

Movement One Discussion Guide

Ground That Remembers: A Three-Essay Series



Document: Ground-That-Remembers_A-Three-Essay-Series.pdf

Reading Time: ~4–5 hours total | **Discussion Format:** 3 sessions × 90 minutes

OVERVIEW

This Discussion Guide covers all three essays in the “Ground That Remembers” series:

Essay	Title	Pages	Core Question
I	The Evolution of the Institution of Slavery in North America	6–21	How was slavery assembled?
II	The Long Memory of the Law	22–55	How did punishment continue after emancipation?
III	From Emancipation to Ownership	56–end	How was land withheld, and how is it reclaimed?

Purpose: To help groups read these essays together, trace the connections between them, and identify how these historical patterns relate to present-day systems and possibilities for repair.

SESSION 1: HOW THE INSTITUTION WAS ASSEMBLED

(Essay I, pp. 6–21)

Opening Reflection (10 minutes)

Have each participant share: *What is something you once saw as permanent or inevitable that turned out to be built - piece by piece - by human choices?*

Discussion Questions (60 minutes)

Understanding the Argument

1. The essay argues slavery was “assembled” rather than “born.” What evidence does it give for this?
2. What are the **four analytical pillars** the essay uses to show how slavery was constructed?
3. How does the essay distinguish indentured servitude from chattel slavery? Why does this distinction matter?

Deepening the Analysis 4. What role does the law play in completing the institution? (Section V) 5. Where do you see evidence of the “Atlantic frame” - how the institution connected to wider empires and capital? 6. What does Section VII mean when it says: *“What was raised by human will can be recognized by human understanding, and one day, by that same understanding, refused to be built again”*?

Connecting Forward 7. Where does this essay plant seeds that Essay II later develops? (Hint: Consider the John Punch case, 1640.) 8. Which pillar feels most relevant to systems you see today? Why?

Activity (15 minutes)

Mapping Construction: Draw a simple timeline showing the four pillars in sequence. Add one contemporary example where you see a similar pattern of slow assembly (policy, norm, infrastructure, etc.).

Closing (5 minutes)

Note the connection to Session 2: Essay II begins with the 1640 John Punch case referenced here.

SESSION 2: PUNISHMENT’S LONG MEMORY + RESISTANCE

(Essay II, pp. 22–55)

Opening Reflection (10 minutes)

Share: *Where have you witnessed a system adapt and continue under a new name after being challenged?*

Discussion Questions (60 minutes)

Understanding the Argument

1. What is the significance of the 1640 John Punch case? Why is it called the “first stone”?
2. Trace the lineage: slave codes → Black Codes → convict leasing → Jim Crow → War on Drugs → mass incarceration. What stays constant?
3. What is Michelle Alexander’s central argument that the essay repeatedly cites?

Deepening the Analysis 4. What does the essay mean by the “Thirteenth Amendment loophole”? How was it used? 5. How does the essay describe the “manufacturing of Black criminality”? 6. What is the relationship between the “long memory of the law” and the “parallel inheritance of resistance”?

Connecting Forward 7. Where do you see the “neutral language” of the War on Drugs mirroring earlier systems? 8. How does Section IX reframe resistance as not just reaction but as *“a tradition with its own life, its own memory”*?

Activity (15 minutes)

Parallel Threads Exercise: Create two columns – “Control Mechanisms” and “Answering Refusals.” Fill each with examples from the essay. What pattern emerges?

Closing (5 minutes)

Note the connection to Session 3: Essay II ends with the question of what it would mean to break the law’s long memory. Essay III answers this through land ownership.

SESSION 3: LAND, DISPOSSESSION, AND OWNERSHIP AS REPAIR

(Essay III, pp. 56–end)

Opening Reflection (10 minutes)

Share: *What does it mean to have “a place to stand”? Where have you experienced belonging - or the lack of it?*

Discussion Questions (60 minutes)

Understanding the Argument

1. What is the distinction between “freedom from bondage” and “freedom to belong”?
2. What happened to the promise of “forty acres”?

3. Define heirs' property and partition sale. Why are these mechanisms of dispossession?
4. What is redlining, and how does it connect to today's racial wealth gap?

Deepening the Analysis 5. How does the essay frame gentrification as “*the closing half of a circle drawn generations ago*”? 6. What is the relationship between “root shock” and physical displacement? 7. How do community land trusts and cooperatives answer the lessons of dispossession?

Connecting Forward 8. Where do you see the “refusal that holds the line” in your own community or networks? 9. What does the closing section mean by “*ownership reimagined as repair*”?

Activity (15 minutes)

Designing Belonging: In pairs, sketch one concrete initiative that could help someone in your community hold ground (literally or figuratively). What resources would it need? What threats would it face?

Closing (5 minutes)

Return to the Foreword's invitation: “*Turn the page, and listen. The soil has been waiting a long while to be heard.*” What does it mean to listen - to the ground, to the history, to the unfinished labor?

CROSS-SESSION THEMES TO TRACK

Track these themes across all three sessions:

Theme	Appears in	Key Idea
Assembly vs. Nature	Essay I	Systems are built, not natural
Continuity Across Eras	Essay II	What looks like rupture is often redesign
Refusal as Tradition	Essays II & III	Resistance is continuous, not reactive
Ownership as Freedom	Essay III	Land ownership is the material foundation of liberty
Repair as Labor	All three	The work of mending what was broken

FACILITATOR NOTES

Before You Begin

- Ensure participants read the **Foreword** before Session 1 - it frames the entire three-essay arc
- Print or share key excerpts: John Punch case (Essay II), 40 acres (Essay III), community land trust (Essay III)
- Prepare a simple timeline handout showing the 400-year arc across all essays

Timing Options

Format	Sessions	Per Session	Total Time
Standard	3	90 minutes	4.5 hours
Intensive	1	6 hours	6 hours (+ breaks)
Extended	6	60 minutes	6 hours (over 2 months)

Common Challenges

Challenge	Mitigation
Overwhelm from historical scope	Emphasize the “assembly” argument - systems can be dismantled
Emotional intensity	Build in processing time; provide wellness resources
Defensiveness about “guilt”	Frame around “unfinished labor” and collective responsibility
Abstract theory	Keep anchoring to concrete examples and local applications

After Each Session

- Allow 5 minutes for individual reflection before closing
- Send a brief summary email with the next session’s reading and one discussion prompt
- Check in with participants about pacing and depth

POST-SERIES INTEGRATION

Individual Reflection Prompts

1. Which moment in the three essays surprised you most? Why?
2. Where do you see the “long memory” operating in your field, work, or community?

3. What is one concrete action that honors the “unfinished labor” described?

Group Follow-Up Options

- Book club pairing with recommended texts (Alexander, Du Bois, Rothstein, Coates, White)
- Community audit: Map one local system for “assembly” and “resistance” patterns
- Action planning: Develop one concrete repair initiative in participants’ spheres

CLOSING QUOTE

“The ground remembers. It carries the weight of every harvest gathered and every harvest stolen, every cabin raised and every town burned, every promise made at dawn and broken before dusk.”

- Foreword, *The Long Memory of the Ground*

ATTRIBUTION

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