

A SURJ Discussion Guide

We know that sometimes mass media can be an entry point into this work for people. With the movie 'If Beale Street Could Talk' stirring up conversation about race and racism, here's a discussion guide from Showing Up for Racial Justice for talking with friends, family, co workers and in SURJ chapters, using the film as a jumping off point. While this discussion guide is geared towards largely white groups, for spaces with Black folks and folks of color who are discussing the movie, and/or leading discussion, some questions may need to be adjusted.

IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK

'If Beale Street Could Talk' is directed by Barry Jenkins (who also directed 'Moonlight') and based on James Baldwin's 1974 novel of the same title. There are many questions here, and they are intended to give you a range of questions to choose from to start the conversation, and of course the conversation will take its own direction. There are some 'notes for facilitators' included below.

Grounding

You may want to open with an Indigenous land acknowledgment, in keeping with Indigenous protocol of opening any gathering. If you are doing a meeting virtually, it can be an acknowledgment that all of Turtle Island [North America] is Indigenous land. You may want to start with some kind of check in that makes sense for the group, depending on who you are.

Introductory Questions

How did it feel to see the film?

[Note for facilitators: Keep the focus on feeling words here. Ask people to be in touch with what was coming up emotionally. You may want to have everyone go around and answer, so everyone can participate. This may take the entire time, and that's okay.]

- How did it feel to see this majority Black film?
- Did you notice who was in the movie theatre with you? How did that feel?

General Reflections

- What were some of the most joyful moments of the film for you?
- Most beautiful scenes?
- What were some of the most painful moments?
- What other feelings came up for you while watching the film?

White people & white supremacy in the film

- What were the many levels of institutional oppression & anti-Black racism & class oppression & 'national oppression' that Tish & Fonny and their families and communities are fighting against? *[Some examples include: housing discrimination, unemployment & low-wage labor, legal oppression - the law as a weapon, brutality and targeting from cops]*
- What did you notice about the depictions of white people in the film?
- How did it feel to see white people depicted in these different ways? *[Again may be useful to ask people to really name some feelings.]*
- Do you think it was accurate?
- Which white people in the film did you relate to/resonate with?

Here are some specific examples of white characters:

- White male cop
- Libby (young white Jewish man who wants to rent the apartment to them) - He says "I'm just my mother's son. Sometimes that's all that makes a difference between us and them." Is there something being said here specifically about Jewish values?
- The many unnamed/unseen white people who will not rent to them
- White women in the film - ie. Italian grocery lady who defends them in front of the cop
- White male lawyer - he believes in the system, is not initially invested in the case. This is challenging his worldview, he wants to do what he views as 'right and just.' Also his white male lawyer colleagues at the law firm create distance from him as he gets deeper into the case.

Gender and Men's violence against women

[Note for facilitators: Please be careful around these questions, include trigger warnings if you are going to talk about sexual violence. Consider the gender dynamics of who is facilitating and who is in the room, ie maybe don't have a cis-dude facilitating discussions of men's violence against women with a room of women & femme folks.]

- What are the ways that gender violence is central to this story? [For example, the story is about Victoria being raped. We see when Fonny's father hits Fonny's mother.]
- How do gendered expectations play out in the film?
- How does prison affect not just the person who is imprisoned, but also their families and their partners? For example, we see how the extreme trauma that Fonny is experiencing in prison is being passed on to Tish in some ways.
- What roles do Black women play in this story? Think about the specific roles of Tish and her mother, Regina.

Scene with Fonny's friend Daniel Daniel copped a plea to stealing a car for having some weed on him

Some quotes from Daniel to bring up conversation around this. [Note that these are not exact quotes, just here to help inspire more discussion.]

- ~ Daniel: 'I understand what Malcolm and those cats were talking about when they said that the white man is the devil, because he certainly ain't a human being'
 - ~ Daniel: 'I saw things that I'll be dreaming about for the rest of my life'
 - ~ Fonny: 'You're out now'
 - ~ Daniel: 'I hear you, and I appreciate it, but you don't know'
 - ~ Daniel: 'They make you so fucking scared'
- What did this scene bring up for you?
 - How did addiction show up in this film and how was it connected to anti-Black oppression and racism? *For example: Daniel is seen drinking a lot, repeatedly asking for more beers.*

Prisons

This film shows how prisons decimate Black families and communities.

- How would you describe the impact prisons have? Some things you may want to name: devastating family connections; increasing violence within communities and families; genocidal.
- What does this film expose about the inhumanity of the prison system?

Conclusion & Taking Action

Links to what is happening today

Most people in prison today take a plea bargain and never go to a jury trial. To link the movie to what is happening today, according to a New York Times op-ed from 2012 by Michelle Alexander, "[More than 90 percent of criminal cases are never tried before a jury. Most people charged with crimes forfeit their constitutional rights and plead guilty.](#)" In addition, many people are sitting in jail simply because they cannot pay bail - they have never been convicted, but are serving time simply for being accused. This affects cash-poor folks. Many people serve long times in horrible and dangerous conditions in jail. Some die in jail because they cannot make bail. In some cases like [Kalief Browder in New York City](#), people come home and commit suicide as a result of the trauma they faced while waiting in jail.

What can we do?

Support work to end cash bail; and work towards a world without prisons. If you are able, donate to organizations doing this work. [The Bail Project](#) is collecting funds and bailing people out of jail who could not otherwise afford bail. Check out "[10 Lessons Learned From the Black Mama's Bail Out Action,](#)" from [Southerners on New Ground \(SONG\)](#). Support and donate to Black-led orgs, such as the [Black Lives Matter](#) global network. Learn more through [Nomoneybail.org](#), a project of Color of Change. Help SURJ undermine white people's support for white supremacy, you can [donate here](#).