

THE TRUE

AMERICA

Photographs by Ernest Cole

Exhibition Learning Guide



About the Exhibition

Ernest Cole (born in Transvaal, South Africa, 1940; died in New York, 1990) was a Black South African photojournalist living in exile who closely observed Black life in America. By 1966, a twenty-six-year-old Cole had spent many years bravely chronicling Black lives under the brutal system of racial segregation known as apartheid. He risked his freedom to publish *House of Bondage* in 1967, a collection of his photographs that depict the horrors of apartheid.

Cole became a “banned person” in South Africa after publishing *House of Bondage* and settled in Harlem, New York. He worked with Magnum Foundation and received funding from the Ford Foundation to undertake a project looking at Black communities and cultures in the United States. Cole’s new photographs revealed the painful ironies of exile and featured his encounters with the African diaspora in the United States, expressing a deep yearning for the continent he had to leave behind. He traveled across the country, visiting cities during major historic events such as protests in Memphis, the funeral of Martin Luther King Jr. in Atlanta, and the aftermath of uprisings in Detroit and Washington, DC. Cole took advantage of a greater freedom to get closer to people in the United States than he could in South Africa, with his photographs representing more interactions with people from a wide range of backgrounds.

Cole passed away at age forty-nine of cancer. In 2017, more than sixty thousand of his negatives—missing for more than forty years—resurfaced in Stockholm at the Skandinaviska Enskilda Banken and were given to Leslie Matlaisane, chairperson of the Ernest Cole Family Trust and nephew of Cole. While Cole’s precise timeline, itinerary, and means of travel surrounding this photographic archive remain elusive, *The True America* offers an opportunity to begin to better understand the scope of Cole’s record of the civil rights movement, and his own effort to find a place for himself in the States.

The texts in this guide are adapted from the essays “Somewhat at Home” by Leslie M. Wilson and “When the Revolution Comes: The Stateless Ernest Cole” by James Sanders in the accompanying book, *Ernest Cole: The True America* (Aperture, 2024).

About This Resource

This resource is intended to inform educators about the exhibition *The True America*, so they are able to lead students of all ages in meaningful discussions surrounding its content. Each photograph in the exhibition offers a valuable opportunity for students to discover and discuss themes related to race relations in the past and present. This resource provides a selection of photographs from which to begin these dialogues.

Each image is accompanied by a brief contextual summary, considering Cole's experiences in the US and South Africa, as well as guiding questions to engage students in the exhibition. Following each image is a section titled "Going Further: Works in Conversation." This section brings other images and ephemera from the exhibition into the conversation. Also included in this resource are a post-visit discussion and post-visit activity.

Before a conversation about a photograph begins, offer students a few moments to examine the work and carefully investigate the scene. Encourage them to look closely and share their thoughts and ideas about the artwork, then guide a dialogue based on their inquiries, perceptions, and thoughts.

Topics for Discussion

Race Relations

In 1966, shortly after Jim Crow-era laws were effectively ended by legislation, Cole arrived in the US from apartheid South Africa. In contrast to his images of South Africa in *House of Bondage*, in which Cole documented racialized violence, Cole consistently documented interracial romance and friendship in the US.

Belonging

Cole grew up in apartheid South Africa with the belief that the US was a racial utopia. Upon his arrival to the States in 1966, he quickly realized that was far from the case. Despite the persistent segregation in the US, Cole was able to find and document Black communities across the country in Harlem, DC, and Atlanta.

Activism

While Cole was in South Africa, his work shined a light on injustice. After he was exiled to the US, he relentlessly documented various displays of activism across the country. He photographed civil rights protests, sanitation worker demonstrations, and feminist marches. In the US, Cole highlighted the action taken in response to injustice.

Additional Themes:

Black Community
Civil Rights Movement
Culture
Documentation
Encounters
Home
Identity
Revolution

Key Vocabulary

Apartheid

a system of institutionalized racial segregation that existed in South Africa from 1948 to 1994, enforced by white government officials discriminating against Black Africans, Asians, and multiracial individuals

Exile

being banned from one's home country, often due to political reasons

Gaze

a photographer's or viewer's own perspective when creating or viewing a photograph, informed by lived experience

Photojournalism

the practice of documenting stories and communicating news through making photographs

Protest

a public expression of disapproval for the purpose of encouraging social or political change

Race

a social construct that categorizes humans based on the color of their skin and other physical features

Segregation

the action of separating people on the basis of race

Street Photography

the practice of making candid photographs of people in public or urban environments

Part One: Somewhat at Home in Harlem

During his time in New York, Ernest Cole settled in Harlem, a neighborhood that in the 1920s and 1930s became a cultural hub for the African diaspora and a symbol of civil rights and Black Power movements. Cole described a kinship between Harlem and the “Harlems of Pretoria” and Johannesburg (two large cities in South Africa) as centers of Black life sustained through legacies of segregation and the resilient efforts to develop robust communities in the face of oppression. Upon arriving in the US, Cole became aware of negative race relations and observed that despite beliefs abroad, the US was not a racially integrated society. He stated, “I had been told that being colored didn’t matter at all in the United States—outside of the South, that is. But everywhere I saw racial attitudes that were very much like those I know from South Africa.” Connecting the Black experience in New York to that of his home country while appreciating the triumph of the Black communities in Harlem, Cole photographed street goers, children, families, workers, signs, and storefronts.



Discussion Questions:

1. What is the mood of this photograph? Use visual clues to explain the feeling, sights, and sounds of this scene.
2. Observe where this band is performing, and think about why. Who might these musicians be, and who is their audience?
3. How does this image communicate Cole's understanding of Harlem as a center of Black life and culture?

Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Ernest Cole, Harlem, ca. 1969, inside cover
(COL_001_COE1969001W00022-16)



Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Ernest Cole, Harlem, ca. 1967-72, p. 40
(COL_031_COE1971001W00146-20)



Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Ernest Cole, Harlem, ca. 1967–72, p. 160–61
(COL_107_COE1971001K019B-14)



Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Cole was drawn to Harlem?
2. What can you infer about everyday life in Harlem based on Cole's street photography?

Part Two: Taking the Streets

Cole seemed to be fascinated by social change in all its forms, from organized protesting to the rise of Black Power parties, and was in favor of revolutions to come. His photography book, *House of Bondage*, was published in 1967 after he fled South Africa. Created as an act of political protest, the images included in this book revealed the everyday indignities of apartheid to the world. Once he arrived in the US, Cole found himself interested in other forms of protest against oppressive government policies and societal beliefs. In his home country, Cole had risked his life to create photographs of life under apartheid, whereas in New York, Memphis, Los Angeles, and other US cities, he had more freedom to make political photographs. He documented various gatherings and marches in which Americans voiced their demands, including the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, and the anti-Vietnam War movement. Cole made not only photographs of signs and slogans, but also images that were centered around interactions with the surrounding environments and the diversity of protesters themselves. This image comes from Memphis in 1968 when Cole was present for the Sanitation Workers' Strike, where Black workers demanded higher wages, safer working conditions, and recognition of their union.



Discussion Questions:

1. Read the signs displayed by the striking Memphis sanitation workers. Given Cole's background, why might he have been interested in photographing these signs?
2. Observe the facial expressions of the man who has spotted Cole's camera, and those of the protesters who have not. What are the similarities and differences?
3. What connections can you draw between Cole's life and his decision to photograph Black men protesting in the US?





Going Further:
Works in Conversation

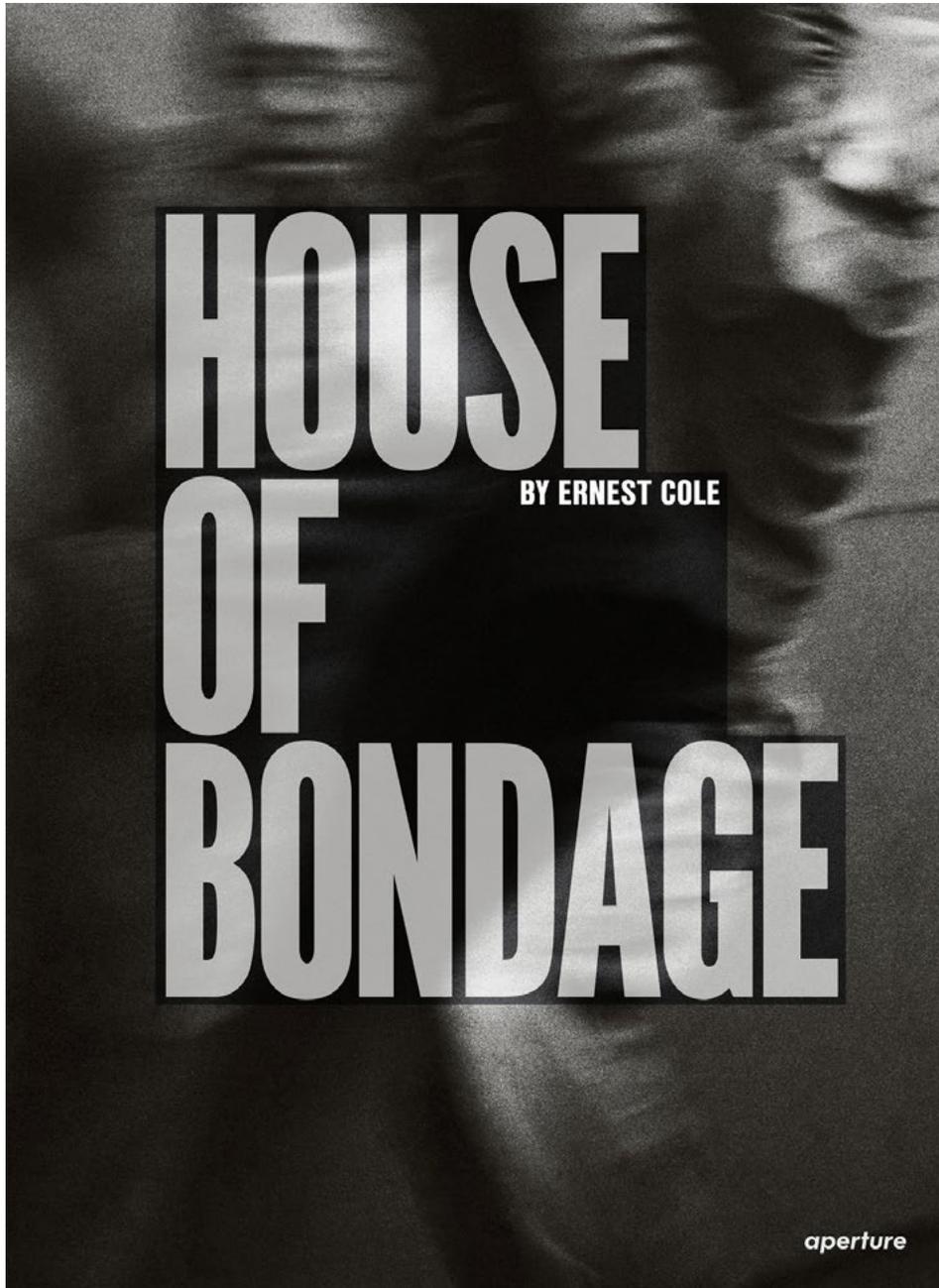
Ernest Cole, Black Nationalist
Headquarters New Libya, Cleveland, ca.
1968, not in book

(COL_167_COE1968002W00011-39)



Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Ernest Cole, *House of Bondage* (New York:
Aperture, 2022)



Going Further: Works in Conversation

Discussion Questions:

1. What is a protest or movement in the present day that you saw, remember, or heard about?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the protesters, signs, and movements documented by Cole when compared to ones that you have seen in your lifetime?

Part Three: Gone Underground

The New York City subway, known for its unpredictable encounters and interactions between people of many different backgrounds, was a common subject of Ernest Cole's documentation. In 1949 in Cole's home country, the South Africa National Party enacted the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, which made it illegal for non-white South Africans and white South Africans to date or marry. Additionally, the Railway and Harbours Acts Amendment was passed in the same year, enforcing racial segregation of train cars and stations. This scene from Midtown Manhattan, like many others Cole's camera captured during this time, was in direct opposition to the laws in South Africa. This image, made during the height of the civil rights movement, shows a white woman and a Black man embracing in a subway car with a group of white passengers in the background. Photographs like this carried a personal significance for Cole, as photojournalism that looks directly at the intimacies between white and Black people had gotten him in trouble at home. It is important to note that in 1966, when Cole arrived in the US, interracial marriages were still illegal in certain states, and it wouldn't be until 1967 that the Supreme Court would make a ruling that nationally legalized marriages between people of different races.



Discussion Questions:

1. What is the relationship between the two people closest to the camera? What visual clues communicate this?
2. What can you interpret about the other passengers' attitude toward the couple? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. How would this image look different if it had been created in South Africa during the same time period?

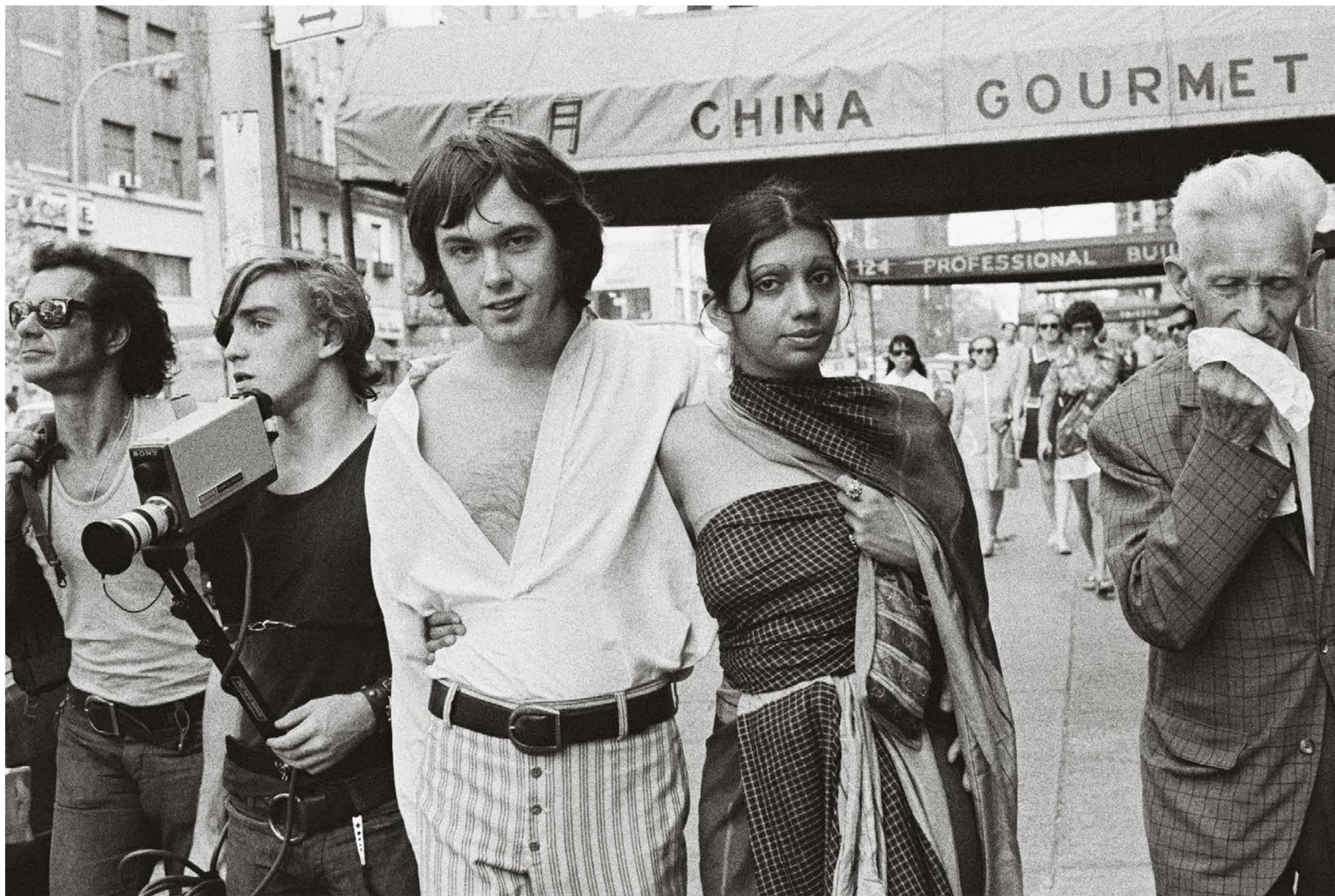
Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Ernest Cole, Midtown, ca. 1967-72, p. 234
(COL_317_COE1972001W00020-10A)



Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Ernest Cole, *Midtown*, ca. 1967–72, p. 266
(COL_257_COE1971001W00282-20)



Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Ernest Cole, *Midtown*, ca. 1970–72, p.
250–51 (COL_248_COE1971001W00296-29)



Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Ernest Cole, Midtown, ca. 1968–72, not in
book (COL_398_COE196004W00008.9)



Going Further: Works in Conversation

Discussion Questions:

1. How do these scenes created on the street and on the subway compare with the people we may see today in a large US city?
2. Given the political context and laws passed in the US at the time, why were these images significant for Cole to create?

Part Four: South

Ernest Cole had a special interest in the South, photographing many states and cities during particularly tumultuous times of the civil rights movement. While he comparatively enjoyed much more freedom photographing Black life in the US than he did in South Africa, he understood the limits of his freedom, determined by his race, after landing in New York and then exploring the South. He stated that he was aware of heightened racism against Black people in Southern states, but that while making photographs in this part of the country, he was concerned about being arrested and even feared for his life. Despite this, his images from these travels create a comprehensive picture of different cities in the wake of significant historical events. Most notably, Cole visited Atlanta after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to document grieving communities gathered for the civil rights leader's funeral. These photographs of crowds of people mourning together—along with images from Washington, DC, that depict the aftermath of uprisings following King's death—demonstrate the distress, frustration, and power of activists and supporters of the civil rights movement during this time in US history.



Discussion Questions:

1. Closely observe the people gathered in this photograph. Focusing on their actions and facial expressions, what type of event do you think this might be? Is this a joyous occasion, or a solemn community gathering? What are some visual cues that might determine that this is a funeral?
2. Knowing that this is the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., what observations can you make about the impact he had on his community at this time? Even though this is a tragic moment, what evidence can you find for community, honor, and hope for the future?
3. How is this image similar or different from Cole's street photography and photojournalism in other cities, including New York? What visual evidence communicates this?
4. What connections can you draw between Cole's life and his decision to travel to the southern US to document this historic event?
5. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral was a widely broadcasted and photographed event. In contrast to his solo street photography practice, this occasion placed Cole among one of dozens of photographers. How may it have felt to be one of many photographers at this funeral who did not attend as mourners, but as witnesses?

Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Ernest Cole, Memphis, 1968, p. 204
(COL_225_COE1968002W00020-29)



Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Ernest Cole, Washington, DC, 1968, p. 213
(COL_238_COE1968002W00001-01)



Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Ernest Cole, Washington, DC, 1968, p. 214
(COL_237_COE1971001WX00083-05)



Going Further:
Works in Conversation

Ernest Cole, Lowndes County,
Alabama, ca. 1967-72, p. 198 (COL_181_
COE1969001W00095-02)



Going Further: Works in Conversation

Discussion Questions:

1. How do Cole's photographs in the South differ from those he made in New York?
2. Is there a different mood carried throughout these photographs? What emotion would you use to describe these images?

Post-Visit Discussion: Looking Together

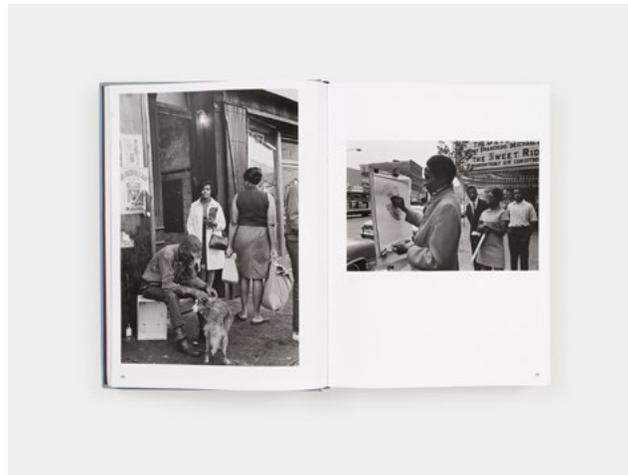
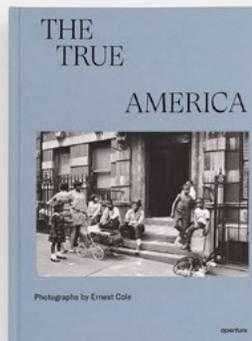
“Cole affirmed his deep commitment to the book as the ideal platform for his work—work that unfolded on its own schedule beyond the news cycle.” —Leslie M. Wilson

The True America exists as both an exhibition and a book. These two different presentations of the same body of work affect how audiences view the photographs. After receiving funding from the Ford Foundation, Cole traveled the country to document Black families in urban environments and rural Southern states, with the intention of producing his study of Black culture in book form. This project was unrealized during his lifetime, making *House of Bondage* the only book of his photographs that he published. The photobook as a medium and method of presentation spoke to Cole, as he felt it was authentic to his work to exist outside of commercial photojournalism.

Discussion Questions:

Look at a photobook together as a class. Consider selecting *The True America*, or another photobook centered around photojournalism and social change. Lead a discussion based on photobooks as a medium, asking:

1. What do you notice about this book? What is it about? Why is it interesting?
2. Was the book created around a theme? Can you identify the theme?
3. What do you notice about the design of the book? Do you think it reinforces the main idea, theme, or story of the book? Why?
4. If looking at *The True America*: How does the book differ from the exhibition? How might that change your understanding of the work?
5. Why do you think a photographer might choose to make their work into a book?



Going Further: Photo Exercise

Invite students to choose a theme that they might consider for a photobook of their own. Have students create mind maps to brainstorm concepts and topics, as well as personal items and classroom objects that could connect to their theme. Provide class time for them to create photographs that fit into their theme using classroom cameras or their smartphones. Encourage experimentation—this exercise should be a low-stakes exploration of each student’s chosen theme.

Going Further: Photojournalism

Ernest Cole was a photojournalist—he documented stories and communicated news through his photographs. Thinking about the themes covered in *The True America* or another photobook shared with the class, students will make their own photographs in the style of photojournalism with classroom cameras or their smartphones. *Preface this activity with a discussion about the ethics of photojournalism.*

The history of photojournalism, and photography in general, has been riddled with moral questions and dilemmas. While the camera is a wonderful tool for telling stories that may otherwise go untold, it has also been historically used as a tool for social and political violence. As you prepare your students to embark on an activity in which they will make their own photographs, this is a good time to have a conversation about what it means to be a photographer who is aware of their position in the world. The following are questions to help guide this discussion:

1. When should you take a picture of a stranger?
2. When should you not take a picture of a stranger?
3. How can you tell if someone is comfortable having their photo taken?
4. If you take a photo of someone without their permission, what are good follow-up steps?

Lesson Plan:

1. Revisit the definition of photojournalism. Discuss with the class that this type of photography is documentary, meaning they provide an accurate representation of real-life people and events. Have a conversation about the ethics of photojournalism, as illustrated above. Talk to students about discerning when they should and should not photograph a certain situation.
2. Introduce topics that photojournalism can cover in relation to your school or community. Take suggestions from the class, and offer additional options including:
 - School Politics: elections, pep rallies, school-spirit week, sit-ins
 - Events: celebrations, festivals, holidays, sports games
 - Culture: people, social change, business, art, music
 - Personal stories: families, communities, everyday life
3. As a class, think of an upcoming school or community event: field day, class fundraiser, sports game or match, student government meeting, etc. Collaboratively create a plan for students to photograph this event to create a photojournalism collection. This can include creating a class mind map centered on what the students would like to highlight about the event. Depending on the size of the class, groups of students can be assigned to cover multiple events. Pose guiding questions, such as:
 - Why are you interested in this event?
 - Why is this event important to our community?
 - What scenes, people, or environments can you photograph at this event?
4. Working as a class or in groups, take students to the school or community event(s) and have them find an interesting person, situation, or environment. If photographing people, invite students to introduce their project and ask permission to photograph the person, then have them encourage the participant to go about their business (for example: “Hi, I’m working on a photography project for class, would you mind if I photograph you while you are doing X? Thank you!”). If they say no, thank them and move on. Encourage students to make more than one photograph from different angles, points of view, and distances. It’s important to read the situation and not take advantage of the participant’s generosity, so remind students to respect that they are documenting people in the middle of something. Invite students to make pictures not only of the people at the event, but also of the environment.
 - For example, if students are photographing a sports event, plan together to document happenings aside from the gameplay, including crowd reactions, players on the bench, concession stands, and field or arena surroundings. Ask students, How do these elements help to create a story?
5. When back in the classroom, have each student or group choose their favorite photographs that they created at the event to share with the class. Lead a critique or a discussion based on what the students have learned about photojournalism as a documentary style of photography. Prompt the discussion with questions including:
 - What can you learn about this event through the photographs created?
 - What story can these photographs tell someone who was not at the event?
 - How can these photographs communicate this moment in your school’s history to future classes?

Going Further: Photobook or Exhibition Creation

Invite students to create a collaborative photobook or exhibition as a class with their photojournalism projects. Given what the class has learned about photobooks and photography exhibitions, decide together what format would be best for presenting the students' work. Have each group submit their selections from the photojournalism activity to be printed using a classroom printer.

Photobooks

As a class, brainstorm different design elements the book will feature, including front and back covers, binding, page size, image sequencing, etc., and assign design tasks to the different groups of students.

Exhibition

As a class, decide a location where the students would like to display their work (e.g. the classroom, a hallway, the library). Students can select and sequence photographs to hang on a wall or large poster paper. For each photograph, use clear shipping labels to print wall text, captions, or titles that provide information on the photographed event.

The True America is organized by Aperture and the Ernest Cole Family Trust. Curated by Leslie M. Wilson, PhD. The exhibition is made possible, in part, with generous support from the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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This learning guide was created by Virginia Cannella, education and public programs work scholar, with contributions from Alex Schlechter, education and public programs manager; Savannah Jackson, education and public programs work scholar; and Leslie M. Wilson, curator of exhibition *The True America* and contributor to *Ernest Cole: The True America* (Aperture, 2024), based on *Ernest Cole: The True America*, edited by Denise Wolff and Lanah Swindle, designed by Oliver Barstow. Curriculum design by Karina Eckmeier. Copyediting: Claire Voon. Proofreading: Freddy Martinez and Susan Ciccotti.

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Aperture is a nonprofit publisher dedicated to creating insight, community, and understanding through photography.

Ernest Cole (born in Transvaal, South Africa, 1940; died in New York, 1990) is best known for *House of Bondage*, a photobook published in 1967 that chronicles the horrors of apartheid. After fleeing South Africa in 1966, he became a “banned person,” settling in New York. He was associated with Magnum Photos and received funding from the Ford Foundation to undertake a project looking at Black communities and cultures in the United States. Cole spent an extensive time in Sweden and became involved with the Tiofoto collective. He died at age forty-nine of cancer. In 2017, more than sixty thousand of Cole’s negatives—missing for more than forty years—resurfaced in Sweden. In 2022, Aperture reissued *House of Bondage*, adding a chapter of unpublished work. In 2024 Aperture published *Ernest Cole: The True America*, the first publication of Ernest Cole’s photographs depicting Black lives in the United States during the turbulent and eventful late 1960s and early 1970s.

Leslie M. Wilson is associate director for academic engagement and research at the Art Institute of Chicago. Her research, teaching, and curatorial endeavors focus on the history of photography, the arts of Africa and the African diaspora, modern and contemporary American art, and museum studies. Her current and forthcoming projects include *not all realisms: photography, Africa, and the long 1960s* at the University of Chicago’s Smart Museum of Art, where she was a curatorial fellow from 2019 to 2021, and *David Goldblatt: No Ulterior Motive* at the Art Institute of Chicago with cocurators Matthew Witkovsky and Judy Ditner. She has written for numerous publications, including *Dear Dave*, *Foam Magazine*, and *Manual*. From 2017 to 2021, she was assistant professor of art history at Purchase College, SUNY. Wilson is a contributor to the book *Ernest Cole: The True America* (Aperture, 2021) and curator of the accompanying exhibition *The True America*.

James Sanders is a journalist, researcher, and scholar. He has written extensively on South African politics, in such books as *South Africa and the International Media, 1972–1979: A Struggle for Representation* (1999) and *Apartheid’s Friends: The Rise and Fall of South Africa’s Secret Service* (2006). He worked as a research specialist on *Anthony Sampson Mandela: The Authorised Biography* (1999), and on numerous documentary films, including *Mandela: The Living Legend* (2003) and *Mandela’s Gun* (2016). He served as a guest editor of *Noseweek* and was the founding editor of *Molotov Cocktail*. Sanders has concentrated his research on the life of Ernest Cole.