

SACRED GROUND

A FILM-BASED DIALOGUE SERIES ON RACE AND FAITH

SESSION SEVEN STUDY GUIDE



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SESSION 7: SELECTIVE ACCESS TO THE MELTING POT AND THE AMERICAN DREAM: 1830S-1960S

To watch beforehand or in the session

- Documentary: *Slavery by Another Name* (in the interest of time you can just watch the first 32.5 minutes, or first 36.5 minutes for people who are prepared to view a graphic section on lynching)
- PBS series: *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, Episode 3: “The House We Live In” (56 min.)

To read beforehand

- Article: “An interview with Noel Ignatiev” about his book, *How the Irish Became White* – first 4 pages of article
- Please review or research your family’s 19th- and 20th-century history in connection to the relevant racial history covered in this session’s films and readings
- Core book: *Jesus and the Disinherited* – second part of Chapter 2 (from paragraph that starts “The crucial question, then, is this...,” on p. 36 of 1996 paperback edition, to the end of the chapter)
- Core book: *Waking Up White* – Chapters 7, 17-18, and 23

Notes to facilitators

Please be sure to have a “deeper dive” participant (or yourself if you do not have someone in that role) visit James Loewen’s “Sundown Towns” website to look up whether your dialogue group’s town(s) or city was a sundown town (further explanation is [here](#)).

Session themes and overview from the author

This session, too, covers a lot of important, sacred ground. The first film, *Slavery by Another Name*, will be hard to take for many people. It is about how, in many Southern states, the system of convict leasing served as a constructed mechanism to keep many African Americans in what was effectively a new form of slavery for decades post-emancipation. In the interest of having time to view another important film, we are only asking you to view the first 32 or 36 minutes, but for those who wish to watch the whole film, it goes on to describe the abusive use of debt peonage as another means of virtual enslavement.

The second film is the second episode of *Race: The Power of an Illusion*: “The House We Live In.” It traces crucial 20th-century history, including how the arbitrary concept of “whiteness” got codified even further, thereby excluding others from the American dream in the process. Two Asian American immigrant men each brought lawsuits that went all the way to the Supreme Court to force the question of who was considered “white” or “Caucasian” and had access to citizenship.

The episode also covers how the G.I. Bill after World War II helped white returning soldiers, but not veterans of color. This, and redlining, paved the way for the federally subsidized creation (i.e., government handouts) of a white suburban middle class, made up of many second- and third-generation European immigrants who initially had faced discrimination. This is a good time to review the concept of the “racial bribe” (referred to in David Dean’s essay in Session 2), whereby immigrant families, many from Southern and Eastern Europe, were given access in the late-19th century and the first half of the 20th century to a track for assimilation via the concept of the melting pot. They got the benefits of whiteness, but that involved keeping African Americans and other communities of color below them, despite their great claims on the American conscience. It also meant suppressing languages and customs brought from Europe that were not welcome in Anglo-American culture. Many Jewish immigrants had to contend with anti-Semitism, and Catholic immigrants with anti-Catholic prejudice. The interview with Noel Ignatiev about his book, *How the Irish Became White*, is a look at one nationality’s experience with some of these dynamics. He shows how the Irish made their own choices regarding with whom to align themselves, revealing that they were not just passively at the mercy of white elites.

James Loewen’s work on sundown towns adds another layer. He has uncovered the history, in meticulous geographic detail, of the all-too-common practice of written and unwritten laws/norms that said that you couldn’t be black and be in town after sundown; in other words, you couldn’t live in that town. Knowing this history is so important, as so many white Americans live in towns that are still virtually all white and have an understandable inclination to think, “I can’t be racist because there is no one here to be racist toward.” Your facilitator or “deeper dive” participant will look up your town or city on Loewen’s website and report to the group. Please feel free to also look up places where you grew up.

We are now in the realm in which there are more likely to be family stories that have been passed down, or parents and grandparents who can be queried, so this is a rich time for members of the dialogue circle to do some more in-depth sharing about how their family histories intersect with these broader trends. For those who have European roots: Do you have ancestors who came in the late-19th or early 20th century? What was their “melting pot” experience? What was lost? What was gained? At whose expense? If you are African American, what were some of your family experiences of the post-emancipation South, or perhaps of the Great Migration? For everyone – Asian American, Latino, Indigenous, black, white: Does your family have a story in relation to the G.I. Bill? Did you have relatives who got access to homeownership and a college education thanks to the G.I. Bill, or relatives who were denied those benefits? How has that impacted your family’s fortunes up to the present day? Did your family live in a sundown town? Or were they prevented from living somewhere? Or did they lose their home when forced into Japanese internment camps? This can start to get very personal, with some of our ancestors getting the benefits of whiteness and others not. This also can be a time to put attention on how Anglo-Protestant culture was prejudiced against Catholics, Jews, and Eastern and Southern Europeans.

This session provides many examples of *multigenerational structures* of racism, illustrating how they ripple through so many aspects of our lives up to the present day, even when, as white people, most of us don’t carry intentional interpersonal racial animus. The idea of “head starts” can be helpful here.