

# PBS's 'Banished' Exposes the Tainted Past of Three White Enclaves

In Areas That Expelled Blacks a Century Ago, Willful Blindness -- and Hope

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"I don't hate white people," says Marco Williams, director of the documentary "Banished," which examines three Southern towns where African American citizens were violently expelled more than a century ago. "But it's not exactly easy to sit across from a Ku Klux Klan member and discuss cross burning."

Williams, who calls his filmmaking a "personal mission," visits the nearly all-white towns, calmly asking uncomfortable questions ("Where did you think the black people had gone?"). He shows old newspaper photographs of lynchings and watches quietly as the current citizens, and some descendants of the banished, confront their difficult history to varying degrees.

His goal in making the film (airing tonight on MPT)? To find a steppingstone to reconciliation.

Harrison, Ark., which bills itself as one of the "Best Small Towns in America," was the site of an expulsion in 1905. Today, Thomas Robb, 61, the national director of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, makes his home nearby.

In the film, Williams listens as Robb defends cross burning as "cross lighting, an old Scottish tradition." Bob Scott, a retiree, says he moved to Harrison for the "lack of blacks." And Layne Wheeler, of the Harrison Chamber of Commerce, deems the Confederate flag flying outside her office window a harmless nod to history.

"My role playing helped reveal the idiocy or hypocrisy of a situation," Williams says.

Why, though, would the citizens of Harrison speak so candidly to Williams? "I make a habit of never lying, ever," Scott, 80, says by phone from Arkansas.

Wheeler, 47, believes it is vital to acknowledge her town's past. She says Williams depicted Harrison fairly, although she downplays the influence of Robb. And she is quick to mention that the flag has been changed to "a different version of the Confederate flag, not the symbol of the hate groups" -- and that a six-year-old community task force on race relations is developing a driving tour of the former African American neighborhood.

For his part, Robb, who compares a Klan hood to a businessman's tie ("It's just tradition," he says), believes the film is "an attempt by an elitist crowd" to force integration on Harrison and "to create white guilt."

"I am not responsible for the acts of my forefathers, good or bad," he says, adding that someone told him "we'll probably get a lot of new membership."

In another segment, one that Williams believes typifies "the complexity of the problems between blacks and whites," he follows two brothers, James and Charles Brown, descendants of a family banished from Pierce City, Mo., in 1901, as they navigate a bureaucratic maze while attempting to exhume their great-grandfather's body from an unmarked grave -- and only afterward request that the town pay their expenses. (Williams also visits Forsyth County in Georgia.)

"Whites are caught up in process," Williams says, "and blacks don't trust whites. Both sides are injured and confused."

"Banished" was inspired by the work of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Elliot Jaspin, who describes "an archipelago of white or virtually all-white counties along the Mason-Dixon Line and into the Midwest." The film

raises the issue of reparations for the descendants of the banished, whose forefathers often lost their homes and possessions.

"Unlike reparations for slavery, land is something we can all relate to," Williams says. "It's the crux of so many battles and wars."

In conversation at his office at New York University, where he teaches documentary film production, Williams suggests that a federal fund, created by a national reparations tax, could help descendants of the banished buy back stolen land at market prices from landowners willing to sell. He praises other kinds of remedy, "an apology, a monument, a scholarship," emphasizing reconciliation and the chance to create reinvigorated, diverse communities.

A similar impulse for reconciliation sparked Williams's career. Williams was a 24-year-old senior at Harvard University when he first heard his father's name. Over the following decade, while Williams studied for two master's degrees at UCLA, he documented his family's four fatherless generations and his own attempts to meet his father. The result: "In Search of Our Fathers," an examination of African American family life that was nominated for a Grand Jury Prize at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival.

Williams lives on the Lower East Side, blocks from where he grew up as the only child of a single mother. "The adage that you can't go home again is hardly true," he says.

He has made 10 films about race relations, including "Two Towns of Jasper" (with co-director Whitney Dow, a filmmaking partner), set in Jasper, Tex., the site of a racially motivated murder of an African American in 1998. The documentary -- which was made with two directors, one white and one black, and two crews, one white and one black -- won a Peabody Award in 2004.

The personal cost of his work? "Anger and resentment and hurt that often comes in the guise of great disappointment in white people for being so unconscious," he says, his voice dropping to nearly inaudible. "Why can't white people be proactive about learning about race in America?" he says, elaborating: "True to racial form, when I show the film, blacks say, 'Oh, yes, and what about this town or that town' and whites are shocked."

Yet he is adamant about the necessity to remain compassionate. "To be angry and make demands solely will not invite your enemy to meet you partway."

"To be a black man in America means that I live in a world that is skewed, that is fraught with destructiveness and violence," he says. "As filmmakers, if we turn the mirror 15 or 30 degrees, we can see what's possible."

*Banished* (90 minutes) airs tonight at 10 on Channel 22.

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