

Teaching Tips | Dynamic Landscapes: Historical Transformations and Collective Memory

Essential Question

- How does the history of a place shape the lives of the people who live in that place and what can these relationships teach us about individual and collective inheritance?

Supporting Questions

- [Economy] In what ways can land ownership impact a community's autonomy and future?
- [Ecology] What are some ways that communities are impacted by changes in how land is used?
- [History] How is collective memory impacted when spaces transform from places of historical pain to modern uses?
- [Personal] What specific historical events have shaped the cultural and physical landscapes you inhabit today?

Historical Thinking Skills:

This resource provides students with the opportunity to practice the following historical thinking skills:

- **Applying Geographical Literacy:** This skill is central to the lesson as students explore how physical landscapes hold historical significance and how they are intimately connected to issues of identity, memory, and ownership.
- **Understanding Diversity of Historical Experience:** This is critical as students will examine how different groups, especially African Americans in the South, have experienced history and how these experiences are remembered and commemorated.
- **Analyzing Primary Sources:** While the film itself is a secondary source, it may include or reference primary sources such as photographs, letters, or oral histories from African American communities in the South. Students might analyze these elements to better understand personal and community experiences.
- **Developing Civic Understanding and Engagement:** By connecting historical events to contemporary issues of justice and equality, students can deepen their understanding of civic engagement and the importance of historical awareness in shaping active citizenship.

Use the following before, while, and after viewing suggestions for engaging students with this resource and with activities related to this topic.

Before Viewing

In order to introduce students to the themes of land, history, and identity, and to engage them in a personal exploration of how these themes are interwoven in their own lives and communities educators can carry this before viewing activity. .

Interactive Mapping Exercise: Ask students to draw a simple map of a place that holds personal significance to them (it could be their neighborhood, a family home, a community center, etc.).

On their map, have them mark specific spots that hold personal or historical importance and write a brief note on why these places are significant.

Group Discussion: In small groups, students share their maps and stories, focusing on how their chosen places are connected to their own identities and histories.

Prompt with questions like:

- "What makes this place important to you?"
- "Are there any historical events or family stories associated with these places?"
- "How does this place shape your sense of identity or community?"

Reflection: Conclude with a class discussion on how personal histories are tied to physical spaces and how this might relate to the themes they will see in "After Sherman."

Clips:

Clip 1: Land as Legacy: A Story of Inheritance and Identity

Time Stamp 7:49 - 12:-00

In this poignant segment of "After Sherman," the camera intimately captures the stories of African American families as they gather on ancestral lands that have been passed down through generations. The families, surrounded by the lush greenery of their homesteads, share heartfelt narratives about their deep-rooted connection to the land.

Elderly family members recount tales of their forebears, who, despite the numerous challenges faced during and after the era of slavery, managed to acquire and retain these lands. They speak with a sense of pride and reverence about the land as a symbol of resilience, a legacy of their ancestors' determination to establish a secure foundation for future generations.

Clip 2: Home: The Heart of Heritage

Time Stamp 27:23 - 28:29

This touching segment from "After Sherman" focuses on the concept of 'home' as a place of return, pride, and family heritage. The person shares their journey of leaving home to explore broader horizons and what it means to realize the true value of his roots. He speaks of 'home' not just as a physical location but as an emotional anchor — a place of belonging where one is always welcome and where familial bonds are strongest. He describes the land and the family home as a nucleus, a central point where all family members, regardless of where life takes them, can return.

The clip encapsulates the profound emotional and cultural significance of 'home' for African American families, especially in the context of land ownership and heritage. It's a testament to the idea that home, in all its forms, remains an enduring source of identity, stability, and love.

Clip 3: Singing in a Strange Land: A Solemn Reflection

Time Stamp - 52:00 - 58:00

In this evocative and somber segment of "After Sherman," titled "Singing in a Strange Land," the mood takes a darker, more contemplative turn. The clip begins with a pastor standing at the pulpit of a dimly lit church, his voice solemn as he speaks about the

concept of singing in a strange land, an allusion to maintaining faith and hope in times of adversity and suffering.

The most poignant moment of the clip comes as it highlights the tragic shooting at an African Methodist Episcopal church, where nine lives were senselessly lost to violence and hatred. The film presents this heartbreaking event not just as a news story but as a deeply personal and communal tragedy, reflecting on the impact of such violence on the African American community.

Clip 4: Bidding on their own property/Buying back what's theirs

Timestamp 1:12:00-1:17:00

Heirs are seen timidly and frustratedly bidding on their own property during a public auction. The crowd of bidders is predominately white while Black descendants attempt to bid on their property and get back what is theirs.

During Viewing Questions

The questions below can be applied to the clips suggested. For the most all questions can be used to engage all of the clips for understanding and/or create a robust discussion.

1. What are the main emotions or themes conveyed in the personal stories shared in the film?
2. Identify a moment where the film connects past historical events to present-day situations.
3. Identify a scene where the impact of historical injustices is clearly illustrated. What makes this impact evident?
4. What are some reasons why they suggest African American people should never sell the land they own?
5. What word describes the feeling the narrators have being from a certain place or knowing that that land is home.
6. Where do you go, you always come back _____?
7. What church is highlighted as being designed specifically for African American people?
8. How would you describe the role of the company, Kodak, in relation to Black people in the town of Rochester, New York?
9. How is the word or concept of forgiveness used in the film in the face of tragedy and hurt?

After Viewing

Personal Connection:

- "Did 'After Sherman' challenge or change any of your previous beliefs or perspectives about the history and experiences of African American communities? Can you share a specific part of the film that had a significant impact on you?"
- "How might the stories and experiences shown in the documentary influence the way you view your own family's history or your community's past?"

Taking It Further: *Below are questions aimed to prompt students to think about practical applications of the knowledge gained from the film, encourage personal reflection on how the documentary relates to their own lives, and consider the impact of historical contexts on contemporary communities.*

Community Impact:

- "How can understanding the history and challenges faced by the communities in 'After Sherman' help us foster a more inclusive and empathetic community in our school or neighborhood?"
- "What similarities or differences do you see between the communities portrayed in the film and our own community? How can we use these insights to address local issues or support community building?"

Action and Awareness:

- "In what ways can we, as individuals or as a class, take action to raise awareness about the issues presented in 'After Sherman,' such as land rights and historical injustices?"
- "How might learning about the history and struggles depicted in the film influence your perspective on current social issues or policies related to land ownership and racial equality?"

Background Information

Dynamic Landscapes: Historical Transformations and Collective Memory

Introduction:

"After Sherman" is a thought-provoking documentary that offers a window into the lived experiences and historical struggles of African American communities in the Southern United States. This film illuminates the enduring impact of land ownership, cultural heritage, and memory, set against the backdrop of American history from the Civil War era to the present day.

Historical Context:

- The Civil War and Emancipation (1861-1865): The Civil War, primarily fought over slavery, resulted in the emancipation of millions of African Americans. The war's end marked a new beginning but also the start of a long struggle for true freedom and equality.
- Reconstruction and "40 Acres and a Mule": The Reconstruction era aimed to rebuild the South and integrate freed slaves into society. The promise of "40 acres and a mule" symbolized hope for economic independence for former slaves. However, the widespread failure to deliver on this promise left many African Americans without the means to build sustainable livelihoods.
- Jim Crow Laws and Land Loss: Post-Reconstruction, the Southern states implemented Jim Crow laws, institutionalizing racial segregation and discrimination. These laws, combined with unfair practices in land ownership and inheritance (like heirs' property laws), led to widespread land loss among African Americans, contributing significantly to the racial wealth gap.
- The Great Migration: In the early 20th century, millions of African Americans migrated from the South to the North and West, escaping segregation and seeking better economic opportunities. This migration significantly changed the demographic and cultural landscape of America.

The Present Day:

The documentary explores how contemporary African American communities are confronting their historical and current challenges. It highlights the continuing importance of land as a source of cultural identity and economic stability, and how historical injustices still impact these communities. Personal stories in the film underscore the resilience of these communities and their ongoing struggle for recognition and justice.

Why This Matters:

Understanding the historical context presented in "After Sherman" is essential for comprehending current discussions on race, inequality, and social justice in America. The film's exploration of the complex relationships between land, memory, and identity invites students to reflect on the long-lasting impacts of history on modern society. It encourages a deeper consideration of how our collective past influences current societal structures and individual experiences.

Conclusion:

"After Sherman" is more than a documentary; it's a gateway to understanding a critical part of American history and its lasting effects on today's society. It presents a narrative that intertwines struggle, resilience, and the quest for equality, challenging us to acknowledge and learn from the past to build a more inclusive future. This film is not only about remembering historical events but also about understanding how these events continue to shape the landscapes and lives of people today.

Discussion Questions: Dynamic Landscapes: Historical Transformations and Collective Memory

1. **Historical Narratives:** "After watching 'After Sherman,' how do you perceive the documentary's portrayal of the unfulfilled promise of '40 acres and a mule'? What impact does this historical context have on the stories and experiences shared in the film?"
2. **Land Loss and Jim Crow:** "How does the documentary illustrate the effects of Jim Crow laws and discriminatory practices on land ownership among African American families? Can you identify specific examples or stories from the film that highlight these impacts?"
3. **Facing Adversity:** "Discuss the examples shown by individuals or communities in the film in response to historical challenges like the Great Migration and land loss. How do these stories reflect broader themes of survival and identity?"
4. **Contemporary Reflections of Historical Struggles:** "How does 'After Sherman' connect historical injustices with contemporary struggles faced by African American communities? What specific aspects of the film helped you understand this ongoing impact?"
5. **Cultural Identity and Land:** "Reflect on the role of land in shaping cultural identity and memory, as depicted in 'After Sherman.' How do personal stories in the documentary illustrate the significance of land to the African American community?"

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