

If Emmett Till Lived: Freedom on American Ground
September 10–December 19, 2026
Education Guide



Diana Matar, *Unknown African American Male*, Scurry, Texas, 2016.

This guide serves as a supplement to the exhibition *If Emmett Till Lived: Freedom on American Ground*, guest curated by Dr. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis in collaboration with Reverend Wheeler Parker Jr., and includes information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, activities, and suggested readings. You may learn more about educational programs at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago (MoCP) [here](#). To schedule a tour of the exhibition or a viewing of prints from the museum's permanent collection, please complete this [form](#).

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Prepare for Your Visit

Before exploring this exhibition, we encourage you to visit the dedicated website for the exhibition and larger initiative at ifemmettlived.org and to learn more about Emmett Till's life and legacy through the [Emmett Till Memory Project](#) (ETMP) and the [Equal Justice Initiative](#) (EJI).

ETMP, developed through a collaboration among the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, Dr. Dave Tell of the University of Kansas, and the design firm Included by FAVOR, is an interactive project that offers historical context and invites visitors to engage with the places, people, and events connected to Emmett Till's story. EJI, founded by Bryan Stevenson, works to deepen public understanding of America's history of racial injustice through research, education, and memorial projects. The resources on their website invite visitors to learn more about the history of lynching and its connection to the circumstances surrounding Emmett Till's murder.



Emmett Till and his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, circa 1953-1955. Photo sourced by the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001701641/>.

Emmett Till's Story: An Introduction

Emmett Till was born on July 25, 1941 just outside of Chicago, Illinois. He was known by all as Bobo, living with his mother Mamie Till-Mobley and grandmother Alma Spearman in Argo. In the summer of 1955, while visiting family in Mississippi, 14-year-old Emmett visited a country store, Bryant's Grocery & Meat Market. He was heard whistling at a white woman, the store clerk, as corroborated by his cousin, the then-16-year-old Wheeler Parker. The whistle violated the racial caste system of Jim Crow rule that kept the economic, civic, and social subordination of black Americans the law of the land. Days later, the woman's husband, Roy Bryant, his half-brother, J.W. Milam, and another man abducted Till from his great-uncle Moses Wright's home, then tortured, mutilated, and killed him, throwing his body into the Tallahatchie River weighted with a cotton gin fan. His body surfaced three days later at Graball Landing and was returned to Chicago per his mother's request. Bryant and Milam were acquitted that summer by an all-white jury and would later confess to murdering Till without remorse.

Emmett's funeral marked a turning point in American history. His mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, made the decision to hold an open-casket funeral, "to let the world see what I've seen." More than 100,000 people filed past his casket in Chicago; the publication of his mutilated body in the black press—*Jet*, *Ebony*, and the *Chicago Defender*—stirred black communities nationally. That act of public witness is widely credited as a catalyst for the modern Civil Rights Movement, invoked by figures from Rosa Parks to John Lewis to Muhammad Ali to Martin Luther King Jr., and echoing forward through the March on Washington, held on the eighth anniversary of Till's death.



Mrs. Mamie Bradley Till-Mobley, mother of lynch victim Emmett Till, getting the first look at the brutally battered body of her son, August 1955.
David Jackson—EBONY Collection.

What If Emmett Till Lived?

Emmett Till could have turned 85 years old this year, had he survived beyond boyhood. This exhibition presents a meditation on what Till could have experienced if he were not murdered in an act of horrendous racial violence in 1955. Instead of showing us images of Till's life, the exhibition draws on photographs by more than 110 photographers from the Museum of Contemporary Photography's permanent collection to present various moments of daily life, such as people at leisure, as parents, workers, and elders.

This exhibition is not an attempt to reconstruct a specific biography. Rather, as referred to by Lewis, it is a creative monument that asks us to consider the value of an ordinary life and the profound loss that occurs when that life is cut short.

Introductory Questions for Thinking and Discussion:

- Why do you think the exhibition uses photographs of everyday experiences rather than photographs of Emmett Till himself?
- What does this exhibition suggest about the relationship between freedom and everyday life?
- How does art and culture help you understand a specific social issue you care about?

Key Theme I: Photography as a Tool for Social Justice

Mamie Till-Mobley had the prophetic wisdom to understand that witnessing was central for American democracy. Her motto was “Let the world see,” and photographs of Till’s funeral sparked a new flame in the Civil Rights Movement. Although there are not images of Emmet Till directly in the exhibition, there are photographs that depict or document aspects of the Movement, or to photography’s role in shaping narrative around histories at large.

Exhibition Highlight: Danny Lyon, *John Lewis in Cairo, 1962*



Danny Lyon (American, b. 1942) has long taken a photographer-as-participant approach to his work, shaping his documentary career through direct involvement with the communities he photographs. His first book, *The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality* (1964), evolved from his experience as a staff photographer for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during the Civil Rights Movement.

SNCC was a leading force in the Movement, organizing nonviolent direct-action campaigns, training activists in nonviolent resistance, and leading voter registration drives in the South. This photograph notably includes activist, educator, leader and US Congressman John Lewis (pictured above, second to left), who dedicated his life to advancing social justice and ending racial discrimination. In July 2020, Representative Lewis wrote an opinion piece, published by *The New York Times* soon after his death, titled “Together, You Can Redeem the Souls of Our Nation” in which he profoundly stated: “Emmett Till was my George Floyd. He was my Rayshard Brooks, Sandra Bland, and Breonna Taylor.”

Exhibition Highlight: Dawoud Bey, *Don Sledge and Moses Austin* from *The Birmingham Project*, 2012



In *The Birmingham Project* (2012), Dawoud Bey (American, b. 1953) responds to tragic events in the history of Birmingham, Alabama. On September 15, 1963, the Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four black girls. The same day, two black boys were subsequently killed in an act of racial violence. The seminal day marked a pivotal point in Civil Rights history, and in 2012, as its 50th anniversary approached, Bey created memorial portraits. Each diptych features a portrait of a child at the exact age of one killed in 1963 paired with a portrait of an adult at the age the child would be in the year 2013. Bey photographed in two significant places: the Bethel Baptist Church, which served as the headquarters for the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (1956–1961), and the Birmingham Museum of Art, where black people in the 1960s were allowed to visit on only one day per week, designated “Negro Day.” The images call attention to the injustices of the past while evoking the lives victims could have experienced.

Questions for Thinking and Discussion

- What was the role of images in the Civil Rights Movement and how does art and culture—photographs, monuments, markers—shape narratives today? In what ways can photography serve as a tool for social change?
- This exhibition uses imagination to challenge historical inevitability, using art to consider what might have been if a historical event—Till’s kidnapping and murder—had unfolded differently or not at all. Curator Sarah Lewis posits the question *What if?*, reminding us that we must first imagine the futures we want to create. How can reflecting on history, as seen in Dawoud Bey’s *The Birmingham Project* (2012), change how you think about what is possible for the future?
- What does justice look like, and what will it take to realize it?

Key Theme II: Rethinking the Ordinary

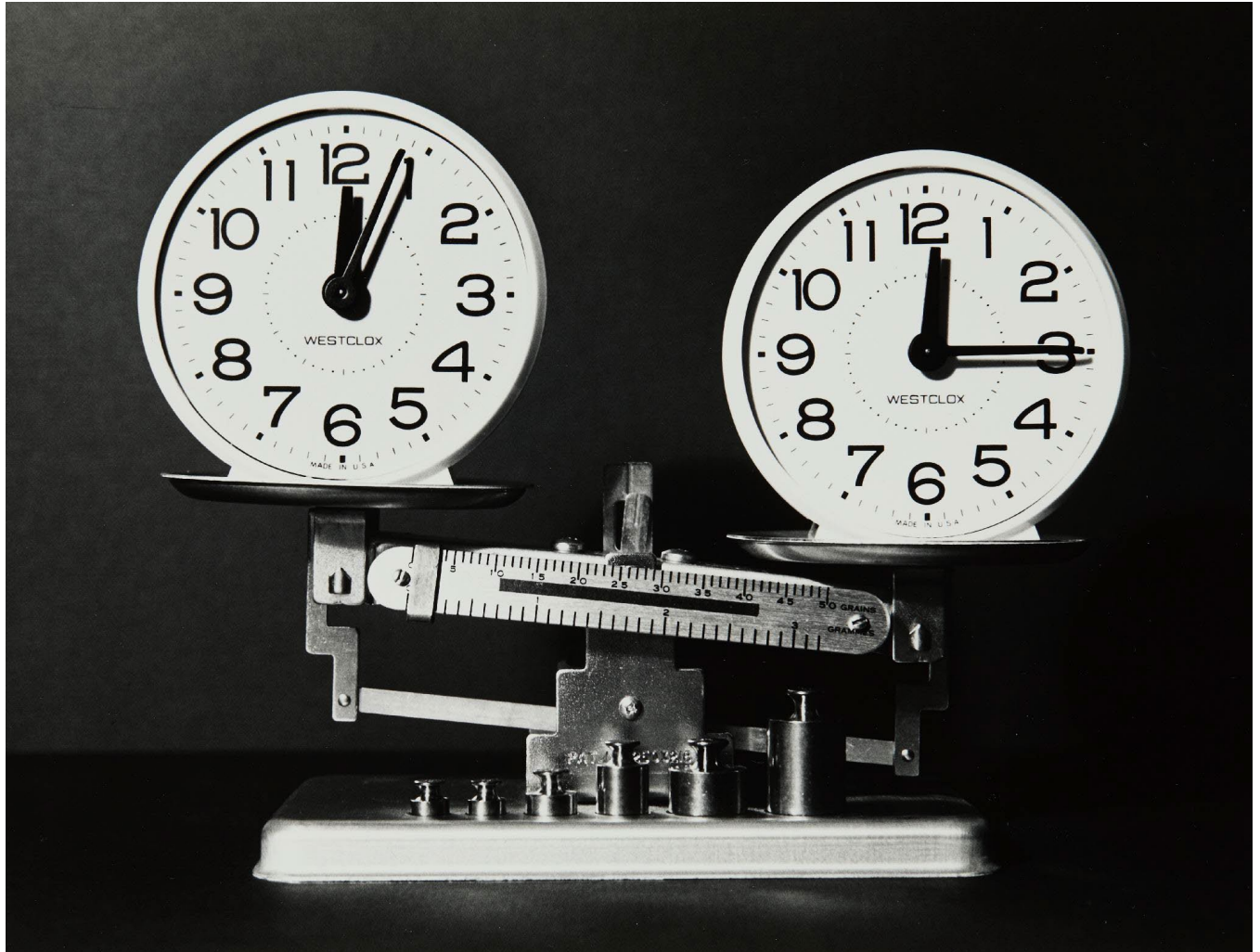


Keith Carter, *Stars*, 1995

Many people encounter Emmett Till's story through images of violence and loss. This exhibition invites us to imagine the everyday moments, experiences, and relationships that constitute a life. In doing so, *If Emmett Till Lived* resists reducing Till to the moment of his murder. It broadens our understanding of freedom beyond liberation from oppression to include the ability to fully engage with and shape our lived experiences and the life to which Till was entitled to live out..

Part documentation, part fantasy, the work of Keith Carter (American, b. 1948) shows that mysterious beauty can be found in the people and things one knows best. His image, *Stars* (1995), celebrates the vibrant soul of Southern culture and the subjective power of sight. The children's starry eyes seem to become both mirror and metaphor for the photographer's gaze as he seeks out the spectacular in the mundane.

Exhibition Highlight: Kenji Nakahashi, *Time – (B)*, 1980



Kenji Nakahashi (Japanese, 1947–2017) made photographs, prints, paintings, and drawings that range from playful and ironic to abstract and contemplative. Nakahashi often worked in the studio, photographing staged scenes that explore the immateriality of time. His images in the MoCP permanent collection demonstrate his enduring curiosity about ordinary moments and objects that shape everyday life.

As Lewis explored the 18,000 images in our collection, this image stood out to her. She states in the accompanying exhibition catalogue *If Emmett Till Lived: A Creative Monument*, published by MoCP and DelMonico Books • D.A.P.: “I saw an image of two round clocks, both placed on a metal scale with the clock set to a future time weighing more. It was a metaphor—the future has weight, and our right to that future conditions what we demand of our now.”

Exhibition Highlight: Stephen Marc, *87th and Constance* from *Changing Chicago*, c. 1987-1992



Stephen Marc (American, b. 1954) documents and interprets history with a focus on the black experience. As part of the *Changing Chicago* documentary project in the late 1980s, Marc recorded everyday life on the street on Chicago's South Side. One of the largest documentary photography projects ever organized in a US city, *Changing Chicago* encompasses work by 33 photographers who were commissioned to document life throughout Chicago's diverse urban and suburban neighborhoods. The project was launched in 1987 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the invention of photography and the 50th anniversary of the Farm Security Administration documentary project.

Marc made these images in the tradition of street photography, capturing ordinary moments, such as adults strolling along busy avenues and children playing in their neighborhoods. He composed each image with attention to careful framing, use of light and shadow, and the expressive gestures of his subjects.

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- How might a photograph of an ordinary moment become historically significant over time? How do photographs change more broadly, depending on their context, sequencing, or presentation?
- What stories from your own family or community would you want future generations to know?

Exhibition Highlight: Cecil McDonald Jr., *Hot Comb Lullabies*, 2006



Cecil McDonald Jr. (American, b. 1965) explores the artistic and intellectual pursuits of black culture as it intersects with and informs the larger culture. In his series *In the Company of Black* (2011–2018), he dismantles generic representations and stereotypes of black individuals. The images show the day-to-day lives of McDonald and the people around him, including his family members, friends, and neighbors. McDonald describes the people he photographs as “extraordinarily ordinary,” counterbalancing sensational media tropes focused on the poles of black pain and black exceptionalism.

Questions for Looking and Discussion

- How can a photograph challenge the images and stories we are used to seeing in the media?
- How does Cecil McDonald Jr. use photography to imagine new ways of representing black life beyond common stereotypes or expectations?
- What everyday freedoms are pictured in this show? Why might imagining joy, leisure, or safety be a political act?

Activity: Reflect on your day.

The photographs in this exhibition depict moments that might otherwise seem ordinary. Take a few moments to think about your own day.

Reflection: Write a list of everything you have done today. When did you wake up? What did you eat for breakfast? Did you travel anywhere? Did you interact with anyone on the bus, on the street, or in the car? Which of these moments might feel significant years from now?

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Key Theme III: Photography as Imagination



Arthur Tress, *Untitled*, 1974

Photographs are often understood as evidence of what has happened or what is happening. This exhibition expands that view by considering photography as a tool also capable of imaging alternative possibilities. While there are intentionally no photographs in the exhibition that depict Emmett Till or Mamie Till-Mobley directly, the images on view collectively form a visual meditation on the life he might have lived had he not had his right to live unjustly denied.

Born in Brooklyn, Arthur Tress (American, b. 1940) took his first photograph at the age of twelve. In the early 1970s, supporting himself as a documentary and ethnographic photographer, Tress began to pursue a more personal direction in his independent projects. Starting with his now well-known series *The Dream Collector*, Tress embraced elements of imagination and fantasy, staging elaborate yet convincing tableaux that visualize dreams or desires, explore archetypal imagery, or evoke the workings of the unconscious.

Questions for Looking and Discussion

- Reflecting on Emmett Till's life and the imagery presented in the exhibition, which images most evoke a sense of possibility for you?

Exhibition Highlight: Adam Ekberg, *Aberrations #4*, 2006



Photographs by Adam Ekberg (American, b. 1975) capture brief moments of lyrical beauty in everyday objects and the artist's understated, ephemeral interventions in his surroundings. His work offers a muted suggestion of a mystical presence around us, whether glimpsed in floating smoke rings or iridescent soap bubbles resting delicately on the grass. For his *Aberration* series, Ekberg photographed a forest's leafy canopy while aiming his camera toward the sun. As the light streamed through the foliage, it refracted through his camera's lens, yielding perfect concentric circles of translucent color in his photographs. This phenomenon is a phantom presence rather than a physical one, existing only within Ekberg's camera.

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- This exhibition asks viewers to consider photographs as a tool for imagining what might have been and what a life justly lived could look like. How might Ekberg's work help us think about photography as a way of imagining possibilities beyond what we can immediately see?
- What does it mean for a photograph to represent something that is not physically present? How might this effect relate to memories, histories, or futures that we cannot directly see?

Exhibition Highlight: Anna Shteynshleyger, *Ghost*, 2003–2009



City of Destiny, a series of photographs by Anna Shteynshleyger (Russian American, b. 1977), comprises portraits, still lifes, interiors, and landscapes taken in various locations in Russia and the United States. The images retain an aura of questioning detachment and quiet observation informed by the ways Shteynshleyger experienced outsider status. For Shteynshleyger, being a photographer mirrors her experience of reality: A photographer observes and composes the world with the desire to connect with it but will always fail to make that connection. The camera separates her from the world while also allowing her to contemplate it.

Activity: Create a photograph of possibility.

Photography is often associated with capturing what is visible. However, photographs can also represent memories and dreams that cannot be directly seen. This activity invites you to use photography to explore something that *could be*, *might have been*, or *is still possible*.

Think about something that cannot be photographed literally but can be represented visually—maybe a future you hope for, a moment that never happened, a change you hope to see in the world, or an idea you want to express. Consider how you can use photography to communicate this idea.

Create an image that represents your chosen possibility and reflect on your interpretation of your photograph as a tool for imagination.

I created this photograph to imagine . . .

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Final Questions for Thinking and Discussion:

- What image (or images) from the show will you carry with you and why?

After Your Visit

We encourage you to continue your learning through educational resources developed by the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, the Emmett Till & Mamie Till-Mobley Institute, Facing History & Ourselves, and the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). The [Emmett Till Curriculum](#) uses videos, primary sources, readings, and classroom activities to explore the history and legacy of Emmett Till's murder, the activism it inspired, and the enduring connections between this history and the present. EJI's [Lynching in America](#) documents more than 4,400 racial terror lynchings in the United States between Reconstruction and World War II, offering broader historical context for understanding the racial violence surrounding Emmett Till's life and death.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to the resources provided in this guide, we encourage you to visit your local public library and ask a librarian for help finding additional books, articles, and other resources to continue your learning.

[“Can you be BLACK and Look at This?”: Reading the Rodney King Video\(s\)Emmett Till Interpretive Center](#)

[Equal Justice Initiative](#)

[Injustice: The Trial for the Murder of Emmett Till at the Chicago History Museum](#)

[Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror](#)

[Original JET Magazine Volume 8 Issue 9 Covering Emmett Till's Story](#)

[The Barn: The Secret History of a Murder in Mississippi](#)

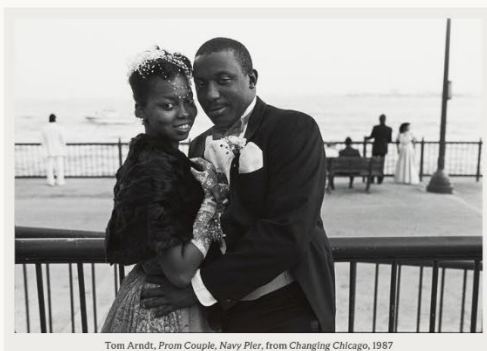
[The Murder of Emmett Till – From the PBS collection: Civil Rights – The African American Experience](#)

[Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation by John Lewis for New York Times Opinion](#)

[If Emmett Till Lived](#) This is an extended website dedicated to this exhibition and book. You are invited through the website to share your own reflections.



◀ 15/21 ▶



Tom Arndt, Prom Couple, Navy Pier, from *Changing Chicago*, 1987

a question worth sitting with. What if he had lived? Add your reflection to a growing archive of others' imagining.

- What if Emmett Till lived?
- What would his life have required of us all?
- What are your hopes for Emmett Till's unlived life?
- How does Emmett Till still live today?

NAME	EMAIL
First Last	example@domain.com
LOCATION (OPTIONAL)	AGE (OPTIONAL)
REFLECTION	
What if Emmett Till lived?	

☐ Please do not display my name and share my submission as anonymous.

☐ By checking this box, I agree to receive emails and newsletter updates from Vision & Justice. (You can unsubscribe anytime.)

SUBMIT

Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in This Guide

This guide supports interdisciplinary learning across visual arts, English language arts, social science, and social-emotional learning. Through close looking, critical discussion, writing, and civic engagement, students develop skills in visual literacy, communication, and analysis of contemporary issues.

Visual Arts Standards

Creating (VA:Cr)

- **VA:Cr1.1 – Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.**
- **VA:Cr2.1 – Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.**

Students engage in creative thinking through reflective and observational activities, including environmental awareness exercises and responses to photographic processes such as photograms.

Responding (VA:Re)

- **VA:Re7.1 – Perceive and analyze artistic work.**
- **VA:Re8.1 – Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.**
- **VA:Re9.1 – Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.**

Students analyze photographic works, interpret meaning, and consider how visual strategies shape understandings of climate change, politics, and social issues.

Connecting (VA:Cn)

- **VA:Cn10.1 – Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.**
- **VA:Cn11.1 – Relate artistic ideas and works to their societal, cultural, and historical context.**

Students connect artwork to personal experiences, environmental awareness, and broader global issues, including climate crisis and political unrest.

English Language Arts Standards (ELA)

Reading Informational Text

- **RI.6–12.7 – Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse mediums.**

Students interpret visual and written materials, synthesizing information from artworks and exhibition texts.

Speaking and Listening

- **SL.6–12.1 – Engage effectively in collaborative discussions.**
- **SL.6–12.4 – Present information and supporting evidence clearly.**

Discussion prompts foster dialogue, critical thinking, and verbal articulation of ideas.

Social Science Standards

Civics (SS.CV)

- **SS.CV.2 – Explain the roles and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society.**
- **SS.CV.3 – Analyze the impact of civic engagement.**

Students participate in civic action by writing to elected officials and considering the role of institutions in climate policy.

Geography (SS.G)

- **SS.G.2 – Analyze the interaction between humans and the environment.**

Students examine how climate change affects landscapes, ecosystems, and communities globally.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Self-Awareness and Self-Management

- Reflection activities help students develop awareness of their personal responses to environmental and social issues.

Social Awareness and Relationship Skills

- Become familiar with diverse perspectives and global experiences represented by artists.

Responsible Decision-Making

- Students engage in thoughtful civic action and evaluate personal and collective responsibility to address climate change.