

LESSON

The Legacy of Emmett Till

Overview

About This Lesson

In the final lesson of this unit, students will consider the connections between the murder of Emmett Till and contemporary victims of violence against Black people in the United States, as well as some connections between the grassroots civil rights movement that was galvanized by Till's murder, the Black Lives Matter movement that emerged after the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin, and worldwide protests after the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and several others in 2020. Students will imagine what it would look like to achieve justice for these shooting deaths, and they will learn about a variety of efforts to do so.

Essential Question

- As we pursue racial justice today, what can be learned from the choices people have made in response to racial violence in the past?

Guiding Question

- What is the legacy of Emmett Till in the ongoing pursuit of racial justice?

Facing History Learning Outcomes

- Students will identify echoes of the murder of Emmett Till and its aftermath in contemporary American society.
- Students will make connections between the grassroots civil rights movement galvanized by the murder of Emmett Till and the Black Lives Matter movement that emerged after the shooting death of Trayvon Martin.
- Students will deepen their capacity for civic engagement by considering their role in the struggle for justice for Emmett Till and for all of the victims of racial violence in the time since his murder.

What's Included

This lesson uses the following student materials. Access materials in this [Google Folder](#).

- **Reading:** Darnella Frazier's Tribute to George Floyd

- **Video:** [The Power of August](#)
- **Reading:** [Beyond Protests: 5 More Ways To Channel Anger Into Action To Fight Racism](#)
- **Reading:** [18 Ways to Sustain the Fight Against Racism](#)
- **Reading:** [7 Ways You Can Take Action for Racial Justice Right Now](#)
- **Reading:** [5 Ways to Stand Up Against Racism and Injustice](#)
- **Reading:** [Understanding and Confronting Racial Injustice](#)

Preparing to Teach

A Note to Teachers

1. Discussing Acts of Violence Against Black People with Students

In Activity 2 of this lesson, students return to the iceberg diagrams they created in Lesson 2 to draw connections between the murder of Emmett Till and acts of violence against Black Americans today. Students may be familiar with the police killing of George Floyd, but they may also raise examples of police violence whose cases did not result in guilty verdicts such as the shooting deaths of Philando Castile and Breonna Taylor. Moreover, students may recall the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, whose death at the hands of civilians resulted in a murder conviction, or they may remember that Trayvon Martin, whose death by a civilian perpetrator resulted in a not guilty verdict, was a catalyst for multiple protests during the summer of 2013. While there are meaningful distinctions between each case, each death occurred within a society where Black lives have continued to be criminalized. In most cases, non-Black people claimed to believe that they were upholding the law and/or keeping people safe when they killed Black people. Some students may struggle to identify these connections, and you may need to provide additional support if students have clarifying questions or if you notice that class discussions comparing acts of violence, past and present, are not attending to these nuances.

2. Attending to Students' Emotional Needs As They Make Contemporary Connections

This lesson prompts students to make contemporary connections to the murder of Emmett Till. Activity 1 asks students to identify echoes of Till's murder that resonate today, and Activity 2 asks students to identify continuity and change in the history of racial violence in the United States. Together, these reflections can surface personal experiences that may be emotionally challenging for students.

When studying this painful history, its legacies, and connections between the past and present, students may cycle through a number of reactions, including anger, pessimism, and feelings of disempowerment. Students may make comments such

as “Nothing has changed, everything is the same,” or “Nothing can be done.” Whether students are feeling proud about how much work has been done to combat racial injustice, disheartened that they see so many similar stories in the present, or any number of other normal responses, it is important to offer support as they express themselves. We also recommend that, whenever possible, you steer them in the direction of recognizing their own agency and capacity to make change, as the activities in Day 2 of this lesson do. We also recommend that you inform staff at your school about the content of today’s lesson. See **Teaching Note 1: Teaching Emotionally Challenging Content** in the “Preparing to Teach” section of [the unit](#) for more information.

3. Assign Homework: Formative Activity 4: Learning from Young Activists

Following this lesson, students will complete the final of four activities interspersed throughout the unit that are designed to help them develop their thoughts, gather evidence, and continually reflect back on the essential question in preparation for the summative assignment. You should assign the activity as homework. See **Formative Activity 4: Learning from Young Activists** in the “[Homework](#)” section of this lesson plan for directions for this activity.

4. Support Students in Making Connections between Till’s Murder and Today

This lesson gives students the opportunity to draw connections between the murder of Emmett Till and contemporary examples of racial violence. If you anticipate that your students will struggle to identify examples of racial violence, consider taking information from the context section of this lesson to share with your class in an accessible way, such as by creating slides or your own student-facing handout.

5. Revisiting Students’ Completed Iceberg Diagram from Lesson 2

One activity in this lesson will require students to revisit their completed iceberg diagram from Lesson 2. The day before teaching this lesson, remind students to bring their completed diagrams to class.

Lesson Plan

DAY 1 Activities

1. Draw Connections between the Murder of Emmett Till and Today

Begin class by asking students to write a response to the following prompt:

What echoes of the murder of Emmett Till and its aftermath are we seeing and experiencing today?

Encourage students to consider current events, what they've heard or seen in the news, or any other relevant connections they can make. After students have had sufficient time to write their responses, engage them using the [Think, Pair, Share](#) strategy by having them share their reflections with a neighbor, and then bring the class together and elicit responses from volunteers.

Responses will vary, but students might draw parallels between the murder of Emmett Till and acts of violence against Black people such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Trayvon Martin, Ahmaud Arbery, and, more recently, Tyre Nichols. Students may also draw parallels between the grassroots civil rights movement that was galvanized by Till's murder and the Black Lives Matter movement that emerged after the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin and inspired worldwide protests after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. (See **Teaching Note 4: Support Students in Making Connections between Till's Murder and Today** in the "[Preparing to Teach](#)" section of this lesson for advice about how to fill in gaps in student knowledge if they struggle to make contemporary connections.)

2. Return to the Iceberg Diagram from Lesson 2

Explain to students that they will continue to explore connections between the murder of Emmett Till and contemporary events. Ask them to take out the iceberg diagram they completed from Lesson 2: Contextualizing Emmett Till's Murder, and give them a moment to reread their work. Briefly review the historical context of Emmett Till's murder by asking students to discuss in pairs the following question:

How does the context explain how the murder of Emmett Till was possible?

Once students have had enough time to discuss in pairs, elicit responses from volunteers. Then ask students to write a written reflection to the following prompt in their journals.

Do you think the context you documented in the iceberg diagram helps explain acts of violence against Black people today? What is the same? What is different?

Once students have had ample time to record their thoughts, ask them to share with a neighbor. Then bring the class together and elicit responses from volunteers. Possible connections students may make include:

- Implicit biases by white people toward people of color
- Continuation of racist attitudes, albeit not as overt as during the 1950s
- Elimination of Jim Crow laws, but the continued over-policing and punitive enforcement of laws in communities of color
- Expanded voting rights, but the continued underrepresentation of people of color in government

3. Turn to the Question of Justice for Victims of Racial Violence

Explain to students that the struggle for racial justice is ongoing, and it relies on the choices of individuals and communities. Explain that the protests that occurred around the world after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 were sparked in large part by a video that was recorded at the scene by 17-year-old Darnella Frazier that went viral.

Tell students that for the rest of class, they will be examining Frazier's choice and its impact and connecting her decisions to the choices of figures like Ida B. Wells and Mamie Till-Mobley. Pass out the handout **Darnella Frazier's Tribute to George Floyd**, and give students several minutes to read and respond using the [S-I-T: Surprising, Interesting, Troubling](#) teaching strategy.

After students have had a few minutes to process their responses to Frazier's post, ask them to respond to the reflection questions on the handout. Once they have reflected, begin a whole-group discussion about the final question on the handout.

- Frazier said that witnessing the murder of George Floyd changed her. In what ways? How? Why?
- How did Frazier's experience witnessing Floyd's murder echo the experiences of those who saw the *Jet* magazine photo of Emmett Till?
- How does Darnella Frazier's decision to film George Floyd's murder and post the video compare with the choices made by Mamie Till-Mobley? How are these acts similar? How are they different?

- What would achieving justice for George Floyd look like? What would need to happen to prevent such murders?

4. Making Head, Heart, and Conscience Connections between the Murder of Emmett Till and the Movement for Racial Justice Today

Give students the opportunity to process today's lesson by engaging them with a [Head, Heart, Conscience](#) reflection. Ask students to respond to the following prompts in their journals or on a separate piece of paper. Remind them that they will not be required to share any of their responses aloud with the class.

- **Head:** What did you learn from this lesson? What connections did you make between the murder of Emmett Till and racial injustice today?
- **Heart:** What emotions did today's lesson raise for you? What aspect of the lesson stands out to you the most, and why?
- **Conscience:** What can individuals, communities, or governments do to work toward racial justice today?

Time permitting, initiate a class discussion by asking students to share aloud their reflections.

DAY 2 Activities

1. Reflect on a John Lewis Quote

The murder of George Floyd sparked national and international protests as people reckoned with the racial inequalities that shaped society. Inspired by the surge of activism sparked by George Floyd's murder, civil rights leader and congressman John Lewis (D-GA) penned [this essay](#) in the *New York Times* shortly before his death. In it, he urged Americans to continue their pursuit for justice.

Ask students to read this quote from Lewis's essay:

"Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself."

Ask students to respond to the quote using the following prompts:

- What connections can you make between John Lewis's quote and what you have learned in this unit?
- How might this idea connect to the choices you've learned about in this unit (e.g., the choices of Mamie Till-Mobley, Ida B. Wells, and Darnella Frazier)?

After students have had enough time to write, initiate a class discussion by asking volunteers to share their responses.

2. Discuss Connections between Racial Justice Movements Past and Present

Remind students that, like democracy, justice is not a state; it's an act. Racial justice requires people to continuously pursue justice. Explain to students that they will watch a video that shows how the killings of Emmett Till and George Floyd galvanized movements for justice. Show a clip from the CBS News report "**The Power of August**" (10:00–15:24). After the clip is over, lead a brief discussion with the following questions:

- What similarities and differences do you see in the movements?
- What do you think is the power of young people in both movements?
- Do you share the young activists' feelings of optimism? Why or why not?

3. Daily Choices Students Can Make to Pursue Racial Justice

Explain to students that they will explore the different choices they can make to become an engaged citizen and pursue racial justice by choosing a reading to help them learn about tangible ways they can become an active participant.

Ask students to pick one of the articles below to read with a partner.

- [Beyond Protests: 5 More Ways To Channel Anger Into Action To Fight Racism](#) (NPR)
- [18 Ways to Sustain the Fight Against Racism](#) (CNN)
- [7 Ways You Can Take Action for Racial Justice Right Now](#) (Global Citizen)
- [5 Ways to Stand Up Against Racism and Injustice](#) (UNICEF USA)
- [Understanding and Confronting Racial Injustice](#) (University of Minnesota Extension)

After pairs finish reading their article, ask students to write a reflection independently in response to the following prompt:

What are two strategies you can adopt to pursue racial justice? Explain why you chose these strategies and why you believe they are important.

4. Reflect on the Broader Significance of the Unit

The final activity for this lesson, and for this unit, will engage students in a reflection that draws on what they've learned in the lesson and throughout the unit. Tell students that they will be reflecting on the value of learning about the murder of Emmett Till and the choices made in its aftermath. Ask them to reflect on the following prompts in their journals or on an [exit card](#):

- I came in thinking . . .
(What feelings or thoughts did you have about learning this history before?)
- Now I think . . .
(How has your thinking changed or deepened?)
- Next, I want to . . .
(What lessons are you taking away from this history to guide your actions or choices in the future?)

Once students have written their responses, engage them in a [Think, Pair, Share](#), and then ask for volunteers to share their responses with the class.

Extension Activities

1. Go Deeper into the History of Policing and the Legacy of Racial Injustice

As part of our current events collection, Facing History has created a series of teaching ideas designed to help students think critically about the long and troubling history between law enforcement and Black Americans. Use the series [Policing and the Legacy of Racial Injustice](#) to help your students bring a historical lens to these complex issues, engage with nuanced sources that reflect a range of experiences with policing, and consider ways to build a society that ensures the safety of all people.

2. Assess the Progress of Protests for Racial Justice

The NAACP Legal Defense Fund resource "[The Changing Landscape of Policing](#)" provides an index of reforms that have been enacted by cities and states to strengthen accountability for law enforcement and work to create fundamental changes to public safety systems. Share these resources with your students to enable them to assess the progress that activists have made since the protests of 2020. As students explore the index, ask them to consider the following questions:

- What significant policies have changed in terms of how police interact with citizens?
- Which policies do you think are the most significant to ensuring racial justice? Why?

Homework

Formative Activity 4: Learning from Young Activists

Share the following directions with students and have them complete the activity for homework:

In Lessons 5 and 6, you examined the choices made by young activists who responded to racial injustice. Review your class notes and the primary source documents from both of these lessons.

Next, highlight words, phrases, or quotations from the documents that illustrate what motivated young people to fight racial injustice. *What motivated the young people you studied in class to confront racial injustice? What did they need in order to take action?*

In your journal, write down some initial reflections about what motivates you by responding to the following prompt: *What are you motivated to act on? What are some ideas you've learned from these lessons about what that action could look like?*