

# *The Civil War (or, Who Do we Think We Are)*

## Teachers' Guide

### Recommended for grades 7-12

#### TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Introduction
- II. About the Film
- III. Getting Ready to Teach with the Film
- IV. Using the Film with Students
- V. Using the Film for Professional Learning
- VI. End Notes

#### I. Introduction

*The Civil War (or, Who Do We Think We Are)* finds the roots of our present divisions in the story we tell about the past. The film can prompt fruitful discussions about the power of historical narratives, the problems of unifying a diverse nation, and the meaning of white supremacy.

The story Americans tell about the Civil War – in schools, public squares, and popular culture – varies over time and place. This film helps students understand that history is constructed. It explores why we tell the narratives we do and what the differences in our stories say about us.

#### Two Ways to Use the Film:

1. Professional Learning: With colleagues in a professional learning community (PLC). Look at p. 7 for some guiding questions
2. Instruction: With students, to raise and discuss compelling questions about the past and present. Look at pp 4-8 for ideas to use with your students.

The film is particularly relevant now because of current political controversies about how history is taught, and the way history makes us feel. The divide reaches into the classroom, and teachers must be prepared to facilitate needed critical conversations. The people in the film make some of the different perspectives in your own classroom visible. And students can learn to explore uncomfortable topics by seeing how director Boynton asks questions with open-hearted curiosity. Encourage your own students to ask questions in the same way.

## II. About the Film

From 2016 through 2019, director and writer Rachel Boynton traveled to communities and schools North and South to talk about the Civil War and Reconstruction and discover what students are being taught. Along the way, she shows that what's past isn't really past, as Americans contend today with Confederate statues and flags, struggle to explain continuing racial inequality, and argue about the importance of slavery as a cause of the War.

Here's how [Matt Zoller Seitz from RogerEbert.com](#) described the film:

"*Civil War (or, Who Do We Think We Are)*" is an account of a country that broke apart and never really got back together. ... [T]he film visits northern and southern territories of the United States to tell the tale of the Civil War, the Reconstruction, and their aftermath as they resonate today. It's important here to separate the Civil War from the Reconstruction period. ... But its thesis that the North won the Civil War and the South won the Reconstruction—via lynching, voter suppression, Jim Crow laws and other forms of disempowerment—will be revelatory to young students, and anyone whose past schooling glossed over or distorted the deeper meaning of those events.<sup>1</sup>

The film, at 1 hour and 40 minutes, may be too long to view in one sitting. However, it is presented in six chapters that allow you to view it in parts or assign for group work. Here are the chapters with approximate time codes.

FILM CHAPTERS	TIME CODES
0. Intro Sequence	(0:00-4:35)
1. The Story Begins with The Lost Cause	(4:35 – 11:38)
2. How We Talk About Slavery	(11:38-29:46)
3. The Heroes of the Story	(29:46 – 40:47)
4. The Story We Ignored/Reconstruction	(40:47 – 57:37)
5. Who is Controlling the Story?	(57:37 – 1:17:27)
6. Empathy (or, Seeing Ourselves in the Stories of Others)	(1:17:27 – 1:40:00)

### III. Getting Ready to Teach with the Film

#### A. Topics

Although it's called the Civil War, this is a film about the present, and can be used, in whole or in part, to address a wide range of topics, including:

- Causes of the Civil War
- Historical memory
- Reconstruction and reunification
- Jim Crow era
- Civil rights movement
- Rise of the alt-right
- Current issues (ongoing residential and educational segregation, voting access, Confederate statues and flags, insurrection)

#### B. Be Prepared: Terms, Language and Useful Background Knowledge

Language, and the way it reflects a point of view, plays a big part in this film, and will be an interesting topic to explore with students. The film also references ideas and terms with which students won't be familiar and for which you might wish to provide background. Here's a selection of terms that you'll want to be ready to discuss.

#### C. The name of the conflict – most are used in the film. They're a great way to begin the topic and quickly surface the idea that words reflect a particular point of view.

- The Civil War
- War Between the States
- War for Southern Independence
- War to Prevent Southern Independence
- War of Northern Aggression
- War of the Rebellion

#### D. Race and Racism<sup>2</sup>

- **Race:** A social construct, which means it was invented by humans, and is based on the false idea that physical traits like hair, skin color, and facial features are significant markers that separate human beings into distinct groups with their own characteristics. This construct assumes that these separate groups are not equal and has been used to justify social and legal inequality. The idea arose during European colonization of the Americas to justify exploitation of Black and Indigenous people and was elaborated on for the next 400 years, into the 20th century.
- **Racism:** In North America, racism encompasses economic, political, social, and institutional actions and beliefs that perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power between white people and peoples of color. A

common shorthand is that prejudice + power = racism. *Prejudice* is a better word to describe individual actions and beliefs.

### E. White supremacy

Miriam-Webster offers [two definitions](#).<sup>3</sup>

- the belief that the white race is inherently superior to other races and that white people should have control over people of other races;
- the social, economic, and political systems that collectively enable white people to maintain power over people of other races.

Note: In chapter V., Boynton says that, for her, white supremacy means “not even recognizing that we’re only telling white stories.”

### F. Lost Cause

The interpretation of the conflict that emerged almost as soon as the war ended to justify the Southern cause and paint the Confederacy in positive terms. You can find an excellent overview in the [Encyclopedia of Virginia](#).<sup>4</sup>

### G. Confederate Heritage Groups

Two groups are mentioned in the film and figure prominently in spreading the Lost Cause idea.

- United Daughters of the Confederacy – Formed 30 years after the war to preserve and “consecrate” Confederate Memory, the UDC erected hundreds of monuments and promoted Lost Cause textbooks for schools. The Encyclopedia of Virginia has a lengthy [article](#)<sup>5</sup>, and this short 6-minute video tell the story of [the textbooks](#).<sup>6</sup>
- Sons of Confederate Veterans, formed at the same time, invited male direct descendants of Confederate soldiers to promote the valor and glory of the “men who wore the grey.”

### H. Rumors of War<sup>7</sup>

This monumental statue is permanently installed at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, but was briefly in Times Square, New York, in 2019, where the director filmed it. The artist, Kehinde Wiley, was struck by Confederate Monuments in Richmond and created this as a “counter-narrative” to the Lost Cause ideas embodied by the statues on Monument Avenue (since removed). The heroic statue turns many ideas on their heads: who has leadership and courage, what wearing a hoodie means, what hair is serious, and of course, who gets to be a hero. To learn more, see: <https://vmfa.museum/about/rumors-of-war/>

## IV. Using the Film with Students

### A. Compelling (or Essential) Questions

- Why does the Civil War still divide us?
- Does it matter that we can't agree on the Civil War?
- Does a unified nation require a single story?
- Should history include multiple perspectives and stories? Is that necessary for a democratic and unified nation?
- Why does it matter who gets to tell the story?
- Was the Civil War successful in achieving a more perfect and just union?
- How does language both reflect and influence point of view?

### B. Questions for the Chapters

#### i. The Story Begins with The Lost Cause

- What reasons does Ms. Arnold give for spending time on the Civil War and Reconstruction?
- Why do the men call it the War Between the States? What does it matter what the war is called?
- According to Prof. Blight, what is the Lost Cause and why did it take hold?

#### ii. How We Talk About Slavery (and don't talk about it)

- The chapter begins with a Black student at Holmes High School in Mississippi saying she sees the country divided "every day." As you watch this chapter, what evidence do you see of a division?
- What do you think about the inscription on the Confederate Monument?
- What do you notice about the two classrooms featured in this chapter? How are they different? How are they similar?
- The Mississippi teacher says, "We don't talk about slaves or slavery as a cause of the War in Mississippi." Can silence and omission be part of the story?
- What makes it so hard emotionally for both Black and white people to talk about slavery?

#### iii. The Heroes of the Story

- The film clip from the 1960s came during the centennial of the Civil War. What message was the film trying to convey about the War? What else was going on at the time that might have influenced the tone of the film?
- How does Prof. Blight answer the question, "Why didn't the Confederacy just go away?"
- Does it surprise you that the young Black student said she'd never had a white friend?

- What is the reason for the African American Civil War Museum? Why did its founders think it was needed?
- Thinking about what you've learned about the Civil War, both in and out of school, do you think you've been presented with a full story?

#### **iv. The Story We Ignored/Reconstruction**

- This chapter presents two very different ways of thinking about Reconstruction: That it was intended to reincorporate the South and reunify the nation and, according to Prof. Carr, "when Black people tried to teach America how to have a real democracy." Were these two goals in conflict?
- Why do you think there are no Black people at the Civil War Roundtable in East Bridgewater, Massachusetts? Do the people interviewed offer any clues?
- This chapter presents several instances of history that "we just don't remember." What are some examples of events that were left out, erased, or distorted?
- Why is some history remembered and some forgotten? Is it accidental?

#### **v. Who is Controlling the Story?**

- The Confederate Battle flag continues to be an ongoing source of controversy.
  - Until 2021, it was a part of the Mississippi flag. In the film, why do opponents want it removed? What does it symbolize to them? What did it symbolize to its defenders?
  - In South Carolina, a woman says that it's a "flag for everybody"? Is she leaving anyone out?
- When it comes to the Civil War, what and who are remembered? What and who aren't?
- Director Boynton says she learned that "white supremacy" meant only seeing white stories. To what extent is the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction in your official curriculum, or in the public monuments you see, mainly white?
- Prof. Blight says the country had a "North-South reunion without racial justice. According to Blight and Prof. Rolph, how was that reunion achieved?
- Segregation also resulted in the postwar period and, according to Blight, was accepted in both the North and South. To what extent does the film offer evidence that segregation persists?

#### **vi. Empathy (or, Seeing Ourselves in the Stories of Others)**

- Why is the idea of a plantation wedding abhorrent to the speaker in the film?

- According to Ibram Kendi, how does racism manifest today? How do many white people explain continuing disparities in Black health, wealth, education, and housing?
- People in this chapter talk about guilt and shame, and one student says guilt is good for you. Is it necessary to feel guilt and shame for what happened in the past? How do these emotions help or hurt our ability to do better in the future?
- “Rumors of War,” the statue in Times Square, puts a 21<sup>st</sup> century African American male in the saddle instead of a Confederate General. What do you think the message of the monument is?

## V. Using the Film for Professional Learning

Use these questions to prompt discussion and spark ideas for teaching about history, race, and national reconciliation with students.

- What did each of us learn in school about the War and Reconstruction and what did we have to unlearn later?
- How can we use this film to examine how historical knowledge is viewed, constructed, and interpreted?
- How can we use the film to prompt students to consider the way language and terminology affects how we view the past?
- How does teacher and student identity affect how we teach about the past? Do any of the classrooms in the film look like ours?
- Why is the issue of how history is taught so contentious, and are there ways to achieve some agreement?
- How can we help students explain the difference between heritage and history?
- What strategies can we employ to facilitate classroom discussions that center on race?
- Terminology affects how we view the past?
- How does teacher and student identity affect how we teach about the past? Do any of the classrooms in the film look like ours?
- Why is the issue of how history is taught so contentious, and are there ways to achieve some agreement?
- How can we help students explain the difference between heritage and history?
- What strategies can we employ to facilitate classroom discussions that center on race?

## VI. Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/civil-war-or-who-do-we-think-we-are-movie-review-2021>

<sup>2</sup> Definitions from: <https://antiracistfuture.org/framework/care-glossary/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/white%20supremacy>

<sup>4</sup> <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/lost-cause-the/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/united-daughters-of-the-confederacy/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOkFXPbILpU>

<sup>7</sup> <https://vmfa.museum/about/rumors-of-war/>