

DAWOUD BEY Elegy



AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO THE EXHIBITION

ON VIEW SEPTEMBER 26, 2025 – JANUARY 4, 2026

New Orleans Museum of Art

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 4

ABOUT THE ARTIST 4

GUIDING QUESTIONS AND
LEARNING OBJECTIVES..... 4

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION 5

BEFORE YOU VISIT 5

LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY 6

CONNECTION TO
NOMA'S COLLECTION 7

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY #1..... 8

TIMELINE 4 – 11

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY #2 9

CURRICULUM STANDARDS 10

AFTER YOU VISIT 11

RESOURCES 11

Dawoud Bey: Elegy is organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and is curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

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COVER Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953), *Tree and Cabin*, 2019, gelatin silver print, Rennie Collection, Vancouver, Image © Dawoud Bey

RIGHT Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953), *Untitled (Tangled Branches)*, 2023, gelatin silver print, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Mrs. Alfred Dupont, by exchange, 2020.168.6. Image © Dawoud Bey

BACK COVER Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953), *Untitled (The Trail and the River)*, 2023, gelatin silver print, Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.10, Image © Dawoud Bey







This educator's guide complements the exhibition *Dawoud Bey: Elegy* and supports classroom investigations by K-12 educators and their students. This exhibition evokes and draws upon the factual and imagined realities of the early African American presence and experience in the United States.

Included with this guide are an introduction to the artist, a brief description of the exhibition, classroom activities that encourage students to reflect on the art featured in the exhibition, and guiding questions to foster critical thinking and help students relate to the presented artwork. Within this guide, educators will also find resources to support learning, including outside links to images and thoughtful book recommendations for various age groups.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

American artist Dawoud Bey has created a body of work that examines and engages with the Black experience in the United States of America. His photographs and films feature and bear witness to the presence of Black American lives, while illuminating their disappearing history in the United States. Much of his photography began with vibrant portraits of African American communities; his more recent work, seen here in *Dawoud Bey: Elegy*, focuses on the histories and stories told by this country's landscapes. Bey takes viewers a Virginia trail where Africans were marched onto auction blocks; to the plantations of Louisiana, where they labored; and along the last stages of the Underground Railroad in Ohio, where fugitives sought self-emancipation.



Dawoud Bey: Elegy weaves together film and photography to retell history through images that encourage the imagining of the historic African American experience, illustrating the impact of these embedded histories on our lives today.

GUIDING QUESTIONS AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. History is composed of many narratives, some popular and some lesser-known. How does that affect our understanding of how history is taught and how it is studied?
2. What insights do photographs provide that written history lessons do not?
3. How can art help us better understand a historical event?
4. How can one's perspective expand our understanding of a historical event?
5. Students will analyze and describe the history of enslaved people in the sites documented in *Dawoud Bey: Elegy*.
6. Students will gain an understanding of how a photograph or an artwork can be a source which provides historical context.
7. Students will compare and contrast historical sources and accounts with the works presented in *Dawoud Bey: Elegy* to gain a deeper understanding of historical time period.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF THE PERIOD OF ENSLAVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

For more than two centuries, Africans were taken from their homes, brought to the American colonies, and enslaved. By the middle of the 19th century, there was a growing anti-slavery movement in the North that provoked a national debate and helped to expedite the American Civil War, which lasted from 1861 – 1865. Though the Union's victory helped to free nearly four million enslaved people, the legacy of slavery remained, inspiring many to continue to fight for justice.

The following timeline consists of information regarding the centuries American perpetuated the practice of enslavement, as well as the acts that led to liberation of many.

1619

Several Africans, likely seized from a Portuguese enslavement ship, were brought to Jamestown, Virginia. They were traded for provisions and classified as "indentured servants."

"The reason that I make the work that I do is to provoke a conversation about the past in the present moment."

—DAWOUD BEY



Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953), *Untitled (James River Through the opening)*, 2023, gelatin silver print, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.4. Image © Dawoud Bey

Best known for his expressive portraits, Dawoud Bey has built a portfolio documenting African American culture and history. With *Dawoud Bey: Elegy*, Bey presents a series of landscape photographs illuminating historical memory within the geography of the United States. Bey's depictions of locations such as the historic Richmond Slave Trail in Virginia—sixty miles from where human beings were traded for provisions in 1619—the plantations of Louisiana, and the Underground Railroad in Ohio, create a complex and layered narrative that challenges the viewer to not only evoke history, but to go beyond it, imagining and including lived experiences.

BEFORE YOU VISIT

ASK

1. How can the following quote from Frederick Douglass be applied to how history has been documented?
"We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and the future."
2. Reflecting on the dilemma he faced regarding slavery, Thomas Jefferson wrote the following in a letter in 1820:
"We have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other." Jefferson's quote about holding the wolf by the ear is a metaphor. What do you think his statement might mean?
3. How are plantations typically photographed, discussed, or viewed?
a.) Who were the photographers?
4. How might someone's identity shape the way they make a historically-based photograph?

EXAMINE

1. The transatlantic slave trade is the largest forced migration in history. It had a profound impact on the development of both Europe and the Americas, imparting a legacy of racial inequity and injustice that continues to have a global effect on societies today.
2. How has the story of the transatlantic slave trade been taught? Question the narratives declared and maintained by those in positions of power, such as those in government and informational media, while also considering multiple perspectives to connect the past to the present.

EXPLORE

Study the visual composition of a landscape. Can they be spacious and vast? Or close and intimate? Does the depth of these landscapes help to tell a story or convey a mood?

CONSIDER

Consider the ways that topics of history are taught. Is there a point of view that is dominant? Are all viewpoints and experiences equally considered? Have students discuss times when a story or topic was told from the perspective of the winner or position of power and how that swayed the narrative.

CONCLUSION

Identify a source's point of view, purpose, historical situation, and/or audience. Identify and describe a claim in a text-based or non-text-based source.

1640

John Punch, a Black man, became the first African sentenced to enslavement for life after attempting to escape. The other escapees, two white men, were only sentenced to additional years of servitude.

1641

Massachusetts became the first North American colony to recognize slavery as legal.

1662

Virginians passed a law which stated that the status of the mother determined if a Black child would become enslaved. This paved the way for more restrictive laws, resulting in the Virginia Slave Code of 1705.

1664

The British established legal slavery when they took over the colonies of New York and New Jersey. Maryland passed a similar law, which established that any freeborn woman who married an enslaved man would also be considered enslaved.

“Always, I’m working in the space of the imagined, seeing the landscape both as it is, but also imagining it as I want it to appear in its final form as a photograph.”

—DAWOUD BEY



Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, *View from the Window at Le Gras*, Heliographic Photograph, 1826, Henry Ransom Center.



Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953), *In This Here Place (Louisiana)*, 2019, gelatin silver print, Rennie Collection, Vancouver, EX29.1.2, © Dawoud Bey

LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

One of the first applications of photography was to capture views of landscapes, which typically feature an area of countryside or open land.

Landscape photography provides a visual representation of natural environments that often evoke a personal connection with the viewer.

The first documented photograph is of an urban landscape, captured by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in France in 1826. He created the image using a process of hardening a naturally occurring asphalt as a light-sensitive coating on light-sensitive paper. Later, he developed heliography, which evolved into landscape photography.

Photographers creating landscapes use light and shadow to manipulate the depth and design of the foreground, middle ground, and background. This can help communicate a feeling or narrative, designed by the artist.

Dawoud Bey captures the history and landscape of America through black and white photography, focusing on the stories the land can tell about its past.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF THE PERIOD OF ENSLAVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

1688

Inspired by the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” Pennsylvania Quakers adopted the first anti-slavery resolution in American history.

1694

Enslavers in South Carolina sought to cultivate rice on their plantations, a crop that required the labor of enslaved people which accelerated the spread of trade in human beings.

1705

The Virginia Slave Code is codified, limiting the freedom of the enslaved, dictated by the slave owners. It also allowed slave owners to punish the enslaved without fear of legal repercussions and specified that people would be rewarded for capturing enslaved people who attempted to run away. Massachusetts declares that marriages specifically between white people and Black people are illegal.

CONNECTION TO NOMA'S COLLECTION



William Henry Fox Talbot, *View of the Paris Boulevards from the First Floor of the Hotel de Louvais, Rue de la Paix*, 1843, Salt Print, Museum Purchase, 1977 Art Acquisition Fund Drive, 77.66

The earliest landscape photography in NOMA's collection, is by English scientist and photography pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot, who developed another method of photography that prevented the photograph from darkening over time due to exposure to light. Talbot's early "photogenic drawing," later known as the calotype process, involved soaking paper covered in a weak solution of table salt (sodium chloride), drying the paper, then brushing silver nitrate on one side. This created silver chloride, which was light-sensitive and would darken where it was exposed to light. The exposure time of this process was roughly two hours. What set Talbot's work apart from those like Niépce was that Talbot would chemically stabilize the photograph once it was completed, making it insensitive to further light exposure.

This highly detailed and crisp photograph features the first floor of the Hotel de Louvais, located on the Rue de la Paix ("Peace Street") in Paris, known for its luxury shops and expensive jewelers. Talbot took this photograph during a visit in 1843, hoping to license his photographic process.

"History is always present."

—DAWOUD BEY

1739

The Stono Rebellion—a slave uprising, turned violent—is put down in South Carolina. Thirty white people and forty-four Black people die.

1758

Philadelphia Quakers stop the practice of buying and selling people for the purpose of enslavement. Quakers in other states, and those in London, soon follow.

1770

Crispus Attucks, a formerly enslaved man of African and Indigenous ancestry from Framingham, Massachusetts, becomes the first martyr of the American Revolution. He was shot and killed in what became known as the Boston Massacre.



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY #1: ACCORDION LANDSCAPE

Foreground, middleground, and background are concepts that apply to many two-dimensional works of art, such as photography. The foreground, middleground, and background divide the landscape into different planes that the artist uses to create a sense of depth. The foreground of a landscape is generally closer to the bottom of the composition, although that isn't always the case. Because this part of the scene is closest to the viewer, the objects within it appear to be larger. The background of a scene is the furthest away. It gives context to the scene, such as where it might be taking place. Because items in the background are meant to appear farther away, they are much smaller in size. Finally, the middleground is the space naturally occurring between the foreground and the background.

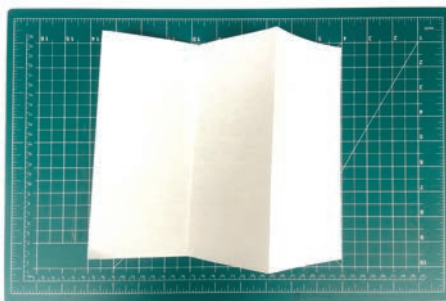
MATERIALS REQUIRED

8.5 x 11 Paper
Pencils
Scissors

OPTIONAL

Craft or X-Acto knife
Markers
Color Pencils

Students will create their own landscapes in a 3-dimensional accordion style, using the foreground, middleground, and background to express an emotion.



Step 1:

Fold the paper into thirds using the vertical lines. The paper will fold like an accordion, so it's important not to start drawing until you've folded.

Step 2:

Begin by drawing the foreground in the lower 3rd of the front page. Before cutting your page, place a cutting mat between the front page and the rest of the folded pages so that you only cut out the front page. Then, use scissors or a craft knife to cut along the top edge of your drawing and along the folded edge to the top of the page. Only the bottom third of the front page should still be attached to the paper.

Step 3:

Draw the middle ground in the middle of the center page. Keep the paper folded as you draw so that you can see the foreground as you draw. Follow the same procedure of cutting along the top of the second drawing and up the fold to remove the top 3rd of the page.

Step 4:

Finally, draw the background in the top 3rd of the final page. Again, keep the paper folded as you draw so that you can see the foreground and middle ground images. The final page will not be cut.



HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF THE PERIOD OF ENSLAVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

1775

The American Revolution begins. General George Washington initially refuses to allow free Black people to serve, but later reverses the policy. By the end of the war more than 5,000 Black people fought against the British.

1793

Congress passes the first fugitive slave act, making it a crime to harbor people escaping enslavement or to interfere with the arrest of the enslaved.

1808

The U.S. Congress bans the importation of enslaved people, including from Africa. The legislation does not prohibit interstate trade in human beings.

1820

Congress approves the Missouri Compromise, prohibiting slavery in western territories north of Missouri's southernmost border.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY #2: ACCORDION BOOK

Art can often serve as a **visual timeline** of history or historical documentation. Dawoud Bey uses his landscape photography to not only document historical places, but to reframe their histories to include the perspective of the enslaved people, creating a portrait of early African Americans in the United States. By thoughtfully photographing these landscapes and stringing together three separate locations, the viewer is able to understand the history of the United States on a deeper, more comprehensive level. Photographing multiple landscapes creates a historical narrative that expresses lived experiences.

Accordion books are a great way to create a series of connected thoughts or images. With the pages being formed from a long, joined sequence of paper, students are able to connect their ideas and artwork visually.

Students will create an accordion book, using visual imagery to express a personal lived experience that can be shared with others. Viewers of the accordion books are able to learn about the event and the student, as well.

MATERIALS REQUIRED

Ruler
Scissors
Cardboard/Cereal boxes
Glue
Paper
Pencils

OPTIONAL

Construction Paper
Markers
Acrylic Paint



Step 1:

Cut a piece of paper half lengthwise to make two long, thin rectangles.

Step 2:

Fold the paper in half width-wise.

Step 3:

Fold the top flap in half again, aligning the bottom edge with the top crease of the original widthwise fold.



Step 4:

Flip the paper over and repeat Step 3 on the other side. The thin rectangle you started with should now resemble the letter "W" when finished.

Step 5:

Repeat the process with the other rectangle.

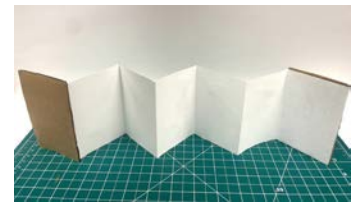


Step 6:

Glue the W's together to make a long accordion. You may want to apply pressure once glued (possibly setting the accordion under a textbook) for a few minutes.

Step 7:

Cut two pieces of 3.5" x 5" cardboard. These will serve as the covers of your book.



Step 8:

Glue your covers to each end of your paper accordion. As before, it helps to apply pressure under a book for a few minutes.

Step 9:

Students will use their new accordion books to document their event.



1831

Nat Turner, an enslaved carpenter and preacher, leads a four-day rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia. It became known as the Southampton Insurrection.

"The Discovery of Nat Turner," engraving from *Popular History of the United States*, published by William Cullen Bryant and Sidney Howard, 1881–88

1839

Enslaved Mende people revolt against their captivity on the sailing vessel *La Amistad*. Their action led to an 1841 U.S. Supreme Court decision which affirmed that the captives were free people with the right to resist forced and unlawful slavery.

1852

Harriet Beecher Stowe published her anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Roughly 300,000 copies were sold by the end of 1852.

CURRICULUM STANDARDS

The following curriculum standards can be addressed by activities and discussions related to Dawoud Bey’s *Elegy*.

Louisiana Student Standards for Social Studies

Grade 5

- 5.2 Use a variety of primary and secondary sources to:
 - a. Analyze social studies content.
 - b. Explain claims and evidence.
 - c. Compare and contrast multiple sources.
- 5.3 Explain connections between ideas, events, and developments in world history.

Grade 6

- 6.2 Analyze connections between ideas, events, and developments in U.S. history within their global context from 1580 to 1791.
- 6.6 Use a variety of primary and secondary sources to:
 - c. Compare and contrast multiple sources and accounts.
 - d. Explain how the availability of sources affects historical interpretations.
- 6.9 Analyze the development of the settlements and colonies in the late sixteenth century through the seventeenth century.
 - f. Analyze the causes, interactions, and consequences related to triangular trade, including the forced migration of Africans through the transatlantic trade of enslaved people and experiences of the Middle Passage.

High School US History

- US.4 Use geographic representations and demographic data to analyze environmental, cultural, economic, and political characteristics and changes.
- US.5 Use a variety of primary and secondary sources to:
 - a. Analyze social studies content.
 - b. Evaluate claims, counterclaims, and evidence.
 - c. Compare and contrast multiple sources and accounts.
 - d. Explain how the availability of sources affects historical interpretations.
- US.9 Analyze the development and abolition of slavery in the United States.
 - a. Describe the origins of the transatlantic slave trade, the Middle Passage, and the early spread of slavery in the Americas.
 - b. Describe the experiences of enslaved people on the Middle Passage, at slave auctions, and on plantations.
 - f. Explain how slavery is the antithesis of freedom.

National Art Standards

Creating

- Anchor Standard 1:** Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard 2:** Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard 3:** Refine and complete artistic work.

Responding

- Anchor Standard 7:** Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Connecting

- Anchor Standard 10:** Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
- Anchor Standard 11:** Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historic context to deepen understanding.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF THE PERIOD OF ENSLAVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

1857

In *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, the United States Supreme Court rules that Black people are not citizens. It also denies Congress the ability to prohibit slavery in any federal territory.

1860-1861

Abraham Lincoln is elected President, the southern states secede, and the Civil War begins. The 1860 census indicates that of the 4,441,830 Black people in the United States, 488,070 are free while 3,953,760 are enslaved.

1863

Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation frees enslaved people in the Confederacy and makes the abolition of slavery an official part of the Union war effort. African Americans begin to enlist in the Union Army to fight to end slavery.

1865

After the defeat of the Confederacy, the United States ratifies the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which declared slavery and involuntary servitude illegal.



Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953), *Untitled #1 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse)*, 20179, gelatin silver print, Rennie Collection, Vancouver, EX29.1.16, © Dawoud Bey

AFTER YOUR VISIT

Once you exit the exhibition, take a break to reflect. Sit in the Besthoff Sculpture Garden or in Café NOMA to share a snack and think about the artwork you have observed today. Take time to reflect on what you observed, felt, or thought, and share your reflections with someone you came with, or write down your thoughts in a notebook or journal.

ASK

1. How have the perspectives presented in Dawoud Bey's *Elegy* reframed your understanding of 18th- and 19th-century history in the United States?
2. Having now seen this exhibition, what periods of history do you think need revisiting to uplift all voices?

EXAMINE

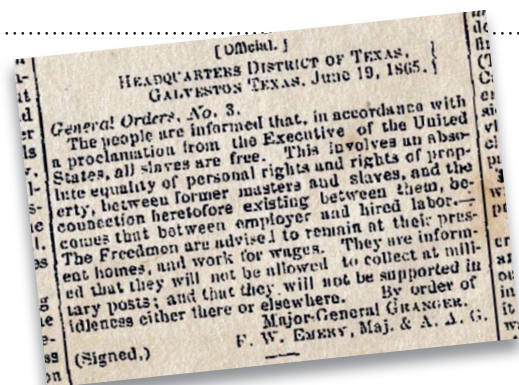
3. Examine the history of your community. Observe the dominant perspective and consider if there may be minimized voices or experiences. Could there be other sides to the story? Write down your answer to reflect on your thoughts and ideas.

CONSIDER

4. Consider the history of enslaved people of the United States. What lives, communities, and histories did they leave behind, and what persevered here in the United States?

CONCLUSION

5. What ethics, if any, are applicable to the ways in which we view the visual representations of slavery?



June 19, 1865

Union General Gordon Granger arrives in Galveston, Texas, and announces the freedom of enslaved people in the state.

RESOURCES



Virginia Museum of Fine Arts



K-12 Louisiana Student Standards for Social Studies



Sean Kelly Gallery



National Core Art Standards



Harry Ransom Center



Jim Crow Museum

BOOKS

Show Way by Jacqueline Woodson

Copper Sun by Sharon M. Draper

Memories of the Enslaved by

Spencer R. Crew, Lonnie G.

Bunch, III, and Clement A. Price

How the Word is Passed:

Remembering Slavery and How It

Shaped America by Clint Smith (new copy developed for younger readers)

The works of Dawoud Bey's *Elegy* address multiple layers of our country's history. By connecting the history of enslavement, forced removal, and violence through physical geography and time, Bey's photographs speak both of the beauty and the darkness absorbed by the land, changing how we view these landscapes, our history, and our present moment.

