Davis Monument protest). Facts are subject to interpretation and perspective by each individual based on their own lived and inherited experience.

Truth is a combination of 1) facts and 2) perspective. Traditionally "truth" is defined as "a body of real things, events and facts." However, it is also defined by Merriam Webster as "sincerity in action, character, and utterance." Sincerity is defined as "honesty of mind and freedom from hypocrisy". The word "true" when used as a verb is defined as "to make level, square, balanced, or concentric." Someone's perception, through their lived experience, is their truth. In order to be true, all perspectives must be included in order to achieve a state of balance.

Space can be either physical or emotional and is defined by the boundaries we create. We physically occupy space and we also inhabit space emotionally as individuals and as a collective; spaces can be safe or unsafe. A safe space is a place we create with others to express our truths and have them received and reflected without the receiver losing their sense of self.

Symbol is a thing or object representing something abstract. A single symbol is at the heart of the conflict in *Look Away, Look Away*. All symbols have a subjective history independent of its original narrative. While a symbol's original narrative is true to its creator, its unique subjective history for each individual is also true for them at the same time. A symbol's story is in a state of constant change.

Representation is having a voice, seat, and power at the table where decisions are made. When a segment or segments of the population are not included, or intentionally excluded from the story, a crucial element (representation) of the validity of a symbol becomes a point of contention. Author and social activist bell hooks said "Representation is a crucial location of struggle for any exploited and oppressed people."

Heritage is comprised of the ideas and objects passed to us from our ancestors. Some of these include folklore, traditions, property, etc. We use these things to create our identity. Resmaa Menakem reminds us that trauma and shame are part of our heritage: "The answer to why so many of us have difficulties is because our ancestors spent centuries here under unrelentingly brutal conditions [and] our bodies stored trauma and intense survival energy, and passed these on to our children and grandchildren." This heritage of violence shapes the story we tell ourselves and then others.

History is a chronological record of events. History is subject to the perspective of the person or group that records and interprets the events (facts). History contains facts, but the perspective on the record (story) and the causes of the events are not universally true. History is a form of subjective storytelling that is constantly being remade and retold.

WRITING PROMPTS

Engaging in conversation with others is important, but engaging in self-reflection is vital. If you are watching the film on your own, participating in a group screening, and/or facilitating a screening for others, the writing prompts listed below will help you explore the stories, perspectives, and subject matter in *Look Away, Look Away*, as a self-practice before discussing with others. Stay curious about yourself and whatever thoughts arise while you write, and then apply this practice of curiosity to others.



ONE

Channeling the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Sharon Brown asks, “*How do you change the heart of a man?*” Do you believe that you can change the hearts and minds of people? Why or why not?

TWO

Have you had a time when you had a change of heart and/or mind in your life? What circumstances, people or lived experience created the space for the consideration and/or change to occur?

THREE

What are your thoughts and/or feelings about the quote from the film by Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War*, “*History is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake?*”

FOUR

Throughout civil rights marches and gatherings, most recently in the protests and rallies across the U.S. following George Floyd’s death in May of 2020, activists carried signs reading “No Justice, No Peace”, and “Know Justice, Know Peace”. How do the meanings of each of these statements change based on the use of the word “know” vs. “no”? What is the impact of each statement to you?

FIVE

Do you believe that state flags should represent people or a time in history? Is there a difference? What else should they represent?

SIX

What similarities and differences did you notice between individuals represented in *Look Away, Look Away*? Do you have anything in common with someone that you didn’t expect? What surprised you about the people in the film? About yourself?

SEVEN

In the violent scene at the monument to Jefferson Davis in New Orleans, George expressed his willingness to die to defend his heritage. What feelings arose in you during this moment and the scenes that followed, including the fight and his arrest? Is there anything in your life that you are willing to die defending?

EIGHT

Do you believe that liberation can be only one way? If so, why? Can there be true liberation if there is still injustice for one of the people or groups of people involved in any given situation? Why?

THE QUESTIONS

Questions open a shared path of discovery. The right questions are a beautiful invitation to someone's perspective in order to gain a deeper knowledge of their life experience and by adding nuance to the stories we've told ourselves about who they are. These questions were designed as starting points for self-reflection and conversation, not political statements where it's obvious who will agree or disagree. Navigating and living into these questions will be difficult and sometimes messy, but this work is necessary to create space for individuals to be seen and heard.

ONE | Symbol

Filmmaker Patrick O'Connor says that the Confederate flag was literally woven into Mississippi's identity [04:36]. What symbols do you feel represent you or have become a part of your identity because of where you were born or what your ancestors experienced? What symbols have you adopted based on your lifestyle, preferences, etc?

TWO | Symbol

Have you ever changed your opinion about the meaning of a symbol? If so, what dynamics may have contributed to this change? Has your view of the Confederate Rebel flag changed after watching *Look Away, Look Away*? Why or why not?

THREE | Heritage

Do you see any common threads between the Sons of Confederate Veterans describing the sacrifices of their ancestors fighting and/or dying in the Civil War, and the African Americans describing their ancestors fighting for civil and human rights, being lynched and/or arrested? Can you honor one without dishonoring the other? Do you see a way to honor both experiences at the same time?

FOUR | History

As the granddaughter of the segregationist Senator John Stennis, Lauren Stennis believed her flag design reflected a changing Mississippi, towards a more inclusive, forward-looking society. Her flag

was embraced by both Black and White Mississippians, but was not chosen primarily because of its association with her grandfather's beliefs. Do you believe that she was penalized for her heritage? Is that fair?

FIVE | Representation

In the film, George Johnson says of the state flag, "If you don't like it, don't live here." Why do you think George feels this way? Is it fair to suggest that rather than try to change a place like Mississippi, it's better to move to a place that suits you? Does living somewhere longer give you power over someone who's lived there a shorter period of time? How do you feel about the rights of the indigenous peoples who lived on the land for centuries before Mississippi (and the Confederacy) were formed?

SIX | Ancestry

Anti-flag activist Lea Campbell says "... it's incumbent upon me as a white Mississippian, and a person of privilege, to use my privilege to do what I can to dismantle the system of white supremacy and symbols of white supremacy that my ancestors created." What responsibility do you share for the actions of your ancestors?

SEVEN | Perspective

Confederate flags are burned twice in the film - at the Jefferson Davis monument protest in New Orleans,

and later at the Mississippi State Capitol. How did you respond to each moment? How did these two responses differ for you, if at all? How did you feel about Sharon Brown's conflicted response to the burning of the Confederate Flag?

EIGHT | Perspective

Look Away, Look Away is bookended by horrific killings of Black Americans, first at the Mother Emanuel Church in South Carolina, and finally on the streets of Minneapolis five years later. How did those traumatic events, and the subsequent protests, civil disobedience and rebellion come into play in the story of the changing of symbols and culture? Specifically how do you feel about the influence of corporations like the NCAA, Walmart, NASCAR, etc.?

NINE | Perspective

In the closing narration, Patrick O'Connor says of the Mississippi flag story, "... there are truths here, and the truth is uncomfortable." Did any of the "truths" in the film make you uncomfortable? Which ones? Why?

TEN | Heritage

What is the significance of the film's final question "Do you consider yourself a Southerner/Mississippian or an American first"? Why does it matter? How do you identify yourself? Geographically? Education/Vocation? Religious/Spiritual? None of the above?

THANK YOU!

We are grateful for your willingness to participate in these difficult and vulnerable conversations.

We are inspired by the words of Valarie Kaur, activist, educator, and author of *See No Stranger* who said, “Love is more than a feeling, it is sweet labor. When we love, even in times of crisis, we can transform relationships, our country, and our future. Love becomes revolutionary.”

We invite everyone to leave these conversations continuing to engage in this labor of love and maintaining curiosity about ourselves and others to revolutionize our communities.

Along our life’s journey, we have learned from so many experts through books, podcasts, essays, articles and speeches from the most revolutionary voices around the world. It is impossible to name them all, but we humbly offer a list of names and resources to continue on this journey that leads first inward toward ourselves and then outward to find each other. We encourage you to learn along with us and share your own resources through the contacts listed on the back of this guide. Thank you for your support, participation and for walking alongside us as we navigate these difficult and necessary conversations.

James Baldwin

Novelist, Playwright, Essayist, Poet and Activist
Book: *The Price of the Ticket*

Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald

Authors and Psychologists
Book: *Blind Spot - Hidden Biases of Good People*

Brene Brown

Shame Researcher, Professor, Lecturer, Author and Podcast Host
Book: *The Gifts of Imperfection*
Podcast: *Unlocking Us*

Pema Chödrön

American Tibetan Buddhist Teacher and Author
Book: *When Things Fall Apart*

John Coski

Author and Historian
Book: *The Confederate Battle Flag: America’s Most Embattled Emblem*

Glennon Doyle

Author, Speaker, and Activist
Book: *Untamed*

Dr. Edith Eger

Author, Psychologist and Holocaust Survivor
Books: *The Choice, The Gift*

Malcolm Gladwell

Journalist, Author and Public Speaker
Books: *Blink, Outliers, Talking to Strangers*
Podcast: *Revisionist History*

bell hooks

Author, Professor, Feminist and Social Activist
Book: *All About Love*

Tony Horwitz

Author and Journalist
Book: *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War*

Valerie Kaur

Civil Rights Leader, Faith Leader, Filmmaker, Lawyer, Author and Innovator
Book: *See No Stranger*

Resmaa Menakem

Healer, Author, Trauma Specialist and Somatic Abolitionist
Book: *My Grandmother’s Hands*

Priya Parker

Facilitator, Strategic Advisor, and Author
Book: *The Art Of Gathering*
Podcast: *Together Apart*

Eli Saslow

Journalist, Pulitzer Prize Winner and Author
Book: *Rising From Hatred*

Sonia Renee Taylor

Poet, Activist, Author and Leader
Book: *The Body Is Not An Apology*

Krista Tippett

Journalist, Author and Podcast Host
Book: *Becoming Wise*
Podcast: *On Being*

Jesmyn Ward

Author and Professor
Book: *The Fire This Time*

Robert Penn Warren

Poet, Literary Critic, Author and Teacher
Book: *The Legacy of the Civil War*

David Whyte

Poet, Author and Speaker
Book: *Consolations - The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*

Curtis Wilkie

Author, Journalist, Professor and Historian
Book: *Dixie*

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Patrick O'Connor
Director / Producer

Margaret McMullan
Producer

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Editor

Misty Talley
Editor / Post-Production Supervisor

Clay Hardwick
Cinematographer

Dathon Seeley
Assistant Editor / Additional Camera

Nathan Willis
Additional Camera

Alex Wiltz
Visual Effects

Leslie Eades & Matt Wagner
Outreach, Engagement and Design

Hannah Johnson
Web Designer

PERMISSIONS

You can use this guide in classrooms, for community gatherings, campuses, public buildings, and it may be used for virtual, and/or in-person gatherings. If you are participating in an event the filmmaker's team hosts through Show & Tell, this guide may be used for your gathering. We encourage you to follow the best practices for gatherings as detailed in our Gathering Guide.

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LOOK AWAY, LOOK AWAY

A Documentary Film About a Flag
and a Reckoning in Mississippi

Produced & Directed by Patrick O'Connor



Instagram @lookawaylookawaydoc

Facebook @lookawaylookaway

Host a Screening outreach@lmntl.vision

Educational Licensing Educational@PassionRiver.com

LOOKAWAYLOOKAWAY.COM

