

Movement One Discussion Guide

Carrying What Remains: How Black Americans Reclaim Histories Shaped by Rupture



Document: Carrying-What-Remains.pdf

Reading Time: ~3–4 hours | **Discussion Format:** 1–2 sessions × 90 minutes

OVERVIEW

This essay traces the tools and methods Black Americans use to reclaim histories that were systematically erased through slavery, forced migration, and racial classification systems. It argues that reclamation is both an act of research and an act of refusal - refusing to accept that undocumented means ahistorical, or that fragmentation determines meaning.

Core Question: If the archive was built to hide Black histories, how do we recover what remains?

OPENING REFLECTION (10 minutes)

Have each participant share: *Is there a silence in your own family history - a question you've never been able to ask, or an answer you've never received? What does that silence feel like?*

PART 1: UNDERSTANDING THE ARCHIVE'S GAPS

(Parts 1–2, pp. 1–14)

Discussion Questions (30 minutes)

Understanding the Architecture of Erasure

1. According to the essay, was the fragmentation of Black American history accidental or deliberate? What evidence does it give?
2. What specific mechanisms broke Black historical continuity? (Middle Passage, naming suppression, kinship severing, etc.)
3. How does the essay distinguish between “archive gap” and “neutral absence”? Why does this distinction matter?

Reading Against the Grain

4. The essay says the archive must be read “against its own biases.” What does this mean in practice?
5. What official records still yield evidence (census, Freedmen’s Bureau, church records, etc.)?
6. Why are Black women’s histories particularly difficult to trace in the archive?

Connecting Forward

7. Where does the essay suggest the paper trail ends? What other methods pick up where records fail?

Activity (15 minutes)

Mapping the Gap: Draw a timeline showing where official records typically stop for Black American families (e.g., 1870 census first names enslaved people). Mark where alternative methods must begin.

PART 2: SILENCE AS TESTIMONY

(Part 3, pp. 15–21)

Discussion Questions (30 minutes)

Understanding Silence

1. The essay identifies four types of silence in Black families. What are they? (Trauma, strategy, migration, grief/shame)
2. How does silence function as a “historical record” rather than an absence?
3. Why is indirect questioning more effective than direct questioning in oral history collection?

Ethics of Interpretation

4. What danger does the essay warn about when interpreting silence?
5. How do you distinguish between “silence that preserves” and “silence that marks genuine loss”?

Personal Application

6. Where have you seen silence operate as protection rather than emptiness in your own family or community?

Activity (15 minutes)

Listening to Silence: In pairs, share one family silence or unexplained detail. Discuss: What conditions might have produced this silence? What other sources might illuminate it?

PART 3: GEOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL MEMORY

(Parts 4–5, pp. 22–34)

Discussion Questions (30 minutes)

Geography as Evidence

1. How does the essay argue that place itself carries historical memory?
2. What forms of place-based genealogical work does it highlight? (cemeteries, church geography, migration routes)
3. How did the Great Migration function as both rupture and geographic knowledge transfer?

Cultural Practice

4. Why does the essay say cultural practice survives when explicit narrative cannot?
5. What specific cultural practices does it cite as carriers of historical memory? (foodways, healing, mourning, naming, speech)
6. How should researchers approach claims of African or Indigenous cultural retention?

Complexity and Humility

7. What does the essay mean by saying Black American culture is “creolized”?
8. Why is reducing cultural evidence to a single origin story problematic?

Activity (15 minutes)

Tracing Practice: In small groups, identify one family or community practice (food, greeting, mourning, celebration, healing). Discuss what history it might encode - without claiming certainty.

PART 4: BLACK-INDIGENOUS INTERSECTIONS

(Part 6, pp. 35–38)

Discussion Questions (30 minutes)

Historical Context

1. What does the essay reveal about Black-Indigenous coexistence in the Southeast before the Civil War?
2. How did racial classification systems erase these connections?
3. What is the significance of the Dawes Rolls in obscuring Black-Indigenous ancestry?

Research Considerations

4. How should families evaluate claims of Indigenous ancestry?
5. What tools are available for investigating this intersection? (DNA, oral tradition, geography, tribal records)
6. Why does the essay caution against both dismissal AND overconfidence?

Personal/Community Application

7. Where do you see Black-Indigenous history erased or simplified in mainstream narratives?
8. Why does recovering these intersections matter for historical accuracy?

Activity (15 minutes)

Mapping Intersection: Research one southeastern region (e.g., Coosa Valley, Alabama). Identify documented Black-Indigenous contact in that area. Discuss what this means for families from that region.

PART 5: AFRICA AND LIVING INHERITANCE

(Part 7, pp. 39–41)

Discussion Questions (30 minutes)

What the Slave Trade Took

1. Which regions of West and Central Africa supplied the American enslaved population?
2. What specific things did the slave trade strip away? What did it fail to remove?

Certainty vs. Belonging

3. How does the essay distinguish between “certainty” and “belonging” in African reconnection?
4. Why is demanding documentary proof of specific origins problematic?
5. How can Black Americans claim relationship to African history without specific genealogical confirmation?

DNA Testing

6. What are the limitations of consumer DNA testing for African ancestry?
7. How should DNA results be positioned within a larger research practice?

Living Inheritance

8. What does it mean to engage African history as “living inheritance” rather than background research?
9. What African scholarship, intellectual traditions, or contemporary work should Black Americans engage with?

Activity (15 minutes)

Rebuilding Relationship: Each participant identifies one way to deepen their relationship to African history (reading, study, cultural practice, community engagement). Share one commitment.

PART 6: RECLAMATION AS RESEARCH AND REFUSAL

(Part 8 + Conclusion, pp. 41–42)

Discussion Questions (30 minutes)

Methodology

1. What does “reclamation as refusal” mean in this context?
2. How does the essay extend the definition of “evidence” beyond official documentation?
3. What scholarly precedents support using oral history, cultural practice, and geography?

Individual and Collective

4. How does individual family research contribute to collective historical repair?
5. What does it mean to build a “corrected account of American history”?

Incomplete Recovery

6. How does the essay handle the reality that some things cannot be recovered?
7. Why is acknowledging incompleteness part of historical integrity?

Final Reflection

8. What does it mean that “fragmentation is a condition within which a story can still be found”?
9. How does the essay’s claim that “what remains is not a remnant - it is a foundation” land with you?

Activity (15 minutes)

Designing Reclamation: In small groups, design one concrete reclamation project (family, community, or institutional). What methods would it use? What evidence would it gather? What boundaries would it honor?

CROSS-THEME TRACKING

Theme	Appears in	Key Idea
Erasure Was Designed	Parts 1, 8	Gaps are consequences, not accidents
Silence as Source	Parts 2, 3	What wasn’t said tells a story
Evidence Beyond Archives	All parts	Cultural practice, geography, oral tradition
Certainty vs. Belonging	Parts 5, 7	Relationship doesn’t require proof
Reclamation as Refusal	Parts 6, 8	Methodology is political stance

FACILITATOR NOTES

Timing Options

Format	Sessions	Per Session	Total Time
Single Deep Dive	1	3 hours	3 hours (+ breaks)
Standard	2	90 minutes	3 hours
Extended	4	60 minutes	4 hours (over weeks)

Preparation

- Provide summary of Part 1 (Architecture of Erasure) for participants unfamiliar with the topic
- Consider pairing with local historical society resources for genealogical research
- Prepare list of recommended readings (Du Bois, Alexander, Rothstein, etc.)

Common Challenges

Challenge	Mitigation
Emotional weight of family silences	Build in processing time; offer wellness resources
Overconfidence in DNA results	Emphasize limitations; position as one tool
Defensiveness about historical claims	Frame as inquiry, not proof-seeking
Feeling overwhelmed by scope	Start with one method (family silence, one practice, one region)

POST-DISCUSSION INTEGRATION

Individual Next Steps

1. Identify one family silence to investigate
2. Choose one alternative method (oral history, geography, cultural practice) to try
3. Locate one African region relevant to family's likely origins for study

Group Follow-Up Options

- Genealogy research swap meet (share findings, troubleshoot gaps)
- Cemetery visit or geography-based field trip
- Reading group (pair with scholarship cited in the essay)
- Community archive project documentation

CLOSING QUOTE

“What remains, even after honest accounting of the losses, is considerable. Names survive in margins. Practices outlasted the prohibition of the languages they once accompanied. Landscapes carry the memory of the communities that shaped them... What remains is enough to build on, enough to rebuild relationship with.”

- **Conclusion, Carrying What Remains**

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