

EDUCATION GUIDE

Regina Agu SHORE | LINES

MoCP Museum of
Contemporary
Photography

Columbia
COLLEGE CHICAGO



Regina Agu, *Hurricane Katrina memorial at Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, St. Bernard Parish, 2019*

This guide serves as a viewer supplement to the exhibition *Regina Agu: Shore | Lines* and can be used for engaging with the exhibition. The guide includes information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, classroom activities, and suggested readings. You may learn more about educational programs at Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago [here](#). To schedule a virtual tour of the exhibition or print viewing with your class, please visit [here](#).

This guide was written by Curatorial Assistants Lilah Hernandez and Julia Smith with Curator of Academic Programs and Collections Kristin Taylor. This exhibition is curated by Associate Curator Asha Iman Veal.

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INTRODUCTION

Chicago-based artist Regina Agu (American, Houston, Texas) works across photography, installation, drawing, and text to explore connections between landscapes and personal histories, with a focus on geographies significant to Black communities.

On the first floor of the exhibition, Agu presents two large-scale panoramic images as part of her ongoing exploration into placemaking and memory, to trace sites and legacies of historical Black North American migration through an expansive tradition of the panoramic form. Employing methods of fieldwork and landscape photography, these immersive works position waterways as defining sites of Black life, identity, and belonging.

The second floor features an array of images from Agu's field guide—a book she made documenting moments from her research with more than twenty Chicagoland and Great Lakes region environmental advocates and ecologists of color, community historians and academics, sailing clubs, librarians, archivists, geographers, and many of the long-time and new migrant families that live and work along these long-storied bodies of water.

On the museum's third level is a selection of works that Agu curated from the museum's permanent collection that showcase waterways from various locations, heavily representing Chicago locations and the people who reside and interact around them across decades. Additionally, the exhibition includes film excerpts from the South Side Home Movie Project, which provides a community centered perspective on life along Chicago's shores through vernacular storytelling.

Through this multi-layered exhibition, Agu underscores the profound relationship between natural landscapes and cultural, historical, and personal narratives.

Key Theme

Histories of Landscape Panorama

Agu's panoramic works are rooted in research of historical paintings of waterways. A popular form of entertainment in the 19th century, large panoramas were noteworthy experiences for viewers as they were paired with music, sound, and lighting effects.

One panorama that inspired Agu's work and research is *Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley* (1850) by John J. Egan. This monumental painting, spanning 2,668 square feet across 25 scenes, illustrates the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys. It was used as a visual aid by archaeologist and traveling lecturer Montroville W. Dickeson, who studied the construction of ancient mounds between 1837 and 1844. Dickeson was particularly interested in the origins of these structures and the archaeological questions surrounding the first peoples of what was then referred to as "The New World." He commissioned Egan to paint scenes based on his travels in the West, where he sought artifacts and burial mounds created by Indigenous communities.

Egan's panorama became a centerpiece of Dickeson's public lectures, functioning as both an educational tool and a visual spectacle. Egan's panorama—now part of the Saint Louis Art Museum's collection—stands as the only known surviving example of its kind from the Mississippi River Valley. Most panoramas from this era were lost to damage from frequent handling as "moving pictures" or were neglected as their popularity declined over time.



Excerpts from *Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley*, 1850, by John J. Egan. Collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri.

On this painting, Agu states: “Like other panoramas of the period, this landscape is depicted as an invitation for conquest, labor, extraction, and modernist progress.” In creating her own immersive, draping panoramas that create a feeling of floating placelessness for the viewer, Agu questions what stories we do not see in traditional and contemporary landscape representations, while also pointing to histories of representing the land through an exaggerated and false narratives of exploitation.

Questions for Looking:

- How does this experience of viewing the landscape through Agu’s photographic panoramas compare to your own experiences of being near a large body of water?
- Looking closely at the photographs, what details do you notice within the imagery that you might not have noticed from afar? What do these details add to your understanding of the work?
- Painter John J. Egan aspired to connect the landscape to human experiences when he created *Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley*. How do you think Agu’s aspirations of using the panorama format compare or contrast to his aspirations?
- How might Agu’s artistic strategies pose a counter-argument or counter-narrative to Egan’s depictions that she calls an “open invitation for conquest, labor, extraction, and modernist progress?”

Regina Agu, *Sea Change*, 2016. Vinyl print. Approx. 6ft. x 70ft. View of Project Row Houses installation, Houston, Texas. Photo by Alex Barber. Image courtesy of the artist.

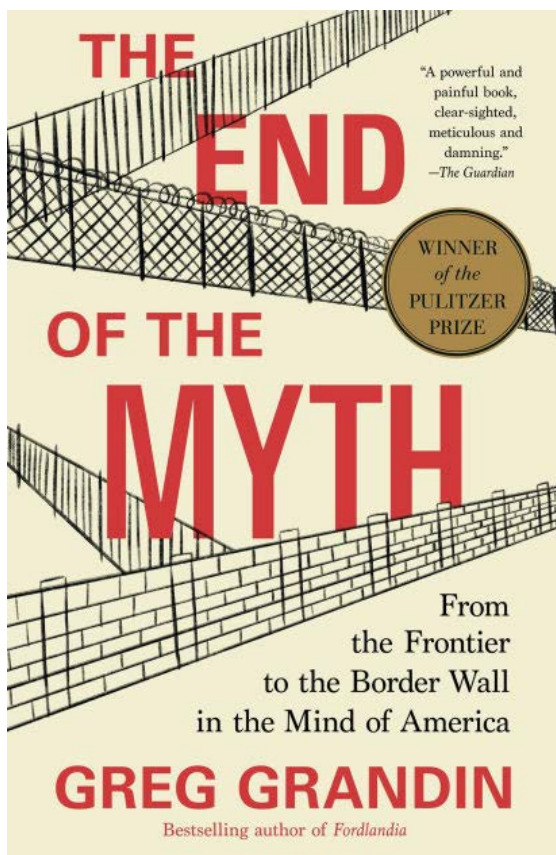


Deeper Reading

The Myth of the American Frontier

As I moved back and forth between the Gulf of Mexico and the Gulf of Guinea, I became very aware of the connections of language, culture, and migration, as well as the common legacies of enslavement, colonialism, and economy that continue to inform these geographies, given that the circulation of human and economic capital persists in the present day.

—Regina Agu



One of the many instances of propaganda used to convince white settlers to migrate to the west was the myth of the American frontier. The belief that the United States was a blank slate for colonists proved to be problematic for many reasons. Not only did it minimize the presence of the already oppressed Indigenous people living in North America, but it justified American imperial practices such as chattel slavery, a foundational pillar of capitalism. By advertising the “Wild West” as land for the taking, the myth of the American frontier became a normalized justification for the oppression of non-white people. This chapter of American history, also known as Manifest Destiny, has commonly been taught in schools with erased details about violence and exploitation.

For more information on this history, we recommend reading *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* by Greg Grandin (2020).

Key Theme

Parallels between the Gulf South landscapes and the Great Lakes

Agu is interested in connecting Midwestern shoreline geographies with other site-specific land histories related to Black communities and migrations. This interest stems from the artist's personal global upbringing. Growing up, she lived between Houston, Texas and several countries in western and central Africa, including Nigeria and South Africa, along with locations in Europe. Additionally, her maternal family resides in Louisiana, which anchors her to Southern Creole communities. The artist states: "I have come to understand that my family's history is a microcosm of larger histories of migration, speaking to larger connections between Africa, the United States, and Europe."

Curator Asha Iman Veal states: "*Shore|Lines* explores and documents a nuanced assemblage of sociocultural geographies that connect across centuries and Black heritage in a way that is rarely considered within the wider visual lore or heritage narratives of Up South cultural ties to the Great Lakes. Agu bridges these connections, through artistic decisions such as exhibiting and paralleling



Regina Agu, *Thorns, Mississippi River Delta*, 2019

the African American Heritage Water Trail of the Great Lakes region alongside coastal wetlands in the Gulf South of Louisiana and Texas."

The Chicago area places Agu photographed in this exhibition include Rainbow Beach, Montrose Beach, and Margaret T. Burroughs Beach at Lake Michigan, Jackson Park Yacht Club, and Chicago's Finest Marina at Little Calumet River. In the Gulf South, Agu photographed places in Louisiana and Texas including the Hurricane Katrina memorial at Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, the Lake Pontchartrain estuarine ecosystem at the Manchac Wildlife Management Area in St. John the Baptist Parish, and the dunes at Galveston, Texas.

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHT

**FALL EQUINOX, 31ST STREET BEACH
(MARGARET T. BURROUGHS BEACH), 2021**



Regina Agu, *Fall equinox, 31st street beach (Margaret T. Burroughs Beach)*, 2021

Fall equinox, 31st street beach (Margaret T. Burroughs Beach), was made near the location of the incidents that started what is known as the Red Summer of 1919. On July 27, 1919, a seventeen-year-old boy named Eugene Williams drifted on a raft past an invisible racial line and into what was deemed a white beach at 29th street. Though Chicago was a destination and considered safer for many Black Americans escaping the segregated South during the Great Migration, the city residents and government still imposed many illegal forms of segregation. On the day that Williams inadvertently treaded into this area of the lake, a nearby man named George Stauber threw stones at him until Williams fell off his raft and drowned. The police did not reprimand Stauber, setting off eight days of violence, rioting, and the deaths of 38 people with an additional 537 injured and over 1,000 made homeless due to many homes burned and destroyed in Black neighborhoods.

Another photograph in this gallery shows Rainbow Beach, a location where—decades later in 1961—demonstrators from the NAACP Youth Council waded into the water in protest to call for an end to segregationist policies in the city. They were met with violent attacks, even though the police were present.

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- Central to Agu's research is the writing of Katherine McKittrick, and specifically the book McKittrick made with Clyde Adrian Woods titled *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (2007). In the publication, McKittrick asserts about Black geographies that "the landscape, our surroundings and our everyday places, the vessels of human violence, so often disguise." How might Agu be visually interpreting this notion of disguised geographies?
- How do the images Agu made in the south compare in composition, tonality, or color to the ones she made in the north? What do you notice about the color and lighting of *Fall Equinox* and *Waves at Rainbow Beach* specifically? What time of day do you think she photographed? What mood does the color range and lighting convey?

Regina Agu, *Dunes at Rainbow Beach*,
South Shore, 2024



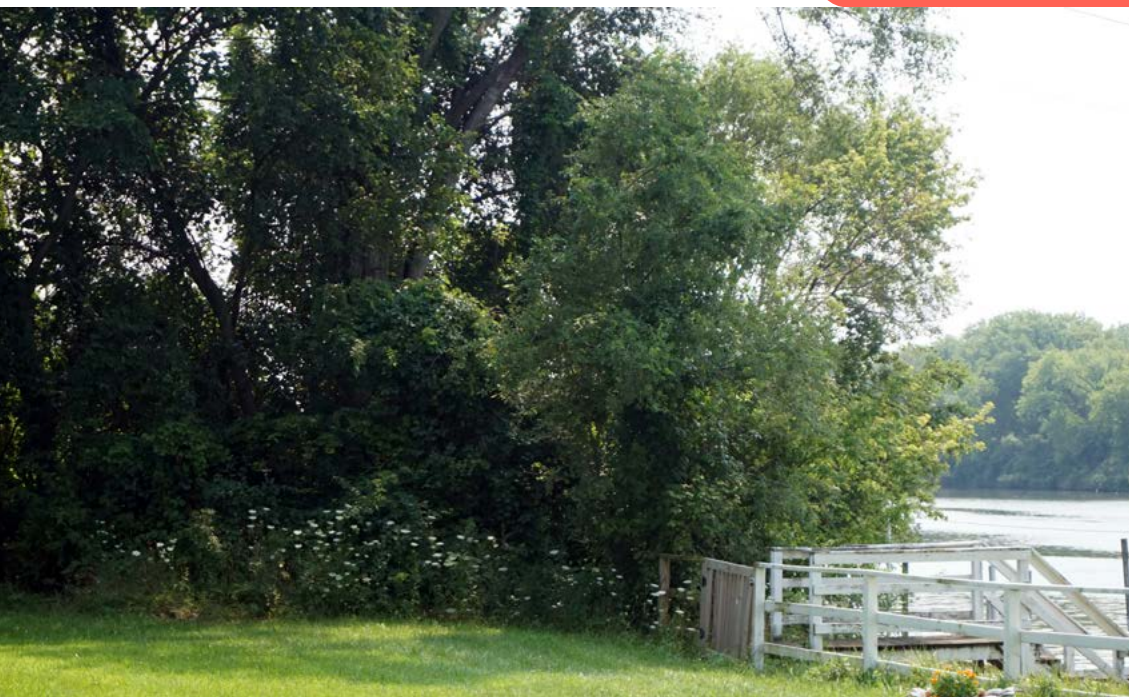
EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHT

VIEW OF THE LITTLE CALUMET RIVER FROM TON FARM (CHICAGO'S FINEST MARINA), 2024

Agu made this photograph along the Little Calumet River at Chicago's Finest Marina—the oldest Black-owned marina in the region. It is also the location of what was once Jan and Aagje Ton Farm—a known stop on the Underground Railroad that is officially recognized and marked with a historic marker by the National Parks. The Great Lakes are connected to the Mississippi River through a series of smaller bodies of water, including the Little Calumet River, and people could escape slavery via waterways out of the South and through to Chicago, Detroit, and Canada. This piece demonstrates Agu's interest in using photography to compress multiple histories into a single image, showing publicly available spaces as representations of a broader community history and placemaking.

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- Consider the composition of *View of the Little Calumet River from Ton Farm (Chicago's Finest Marina)*, and where the artist set the edges of this photograph. If you did not know anything about the photograph or artist, are there any details within the image that indicate specifically where it was made or in what time period?
- Notice the ways that the photographs on the second floor of the museum are hung in groupings instead of in a straight line. Does this experience of viewing work add to your interpretation of the story the artist is presenting?



Deeper Reading

Chicago, the Underground Railroad, and the Great Migration



Unknown photographer, Ton Farm, c. 1890
Image courtesy of the Midwest Underground Railroad Network

The Underground Railroad was a grassroots network of people and businesses that provided food, shelter, protection, and passage for enslaved people escaping to states where slavery was less prominent or formally outlawed, beginning with Pennsylvania in 1780. Because of its provisional, covert existence, much information concerning the Underground Railroad is unknown, but it is estimated that between 25,000 and

50,000 enslaved people used this network to escape to freedom through the end of the Civil War in 1865. The network utilized waterways, and locations along rivers became stops, and Chicago was on the route for its central location and for its proximity to the rivers.

Nearly 100 years after the emancipation of enslaved Americans but during the time of the segregated Jim Crow laws of the South, Chicago became home to many Southern Black Americans during the Great Migration (1915–1970). At this time, an estimated six million African American people left the South to pursue better lives in the North and West. Many large US cities—including New York, Los Angeles, Washington, DC, and Detroit—grew drastically, with the promise of industrial jobs and freedom from Southern oppression. Chicago was permanently transformed during this time; its population of Black residents grew from just two percent of the overall population in 1910 to 33 percent by 1970.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE SEE THESE RESOURCES:

[The African American Heritage Water Trail Guide by Openlands](#)
[Great Migration: Finding Pictures by the Library of Congress](#)

Key Theme

Capturing Community Memory

Agu curated a selection of works from the MoCP permanent collection and films she found in the South Side Home Movie Project archive. In presenting these works in conversation with her photographs she made with various community partners, Agu presents personal histories as necessary components of broader geographic and cultural histories.



Ron Gordon, *Around the PCII Metropolitan Sanitary District Little Calumet River*, from *Changing Chicago*, 1987



Antonio Perez, *Easter Sunrise Service, East Side* from *Changing Chicago*, 1988

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHT

SELECTION OF WORKS FROM THE MoCP COLLECTION

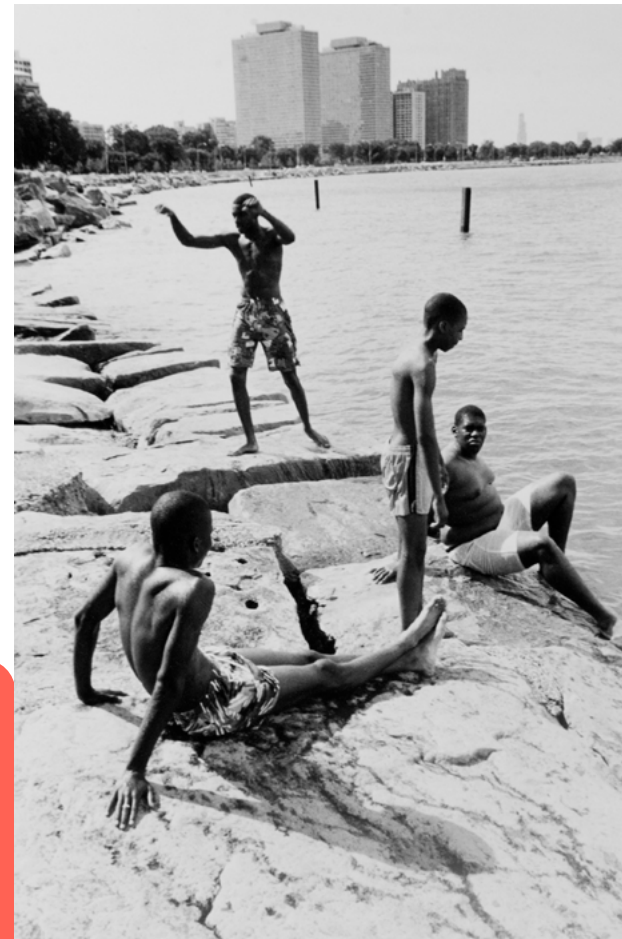
A highlight of this selection, curated by Agu, includes a photograph by Antonio Perez (American, b. 1963) capturing an early morning Easter prayer service along Lake Michigan. Perez documents the daily lives of Chicagoans across the city's diverse neighborhoods and areas. Reflecting on his work, Perez states: "This area has been my home since birth and has a rich family and work-ethic history. Through my photographs, I hope to showcase its many hidden treasures, seen in the expressions of the people."

Another standout is a piece by Stephen Marc (American, b. 1954), portraying young men relaxing on the 55th Street beach in Chicago. Marc's photographs center on the Black experience, with this image forming part of a larger series of documentary works he created in Southern Chicago.

In contrast, Ron Gordon's (American, b. 1942) photograph comes from a 1980s project documenting buildings slated for demolition and neighborhoods on the verge of disappearing. Through his photography, Gordon seeks to preserve a visual record of the ever-changing urban landscape and to explore people's relationships with the built environment.

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- Consider the array of works Agu curated from the MoCP permanent collection for this exhibition. What associations can you make between these works and the works Agu created on the first and second levels of the museum?
- How might these works add to Agu's interest in working within the genre of landscape photography to tell fuller geographic histories?



Stephen Marc, *55th Street Along the Lakefront*, from *Changing Chicago*, 1987

Activity

Picturing Water

Classroom Activity:

Photograph or illustrate a body of water that is significant to you. Along with the imagery, write about the location, considering these questions:

Why is this location significant to you? Who first brought you there? What was your first experience of encountering this place like? How often do you return there, if at all? Describe how your body feels when you are at this location. What does the water sound like? What colors can you see from the shore? What time of day is best to visit this area and why? What do you know about the history of this place?

Using different colored markers, write words directly onto your picture of water. Consider different ways the text can be incorporated into the compositions.

NOTE TO EDUCATORS: Please also see this Art, [Activism, Policy, Power resource](#) specific to the themes presented in this exhibition.



Regina Agu, *Boat tour, Mississippi River Delta*, 2019

Share your images!

Post your images to Instagram, tagging us at [@mocpci](#) with the hashtag [#shorelinesmcp](#)

EXTENDED RESOURCES

BOOKS

Grandin, Greg. *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2020.

McKittrick, Katherine, and Clyde Adrian Woods. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*. Toronto, Cambridge, Mass: *Between the Lines*; South End Press, 2007.

ARTICLES

Sailor, Rachel McLean. "Western Landscape Photography: Then and Now." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 116, no. 1 (2015): 92-109. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ohq.2015.0073>.

ARCHIVES

South Side home movie project, <https://sshmp.uchicago.edu>

The 1919 project: <https://chicago1919.org/>

ORGANIZATIONS

Jackson Park Yacht Club, the largest black recreational sailing club, <https://jacksonparkyachtclub.org>

Little Calumet River Underground Railroad Project, <https://www.illinoisundergroundrailroad.info/little-calumet-river-ugrr/>

Earth Justice, a nonprofit environmental law organization: <https://earthjustice.org>

Openlands, an organization that protects the natural and open spaces of northeastern Illinois and the surrounding region, <https://openlands.org>

ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS ADDRESSED IN THIS GUIDE

VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

VA:Re7.2 Perceive and analyze artistic work. Visual imagery influences understanding of, and responses to, the world.

VA:Re8 Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work. People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

VA:Re9 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. People evaluate art based on various criteria.

VA:Cn11 Relate artistic ideas and works with social, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding. People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.

MEDIA ARTS STANDARDS

MA:Re7.1 Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work. Media artworks can be appreciated and interpreted through analyzing their components.

MA:Re8.1 Anchor Standard 8: Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work. Interpretation and appreciation require engagement with the content, form, and context of media artworks.

MA:Re9.1 Anchor Standard 9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. Skillful evaluation and critique are critical components of experiencing, appreciating, and producing media artworks.

SOCIAL SCIENCES STANDARDS

SS.H.8 Analyze key historical events and contributions of individuals through a variety of perspectives, including those of historically under-represented groups.

SS.H.11 Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

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