Directed by Stanley Nelson
BAM Rose Cinemas
Wednesday, January 15, 2014

Study guide written by
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Dear Educator

Welcome to the Study Guide for Freedom Riders, the American Experience documentary directed by award-winning filmmaker Stanley Nelson that you and your students will be attending as part of BAM’s Civil Rights in Cinema Series. This visit will provide you with an invaluable entry-point into one of the most pivotal and tumultuous periods in mid-20th US history—the Civil Rights Movement. Freedom Riders chronicles a time in our not-too-distant past when segregation and racism were not only tolerated, but also upheld by local laws and customs. Most importantly, it shines a spotlight on those who resisted and sought justice and equality, and the challenges they faced for doing so. Told with a power and vibrancy that leaps off the screen, this documentary about hundreds of ordinary citizens who would no longer accept segregation, inequality, and racism, will engage, educate, and inspire.

Enriching Your Classroom Learning

Arts experiences, such as the one you have chosen to attend at BAM, always work best when themes, ideas, and elements from the piece can be aligned to your pre-existing classroom learning.

The goal of this study guide is to:

• Provide you with information that will help you prepare your students for your screening experience at BAM.
• Connect to your curriculum with information and activities aligned with the Common Core Standards and the NYC Department of Education’s Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts.
• Reinforce the invaluable critical thinking and analytical skills that are at the foundation of all New York and Federal standards-based learning.
• Give you and your students the tools to have an engaging, educational, and inspiring experience at BAM.

Throughout this guide you will find Enrichment Activities and Guiding Questions to facilitate integrating your visit into your curriculum.

Synopsis

In 1961, between May and December, more than 400 Americans (black and white) northern and southern, and ranging in age and religious affiliation decided to risk their lives by riding Greyhound buses through the Deep South. For exercising their federally granted right to travel on interstate buses and have equal access to bus facilities and waiting areas, these people endured violent mobs, beatings, and imprisonment. They were called the Freedom Riders, and this introspective documentary charts the course of their eight month act of nonviolent protest, an act that changed the course of history. Based on Raymond Arsenault’s book Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice, this film provides an in-depth look at the central characters involved in the Freedom Rides—the riders themselves, the journalists who witnessed this historical act, and the political figures and government officials who tried to negotiate and make sense of the growing resistance to the status quo. Combining compelling first person accounts with historical news footage, this documentary gives the Freedom Riders their earned place in US history and makes this time period immediate and relevant to students today.
The Movement

Civil Rights & The Power of the Moving Image

From an early age, young New York City students learn about Rosa Park’s refusal to give up her seat on the bus, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. They are taught about one of the most significant and transforming achievements in our cultural history—the defining democratic uprising of the mid-20th century referred to as the civil rights movement. What Freedom Riders provides you with is an educational tool that will engage your student’s minds in this important subject matter, and engage their hearts through the vibrancy of cinematic documentation.

Civil rights leaders understood the power of the moving image to rouse and build support for their cause. At the same time that discontent with the federal government’s complacency over segregation was growing, a popular new invention found its way into people’s living rooms: the television set. First shown as an invention in Flushing, NY at the 1939 World’s Fair, the television set would become a fixture in US homes by the nineteen-sixties. This allowed the news, both national and international, to be transmitted on a daily basis into living rooms, and gave current events an immediacy that could not be experienced by reading the daily newspaper or tuning into a radio broadcast.

For the first time, families in Boston could finish their dinner, sit in their living rooms, and tune in to see what was happening in California, Alabama, and other parts of the country. If perhaps segregation and discrimination were not directly an issue in their daily lives, seeing images on television of violence being inflicted on human beings who were actively challenging a system of institutionalized racism gave the issue an urgency that activated support.

Enrichment Activity

Pre-Screening Civil Rights Primer

Below is a chronological list of twenty key events from the Civil Rights Movement. Pair students up with a partner or put them into groups of three and assign each group one of the events on which to research and prepare a short class presentation. Students should identify the event and explain its significance to the Movement. NYS ELA Standards E3b, E3c, E6a Blueprint: Making Connections.

1863 Emancipation Proclamation
1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson
1910 NAACP is organized
1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education
1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott
1957 Little Rock Nine
1960 Sit-ins begin in North Carolina
1961 Freedom Riders
1963 March on Washington
1964 Medgar Evers is murdered
1964 King wins Nobel Peace Prize
1965 Malcolm X emerges
1965 Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964
1965 Malcolm X murdered
1965 Voting Rights Act of 1965
1965 Watts Riots
1966 March on Mississippi
1968 Black Panther Party organized
1968 MLK murdered

Pre-Screening Review: Vocabulary

Segregation: The separation or isolation of a race, class, or ethnic group by enforced or voluntary residence in a restricted area, barriers to social intercourse, separate educational facilities, or by other discriminatory means.

Jim Crow Laws: Local laws that separated blacks and whites in the South after the Civil War.

Ku Klux Klan: A secret society organized in the South after the Civil War to reassert white supremacy by means of terrorism.

CORE: Congress of Racial Equality; a civil-rights organization dedicated to the use of nonviolent direct action to promote better race relations and end racial discrimination in the United States.

Civil Disobedience: Using nonviolent resistance to challenge laws believed to be unjust.

Questions

• What is a civil right? From what document do we derive our civil rights?

• What does the phrase, “Separate but Equal” mean? How was that phrase used during the Movement? Who do you think used it most? How do you feel about that phrase?
Eleven years before Rosa Parks, Irene Morgan was arrested in Virginia for refusing to give her bus seat to a white passenger. She was convicted on October 18, 1944 at the Middlesex County Circuit Court, but appealed to the Virginia Supreme Court where her conviction was upheld. With help from NAACP lawyers, including Thurgood Marshall, *Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court in March 1946. The Court’s decision struck down state laws requiring segregated seating for interstate bus travel. In 1947 the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sent 16 volunteers on the Journey of Reconciliation to test compliance with the Supreme Court’s ruling. (Excerpted from Freedom Riders website.)

**THE JOURNEY**

April 9, 1947: Eight white and eight black members of CORE set off on a two-week bus trip to test the Supreme Court’s decision, riding through Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky—all states with segregated systems. The riders suffer several arrests, notably in North Carolina.

May 4—8, 1961: Building on the Journey of Reconciliation, James Farmer recruits a group of thirteen CORE members, a mix of black and white, young and old, and male and female to test and challenge segregated travel facilities and codes throughout the Deep South.

May 9—13, 1961: As they enter North Carolina, the riders are faced with strong resistance. Riders are arrested in Charlotte and some are attacked in Rock Hill, South Carolina. They eventually reach Atlanta, Georgia on May 13th where they met with Martin Luther King Jr. They ask him to join them, but King is not a supporter of what they are doing at this point. He encourages them not to continue.

May 14, 1961: The most violent day of the Freedom Rides. Riders are met by an angry mob of whites outside of Anniston, Alabama, where the bus windows are smashed, the tires slashed, and fire bombs thrown in. The second bus makes it to Birmingham only to be met by a Klan mob aided by local police who beat and attack the riders. (This attack was sanctioned by Police Commissioner Bull Connor who struck a deal with the Klan allowing them 15 minutes to burn, bomb, maim, and kill without any arrests or police intervention.)

May 15—18, 1961: Forced to complete the journey by plane under the protection of the Kennedy Administration, CORE riders, many badly injured and beaten, decide to end the Freedom Rides. Diane Nash rallies supporters in Nashville and organizes a new group to continue the rides. The Nashville Student Movement Ride begins.

May 19—23, 1961: The riders convene in Montgomery, along with fifteen-hundred supporters and Martin Luther King Jr. at the First Baptist Church. While they are in there, a mob forms outside the church, trapping them inside. King makes calls directly to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, who then tries to negotiate with governor John Patterson to send in protection for the riders. Ultimately, federal troops are dispatched to protect the riders.

May 24, 1961: Leaving Alabama, the riders enter Mississippi where they are arrested for a “breach of peace” or “for their own protection.” Jails become the new destination for riders who continue to descend on Mississippi throughout the summer of 1961, many serving time in Parchmen State Prison.

September 22, 1961: The ICC announces that as of November 1, bus segregation would be forbidden.

**FREEDOM RIDE TIMELINE**

**April 9, 1947**
The Journey of Reconciliation begins.

**May 4—8, 1961**

**May 9—13, 1961**
First Freedom Rider arrest in North Carolina.

**May 14, 1961**
Freedom Rider buses are bombed and mobbed in Anniston and Birmingham, AL.

**May 15—18, 1961**
Diane Nash rallies a second wave of Freedom Riders in Nashville to resume the Rides.

**May 19—23, 1961**
RFK dispatches federal troops to Alabama to protect the riders.

**September 22, 1961**
The ICC announces that as of November 1, bus segregation would be forbidden.
A major thematic undercurrent in Freedom Riders is the relationship between the riders and the Kennedy Administration. Spend time discussing the role of the Kennedy Administration and how they helped and hindered the Freedom Riders in their pursuit of justice. In addition, examine how the widespread media coverage of the rides reflected on America in the world, specifically with the Soviet Union. CCSS ELA-Literacy.SL9-10.4; Blueprint: Making Connections.

Freedom Rides and the Cold War

ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

Fairy Tale Brainstorming

The biographies on this page are only a small sampling of the key figures involved in the Freedom Rides. Using the list that follows, have students choose a person to write a short biography about that they can share with the class. The biography should focus on this person’s role within the Freedom Ride movement. CCSS ELA-Literacy W9-10.4; Blueprint: Making Connections.

Ralph Abernathy
Catherine Burks-Brooks
Pauline Knight-Ofusu
Carmichael
Benjamin Elton Cox
Rabbi Israel “Si” Dresner
Genevieve Hughes Houghton
Bernard Lafayette Jr.
Glenda Gaither Davis
Joan Trumpauer Mulholland
William Harbour
James Peck
Charles Person
CT Vivian
Hank Thomas
Robert F. Kennedy
John F. Kennedy
Eugene “Bull” Connor

KEY PLAYERS

JAMES FARMER

“I was certain I was going to die. What kind of death would it be? Would they mutilate me first? What does it feel like to die? Then I grew panicky about the insurance. Had I paid the last installment? My wife and little girls—how would it be for them? Well, damn it, if I had to die, at least let the organization wring some use out of my death. I hoped the newspapers were out there. Plenty of them. With plenty of cameras.”

James Farmer was the co-founder and National Director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the architect of the original CORE Freedom Ride of 1961. Farmer saw the significance of desegregating interstate travel and envisioned the ride as a way to spotlight CORE and its philosophy of nonviolent direct action. Farmer took part in the ride, but returned to Washington, D.C. from Atlanta on the morning of May 14 for his father’s funeral. On May 21, Farmer flew to rejoin the riders in Montgomery. Upon arriving in Jackson three days later, Farmer was jailed for “breach of peace” and other charges and later was transferred to Mississippi’s notorious Parchman State Prison Farm.

DIANE NASH

“It was clear to me that if we allowed the Freedom Ride to stop at that point, just after so much violence had been inflicted, the message would have been sent that all you have to do to stop a nonviolent campaign is inflict massive violence.”

Raised in a middle-class Catholic family in Chicago, Nash was shocked to experience brash Southern segregation when she began college at Nashville’s Fisk University in 1959. Her outrage led to action and she became one of the most respected student leaders of the sit-in movement in Nashville. After hearing about the bus burning and rioting that besieged the Freedom Riders in Birmingham and Anniston, she gathered support amongst her peers and community leaders and recruited a brave group to pick up the Freedom Rides where they left off. Elected the coordinator of the Nashville Student Movement Ride, she oversaw the second wave of Freedom Riders.

JOHN SEIGENTHALER

“I grew up in the South, the child of good and decent parents...I don't know where my head or heart was, or my parents' heads and hearts, or my teachers’. I never heard it once from the pulpit. We were blind to the reality of racism and afraid of change.”

John Seigenthaler grew up in Nashville and worked as a newspaper reporter before he became a special assistant to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy in January of 1961. He served as the liaison between the federal government, the Freedom Riders, and white segregationist state officials. On May 15th, he successfully arranged and escorted the original CORE Freedom Riders to safety in New Orleans.

JOHN LEWIS

“All of us must get in the revolution. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village and every hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the revolution is complete.”

(Excerpted from Lewis’ speech from the March on Washington. Full text can be found here.)

John Lewis, US Representative for Georgia’s 5th congressional district, was one of the prominent leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. One of the best-known among the Freedom Riders, he began with the initial CORE Freedom Riders, left briefly to interview for a fellowship on the day of the violent bus burning in Anniston, then helped to convince his friends and mentors in Nashville to continue the rides. He ultimately rode to Birmingham, faced the angry mob in Montgomery, and was arrested in Jackson, where he ultimately served jail time at Mississippi's Parchman State Prison Farm.

Following the rides, he served as the chairman of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), speaking at the 1963 March on Washington and playing a major role in the 1965 Selma—Montgomery March alongside Martin Luther King Jr.
**DISSECTING A DOCUMENTARY**

*Freedom Riders* is a documentary film whose purpose, as the name suggests, is to document a very important event in history. It is helpful for students to be able to look at a film such as *Freedom Riders* and have an understanding of the many components that are woven together in order to create a coherent, compelling viewing experience that honors the story. The table below breaks down the varied components that one might find in a documentary film, many of which are used in *Freedom Riders*. In addition, it is valuable for students to understand that a documentary film is a constructed piece of media. The process by which the visual, audio, and text track are cut, trimmed, layered, ordered, and integrated to create the final film is called editing. It is the editor’s job to work with the director and make decisions about how to integrate all the components below to tell the story in a clear and engaging way.

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Use one of the following two clips from Freedom Riders for this activity:
“The Student Leader”
or Chapter 7 “Diane Nash” 45:37-48:15
*Please note: These clips contain the word “nigger” used in a context that honestly communicates the harshness of the bigoted language.

1) Use the following questions to begin a brainstorming session with students about documentary film.
What is a documentary?
What are some of the differences between fictional and non-fictional (documentary) films?
How do they look different? Sound different?
Which documentary films have you seen?
What are some things we find in documentary films that we do not find in fictional/narrative films?

2) Now, have students watch one of the two suggested clips. After viewing, ask the following questions: What is happening in this clip? Who do we meet? What do we learn about her? Who is giving us information? What do we see? What inferences can we make about the film on the whole from this clip?

3) Ask students to think about the last research paper they wrote. What was their process? Did they begin with an outline? A thesis statement? How did they gather information? What sources did they use? Explain that a documentary is developed in a similar way, except the sources can be experts on the subject at hand, historical footage, photographs, etc. that are compiled and often appear in the end product.

4) Next, identify the three basic documentary film tracks outlined in the chart. As a class, see if students can fill in the columns under the main heading on the table above identifying the different components of documentary film. Review any that they do not identify on their own.

5) Give students a blank piece of paper and have them watch the same clip, this time listing the different components as they come up in the clip. For example: Song with vocals, still image, instrumental music/underscoring, interview, historical television footage, etc. More cinema savvy students can also identify the various pans and zooming in and out that occurs with the still images, as well as camera shots and angles.

6) Discuss what they have listed and how editing helps to meld the three tracks together effectively. If time permits, use the second clip and do the same activity.

CCSS ELA-Literacy SL9-10.1; Blueprint: Literacy, Making Connections.
THROUGH THE LENS
Prior to a pre-screening lesson or unit, use one of the iconographic photos taken of the Freedom Riders (such as Joseph Postigliano's image of the bus that was set on fire), to engage students in the subject matter. There are numerous images readily available on the internet.

- To begin with (and without any prior discussion) give the students two minutes to examine a copy of the photograph you have chosen. They should formulate an overall impression and then examine its individual elements.
- Immediately after this examination, have students write a two to three line caption or phrase that they feel describes the photo.
- Next, ask students to create three lists, documenting details about the people, objects, and activities based on a close examination of the photo.
- Have students write three things they can infer about the event based on the photo and ask them to list at least three questions that this photo raises for them.
- Have students share their inferences and questions with the class and discuss.
- As an extension to the exercise, have students find and bring in another Freedom Riders image that they find compelling and create a place in the classroom where these images can be displayed.

SEGREGATION AND THE SOUTH
One of the programs from which the film Freedom Riders took a great deal of archival footage was, “Who Speaks for Birmingham.” Broadcast during the visible rise of the civil rights movement in the media, this cutting edge CBS program reported on the racial divide between the white and black communities of Birmingham, Alabama. Residents testify to their conflicted feelings about how racial integration will affect their lives, with very differing portraits of the bus.

Prior to screening, ask students to listen closely to the opinions that both parties being interviewed express. After they have watched both clips, proceed with the following discussion questions:

What is Mrs. Bridges’ opinion on segregation and prejudice in Birmingham?
How does she justify her assertions?
How is Reverend Shuttleworth’s experience of segregation different than Mrs. Bridges?
How do you think people in 1961 responded when their program aired on television?

THE OTHER SIDE
Below is a quote taken from the film by H. Brandt Ayers, publisher of the Anniston Star, who tries to explain the Southern mentality during the Freedom Rides. (Clip: 20:59 – 22:07) Share this quote with students and have them write a reflective essay in response to it. In their essay, students should reflect on how they would respond to someone who shared these views, the challenge of being nonviolent in the face of such views, whether these ideas and beliefs still remain in our society today, and who might be the groups marginalized now.

“It was a very disconcerting period. It was as if one civilization was coming unhinged and was free-floating and taking on water. People in the South felt: I’m being asked to live in a different way, I’m asked to have different attitudes, I’m asked to behave differently. And as I’m being made to do all of these things, there are people who come on the TV in my own living room and tell me that I’m a redneck, and I’m a racist, and I’m all of these things—and by God, I’d like to…I’d just like to punch some of those—damn agitators right in the face! I gotta hate somebody!"

NYC ELA Standards: E2f, E4a, E4b; Blueprint: Making Connections.

WOULD YOU GET ON THE BUS?
While the Freedom Riders eventually gained a great deal of support for their actions, in the beginning, many prominent leaders in the Movement, including Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King Jr., as well as the Kennedy Administration, tried to dissuade the riders from going forward, believing that their actions would do more harm than good. Nevertheless, hundreds of people applied to be on that first bus and hundreds more joined in the rides after the initial group set out.

View the following clip of Percy Sutton (NAACP activist, lawyer for Malcolm X) explaining how he struggled with the decision of whether or not to get on the bus.

Students can respond in the following ways:

A written response that answers the question: Would you get on the bus?

A written “application essay” to be a Freedom Rider.

A letter to their parents asking them for permission to go on the rides (anyone under 21 needed parental consent) and explaining why they want to take part.

CCSS ELA Literary W.9-10.4; Blueprint: Making Connections.

NON-VIOLENT PROTEST
The roots of non-violent protest and civil disobedience can be traced back to Mohandas Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau. Civil Rights leaders were well versed in the theories and writings of both. Look at the writings of one or both of these figures in class, or have students explore them outside of class. ELA Standards: E1a, E5a, E6a.
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Leadership support for BAM Education Programs is provided by Altman Foundation and The Irene Diamond Fund.

Expansion of BAM’s Community and Education Programs made possible by the support of The SHS Foundation.

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Leadership support for educational film screenings and Brooklyn reads is provided by Goldman Sachs Gives at the recommendation of David and Susan Marcinek.

Development of new education and community initiatives at the BAM Fisher supported by Brooklyn Community Foundation; Rockefeller Brothers Fund; and The Skirball Foundation.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/

**RESOURCES**

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