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“The Most Southern Place on Earth”

NEH Landmarks of American History Workshops for School Teachers

June 18-24, 2023

## **Emmett Till and the Legacy of Lynching**

(a 2-day lesson plan for high school ELA)

### **Overview:**

This lesson plan may be used independently or presented as part of a larger unit for English 11 centered around the anchor text *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, by Mississippi author Jesmyn Ward, which won the National Book award for fiction in 2017. Using the main characters’ journey from the coastal south Mississippi to Parchman prison in the Delta, the novel traces the struggle of Black Americans from slavery to the prison farm system to lynching to modern mass incarceration. This lesson will provide context for the novel reading by helping students understand lynching as a violent oppressive structure to perpetuate white supremacy through racial terror and injustice. The lesson will also invite students to consider how narratives are conveyed differently through various media and how to synthesize narratives that may reach different conclusions and consider potential biases of storytellers. Finally the lesson will culminate in a consideration of storytelling as an act of commemoration and provide students an opportunity to write a creative commemorative work for a local historical racial terror lynching victim.

A lesson at a later point in the novel reading will provide context on Parchman Prison and the connection of convict labor and mass incarceration as further structures of historical racial oppression.

This lesson plan is designed for two 90-minute blocks. Scaffolding, modifications, and accommodations should be provided as needed.

### **Essential Questions:**

- *How does the medium of a “text” affect the telling of a story?*
- *How does the bias of a storyteller affect interpretation of a story?*
- *Why is it important to consider multiple perspectives and narratives to reach conclusions?*
- *How do we draw conclusions from conflicting narratives: can they coexist, or is there absolute truth?*
- *How can we commemorate an event or individual by retelling a story? (for Day Two)*

### **Virginia Standards of Learning Addressed:**

- R.11.4.k) Compare/contrast literary and informational nonfiction texts.
- R.11.5.d) Paraphrase and synthesize ideas within and between texts.
- R.11.5.e) Draw conclusions and make inferences on explicit and implied information using textual support.

- R.11.5.f) Analyze multiple texts addressing the same topic to determine how authors reach similar or different conclusions.

Essential Knowledge, Skills, and Processes (detailed expectations of standards):

- understand the difference between objectivity, or fact, and subjectivity, or bias, in media messages.
- analyze how the media’s use of symbol, imagery, and metaphor affects the message.
- analyze and critique themes across texts and within various social, cultural, and historical contexts.
- analyze and critique themes and issues within and across texts related to:
  - religious diversity; political struggles; ethnic and cultural mores and traditions; and individual rights, gender equity, and civil rights.
- organize and synthesize information from paired texts while maintaining the intended purpose of each.
- analyze information from multiple texts to make inferences and draw conclusions.
- compare and contrast how complex texts treat the same topics

### DAY ONE:

**“Koolickles” (10 minutes)** (optional)– To prompt curiosity and create a “flashbulb moment” for students, they will arrive to class to find a “Koolickle” on their desk. (A “flashbulb moment” uses the element of surprise to stimulate the brain, enhance curiosity, and create a memory to strengthen retention of learning.) The teacher will then post a [short article](#) explaining the tradition and then ask if they can use their knowledge of archetypal color symbolism to infer the possible significance of the color red being used in the Kool-Aid.

### Learning Stations (60 minutes):

Students will travel in groups through four 15-minute stations featuring the following resources as they take notes on [this chart](#). Before students begin, teacher will review the questions on the chart and set the focus for inquiry, providing examples of biases, etc. During the learning station activity, teacher will circulate around the room to interact with groups and encourage critical thinking.

Station 1: Students will examine printed photos of the teacher’s personal trip to visit Mississippi sites related to the Emmett Till tragedy (during the NEH Landmarks workshop) and watch a video about the Emmett Till photo that galvanized the nation: [The Body of Emmett Till \(Time\)](#) (8:18) (Students will watch together on Promethean board or Chromebook.

Station 2: Website: [Emmett Till Memory Project](#) Students will not have time to explore every resource on this website, but will choose to read individually what interests them in the time allotted.

Station 3: Poetry and Song: [A Wreath for Emmett Till](#) , [Choosing Brave:How Mamie Till Mobley and Emmett Till Sparked the Civil Rights Movement](#), by Angela Joy and [“The Death of Emmett Till.”](#) by Bob Dylan (teacher copies of the books and YouTube video)

Station 4: News Article: [“Who Was Emmett Till?”](#) (New York Times)

**Exit Slip (15 minutes):** (To be completed on the back of their note-taking chart) Students will choose ONE of the essential questions and respond in a well-developed paragraph of 100 words or more, using textual evidence from TWO OR MORE of the texts explored to support their ideas.

## Day TWO

**Discussion (15 minutes):** Students will be invited to share their responses to the essential questions from the previous day aloud. Some of the points that will hopefully emerge from student responses are as follows, but all thinking will be respectfully considered.

- *How does the medium of a “text” affect the telling of a story?*

Photos and video can have a powerful impact by appealing to an additional sense with a visual reflection of reality. The shocking photo of Emmett Till’s disfigured corpse that his mother bravely chose to share could not be ignored by the nation in the way that a print news story might have. Poetry and song often use imagery, metaphor, symbol, and rhythm to capture or provoke an emotional response. News articles maintain an objective tone and provide important information.

- *How does the bias of a storyteller affect interpretation of a story?*
- *Why is it important to consider multiple perspectives and narratives to reach conclusions?*

Narrators can have varying perspectives on the same story and prioritize different details and even offer conflicting perspectives. The narrator’s motivation in telling the story can also influence the narrative. The limitations of the narrator’s first-person access to the story also influence the story. Primary sources are especially important and secondary sources should cite their sources.

- *How do we draw conclusions from conflicting narratives: can they coexist, or is there absolute truth?*

Students may have noticed that one of the books offers a somewhat differing account of the Emmett Till story with the whistle as a technique to control his stuttering (a theory

mentioned by Till's mother), rather than the narrative of it being a playful, "wolf whistle" reported by other eyewitness accounts, including his cousins interviewed 30 years after the incident. We might also discuss what effect the passage of time may have on the telling of a story.

**Introduction of Additional Essential Question:** *How can we commemorate an event or individual by retelling a story?* Teacher will write the word "commemorate" on the board, pointing out its Latin root "mem," and make sure they understand its definition. Responses to the question will be invited, possibly related to the stations from the previous day.

**Video (10 minutes):**

Ask students if they think it is important to commemorate racial terror lynchings such the one that happened to Emmett Till and why. (Based on the previous day's stations, they will likely say that it is, but some may make the point that it brings up unpleasant history or stirs racial divisions.)

Video: "[Reckoning with Remembrance: History, Injustice, and the Murder of Emmett Till](#)," by Patrick Weems (6:11) This video discusses an incident in which somebody vandalized an Emmett Till marker and an ensuing reconciliation. Give students an opportunity to respond to the video.

**Nonfiction Readings (20 minutes):**

(Optional) NOTE: These readings connect the issue of lynching to a specific local community. As an alternative, teachers are encouraged to provide research on any lynching in their own communities or [resources on lynching from the Equal Justice Initiative](#).

The teacher will ask students where lynchings happened in our country. (They may guess the South or "everywhere.") Reveal that lynchings too place in our own county although students are likely not aware of those stories.

Read aloud or have students read aloud in small groups:

Article #1 "[Three Lynchings in Wise County](#)" – research by local historians Zoe Crihfield, Tom Costa, Dylan Mabe, and Thomas Noble

#2 "[The Practice of Memory: Commemorating America's History of Racial Terror](#)," by Anya Slepian

**Making Connections: Venn Diagram (10 minutes)**

After reading, students will work in groups to complete a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting the efforts to commemorate the Emmett Till story to our own community's racial terror lynchings and local efforts to commemorate them. Students will draw the diagram themselves on large chart paper. The teacher will collect responses into a whole class Venn diagram on the whiteboard. Students may note that, like the efforts to commemorate the

Emmett Till case, our community's commemorative efforts were led by a partnership of Blacks and whites and that there has been controversy and vandalism of markers.

**Commemorative Writing (30 minutes):**

Students will individually commemorate our county's local lynchings or another aspect of the story (such as the sheriff's stand in averting an additional lynching or the Norton newspaper' editor's influence in advocating for the first state anti-lynching laws) through one of the following creative choices:

- A reflective letter to the person
- Write from the point of view of the individuals (possibly a "poem for two voices including the voice of Emmett Till)
- A poem (free verse or other format such as haiku, tanka, diamante, or "found" poem)
- A historical marker (digital design or using provided art supplies) with at least 100 words of text.
- A creative "one-pager" combining art and words
- Another creative expression approved by teacher

These will ideally be displayed in a prominent location in the school or community to complete the authentic expression of commemoration.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Unpacking the Story of Emmett Till

Stations	What details of the Emmett Till murder does the storyteller focus on? Do any of these conflict with other narratives you have encountered?	What is the purpose of the text and what does the storyteller most want us to understand?	What are the biases or limitations of the storyteller?
1 Photos and Video			
2 Website			
3 Poetry and Song			
4 News Article			

**Exit Slip:** Choose ONE of the following essential questions and respond in a well-developed paragraph of 100 words or more, using textual evidence from TWO OR MORE of the texts we explored today to support your ideas. Use the space below to write your response.

- *How does the medium of a “text” affect the telling of a story?*
- *How does the bias of a storyteller affect interpretation of a story?*
- *Why is it important to consider multiple perspectives and narratives to reach conclusions?*
- *How do we draw conclusions from conflicting narratives: can they coexist, or is there absolute truth?*