

## INTRODUCTION

We are so excited to help bring a powerful new documentary, *Descendant*, to your classroom in partnership with Netflix and Participant! In *Descendant*, award-winning filmmaker Margaret Brown returns to her hometown of Mobile, Alabama, to document the search for and historic discovery of The *Clotilda*, the last known slave ship to arrive in the United States, illegally carrying 110 kidnapped Africans. The international slave trade had been made illegal in the US in 1808, but human trafficker Timothy Meaher made a bet that he could get around the law with his ship. Today, the residents of Africatown, just north of Mobile, count the *Clotilda* survivors among their ancestors. The new documentary brings their stories to light as they grapple with a growing spotlight on their community following the discovery of the sunken *Clotilda*. The film shows how events that unfolded more than a century ago continue to have lasting repercussions several generations later.

This packet comes with:

- [Background Information about The Clotilda and Africatown](#)
- [Director's Statement by filmmaker Margaret Brown](#)
- [Film Discussion Questions](#)
- [Instructions and link to a Zoom](#) for a live debrief of issues raised in *Descendant* and a discussion about how to talk about race in the classroom. The panel will be Friday, March 03rd, from 11:30-12:30 ET. A recording of the session will be live on our website immediately following the event. This event is free, open to the public, and designed to start an interactive discussion. So come with questions and comments! (1 hour)

You can view the film (PG; 1 hour 49 min.) directly on Netflix. If you do not have access to Netflix, please contact us at [sttp@rfkhumanrights.org](mailto:sttp@rfkhumanrights.org) for a link to view the film. Please check back on our [website](#) after March 3 to view the pre-recorded panel discussion about the film.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT FROM MARGARET BROWN

Fourteen years ago, I made a documentary feature about Mobile's still openly segregated Mardi Gras celebration. "The Order of Myths" centered on the tangled interconnected histories of two Mardi Gras queens, one Black and one white. The white queen, Helen Meaher, was a direct descendant of Timothy Meaher, who local legend said had brought the last slave ship to America, illegally in 1860. The black queen, Stefannie Lucas, was a direct descendant of one of the African captives who was allegedly brought to America on that ship. The ship was called *The Clotilda*, and the parallel histories represented by these two girls made up the emotional core the film was built around.

In making "The Order of Myths," I came to be close with some residents of the enclave called Africatown. This is a somewhat isolated residential area of Mobile, surrounded by big industry, and said by its residents to have been founded by former enslaved peoples who had arrived aboard that last ship, *The Clotilda*. I also became quite close with a researching Folklorist at the University of South Alabama, Dr. Kern Jackson, who has spent more than two decades recording the oral histories of the Africatown community. The story stayed present in my life, but I didn't think I would ever revisit it as a filmmaker.

Then, in 2018, a friend sent me an article saying that a ship's wreckage had been found in the Mobile River, and it was thought to be that of *The Clotilda*. This would be a monumental discovery, and the national media knew it, for no slaving vessel had ever been discovered in North American waters. But even more starkly for Mobile, what many had always called myth could be proven real, and the story of the Africatown community I had come to know could be verified. Two weeks later, I headed to Alabama to begin documenting.

What interested me at first was to try to get at the differences in how the story was being told within different communities of Mobile. How did 'white Mobile' understand *the Clotilda* history vs. how the Africatown residents told it — that old duality of Mobilian storytelling I knew so well. As seen in "The Order of Myths," my own family comes in part from this milieu and reckoning with what might be my own family's secrets is never far from mind. What I found instead was that white people, most particularly those directly connected to the story, didn't want to talk about this story at all. Silence. Africatown, on the other hand, was a community brimming with pride, deeply connected to its history, celebrating and conjuring its story in present and dynamic ways as it confronts current day challenges."

The story of *The Clotilda* was not a "myth" or a "legend" as it was often referred to by white people, but an already present history, just one that was not told or accepted as the dominant "American" narrative. I came to recognize that this rich and insistent connection to the past represented something quite meaningful well beyond Africatown and Mobile, something that touches on the experience of the Black community as a whole, and really on the whole nation's understanding of itself.

In the same year, 2018, the book *Barracoon* was released. This featured interviews Zora Neale Hurston had conducted with the last survivor of *The Clotilda*, a man named Cudjo Lewis, in 1928. Another piece of the puzzle of history had now risen to the surface. For the first time, Africatown residents could read the transcribed words of an ancestor and founder of their community, including memories of his capture from his West African village and the voyage across the ocean.

In her life, Hurston herself moved away from the Deep South, to make a career as a writer in New York. But all her pursuits would lead her repeatedly back down to where she came from, sometimes with just a pad and paper, other times with sound recording devices, and still others with a film camera. That spirit that she had, to keep going back home and keep trying to get at those stories — in words, in sounds, in footage — is something I connect with deeply as a filmmaker, and a southerner, and a woman. I wanted to be sure to try to illuminate that sense of creative kinship as best as I could through the film. And this book being fresh on the collective mind of Africatown as the ship was closer and closer to being found (and it was found in 2019), I wanted to be sure to explore the weight its words would carry.

The story of the Africatown community is not mine to try to tell. Fascinations with the Old South, and ghosts and slave ships and murky rivers — these tropes have tended to be used to hide more truths than they've helped reveal. The pitfalls of trying to make a film like this against that backdrop are many, and the challenges and self-adjustments have been constant throughout the process. I hope that in the end — through collaboration with Kern Jackson and the others on the team we built, through the closeness of my friendships with the film's characters, through a willingness to be honest with ourselves throughout and recognize the limitations in telling a story like this — hopefully, we've succeeded in making something moving and meaningful and expansive, and that leaves the audience with a set of questions they may not have otherwise felt comfortable to ask. For me, this film feels like my life's work till now. It is an opening to all that's driven me creatively since I first picked up a camera and tried to tell a story.

My hometown of Mobile, Alabama is a city of closely guarded secrets. Its founding father, the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, supposedly had snakes tattooed over his torso, to be revealed only when with his Native American trading partners. Its Mardi Gras, oldest in the nation, is famously characterized by masked mystic societies of anonymous membership and storied pasts. In Mobile, myths are a way of life, and the truth is often hidden in plain sight. But what underpins all that storybook Mobilian lore is the one darkest, most painful and indeed most American of secrets: the brutal reality of slavery. This is the big truth I was not taught in school, though its lasting impacts were right there surrounding us every day. But how could there be such a startling disconnect in what we call 'History'? Much of my journey in life and pursuits as a filmmaker stem from this disorienting question.

-- Margaret Brown

## FILM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After watching the film, use the following questions to help guide discussion about the issues raised in the film.

1. What did you learn about the *Clotilda* and why is its discovery so important?
2. Why do you think the film is called *Descendant*? What are all the implications of that term?
3. Describe the history of Africatown. In what ways is Africatown a microcosm of racial issues in the United States?
4. Who is Timothy Meaher? What law did he break and why? Describe the connection between the Meaher family and Africatown - both past and present.
5. Why do you think the film does not feature interviews with the Meaher family?
6. “Only by understanding the truth about our past can we begin to work towards a more equitable future.” - What does it mean to know the “truth of our past” and how can it help us to create a more equitable future? Can you give some specific examples, using the film as a starting point?
7. In the film, Emmett Lewis IV states, “My only fear is my people’s story never to be told.” What is the importance of oral history in the film? Are there items and artifacts that are important to your heritage? How far back do you know your ancestry?
8. The film focuses on modern examples of systemic racism, including environmental racism, in Africatown. What historic and systemic racism did/do residents of Africatown face? How are they taking action?
9. What would justice or reconciliation look like in Africatown?
10. In her director’s statement, filmmaker Margaret Brown writes:

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- a. Why do you think this disparity exists?
- b. What do you think she means when she says that the residents of Africatown are using storytelling to “confront current challenges”?
- c. How can storytelling be used as a way to heal communities?
- d. Why is telling these stories important?
- e. What might happen if we silence these stories?

## LIVE PANEL: HOW TO TALK ABOUT RACE IN THE CLASSROOM

Join us for a panel discussion about strategies for discussing race in the classroom. The panel will be **Friday, March 03rd, from 11:30-12:30 ET** and will feature:

- **Guadalupe Cardona**, Ethnic Studies teacher and lead educator at Roybal Learning Center in downtown Los Angeles;
- **Dr. Kern Jackson**, co-writer and co-producer of *Descendant* and director of the African American Studies program at the University of South Alabama;
- **Dr. Ndindi Kitonga**, co-founder of Angeles Workshop School, a radical secondary school in Los Angeles with a focus on democratic learning and class consciousness;
- **& Julio Gomez, Emely Hernandez, and Sebastian Herrera** - student leaders of the Manhattan Academy for Arts and Language equity team

A recording of the session will be live on our [website](#) immediately following the event. This event is free, open to the public, and designed to start an interactive discussion with our policy expert. So come with questions and comments - we want to hear from you!

**WHAT:** *Descendant* live debrief: How To Talk About Race in the Classroom

**WHEN:** Friday, March 10th, at 11:30-12:30 EST

**WHERE:** Zoom

**LINK:** Please click the link below to join the webinar:

<https://rfkhumanrights.zoom.us/j/89983440464>