

Teaching Tips | Brief Tender Light

This film explores the following issues:

- African visions for the future
- Coming of age
- Education and social mobility
- Im/migration: leaving home, making home in a new place
- LGBTQ+ rights in Africa
- Race and Blackness in the US
- Reconciling personal dreams and wishes with family and community needs and expectations
- What makes a good life
- What it means to be African

Essential Questions

- How do our identities intersect or clash with family, community, and culture?
- How does access to education influence our perception of personal and social development?
- Why is the story of the international student studying abroad in America important, and what can we learn about ourselves as a country through this new lens?

Supporting Questions

- How do our cultural differences contribute to our sense of self?
 - How do cultural differences contribute to how we conceive of others?
 - How does the concept of cultural responsibility¹ come into play here?
- How can social institutions create opportunities for minority groups, or economically disadvantaged individuals?
- Why are policies like Affirmative Action important to creating equal opportunities in education?
 - Why would there be pushback against such policies?

Historical Thinking Skills

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

- Applying Geographical Literacy

¹ i.e. an attitude which respects, protects, and advocates for cultural diversity.

- Analyzing multiple perspectives
- Analyzing Primary Sources
- Developing Civic Understanding and Engagement
- Understanding Diversity of Experience

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

BEFORE VIEWING (approximately 20 minutes)

1. Have students create a family tree, listing their immediate families and (to the best of their knowledge) where their family came from.
2. Then, ask students to free write on 1-2 of the following words (what personal, cultural, and/or social relevance do these have for them):
 - Family
 - Identity
 - Community
 - Relationships
 - Cultural heritage / Culture

As a class, carry on a discussion about the differences and intersection of the above terms, and discuss how students' families differ from their community and where they intersect.

- What does identity have to do with the following: family, relationships, community, and/or culture; language, spirituality, the land, and Land Rights; education, history, and/or race/ethnicity?

WHILE VIEWING (approximately 30-40 minutes)

Have students watch and listen carefully for key points in the video that help answer questions you pose. If you wish, you can ask students to take notes as they watch. They may watch the video more than once and read the transcript, as needed.

1. Clip One: 18:12-21:20 (runtime: 3:32)

- a. What does the clip indicate about the impacts of institutionalized racism within and across the education, welfare, and justice systems of the U.S.?
 - i. How does Affirmative Action work to correct this discrimination against minority groups in an educational setting?
 - b. How do the examples the filmmaker uses paint a larger picture of racial stereotyping and prejudice in America?
 - i. How do these examples explore the concept of racial prejudice as an African American versus native African?
 - c. What does Arthur mean when he recounts his first time arriving in America and “seeing only the opportunity” aspect of being there?

- 2. Clip Two: 37:15 - 41:28 (runtime: 4:40)
 - a. According to Fidelis, how is the concept of “education” different based on cultural, societal, and formal understandings of the term?
 - b. How can forms of education be used to white wash or colonize a culture? Can you think of an example of this in U.S. history?
 - c. What is the difference between cultural and educational knowledge, and how can the two be at odds with each other?

- 3. Clip Three: 31:50 - 36:06 (runtime: 4:16)
 - a. Throughout the film, Billy experiences pressures from his family. What are they and how might they influence his decisions as a student and an individual as he develops his personal and career motivations?
 - b. What does Billy mean when he says, “I see my grandparents through [my father’s] actions”?
 - i. What is the value of intergenerational knowledge to family memory and cultural memory?
 - c. The Rwandan Genocide lasted about 100 days and left almost 1 million individuals dead in 1994. How might the context of this genocide inform Billy’s father’s statement, “He has to be twice if not three times as productive as we are,” when referring to his son?

AFTER VIEWING (*approximately 7-10 minutes*)

Review responses to the While Viewing questions above, then follow up with 1-2 of the questions below and discuss as a class.

1. Are students interested in studying abroad in university, or outside of the university system? Where would they want to go, and what challenges do they anticipate might arise from being away from home?
2. Consider the title of the film after watching the film. Why do you think the director chose this title, and how does it tie in with the different storylines that are followed in the film?
3. Why is it important for the film to follow each student's story for the full 10 years?
 - a. What is the benefit of committing to such a long amount of time with each individual?
 - b. How would the film be different if it only followed each student while they were studying at MIT and not after?
4. What are the many ways identity can be explored through formal education?
5. Have students choose one main participant (Fidelis, Billy, Philip, or Sante) in the film. Then, have students discuss similarities and differences between their families and community, and the participant they chose in the film. What are the many ways that identity can be constructed and understood?

Taking It Further *(approximately 20 minutes)*

Choose one of the following for a final activity:

1. Have students choose one participant in the film (Fidelis, Billy, Philip, or Sante) and have them examine what position each one holds in their family. How might your understanding of each participant be different if the film was only told from the filmmaker's perspective (a singular point of view versus multiple points of view)?
2. Have students choose one participant in the film (Fidelis, Billy, Philip, or Sante) and do research into their home country. What are the cultural practices of the region this participant is from? What languages are spoken? What is the typical family size? Familial practices (for example, do grandparents tend to live with their children?), etc.?
3. Read the first eight pages of 'Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. Petitioner' v. President and Fellows of Harvard'
(chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_hgdj.pdf)

- a. Have students explore the following questions based on the above case:
 - i. Why is it difficult to subject affirmative action cases to, "meaningful judicial review," and what is meant by "judicial review"?
 - ii. Why are goals of affirmative action so difficult to measure, according to the above paper?
 - iii. What does the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment say about race and stereotyping? How might this impact or skew perceptions of Affirmative Action?
 - iv. Why might focusing on an institution like Harvard and the University of North Carolina (UNC) be important focal points for discussions around effectively implementing affirmative action?
4. The filmmaker behind *Brief Tender Light*, Arthur Musah, came to the United States twenty years ago to study at MIT. Have students explore the differences in viewpoints from the students he chooses to follow and his own. How does age factor into their expectations of being new students at MIT? How does their own identity as Black Africans versus being black in America shift throughout the film?
 - a. How has the dialogue of race in America become a globalized discussion since the filmmaker was first in school?
 - b. What are some important factors to this dissemination of information and ideas?

Author:

Julia Sherman graduated with a BA in Communication Studies and a certificate in African-American Studies from the University of Montana, where she was awarded the Richard Drake Writing Award for her research on the development of visual media and film and its impact on social movements in the 1960's. A historian at heart, Julia has been deeply embedded in the film industry for the past six years, working with Tribeca Film Institute's filmmaker department and then Big Sky Film Institute in a variety of positions, from Operations to Associate Programmer. Her work on film projects around Montana keep her rooted in Missoula as does her own passion for developing programs that encourage students to harness the potential of visual media as an educational tool. She partners closely with the Montana Office of Public Instruction, leading workshops and teacher trainings in media literacy and documentary film theory.

Background Info:

Exploring Race, Class and Affirmative Action

College admissions often loom larger for people of color, low income and first generation students. The barriers that come with applying to colleges, whether it be application portals, essay standards, specific test scores, letters of recommendation, etc. often deter students that don't have the same resources as young people with more social and economic privileges. According to research by the Brookings Institute, the likelihood of completing a college application for students is largely reflective of where they grew up, what they look like and whether their parents went to college.^[1]

Policies like Affirmative Action have opened doors and allowed for more concerted effort in creating opportunities for these students of color and low income students. Affirmative action can be traced back to 1961, when President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925, ordering government contractors to take "affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin."^[2] Programs that follow the guidance of affirmative action typically focus on access to education and employment.

The implementation of affirmative action in an academic setting demonstrates the contrast of opportunities available to people of color versus the white population. In 1955, for example, only 5% of college students, ages 18-24, were African American. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when affirmative action policies were more actively enacted, this number began to climb at a steady rate, to almost 8% in 1970, over 9% in 1980 and 11% in 1990.^[3] In 2020, roughly 13% of African American students were enrolled in postsecondary schooling, 36% of the 18-24-year-old African American population (40% of that age group is the national average).

Following the Supreme Court's decision to end affirmative action, states like Texas, Missouri and Wisconsin, among others, are retracting race-based standards and decision-making, states that have historically factored in race and ethnicity into their scholarships and educational opportunity decision-making process.^[4]

The hurdles that Affirmative Action has aimed to address is reflective of the experience of international students studying abroad in the U.S., especially students of color like Fideliz, Billy, Philip and Sante in the film. In addition to prejudices specific to racial and ethnic differences in the U.S., International students also can struggle with adjusting to cultural differences, diversity in learning styles, social norms, holidays and celebrations, food and diet, among other things. *Brief Tender Light* helps bring to light these nuances in the Black experience through the lens of four very different African students whose cultural backgrounds and ideological compasses clash with American culture and the academic expectations of being a student at MIT. These unique perspectives allow us to look not

only at what pursuing an academic career at an institution like MIT can mean for young people looking to build skills and enrich their communities in new ways, but what it says about the role race and class have played in our nation's history.

1. Taylor Odle, Jennifer A. Delaney, and Preston Magourick, "Complex applications create barriers to college—some are trying to change that." Brookings Institute (October 2023):
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/complex-applications-create-barriers-to-college-some-are-trying-to-change-that/#:~:text=Students%20must%20manage%20various%20deadlines,applying%20and%20enrolling%20in%20college.>
2. Robert J. Weiss, "Affirmative Action: A Brief History" *Journal of intergroup relations* (1987), 15#2 p.40-53.
3. The National Archives, "Affirmative Action: History & Rationale":
<https://clintonwhitehouse3.archives.gov/WH/EOP/OP/html/aa/aa02.html>.
**Need to source check!*
4. Nadra Nittle, "The fallout from the Supreme Court's affirmative action decision has already begun." The 19th (July 2023):
<https://19thnews.org/2023/07/supreme-court-affirmative-action-decision-fallout-advocates-conservatives/>.