

# RACE IS THE PLACE

## DISCUSSION GUIDE



# BEWARE

This video performance documentary presents a bold, lyrical, and often poetical montage of performances by established artists and up-and-coming young talent from minority communities who use words—**spoken, sung or chanted**—to get their message across.





## FROM THE FILMMAKERS

We are trying to develop a completely new approach to exploring and illuminating Americans' perceptions of race. Unlike traditional narrative and documentary approaches, the power of these focused performances offers a way to connect with audiences on a different level. Although some of the work we have included might be considered confrontational, our goal is not to shock for shock's sake, but to cut through viewers' defenses in a way that demands a response.

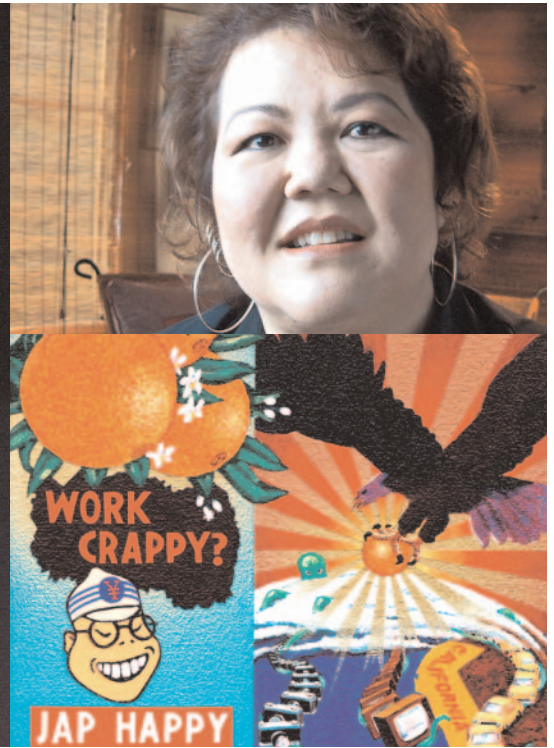
We have used a variety of visual approaches and shooting styles. Some performances were shot on location using single-camera setups and stylized lighting and sound design. Others were shot in front of live audiences at the World Stage in Los Angeles, the Julia Morgan Theater in Berkeley and the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York. And some were shot on location in a documentary style. A series of comments by the performers helps illuminate issues in their work and provide context for the audience.

The dramatic scenes, musical performances, poetry slams and monologues are intercut with archival materials (old film, video, photographs, cartoons, illustrations and early sound recordings). Simple powerful graphics that emphasize

and reinforce the power of the performers' words and a rich musical soundtrack are unifying elements that tie the different segments together. Comments from a few important figures in America's culture wars—including poet and essayist Amiri Baraka and writer James Baldwin—help unify the piece and remind the audience of broader truths. Another level of insight comes from the powerful images created by a group of contemporary artists. And throughout the program, we have "integrated" historical and contemporary images that track the persistence of racism in the United States.

Thirty years ago the poet Gil Scott-Heron told us "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." He was referring to the selectivity employed in deciding which messages can be presented to the public. Scott-Heron talked about a "revolution" because the goals of equality, even after the great achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, seemed in some ways as distant as ever. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the frustration and the desire for equality and change still exist, even though the romantic dream of revolutionary transformation has faded. It is time to begin talking again.

*RAYTELLES AND RICK TEJADA-FLORES*



## THE FILM

*RACE IS THE PLACE* offers a different way to look at one of the most pressing social issues in America today: racism. The film offers its analysis through the prism of performance, music, poetry and art. Dramatic scenes, musical performances, monologues, poetry slams and visual art are intercut with documentary sequences and archival materials from popular culture, including Hollywood films, old newsreels, photographs, early sound recordings, posters and product packaging. The result is an elegantly blunt commentary on the endless permutations and continued survival of racism in the United States.

### Performance Artists Featured in *RACE IS THE PLACE*

**Kate Rigg**, satirist ([katerigg.com](http://katerigg.com)) – “Rice, Rice Baby”

**James Luna**, performance artist ([jamesluna.com](http://jamesluna.com)) – “Take a Picture with a Real Indian”

**Piri Thomas**, poet ([cheverote.com](http://cheverote.com)) – “In My Barrio”

**Danny Hoch**, actor, writer ([dannyhoch.com](http://dannyhoch.com)) – “Bronx”

**Boots Riley**, musician ([thecoup.net](http://thecoup.net)) – “Underdog” (“This Is for My Folkers”)

**Haunani Kay Trask**, writer ([speakoutnow.org/People/HaunaniKayTrask.html](http://speakoutnow.org/People/HaunaniKayTrask.html)) – “Settlers Not Immigrants”

**Culture Clash**, theater group ([cultureclash.com/posada.html](http://cultureclash.com/posada.html)) – “Haitian Man,” “Asian Car Guy,” Salsa

**Andy Bumatai**, comedian ([andybumatai.com](http://andybumatai.com)) – “Discovering”

Established artists and up-and-coming talent from minority communities use words, performance, music and images to share their insights. Some have crossed into the mainstream while others speak primarily to their own communities as they look for ways to make sense of their place in a society that often does not see past the color of their skin.

**Ahmed Ahmed**, comedian ([ahmed-ahmed.com](http://ahmed-ahmed.com)) –

“Bad Time to Be From the Middle East”

**Beau Sia**, actor ([beausia.com](http://beausia.com)) – “Entertainment Industry”

**Lalo Guerrero**, musician ([markguerrero.net/8.html](http://markguerrero.net/8.html)) – “No Chicanos on TV”

**Amiri Baraka**, poet ([amiribaraka.com](http://amiribaraka.com)) – “In the Tradition”

Shabaka, actor ([imdb.com/name/nm0377106/](http://imdb.com/name/nm0377106/)) –

“Klanman” (Martin Luther King)

**Mayda del Valle**, poet

([globaltalentassoc.com/site/clients/mayda.htm](http://globaltalentassoc.com/site/clients/mayda.htm)) –

“Descendancy”

**Michael Franti**, musician ([spearheadvibrations.com](http://spearheadvibrations.com)) –

“Can’t Stop”

The film also features the visual art of **Ben Sakoguchi**, **Faith Ringgold**, **Michael Ray Charles**, **Paula de Joie** and **Enrique Chagoya**.

## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

### Before Viewing

- Think about the media you view and listen to most frequently. What kinds of people do you regularly see and hear? Whom do you see and hear rarely or not at all? Does it matter whether people get to see people who are like themselves?
- What kinds of things make you feel like you belong? What kinds of things make you feel “alien” or like an “outsider”?
- What kinds of art are regularly available in your community (fine art, performance art, public art and so on)? What perspectives are represented? Left out? What do you think the impact of art is on your community?

### After Viewing

#### General

- Name one thing from the film that “spoke truth” to you. Why did this particular thing resonate with you?
- If you could make sure that one person who wasn’t here today could see *Race Is the Place*, who would you want that to be and why?

#### Race, Race Relations and Racism

- What do you learn from the film about how people, including white people, are affected by racism?
- How do the performers both use and challenge stereotypes? What is the long-term impact of stereotypes? In your community or family, how are stereotypes reinforced or interrupted?
- Think about the various racial and ethnic groups represented in the film. Where do your ideas about those groups come from? What images do you most often see of each group? Who controls those images? What do the performers in the film think is missing from the typical images? What do they think is important for you to know about them and about their racial or ethnic heritage?
- Boots Riley says, “All I got to do is talk about what’s real, and I’ll be talking about race.” Is it possible to talk “real” about the United States and leave race out? Why or why not? How about socioeconomic class?

#### Art and Culture

- Describe what you think an artist’s responsibilities are. Do artists from minority groups have responsibilities to “their people” that differ from the responsibilities of artists from dominant groups? Do artists have a responsibility to engage with society and challenge people’s ideas?
- Does it matter whether we see people like ourselves on television or in movies? Why or why not? Is it enough to simply see people from our culture or race or do the portrayals have to be positive? Is a portrayal that is accurate, but negative OK? Why or why not?
- What things in pop culture make you feel good about yourself? What kinds of pop culture images and ideas make you feel bad about yourself? Which seem to have more power and why?

#### Language

- Several artists in the film use the word “nigger.” Is it OK for some people and not others to use the “n” word? Do you use the term? Why or why not? If you use the “n” word, when do you use it? Why do some people hear the term “nigger” as hurtful? Should their pain keep others from using the word? Why or why not?
- Comedian Andy Bumatai is amused when he is asked, “Could you do some of that *ethnic* humor?” because “in Hawaii it’s just called humor.” How do labels like “*ethnic* humor” and “*female* athlete” reinforce the centrality of some groups and marginalize others? What phrases have you heard or used that reinforce the centrality of Caucasians and/or cast one group as central and another as “other”? In your view, what is the impact of using group labels for people of color, but not for whites?



## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. You might segue into brainstorming with this prompt: "How did viewing the film make you feel? How might you turn those feelings into action?"

If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

Create your own art exploring the impact of race, prejudice and/or stereotyping on your life. Display it along with commentary about what it was like to make the piece and what you learned from it. Invite media to cover your art exhibit.

Collect both positive and negative historical images of your racial, ethnic or religious group. In a public place, create a bulletin board on which you post the images along with your own historical notes and commentary. Attach an envelope containing blank index cards and a pen and invite passersby to add their own comments. Organize an event at which you share the comments.

Assess your local media to see if coverage matches the racial, ethnic and gender balance in your community. If not, work with media makers to suggest stories and contacts that would be more representative.

Find out who is doing antibias work in your community and ask how you can get involved.

For additional outreach ideas, visit [itvs.org](http://itvs.org), the website of Independent Television Service (ITVS). For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit yourself to pursue one item from the brainstorm list.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY AND ACTION

### Books and Articles

Loewen, James. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (Touchstone, 1996). A good resource for background on misperceptions common in U.S. history texts.

McIntosh, Peggy. "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (Available at <http://www.utoronto.ca/acc/events/peggy1.htm>). A classic article describing white privilege.

### Websites

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/raceistheplace> – Companion website to the PBS broadcast.

<http://www.itvs.org/outreach/raceistheplace> – Community engagement page from ITVS featuring information and resources for discussion and community action.

[www.nccj.org](http://www.nccj.org) – National Conference for Community and Justice; has links to antibias education resources and organizations, including listings of many local initiatives.

[www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org) – Facing History and Ourselves; national educational and teacher-training organization that encourages students to examine racism and prejudice in order to promote a more informed and humane citizenry.

[www.ameasite.org/](http://www.ameasite.org/) – Association of Multiethnic Americans; nonprofit group that promotes a positive awareness of interracial and multiethnic identity; website contains a great list of links to related organizations as well as recommended resources.

[www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org) – Website of the Teaching Tolerance program of the Southern Poverty Law Center; provides a variety of antibias resources for classrooms and individuals.

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