

EMMETT TILL INTERPRETIVE CENTER

RACIAL RECONCILIATION BEGINS BY TELLING THE TRUTH

Emmett Till Interpretive Center Launches Youth Advisory Council to Empower Mississippi Delta Students

We are proud to announce the launch of the Emmett Till Youth Advisory Council, a new 12-month initiative designed to inspire and empower high school students from Tallahatchie, Leflore, and Sunflower counties in the Mississippi Delta. This council seeks to engage students in exploring the legacy of Emmett Till while equipping them with tools to advocate for social justice and meaningful change in their communities.

The Council will provide students with the opportunity to visit historic sites, learn from civil rights leaders, and develop leadership and advocacy skills. Through workshops, field trips, and collaborative projects, members will deepen their understanding of Emmett Till's story and its relevance to modern-day struggles for justice and equality.

"This initiative is deeply personal for me," said Jay Rushing, ETIC's Youth Coordinator and a former high school student from Cleveland, Mississippi. "Growing up in the Delta, I've always loved this region and its history. I know how transformative it can be for young people to see themselves as part of the ongoing narrative of change. This council is about giving them a voice and a platform to carry Emmett Till's legacy forward."

The launch of the Youth Advisory Council comes during the 70th anniversary of Emmett Till's murder, a moment of reflection and recommitment to the principles of justice and equality that his story represents. By engaging students in the Mississippi Delta, the program aims to inspire the next generation to lead with purpose and passion.

Participants in the Emmett Till Youth Advisory Council will embark on field trips to sites of historical significance, including the Emmett Till Interpretive Center and the newly established Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument. They will engage in workshops designed to enhance their leadership, advocacy, and storytelling skills, while also connecting with local and national civil rights leaders. Through creative projects, they will have the opportunity to share the story of Emmett Till and uplift the sacrifice of Mamie Till-Mobley and their enduring importance to wider audiences.

We invite parents, educators, and community members to encourage young people to apply and participate in this transformative program. Together, the Center and the youth of the Delta aim to honor Emmett Till's memory by creating a brighter and more equitable future. The application deadline is January 31, 2025.

For more information about the Emmett Till Youth Advisory Council, including how to apply or support the program, please contact Jay Rushing at apply@emmett-till.org.

January Gill O'Neil's *Glitter Road* Tells Till Story through Poetry

By Matt Switliski

January Gill O'Neil's fourth book of poetry, *Glitter Road* (CavanKerry Press, 2024), includes multiple poems that engage with the story of Emmett Till, something she was not expecting when she moved to Mississippi for a one-year university appointment. "I didn't come down saying I'm going to write this book and it'll be on Till. It just sort of unfolded."

As to how that unfolded, the short version is this: she published her first poetry collection while working in administration at Babson College in Massachusetts. Through a friend, she connected as a volunteer with the Massachusetts Poetry Festival and was later hired by Salem State University to run the festival, which she did for six years, and teach writing, which she does to this day. After her third book was released, she was invited to serve as the John and Renée Grisham Writer in Residence at the University of Mississippi for the 2019-2020 academic year, which brought her to the Delta. (Check out [this mini documentary](#) from Peabody TV to hear more about her life.)

She had fewer teaching responsibilities while in Mississippi, giving her the chance to explore and learn about her new environment. It was that freedom that allowed her to attend the dedication of the bulletproof sign at Graball Landing in 2019 following the nationally reported vandalism. En route to the ceremony and thereafter, she had multiple conversations that deepened her understanding of the Till story. Being in the place where history happened and seeing how that history was treated got her thinking.

"It's a different take to go and stand next to this river and sort of imagine those events. I was captivated and I wanted to know more," she said. "And the other fascinating thing for me is learning about or having a better understanding about what is memorialized and what is forgotten, and I think I was a little surprised going to those really important historic sites: it's not a big deal. Like there's no guards, there's no gates at the time. It wasn't a federal park or anything [yet]."

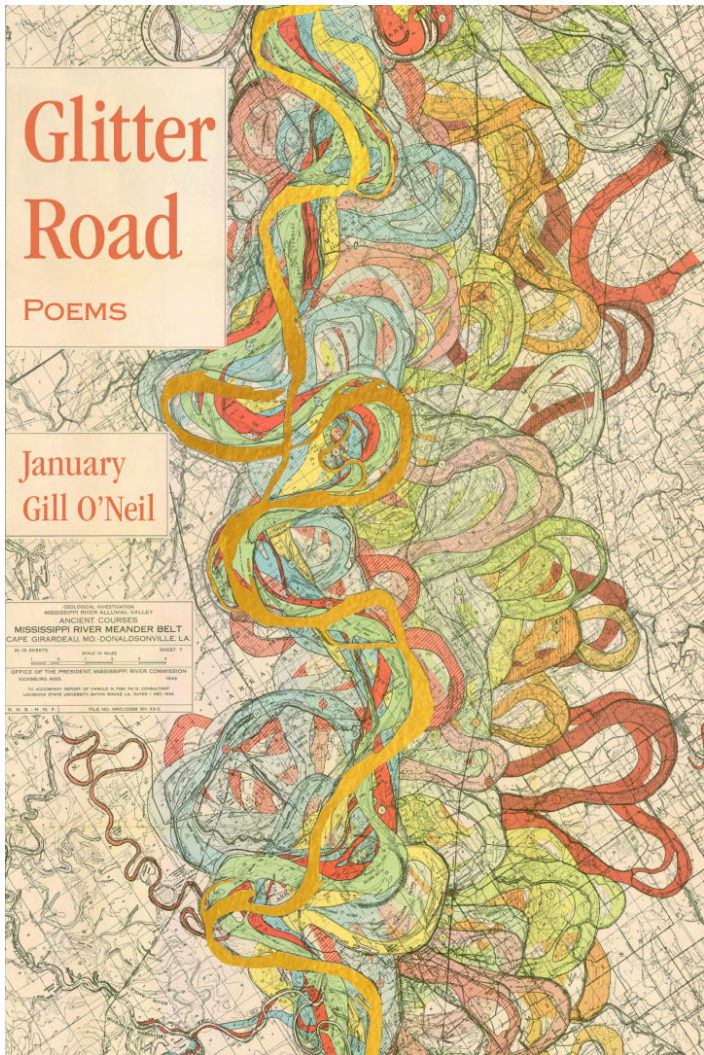


Photo credit: John Andrews

She incorporated Till's story into a number of her poems that would eventually become *Glitter Road*. "I don't think I knew [the Till story] better than many people," she said. "I knew the story the same way I knew about Rosa Parks, nothing more than these events happened." She acknowledged that, when she has toured for the book, many readers admit they didn't know much about Emmett Till either. Some of the resulting conversations have been uncomfortable, but O'Neil said that her work has opened a space for talk about race with and among her audience. "It's one of those gifts I didn't see when I was writing this book."

For her, *Glitter Road* is not just a chronicle of tragedy. The book is full of "joy and hope and wonderment" as it centers on various relationships in O'Neil's life. The poems she herself likes reading—and what she hopes her own poetry achieves—give the impression of listening in as a person focuses and reflects on the world, ranging from the major occasions like weddings and funerals to the small ones like seeing cardinals at a feeder.

She called the current moment the best time to read poetry "because it's so accessible." She also expressed her wish that more people took time away from screens to preserve their own stories and the stories of others. "We're losing our elders. We're finding out how fragile life is. If there is a way to document some of these stories, do that and then figure out how to write about them later."

“Don’t be afraid of the page. Picking up a journal and spending ten minutes might make all the difference. It’s a way of centering. It’s a way of dealing with things.” She urges her students to tell their own stories, or else someone else might (and likely not in the ways they’d want). She said that applied equally to people who don’t consider themselves writers or poets.

Though she could not have predicted how her time in Mississippi would go, she felt grateful that she had not let the opportunity pass her by. As for helping keep the history alive, she said, “Till’s story is not a new one, of course, but I get to say it to audiences that may hear it in a way they hadn’t heard it before. Poetry is just another way of telling it.”

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