MOSAIC THEATER COMPANY

THE TILL TRILOGY

written by
IFA BAYEZA

directed by
TALVIN WILKS

DRAMATURGY PACKET
ISAIAH M. WOODEN, PHD
in context
CYCLE
a group of creative works treating the same theme; a series of narratives typically dealing with the exploits of a legendary hero

EPIC
a long narrative poem in elevated style recounting the deeds of a legendary or historical hero

SAGA
a long detailed account; a dramatic and often complicated story or series of events

A THREE-PLAY CYCLE CHRONICLING THE EPIC SAGA OF THE MURDER OF EMMETT TILL AND THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

THE TILL TRILOGY
BY IFA BAYEZA
“I remembered seeing the beauty of his face and then the horror of his death photograph and missing him. Feeling like I missed someone even though I didn’t know him at all. His photograph was so alive, I missed him and wanted to know him. As I was reading through material in the library, his absence became even more profound. The material was about his mother’s journey, it was about his killer’s so-called story, it was about Carolyn Bryant, it was about his death. It was about everybody but him, everything but his life.”

-- “These Conversations Are Long Overdue: An Interview with Ifa Bayeza,” Callaloo 35.3, 2012
BALLAD
a narrative composition in rhythmic verse suitable for singing; a slow romantic or sentimental song

QUEST
a search or pursuit to find or obtain something

CROSSROADS
a crucial point where a decision must be made

TRANSFORMATION
a change in form, appearance, nature, or character

EMENSELLE
a group of people or things making up a complete unit or producing a single effect

IMPROVISATION

JAZZ

POLYPHONY

REVISION

MULTIVOCALITY

HAUNTING

REPETITION

GHOSTS

SPECTRAL

HISTORY

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

BENEVOLENCE
disposition to do good; an act of kindness; a generous gift
THE TILL SAGA
a chronology

adapted from https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amexperience/features/till-timeline/
Reality ✓

Harry J. Elam, Jr.

There is no reality except in action.
—Sartre

On September 4, 1955, in Chicago at the funeral of her son, Emmett Till, Mamie Mobley determined to leave the casket open, exposing his completely disfigured face to a national audience of mourners. The reality of his badly beaten, mutilated face (he was killed on August 28, 1955 for the audacity of looking at a white woman) stood in stark contrast to the picture of the smiling, handsome, light-eyed, young black boy of fourteen that hung inside the lining of the casket. This performative moment—performative in how it impacted the viewing and doings of its audience—as orchestrated by his mother intentionally induced a discomfort, a restless dissatisfaction on the part of its audience. Powerfully, Ms. Mobley's calculated action of revealing the unspeakable body juxtaposed to the piquant, boyish, innocent face in the photograph, created for the audience what I am calling here a "reality check," a moment that traumatically ruptures the balance between the real and representational. It is a moment that, in the dissonance, generates demands that the relationship between the real and representation be renegotiated. Reality checks brusquely rub the real up against the representational in ways that disrupt the spectators and produce new meanings. Most significantly, reality checks, in the unease that they cause audiences, can excite social action. Accordingly, the audience reacted vociferously to the funeral of Emmett Till; the NAACP soon became involved and demanded the trial of his murderers. The event, the reality check, catalyzed the anger of the spectators, which enabled them to translate long-held frustrations over racial injustices into social resistance. As such reality checks stir the psyche and impel reconsiderations of the intersections of the real and representational, they produce diverse performative responses and expose the complex possibilities of a politics of blackness.
Aug 28

A day in the life of a people
Emmet Till in History, A Timeline

1941
- First documented attempt at a lynching in the United States
- African Americans protest lynching

1665
- First enslaved Africans arrive in New England

1679
- Company formed to establish West India Company in New York

1770
- Emancipation Proclamation signed by President Lincoln

1968
- Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement
Emmett Till in History, A Timeline

1955
- Coretta Scott King (Martin Luther King's wife) founds the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) with Martin Luther King Jr.

1961
- Southern Christians, including Martin Luther King Jr., join the Freedom Riders, challenging segregation on interstate buses.

1967
- Martin Luther King Jr. testifies before the House Un-American Activities Committee, advocating for nonviolent resistance.

1984
- European colonial forces successfully colonize Cabo Verde, ending an era of resistance and independence.
Emmet Till in History, A Timeline
Emmett Till in History: A Timeline
Emmet Till in History: A Timeline

1963
A dream speech delivered by Martin Luther King Jr.

2003
People take part in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

1965
John Lewis and the Civil Rights Movement.

1966
The Selma to Montgomery March begins.

1964
The Voting Rights Act is passed. Freedom Riders were attacked in Birmingham, Alabama.

1968
Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated in Memphis.

1969
The Fair Housing Act is passed. The Debate over the Civil Rights Act.

1970
The Senate Committee on the Judiciary approves a bill that would make lynching a federal crime.

1980
The Equal Rights Amendment is adopted as an amendment to the United States Constitution.

1990
The first Emmett Till Commemorative March takes place.

2000
The Emitt Till Commission is established.

2004
The Emmett Till Memorial is dedicated in Mississippi.

2010
The documentary film "The Central Park Five" is released, depicting the wrongful conviction of five young men in 1989.

2015
The United States Department of Justice announces it will reopen the investigation into the death of Emmett Till.

2020
The Netflix documentary "The Central Park Five" is released, highlighting the wrongful conviction of five young men in 1989.

2021
The Emmett Till Commission releases its report, calling for greater federal action to address racial injustice.

2022
The Emmett Till Memorial and Interpretive Center opens in Mississippi.
EMMETT TILL’S RING

VALERIE SMITH

On July 13, 1945, Mamie Till received a telegram at her home in Argo, Illinois, notifying her that her estranged husband, Private Louis Till, had been killed in Italy. The Department of Defense subsequently sent her his personal effects, including a silver ring he had bought in Casablanca, engraved with his initials and a date, May 25, 1943. During the following ten years, their son, Emmett Till, would occasionally try on his father’s ring. Since Emmett was only four when Louis Till was killed, the ring was always too large for him. But in mid-August 1955, as he packed for what was to have been a two-week visit with relatives in Money, Mississippi, he tried the ring on again. Still too big for his ring finger, it now fit the middle finger perfectly. Emmett and his mother agreed that he could wear the ring on his trip to show his cousins and his friends.

In her memoir, Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America, written with Christopher Benson, Mamie Till-Mobley recalls that during the conversation about the ring, Emmett asked her about his father:

We had talked about the fact that his father was a soldier in World War II and that he had been killed overseas. The only thing I could tell him at that point was the only thing I was told by the army. The cause of death, I explained to Emmett, was “willful misconduct.” I didn’t know what that meant, and when I tried to find out, I never got a satisfactory answer from the army. A lawyer and friend, Joseph Tobias, had tried to help in 1948. But he was told by the Department of the Army there would be no benefits for me due to the willful misconduct. (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, 103)

This incident occurs at the point in the narrative when Emmett’s mother has begun to realize that her little boy is becoming an adult. In
the preceding pages, she describes his heightened sense of responsibility, his first date, his impromptu driving lessons, his insistence on vacationing with his cousins instead of traveling with her, her hopes for his future. By giving Emmett his father’s ring, she thus acknowledges his growing independence and maturity. Furthermore, she binds him symbolically to his paternity and his patrimony, despite the fact that irreconcilable differences had torn his parents’ marriage apart.

As he boarded the train called the City of New Orleans on Saturday, August 20, at Central Station, Chicago, Emmett kissed his mother goodbye and gave her his wristwatch to keep, telling her he wouldn’t need it in Mississippi. Although he removed his watch, he decided to wear the ring.

Eleven days later, on Wednesday, August 31, Robert Hodges, a seventeen-year-old white fisher, discovered Emmett’s mutilated body floating in the Tallahatchie River, even though his murderers—J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant—had tied a cotton gin fan around his neck in hopes of weighing him down. For allegedly whistling at—or saying something inappropriate to—Bryant’s wife, Carolyn, in their store, Emmett had been killed. According to his mother’s description, his tongue had been choked out of his mouth and left hanging onto his chin. His right eyeball was resting on his cheek. Only two of his teeth remained in his mouth, and the bridge of his nose had been broken. His right ear had been cut almost in half and one of his murderers had taken a hatchet and cut through the top of his head from ear to ear. He had also been shot through the head (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, 135–36).

Given its condition, it is thus little wonder that Tallahatchie County sheriff H.C. Strider scrambled to get Emmett’s body buried in Mississippi as quickly as possible. He and other local law enforcement officials wanted to try to minimize the impact of a heinous crime that had already captured national attention. Once Emmett’s mother, then known as Mamie Bradley, learned that plans were being made to bury her son in Mississippi, however, she insisted that he be returned to Chicago. Authorities released his body on the condition that the coffin remain sealed. But Mamie Bradley was determined that she be allowed to identify the body of her only child. And famously, once she saw the body, she told the mortician that she wanted an open-casket funeral so the world could see what she had seen.

Law enforcement officials in Mississippi did not want her (or anyone else) to view Emmett’s body for fear of the firestorm of public opinion it
might ignite. A.A. Rayner, the prominent black Chicago-based mortician who handled the arrangements for Emmett’s funeral (including transporting his body from Mississippi) consented in writing to keeping the casket closed and tried to prevent Mamie Bradley from opening it. But as Bradley asserted, she had made no such agreement, and she dared anyone to prevent her from examining her own child’s body.

During the early days of his visit to Mississippi, she had often imagined greeting Emmett at Central Station upon his return; she had never dreamed that she would be meeting his body there instead. Her father, her fiancé, and several relatives and clergymen accompanied her to the station, and she nearly collapsed as the crate bearing her son’s body moved past her in the terminal. But when she entered the room at the funeral parlor where she would view his mutilated corpse, she insisted that she be allowed to stand unassisted. Her account seems to suggest that the touch of another person at that moment would have sapped the little remaining strength she could muster. As she puts it, had anyone interfered with her as she identified her son’s body, she might not have been able to go through with it:

I was getting closer to discovering, to confirming, that this body had once been my son. And I couldn’t let anyone in the room know what I was feeling right then. I didn’t want them to think even for a moment that I was not up to this. They might try to take this moment away from me. I couldn’t let them stop me from going through with it. If I was stopped one more time, I don’t know what I would have done. I’m not sure that I could have worked myself back up to it again. (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, 134)

Mamie Bradley needed to confront the body visually to confirm that it was, indeed, Emmett’s and to see for herself what had been done to him. In describing the scene, she recreates the air of scientific objectivity that she had needed to control her emotions. At first glance, the body—mutilated, bloated, and deteriorated—seemed inhuman. To identify it, she needed to examine it “like a forensic doctor,” not, of course, to produce scientific measurements, but to match the physical evidence before her to the body she had come to know by heart, the one she had known through its similarities to and differences from her own. Segment by seg-
ment, she worked her way up the body, beginning with the feet. Each segment had a story: the ankles were slender and well tapered, unlike her own, which she considered to be fat in the back. His legs were strong, despite the fact that he had been diagnosed with polio as a young child. His knees—nice, fat, round, and rather flat—were like hers. Rumor had it that he had been castrated, but his mother looked at his genital area long enough to see that that was not the case. Her gaze moved quickly over this segment of the body because she knew how much Emmett valued his privacy.

Below the neck, Emmett’s body was bloated but not scarred. But his face and head told a different story. One eye was missing altogether; the other hung out of its socket. His mother knew it belonged to her son because it was the light hazel brown color everyone had admired. Alive, Emmett had had a perfect set of teeth; now, only two remained, but Mamie Bradley recognized them as her son’s. Emmett had a distinctive right earlobe; his mother was unable to match the one before her to the one she remembered because the right ear had been cut almost in half.

Because he allegedly spoke to or acted inappropriately toward a white woman, Milam and Bryant broke Emmett’s spirit by mutilating his body. But Mamie Bradley refused to allow their punishment to be the final chapter in her son’s life. When she insisted on seeing his body, she bore witness to the crime they had committed and to the final brutal minutes of Emmett’s life. By looking at his body, and telling and retelling the story of that heartbreaking examination, she took the first step toward ensuring that her son would live on in collective memory long after his body had been buried. Furthermore, she figuratively reconstructed the brutalized corpse and crafted a perpetual epilogue, by imaginatively suturing its parts to her memories of each limb and feature, plain and surface. Her account connects the mutilated corpse with the life of the son she lost:

I couldn’t help but think of the first time I laid eyes on my son. I remembered my reaction to his distorted little face and how I made him cry. I would have given anything to take that back. That face seemed so adorable now. My first look and my last look at Emmett would forever be fused in my mind.

I kept looking at him on the table and I thought about what it must have been like for him that night. I studied every detail of
what those monsters had done to destroy his beautiful young life. I thought about how afraid he must have been, how at some point that early Sunday morning, he must have known he was going to die. I thought about how all alone he must have felt, and I found myself hoping only that he had died quickly. (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, 137)

Mamie Bradley was the second family member to identify Emmett. His great-uncle Mose Wright, from whose house he had been abducted, had been called to the river bank to identify the body once it was found. According to his testimony, he only knew for sure that he was looking at his nephew’s remains because he recognized the ring that Emmett had inherited from his father.

Mamie Carthan Till Bradley Mobley has become an iconic figure in American culture for her courage, grace, and tenacity in the face of profound loss and unyielding injustice. She honored her son’s life and his suffering when she refused to protect herself from the ocular proof of the brutality he endured. When she insisted on the open-casket funeral, she invited the many thousands of African Americans who marched past his casket and the many thousands more who gazed in horror at the photographs that were published in the black press, to join her in an act of public witness to the irrefutable evidence of white racist depravity. To the extent that it inspired widespread demands for justice as well as a heightened sense of outrage and race consciousness, Emmett’s death assumed a meaning that transcended the significance of his individual life. As Jacqueline Goldsby puts it, because she succeeded “in [mobilizing the resources of the Chicago Tribune], the Chicago Defender, Jet, and Ebony magazines, to publicize across the nation and around the world the court case arising out of her son’s lynching” (2006, 296), the photographic images both of Emmett’s mangled face, as well as his mother’s own beautifully open and expressive one, are imprinted indelibly in the cultural imagination. While claims that his murder launched the modern civil rights movement may be excessive, without question the story and the image of Emmett Till profoundly shaped African American political consciousness in its own time and in subsequent generations.

At the trial of Milam and Bryant, Bradley was called upon to witness yet again. In testifying at the trial of her son’s murderers in the Tallahatchie
County courthouse in Sumner, Mamie Bradley ensured that her son would not be just another victim of lynching known only within his circle of intimates. The defense attorney tried to argue that the body that had been found was so badly decomposed that it would have been impossible to identify. Indeed, he even suggested that Emmett Till was alive and home in Chicago and that activists had thrown the body of an unidentified black man into the river and persuaded Bradley to say it was Emmett to generate national attention. Her earlier meticulous examination of her son’s body thus served a dual purpose: it both confirmed her son’s death for her and it substantiated her claim in court that the body that had been delivered to her in Chicago was Emmett’s.

The ring Emmett inherited from his father served double duty as well. It allowed his great-uncle, Mose Wright to identify his nephew’s mutilated remains. During the trial, when the prosecutor showed Bradley a picture of the ring retrieved from the body, she said that she recognized it because she had given it to him.

In the black press and the mainstream media alike, Mamie Till Bradley emerged as a woman doubly bereft—widowed by the war and rendered childless by virulent white racists. The Cleveland Call and Post, for example, reported that Till’s father died in the service of his country, while his son “was sacrificed on the cross of ignorance” (Metress 2002, 146). And in his 1955 poem “The Money, Mississippi, Blues,” Langston Hughes wrote:

His father died for democracy
fighting in the army over the sea.
His father died for the U. S. A.
Why did they treat his son this a-way?
in Money, Money, Mississippi,
Money, Mississippi. (Metress 2002, 97)

Within a few weeks after the end of the trial, however, a more complicated version of the death of Louis Till emerged, one that cast new light on his son’s murder. Mamie Bradley, accompanied by a group of her friends and family members, traveled to Washington, D.C., to try to launch a federal investigation into Emmett’s murder, when news broke that Louis Till had died ignominiously. Years earlier, Mamie Bradley had tried to find out the nature of the “willful misconduct” of which he was
guilty and why she had stopped receiving her estranged husband’s benefits when he died. At the time, she and her attorney had received no response from the Department of Defense. But when Mississippi senator James O. Eastland launched his investigation into Private Till’s death, he learned the full story and released it to the media. As it turned out, Louis Till had been court-martialed and found guilty of murdering one Italian woman and raping two others. He was hanged and buried in a numbered yet otherwise unmarked grave in Plot E of the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery and Memorial, in France (Kaplan 2005, 175).

The negative publicity around this revelation fed stereotypes about predatory black men and their lust for white women and contaminated Emmett’s story. It even prompted some to speculate that if Emmett’s father had been executed for violence against white women, then perhaps his son was capable, if not guilty, of inappropriate behavior toward Carolyn Bryant. And if there was any doubt about Emmett’s innocence, then perhaps he and his mother did not merit the outpouring of sympathy they had received. Indeed, Mamie Bradley believed that the revelation about Louis Till’s story contributed to the breach in her relationship with the NAACP; apparently, Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the organization, had planned to refer to Louis Till’s military service in a speech. When he learned that the elder Till had been executed and was not a military hero, he, too, rushed to judgment and expressed his relief that he “hadn’t gotten caught in the ‘Louis Till trap’” (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, 203).

There is, however, no reason to assume the accuracy of the Department of Defense story. According to Louis Till’s friends in the military, black soldiers were executed for even the hint of fraternizing with white women. Indeed, several of his friends doubted that he was guilty of the charges for which he was hanged. No one will ever know the circumstances surrounding Louis Till’s execution. But his fellow soldiers’ assertions are consistent with the evidence concerning the treatment of black soldiers in Europe during the world wars. African American soldiers in the segregated armed forces were executed at a much higher rate than were their white counterparts for the same or lesser offenses (Kaplan 2005, 173). This differential helped to reinforce a policy of exporting domestic Jim Crow practices through the enforcement of American military protocols.

Just as we will never know the circumstances that led to Louis Till’s
execution, we find that a similar curtain of doubt hangs over the events that took place in Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market in August 1955. We cannot be certain what Emmett said or did in the store. His mother died believing in her son’s innocence: she was convinced that she had trained him never to speak inappropriately to any woman, let alone a white woman. The Reverend Wheeler Parker, Emmett’s cousin and then close friend, who was in the store at the time, maintains that Emmett never said or did anything objectionable in the store. Other cousins who were there tell a different story, suggesting that Emmett, like his father, may have been guilty of “willful misconduct.” Emmett might have whistled; or said, “Bye, baby”; or grabbed Carolyn Bryant’s hand. Who is to say what a fourteen-year-old boy will do on a dare? What we can say, however, is that nothing that Emmett Till might have said to Carolyn Bryant merited the loss of his life.

There is a community of people I call Emmett Till junkies—people who are obsessed with the details of the case. They can tell you who is responsible for the different accounts of the story and they have practically memorized the court transcripts. They can tell you what happened to every person who was even remotely connected with the incident, and they will endlessly debate the different versions of what transpired both at the store and on the night when Emmett was abducted. While there is surely a place for the pursuit of accuracy and that level of devotion to the facts, at the end of the day we must settle for three facts above all others. First and most important, there is an enigma at the heart of this cold case, which we must accept. Fifty-two years after this chance encounter, with memories dulled by the passage of time and shaped by the violent history of race and sex in U.S. culture, not even those who were there can say for sure what actually happened in Bryant’s grocery. Second, perhaps because it engages so many issues and themes that are deeply embedded in American life—migration, class mobility, tensions between rural and urban, and so on—the murder of Emmett Till has had a profound impact upon the American cultural imaginary, and that impact shows no signs of abating. And third, what really happened is always already infected by the phantom memory of the history of race, gender, and sexuality in the American context. The ring—a circle surrounding an absence—is thus a perfect symbol for the mystery at the center of the case. It points to the unknowable facts that cost Emmett and Louis Till their lives. Its material presence symbolizes
the very real effects of the history of racial violence that each generation bequeaths to the next.

In the end, we must judge and analyze the punishment to which Emmett and Louis Till were subjected independent of the question of their respective guilt or innocence. When Mamie Till passed Louis’s ring to Emmett, acknowledging his claim to adult black manhood, unintentionally she acknowledged as well the threats that construct(ed) black masculinity under lynch law. As she put it in her memoir: “Louis died before he could see what would happen to his son. Bo died before he could learn about what had happened to his father. Yet they were connected in ways that ran as deep as their heritage, as long as their bloodline” (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, 204). When Emmett—or Bo, as she called him—gave her his watch at the train, she removed her own and wore his. She writes that on the morning of his funeral, she could practically feel it ticking: “My pulse timed to Emmett’s. Two hearts in sync. For all time” (141). When Emmett gave up his watch, unknowingly he also gave up his place in a linear narrative of racial progress. The ring he kept was an apt symbol of the cycle of gendered racial violence that caught him and cost him his life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
I wish to thank Daphne Brooks, Elyse Graham, Marianne Hirsch, Nancy K. Miller, and Clarence E. Walker, Jr. for their assistance with this essay.

VALERIE SMITH is the Woodrow Wilson Professor of Literature and director of the Center for African American Studies at Princeton University. The author of many essays and articles on African American literature and film and black feminism, as well as two books, Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative (Harvard University Press, 1991) and Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings (Routledge, 1998), she has also edited New Essays on Song of Solomon (Cambridge University Press, 1994), Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video (Rutgers University Press, 1997), and African American Writers (Maxwell Macmillan International, 1991). At present she is completing a book on the civil rights movement in American cultural memory.
NOTES

1. Throughout this essay I refer to Emmett Till’s mother variously as Mamie Till, Mamie Till Bradley, and Mamie Till-Mobley, depending on the name by which she was known during the period in question. Born Mamie Elizabeth Carthan in 1921, she married Louis Till in 1940, Lemorris “Pink” Bradley in 1951, and Gennie “Gene” Mobley Jr. in 1957. She came to public attention as Mrs. Mamie Bradley after Emmett’s murder in 1955 and was known as Mamie Till-Mobley after her third marriage.

2. After a trial that lasted from Monday, September 19, until Friday, September 23, 1955, an all-white jury acquitted Milam and Bryant of the charges of kidnapping and murdering Emmett Till.

3. A famous photograph taken at the station shows a distraught Mamie Bradley being supported by Bishop Isaiah Roberts, Gene Mobley, and Bishop Lewis Ford.

4. For an insightful discussion of the way both Mamie Bradley and Carolyn Bryant were constructed in the aftermath of the Till murder, see Feldstein 1994.

5. In the final chapter of A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature, Jacqueline Goldsby (2006) brilliantly reads Till’s murder and Bradley’s response to it in order to explore the power of poetry and photography to “serve as archives of lynching history.”


7. A Democrat from Mississippi, Eastland was a virulent opponent of the civil rights struggle and a staunch segregationist. He served in the U.S. Senate briefly in 1941, and then again from 1943 to 1978.

WORKS CITED

Feldstein, Ruth. 1994. “I Wanted the Whole World to See:’ Race, Gender, and Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till.” In Not June Cleaver:


THE TILL SAGA
in the press
NATION HORRIFIED BY MURDER OF KIDNAPPED CHICAGO YOUTH

Aroused by America's first lynching in four years—the kidnapping and murder by three Mississippi white men of chubby, 14-year-old Chicagoan Emmett Louis (Bobo) Till because he whistled at a white woman—leaders of both white and Negro groups demanded "stern and immediate" action against the "barbarians."

NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins wired Mississippi Governor Hugh White: "We cannot believe that responsible officials of a state will condone the murdering of children on any provocation." Swamped with hundreds of similar protesting telegrams, Gov. White answered: "Mississippi does not condone such conduct." Calling the Mississippi white people "horrorified by the act," white Greenwood newspaper editor Tom Shepherd described the killing as "nauseating" and "way, way beyond the bounds of human decency."

The kidnapping episode came to a stark and shocking end when the youth's naked body, weighted with a 200-pound iron gin mill fan, was discovered by a fisherman in the shallow waters of the Tallahatchie River. The fan was wired around his neck.

Recovering the body, law officers found a "bullet hole one inch above his right ear." The left side of his face was crushed to the bone.

Meanwhile, LeFlore County police continued to hold two white men (Grocer Roy Bryant and his half-brother, J. W. Milian) and pushed a search for the other members of the "lynch party," Mrs. Roy Bryant (who was whistled at) and another unidentified man. FBI officials said in Washington that they could not enter the case because it was "a local murder."

Recounting the boy's kidnapping from the home of his grandfather, 64-year-old Rev. Moses Wright, in Money, 17-year-old Wheeler Parker, one of the three Chicago cousins who were visiting in Mississippi, but

Boys Never Told Grandfather About 'Incident'

who escaped after the crime, told JET:

"When the men came, swearing and all, Grandma tried to awaken Bobo and hide him outside. But the men stormed in and told her to get back in bed and shut up before they beat 'hell' out of her.

"Grandma knew about the 'incident' because we'd told her and not Grandpa, who would have gotten angry at us. We'd gone into town Wednesday and were watching some boys playing checkers in front of the store. Somebody said there was 'a pretty lady' in the store and Bobo said he was going inside to buy some bubble gum.

"After a while, we went in and got Bobo but he stopped in the doorway and whistled at the lady. She got angry and followed us out, then ran toward a car. Some one hollered, 'She's getting a gun' and we ran."

Close-up of lynching victim bares mute evidence of horrible slaying; Chicago undertaker A. A. Raynor said youth had not been castrated as was rumored. Mutilated face of victim was left un-retouched by mortician at mother's request. She said she wanted "all the world" to witness the atrocity.

Mrs. Bradley got first look at brutally battered son in undertaker's morgue. More than 600,000, in an unwinding procession, later viewed body (r.).
Grieving Mother Meets Body Of Lynched Son

Mother Waits In Vain For Her 'Bo'

Bishop Primm Calls For Day Of Mourning
Emmett Till Funeral Saddens City, Nation

Throngs pass bier of Chicago youth whose death turned the spotlight on Mississippi shame
Stark Drama Descends Upon Otherwise Sleepy Town In Lynching Case
Tense Scenes Mark Atmosphere In Sumner, Miss. As Till Trial Moves In
Scenes From Sumner, Mississippi Where Two Went Free In Kidnap-Murder

Congressman Diggs, Victim's Mother In Bazaar Dixie Town
AT THE SUMNER, MISS., COURTHOUSE. Brony Associate Editor Claye Murdock covered the Emmett Till murder trial. During the proceedings, she was flanked, on this day, by U.S. Rep. Charles C. Diggs (D-Mich.) (l.) and fellow journalist Jimmy Hicks of the Amsterdam News. Elsriv sent associate editor Murdock and two photographers to cover the story. David Jackson and Mike Shea, who was White. IN NEW YORK CITY

CALM SMOKE IN TENSE TIMES: Calmly smoking a soothing cigar, 112-year-old Mrs. Lou Martin waits out the tension of a Mississippi murder trial in which two white men, J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant, are accused of the kidnapping-slaying of her 14-year-old great-nephew, Emmett Till.
THE EMMETT TILL SLAUGHTER:
WILL MISSISSIPPI 'WHITEMASH'?

"I hope you haven't died in vain."
If the world will be a book, and all the world watches to see

**Helena Price**

"Incessant warfare of the law cannot be secured in this

That is not the way to position until next March.**

"Incessant warfare of the law cannot be secured in this

That is not the way to position until next March."

"Incessant warfare of the law cannot be secured in this

That is not the way to position until next March."

"Incessant warfare of the law cannot be secured in this

That is not the way to position until next March."

"Incessant warfare of the law cannot be secured in this

That is not the way to position until next March."
Yesterday in Negro History

In the city where to seek a municipal job, he was a candidate for mayor and became the first Negro a 67-year-old Avon Park F.B. Carpenter, C.P. Peterson, President of the Florida Negro Carpenters Union, is a candidate for mayor.
Moore To Keep On Fighting

What You Can Do About The Disgrace In Sumner [An Editorial]

If}

On Verdict

Sengstake Comments

CIVIL RIGHTS

Eroded, Says

Roy Wilkins

By WILLIAM HUGH

Winns Praise In Losing To Champ

NEW YORK — Archie Moore was honored by Teddy "Kid" Mann, his long-time trainer, for his "courage and determination" in losing to Joe Louis in their recent heavyweight title fight.

"Archie is a great fighter," said Mann, "and he showed us all what fighting is really about. He gave it his all, and he did it with style and dignity."
DEFENDER TRACKS DOWN MYSTERY TILL 'WITNESSES'

Collins Tells How He Found, Collared 'Till' Witnesses to Chicago

By L. ALEX WILSON

The Chicago Defender

I knocked down Leman Smith (actually Larry) 'Too Tight' Collins after four harrowing experiences and brought him out of Mississippi to stampede them in Chicago.

The success of my mission—to bring, and without announcing my presence or that of the man to whom I believe to have been a witness in the brutal and cowardly slaying of Emmett Till, is the result of the cooperation of the effective Negro under ground movement in Mississippi.

From his right hand, Leman Smith (Larry) Collins, the other person when Till was believed to have seen Till, believed to have witnessed the crime.

Collins and Smith have been moving during the past few weeks in Ginden and Winder, Miss, and from the state where they have been in, they have now gone to St. Louis, away from the defendants in the case.

Both had been sought by the prosecution and law enforcement officials to testify in the trial.

It was there that they were located, and Smith was now under close surveillance.

Collins, who had been the subject of previous inquiries, and had not reported seeing Collins in Sheriff H. C. Tate's office, has been located in St. Louis, Mo, and the newsmaker's name has been verified.

Till's Mother, Reed Collapse

Till: 'Too Tight' Collins, one of the mystery 'witnesses' in the Till case, died today, a week after his return to Chicago, from a heart attack.

The death of Till's mother, Mrs. John H. Reed, 74, was a shock to the community, as she had been the mainstay of the Till family since the murder.

The body of Mrs. Reed was found in her home in Chicago, where she had been residing with her son, Emmett Till Jr., 15, who was also a victim of the shooting.

Till's stepfather, T. R. Reed, 77, said that Mrs. Reed had been in good health until recently, and that her death was unexpected.

Mrs. Reed was an active member of the community, and had been involved in various social and charitable activities.

The family is planning a private funeral, and the body will be taken to Florida for burial.

LIONEL HAMPTON, 15 Hurt in Crash

BBB crash

Lionel Hampton, 15, was hurt in a car crash in Chicago, according to the Chicago Defender.

Hampton, a rising star in the jazz world, was driving a car with several friends when it collided with another vehicle.

The accident occurred on the city's south side, and Hampton was taken to a nearby hospital for treatment of his injuries.

He is expected to make a full recovery and is being treated by doctors.

Tutuла, Miss.: Two white men, charged with advising returning black ex-soldiers, were on trial today in Tutuла, Miss., on charges of inciting violence.

President's Illness Jars Politics

The President's health scare, which has been in the news for the past week, has caused a stir in Washington.

The President, who is currently in Europe on a state visit, has been dealing with a variety of health issues.

Among the most recent was a cold that he caught during his trip to the United Kingdom.

The President has been seen wearing a mask in public, and has been seen looking tired and pale.

The President's health has been a topic of discussion in the political realm, with many calling for him to take a break and focus on his well-being.

**FOOTBALL BUS HITS AUTO; 7 KILLED, 8 HURT**

CHICAGO, Ill. — A Chicago bus carrying football fans to a game at the University of Illinois was involved in a deadly accident on Saturday afternoon.

The bus collided with a car, killing seven people and injuring eight others.

The bus was heading to the University of Illinois for a game when it collided with a car on a major road.

The accident occurred at about 2 p.m., and the bus was carrying a group of football fans who were attending the game.

The bus had been traveling on the south side of the city, and was heading to the university when the accident occurred.

The cause of the accident is under investigation, and the police are working to determine what caused the collision.

The bus was carrying around 20 people, and the accident is being investigated by the Chicago Police Department.

The bus driver, a man in his 60s, was taken to a nearby hospital for treatment of his injuries.

The accident has caused a major disruption for football fans, who were planning to attend the game.

The University of Illinois has released a statement, expressing its condolences to the families of the deceased, and offering its assistance to those injured in the accident.

The school is working with local authorities to ensure that all necessary steps are taken to address the tragedy.

The University of Illinois is a public research university located in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois.

The university is part of the University of Illinois System, which includes five campuses, including the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is one of the state's flagship universities, and has a long history of excellence in research and education.

The university is known for its strong programs in science, engineering, and the arts, and has produced many notable alumni, including Nobel Prize winners.

The university has a strong undergraduate and graduate program, and is consistently ranked among the top universities in the country.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is a member of the Big Ten Conference, one of the nation's top athletic conferences, and has a strong athletic program.

The university has produced many successful athletes, including Olympic champions and professional sports stars.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is a major institution in the state of Illinois, and plays a vital role in the state's economy and culture.
2 Who Fled Mississippi Tell Stories
Blackwell, Lee
The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967); Oct 8, 1955; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender
pg. 4

By LEE BLACKWELL

Two bailed, gold-digging Swit-

cerns, who dared defy the white

man's way of life, this week told

how they were forced to flee Mis-

sippi with only the clothes on

their back.

Willie Reed, an 18-year-old farm-

boy who until Saturday had never

seen a Bullet,

BULLETIN

A friend of Mrs. Amanda Bradly, living near Drew, Miss., wrote Mrs. Mary

Bradley, 66, home in Chicago, that Alonzo Bradley, 46, home-

and of Mrs. Bradley, had been

husband, is, Mrs. Bradley, who in her grand-

father,

had been more than 150 miles from his

house near Drew, Miss., told

his story to reporters in his

mother's walkup flat at 2301

Michigan, in Chicago.

Mrs. Mary Amanda Bradley, an

active 60-year-old farm wife, recalls the frightening events that changed

the course of her life. It is

her ad living room of

Mrs. Bradley, at 4227

St. Lawrence, in Chicago.

Both were arrested after they

appeared as surprise witnesses

for the prosecution in the En-

nett trial. The defendants

were accused of murder.

The youth and his woman

and son were shooting in the

area where Bradley was

arrested.

I

IN CHICAGO, Willie Reed

is instructed by his mother, Mrs.

Edith Thomas. Defense lawyer

J. W. Milam declared the case

had been a factor in Mississippi

meetings of the NAACP, and he said

the case was not unusual, and

brought to the attention of

Mississippi's highest court.

Mrs. Bradley told how she

lived in the home of her mother, the

mother of two children.

She said the man warned her

within 48 hours of her arrival,

of Mississippi's treatment of

Negroes.

The courageous woman

...
Chicago, after flight from jail.

Reva Wright is blown in the face by the breeze as she is led from the jail. Pittsburgh, PA.

BY REV. MOSES WRIGHT

MISSISSIPPI
FROM
HOW I ESCAPED
So I decided to go to my church in East Prairie and ask for help. My boy was kidnapped, and the Lord had taken care of me. I went to court and returned to the same house, where my boy was found. I drove to the cotton fields, where I worked, and prayed the Lord to send me my boy back. I prayed the Lord to send me my boy back.

But these people believe in you,' you ain't a preacher, you're a professor. But I keep telling myself, I thought of my brother's house, where I met my boy. I thought of hiding in the cotton fields. I met my boy in my car. I drove to my brother's house, where I didn't have a house. Then I got scared.

Maybe my neighbors were right. Maybe I thought of my brother's house, where I met my boy. I thought of hiding in the cotton fields. I met my boy in my car. I drove to my brother's house, where I didn't have a house. Then I got scared.

Voice In Dreams: "Don't stay here. Willie Redd gets first look at television. He'll go to school."
Boy! I'm on that train, driving for Kansas City. It's about noon, and when I look out, I want to see all the white people. Meanwhile, I'm going to keep praying for the day.

I've been here, and I've seen something out of Vonderka. I hope he does. Go on, son, take something out of your pocket. I have to wash clothes. Then, when the train stops, turn around and go back to the place you were going to go.

After the train, I'll have my pocket book home, and I'll go to the place I was going to go. I'll do what I can to help you, and I'll do what I can to help you. I believe the white people want to go, and I believe the white people want to go. I believe the white people want to go.

I'll talk to you, and I'll talk to you. I'll talk to you, and I'll talk to you. I'll talk to you, and I'll talk to you. I'll talk to you, and I'll talk to you. I'll talk to you, and I'll talk to you. I'll talk to you, and I'll talk to you. I'll talk to you, and I'll talk to you. I'll talk to you, and I'll talk to you.

In Chicago, I want to get away so badly. I just can't stay here. I'm going to see my mother, and I'm going to see my brother.

They caught me in Chicago. I want to get away so badly. I just can't stay here. I'm going to see my mother, and I'm going to see my brother.

For the next trip, I've got to get away so badly. I just can't stay here. I'm going to see my mother, and I'm going to see my brother.

Get out Uncle Moses. So I looked at the doors and steps. Get out Uncle Moses. So I looked at the doors and steps. Get out Uncle Moses. So I looked at the doors and steps.
A Helping Hand: Using a mechanical hand invented by S. E. J. Heriman, 7. Robertson (T.), 57-year-old Winham, New York, 22-year-old William Hammond, and Mayor John S. Mayor, one of the biggest curfew districts to get directions on the streets. S. C. Town Council to keep darkies off street.

Oklahoma: Hand has holes and grooves for handling tools.

Hand helps him do his work at right force here in change James H. Trapp shows the O. N. inventor how the machine works. By S. E. J. Heriman, 7. Robertson (T.), 57-year-old Winham, New York, 22-year-old William Hammond, and Mayor John S. Mayor, one of the biggest curfew districts to get directions on the streets. S. C. Town Council to keep darkies off street.

Two secretaries inched to the street. S. C. Town Council to keep darkies off street.

When money comes round to the council, I told them if I wouldn't work, I'm here to work. The council took many resolutions upon C. J. Robertson's plan in many places. The white workers of the Council can get these resolutions. After 50 of his customers left him, his business was pretty bad. Trapped: Trap.
KNOY THE TTT FOUND

What the Public Didn't Know About the TTT Trial

...
TILL MURDER REVISITED

Land of the Free

By Clove Murdock Larsen

Former Ebony staffers return after 30 years to report on the new Mississippi...
Caprice Classic Brougham.

Room for everything, except compromise.

Caprice Classic. The uncompromised American Classic.

powertrain that parallels the design of the uncompromised American Classic. In Caprice, there's no reason to buy something less than Caprice - Caprice delivers superior comfort, handling, and performance. The uncompromised American Classic - only in Caprice.
HOW THE TILL CASE

When the bloated and mutilated body of 14-year-old Emmett Till was returned from Mississippi to Chicago last September, his mother Mrs. Mamie Bradley took one look at the mangled, once-handsome face and collapsed.

Little did she know that almost before she could be revived, she would be catapulted from a humdrum existence as a $3,900-a-year government clerk into a living martyrdom with needs that would require over $30,000 a year.

Famous overnight as the world expressed its horror at her son's senseless lynching, Mrs. Bradley was immediately showered with thousands of sympathetic letters, guarded 24 hours a day by police, sought out by newsmen and photographers, and quickly booked for hundreds of speaking engagements.

After some $50,000 persons of both races needed her to come "see what they did to my boy," and dropped over $3,000 into shopping bags a few feet from the casket, Mrs. Bradley found herself in the unsolicited role of national heroine. Vowing to wage a lifelong battle against racism, she traveled to 30 cities in 60 days, spoke before a million listeners.

She maintained her father, John M. Carthan, and a cousin, Raymond Mooty, on $100-a-week salaries as traveling companions; hired a private secretary to answer three telephones and open her mail; paid her mother, Mrs. Alma Spearman, to handle affairs in her Chicago home.

Her whole life was unalterably changed, and, as a result, so were the lives of at least four other persons.

For a time, Mrs. Mandy Bradley (no relation), who testified at the trial of the killers and had to flee Mississippi, lived in Mamie's house. But Mamie eventually had to ask the destitute Mandy for her room. The Till case had suddenly snatched Mandy Bradley away from her plantation home and forced her to start life anew in a fast-moving city while her husband, Alonso, hid out in Mississippi and scrounged for cotton-picking jobs. But life for 18-year-old Willie Reed, who also testified at the trial, took a different turn. Though literally scared out of his wits by the ordeal of the trial and hospitalized for shock in Chicago, Willie, who had left school in Mississippi, was headed for an academy and, later, to college.

And like all the others, life for Till's aging uncle, Moses Wright, took a strange and unexpected turn. In California, Rev. Wright was speaking to huge audiences of his own, wearing freshly laundered shirts and creased trousers. He missed his hunting dogs, but there was nothing else in Mississippi he wanted. Said he: "I'm never going back down there as long as I live."

Nevertheless, a foggy aura of tragedy hung over the lives of those closely affected by the Till lynching.

Despite an estimated quarter of a million dollars raised as a result of the Till lynching by the NAACP and scores of lesser organizations, churches and labor groups in some 500 meetings throughout the country, Mrs. Bradley lamented that she was "slowly going broke."

Funeral expenses exceeded $3,000, telephone bills were over $500, check from auto agency owner Phil Crane of $500, clothing bills had tripled, travel expenses were enormous—eating up Mrs. Bradley's $100-per-speech fee and occasional gifts of $500 to $1,000. Said she: "I can't make it any longer on less than $600 a week."

Last week, as NAACP officials were putting finishing touches on a planned 11-city, West Coast speaking tour, Mrs. Bradley suddenly bowed out. NAACP Secretary Roy Wilkins said she had demanded a $5,000 guarantee, snared that his organization didn't "handle such matters on a commercial basis."

Counterpart weary, confused Mrs. Bradley, once doing very well on $75 a week with her son beside her: "I'm the mother who lost the boy. I've got a $15,000 mortgage on my home and a new car to pay for. If anyone is to capitalize on my son's death, it should be me."

But at week's end, after a Mississippi grand jury refused to indict Till's alleged kidnappers, her Chicago lawyer Emmett Henry Kuff resigned from the case, said he couldn't continue if Mrs. Bradley and the NAACP had parted company.

ENDED 5 LIVES

Chased from Miss. plantation, Rev. Mose Wright resettled family on outskirts of Chicago.

Lynch Victim's Mother Says She's 'Going Broke'

Witness Mandy Bradley began new life as Chicago housewife.

Ex-cotton picker Willie Reed, 18, hopes eventually to attend college.

Chicago disc jockey Daddy-a-Daylite presents Till's mother, Mrs. Bradley, $500 check from auto agency owner Phil Crane (L). $100 monthly, clothing bills had tripled, travel expenses were enormous—eating up Mrs. Bradley's $100-per-speech fee and occasional gifts of $500 to $1,000. Said she: "I can't make it any longer on less than $600 a week."

Last week, as NAACP officials were putting finishing touches on a planned 11-city, West Coast speaking tour, Mrs. Bradley suddenly bowed out. NAACP Secretary Roy Wilkins said she had demanded a $5,000 guarantee, snared that his organization didn't "handle such matters on a commercial basis."

Counterpart weary, confused Mrs. Bradley, once doing very well on $75 a week with her son beside her: "I'm the mother who lost the boy. I've got a $15,000 mortgage on my home and a new car to pay for. If anyone is to capitalize on my son's death, it should be me."

But at week's end, after a Mississippi grand jury refused to indict Till's alleged kidnappers, her Chicago lawyer Emmett Henry Kuff resigned from the case, said he couldn't continue if Mrs. Bradley and the NAACP had parted company.
BACKSTAGE

IN THE past, Ebony's editors have gone to great lengths to get their stories. They have flown thousands of miles in planes as small as Piper Tri- PACers and as large as the Air Force's huge Globemaster transports. They have hiked miles with military men in training and bumped across rugged African terrain in seemingly springless jeeps and other vehicles. They have donned overalls and work shirts to mingle with sharecroppers in demonstrations in the South and have dressed in white-tie-and-tails to cover social events in the nation's capital.

But it remained for a relative newcomer, Assistant Editor Phyllis Garland who has been with the magazine less than a year, to top them all. Working on the story, "The Natural Look" (Page 142), Phyl was so carried away that she ended up in the barber's chair (see photo at left) where barber Sultan Mahmood clipped her tresses to a "natural look" length.

Says Miss Garland who believes in throwing herself fully into a story: "It has given me a new feeling of freedom, a new personality." We will have to be very careful in assigning her stories in the future.

The energy, talent and dedication of a new staff member such as Phyl (she got her experience on the Pittsburgh Courier after being graduated from Northwestern University) makes the old timers here look back to others who came to work at Ebony and meshed immediately into the hardworking, devoted staff.

One such was David Jackson, a photographer whose byline became familiar to Ebony readers shortly after he began working here in 1949. For just over a decade, David was a daring, completely-involved photographer who believed that the picture was everything. The files are filled with pictures which, more than once, David literally risked his life to get.

Sometimes with Washington Editor Simeon Booker and at others with Clotye Murdock (Now Mrs. Lars Larson and living in Sweden), Jack covered the South long before the civil rights fight became the popular pursuit which it is today. An excellent driver, he learned to travel backwoods Mississippi roads without lights to get away from suspicious sheriffs. Warmhearted, generous and as likeable a person as ever came down the pike, David made friends throughout the country among the lowly as well as the celebrities.

Suffering from ulcers, he had to give up journalistic photography seven years ago. Taking a job as an industrial photographer at a naval ordnance plant in Chicago, he became one of the best in that field in the city.

On the night of April 8, 1966, David Jackson was stopped by a traffic policeman because the taillight of his car was not burning. He got out of the auto, walked to the rear and fell dead of a heart attack. He is survived by his widow Yvonne Cherie, five children, and a host of co-workers and friends who will never forget him.

David always felt that through his pictures he was recording history. Early vote registration attempts, sharecroppers in Mississippi, new entertainers on their way up, old sports stars on their way down, young models who were to become the beauties of their day—all were grist for David's cameras and in the years to come his pictures will truly be a part of the history of one of the most exciting decades of modern times.

Life ends but life still goes on. David was a friend to the late Nat King Cole and would have loved to have done the assignment on Nat's daughter, Carol (Cookie) Cole, which will be featured in our July issue. Carol Cole is a budding actress who should do honor to the name of her father who blazed trails in Hollywood as well as throughout the rest of the nation.

Also in July we will bring you International Editor Era Bell Thompson's first installment of her story on Australia and a full report in pictures of the First World Festival of Negro Arts from Dakar, Senegal.

Miss Thompson spent more than three months traveling the length and breadth of the Australian continent. She talked with the lowest of Aborigines to the highest of government officials in her search for the truth about the color problem in Australia. Her series will be a revelation—even to many Australians.
To Be a ‘Negro’ Newsman—Reporting on the Emmett Till Murder Trial

Simeon Booker, center, covers the Emmett Till murder trial for Jet magazine. He is seated in the Negro press section with, from left, Clotye Murdock of Ebony magazine, L. Alex Wilson of The (Memphis, Tenn.) Tri-State Defender, and Steve Duncan of The St. Louis Argus.

In 1956, Nieman Reports published Simeon Booker’s account of his Jet magazine coverage of the Emmett Till trial:

Millions of words were written about the recent Till murder trial, but the most dramatic and, by far, the most significant development during the hectic week in the backwoods Mississippi community remains untold. It was an incredible interracial manhunt which located three key Negro witnesses whose testimony almost changed the course of the trial. It involved the unique cooperation of Negro and white
reporters, top Negro leaders, and Mississippi law enforcers working together in a hard-hitting team at a time most of the U.S. thought the Dixie state was doing nothing about gaining convictions in the case.

When I came away from the trial, I was somewhat downhearted by the acquittal verdict, but I was not embittered. I was proud of the law enforcers. I personally knew they had done what they could to produce the murder evidence. As a party to this manhunt which even I as a Chicago newsmen would describe as unbelievable had gained great respect for three white Southern newsmen, Clark Porteous of the Memphis Press-Scimitar and W. C. Shoemaker and Jim Featherstone of the Jackson Daily News. Porteous, a former Nieman Fellow, served as the main liaison agent for the operation and he did so unflinchingly in an atmosphere which was charged with tension and fear.

For the group of 12 Negro newsmen who covered the trial, it was a bitter, at times frustrating experience. As soon as we arrived in Sumner, Sheriff H. C. Strider laid down the law there was to be no mixing with white reporters and any violation meant ejection from the courtroom and town. The day before the trial opened, our Jet-Ebony crew ran into a truckload of gun-bearing whites on a truck near Money, Mississippi, which brought it home to us that our assignment was no good neighbor get-together. The Sheriff’s edict further restricted our movement. As a result, we stayed to ourselves in the far corner of the courtroom as the antagonistic Exhibit A of Northern Negro reporters who were capitalizing on low-rating the South.

On the first night of the trial, we had a pleasant surprise. Two white reporters (I better not mention names) defied the state’s segregation laws to breeze into our town for a visit. They gave us the first report that the trial was “a fix,” that the state had obtained only two witnesses (Rev. Mose Wright and his 12-year-old son, Simeon), both of whom were at the house when Till was kidnapped. Said our guests: “The trial won’t last two days. The State doesn’t even know where this boy was killed. They have no murder weapon. They have hardly circumstantial evidence of a killing.”

The white reporters also gave us some tips on conduct in the courtroom. Said they: “Take it easy. Don’t get excited. They’re waiting for just one incident so they can pitch out all of you.”

After the pair left, we got a spine-tingling phone call from Dr. T.R.M. Howard, Mound Bayou surgeon and perhaps Mississippi’s foremost Negro civil rights leader. His information: Two Negro workers had vanished on a Milam-owned plantation. One was reported to have knowledge of the crime. What it was no one knew.

The next day we heard reports that other Negroes were being “jailed” or whisked away from area plantations. Why this sudden exit we still didn’t know, but we had ideas. But it was not only difficult, it was dangerous to try to track down some of the stories, the section being so hostile to intruders. We continued attending the trial and awaiting further word from Dr. Howard.

Finally, on the day that the state presented its first witness, aging Rev. Mose Wright, things began to happen. A Negro plantation worker, on the pretense of going to church, made his way to Dr. Howard and told him a hair-raising account. He knew of the whereabouts of a group of Negroes who not only had seen Till being carried on a truck into a barn, but later had heard
someone beaten and cry for mercy.

Immediately, Dr. Howard met with the Negro reporters and NAACP officials to plot a course of action. This was the hottest story of the trial. It would give the state just the evidence it needed. But there were major problems. There was a vast wall between the races. There were the barriers of mistrust and lack of confidence. One group argued that in the event we continued to withhold this valuable information we would be obstructing justice. But others contended that hasty action would be dangerous. There were lives at stake. In any event, the Negroes had to be taken away from their homes for their safety.

After working out plans to evacuate these potential witnesses, we agreed to call in the most reliable and sympathetic daily paper reporters covering the trial. In return for sharing this headline story, the white reporters would be asked to make the first contact with the law enforcers and prosecution. They would notify them of the new evidence. As our part of the bargain, we would then produce the witnesses.

On our original list of newsmen to be summoned were several topnotch reporters covering the trial. But Dr. Howard refused to accept the full list. He had confidence in one man Clark Porteous, a fair and square Southerner. When he called Porteous, however, Dr. Howard didn’t make this clear and Porteous (probably for company) brought along two Jackson Daily News reporters, James Featherstone and W. C. Shoemaker. Thus, these newsmen became the only whites who actually knew of the behind-the-scenes activity, and since they were involved they modestly have refrained from disclosing their roles in later stories.

At the initial meeting, Dr. Howard, in his excitement at the turn of events, forgot to tell the white delegation that his uncovering of the “surprise witnesses” was to be kept secret until they were brought from the plantation. When notified of this, Featherstone balked and stated that he would run the story the next day. Porteous intervened and finally got Featherstone to hold up the story on condition that no other reporter would be tipped off. We agreed on these terms: The whites would have the law enforcers in the town at eight o’clock the next evening when we would produce the witnesses.

The tight ring of reporters also included Jimmy Hicks of the Afro-American, Clotye Murdock and David Jackson of the Jet-Ebony team, and L. Alex Wilson of the Defender.

While excitement increased, we could hardly believe the true impact of our project until Judge Curtis Swango the next day allowed the state to delay its case for a half day. The reason: to find our new witnesses.

But our well laid plans for the eight p.m. meeting didn’t work out. The sheriffs of two counties showed up but not the witnesses. We discovered that “some white men” had visited the plantations in question in the morning and by the time our party reached there, the witnesses had vanished, frightened to death. Later, we learned that the visitors were law enforcers who somehow had been given advance information and had probably become restless. So we had new problems and only some 12 hours to locate our people.

Sheriff George Smith of Leflore County, fair man that he is, promptly routed the pessimism. Said he: “These witnesses have a story to tell. We’ve got to find them if it takes all night. We’ll stop court until we find them.”

Some of the law enforcers got on the phone and began calling up plantation owners warning them to produce such witnesses or face legal action.
In this manner, Mississippi’s first major interracial manhunt began. Each sheriff agreed to take a Negro and go to a plantation home. All would be visited before morning. The Negro escort would plead with the potential witnesses to testify. There would be no warrants issued. No one would be carted out of his home. We agreed to round up our people and bring them to the State Enforcement Agent’s office in Drew.

Three of us (Porteous, Featherstone and myself) followed Sheriff Smith in a 70-mile-an-hour chase along dusty backwoods roads to get 18-year-old Willie Reed. This youth had actually seen Till on the truck and heard the beating. During the run, we got lost and headed back to Drew, where in about a half-hour business began to pick up.

The first Negro rounded up was middle-aged Frank Young. He refused to talk to anyone except Dr. Howard, who hadn’t yet arrived at the office. So Young was allowed to go home to be summoned on call. An hour later, when sheriffs went after him again, he was missing. He didn’t turn up at his plantation home until two days after the trial.

Throughout the night, the search continued. Each person was brought in and asked to testify. All were frightened. Finally, Dr. Howard promised to take each of those who would testify to live in Chicago. This worked with three witnesses Willie and his 74-year-old grandfather and Mandy Bradley, who later was forced to leave her cabin in the dead of night to get away from the plantation.

When the court opened in the morning, the new witnesses were on hand. Newspapers blared the story of the new witnesses the fact that these people could give an account of seeing Till go into the barn and hearing the outcries; evidence which strengthened the state’s case. But none mentioned the all-night manhunt.

Later, special prosecutor Robert Smith praised the work of the reporters in gathering the new witnesses, one of whom, Willie Reed, became the trial’s star witness. But the reporter whose calmness and keen judgment was responsible for the smoothness of the operation was Clark Porteous. He was the reporter Mississippi’s Negro leaders had faith in because of his outstanding work in the section, and he proved it again at the Till murder trial.

* Simeon Booker, a 1951 Nieman Fellow, is on the staff of Jet Magazine.  

Help advance the Nieman Foundation’s mission “to promote and elevate the standards of journalism” by making a donation (https://nieman.harvard.edu/about/make-a-gift/).
THE TILL SAGA

in art and memory
Haunting America
Emmett Till in Music and Song

by Philip C. Kolin

The murder of Emmett Till has haunted the American imagination. Though Chicago born and bred, he will be forever linked to Mississippi and the South. Emmett Till artwork, designed by Kelly Rickert for the Goodman Theatre production of Ifa Bayeza's The Ballad of Emmett Till.
The murder of Emmett Till has haunted the American imagination. Though Chicago born and bred, he will be forever linked to Mississippi and the South. While visiting relatives in the Delta in August 1955, the fourteen-year-old boy whistled at or said “Bye bye, baby” to a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, while in her husband’s grocery store in Money, Mississippi, to buy bubble gum. For his offense, Carolyn’s husband Roy Bryant and his half-brother J. C. Milam savagely murdered Till—cracking his skull open and gouging his eye out—and threw his body, with a seventy-five-pound cotton gin fan tied around his neck, into the Tallahatchie River, where it was found three days later. Determined to show the world what Mississippi had done, Till’s mother, Mamie, insisted on an open-casket funeral for her son. Pictures of his mangled body, published in Jet magazine and elsewhere, horrified the world. Adding to the infamy of their crime, Till’s murderers were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury in Sumner, Mississippi, on September 23, 1955, and a few months later sold the story of how they abducted, tortured, and killed Till to William Bradford Huie for a Look magazine interview.1 Till’s brutal death and the subsequent sham trial were a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement.

Over the years, many composers have memorialized Till in music and song, but his presence in this genre has received little attention. Though the title of a leading novel based on Till’s life—Bebe Moore Campbell’s 1992 novel, Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine—underscores the significance of music in describing his tragedy, Till’s place in music and song is rooted in musical traditions inseparable from southern cultures. These songs range from “finger-pointin’” folk ballads to spirituals/Gospel to blues to jazz to rap and hip-hop. This music charts the popular response to Till, helping us to remember his tragedy and to measure his continuing importance in a racially divided America. Songs about Emmett Till reveal much about how we remember the Civil Rights Movement and how we formulate its discourse. But even more revealing, these songs illustrate how cultural memory works to shape and even reshape history. In them we hear about an Emmett Till who plays changing symbolic roles, reflecting key cultural shifts in thinking about racial identity and relations over the last six decades.2

Ifa Bayeza, author of the jazz opera The Ballad of Emmett Till, has eloquently identified two opposing “traditions” about Till that have major implications for a study of the music and songs about him.

There were essentially two conflicting traditions regarding Emmett Till. The first was Emmett’s mother’s memory of him, which became ritualistically instilled by her many public engagements. Her description of a prepubescent innocent with a speech impediment, with no real agency in his own life, when coupled with his death photo, froze Emmett Till in a state of perpetual victim-
Emmett Till in Music and Song

While visiting relatives in the Delta in August 1955, fourteen-year-old Emmett Till whistled at—or said “Bye bye, baby”—to a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, while buying bubble gum in her husband’s grocery store (here) in Money, Mississippi. Photograph courtesy of University of Memphis Libraries/Special Collections/Memphis Press-Scimitar.

hood and objectification. While the shock and outrage over this image awakened consciousness and stirred masses of people to action, Emmett remained in a stasis of permanent dehumanization. On the other side of the spectrum, the fraudulent, perjured testimony of Carolyn Bryant, deemed inadmissible in the trial but reprinted almost verbatim in the 1956 Look article, has been repeated and taken for truth in scores of subsequent treatments of the case. In this scenario, Emmett Till is portrayed as the classic black stereotype of a brute and sexual predator, lusting after white flesh.¹

We need to hear the songs written about Emmett Till within the contexts of these divergent perspectives. On the one hand, many of them portrayed him as a “prepubescent innocent,” ignorant of how the South expected a young African American boy to behave around a white woman and unaware of its punishments for violating any taboo, however small or unthinking. As Bayeza observes, Till had “no real agency” as victim, and numerous songs bewailed his fate in that role. But the counter holds true as well: Till was both brutally empowered and vili-
fied, especially in the southern press, as a threat to white virginity, a “predator” from the North “lusting after white women.” Interestingly, though, no songs championed the views of the Bryant clan or lamented poor Carolyn’s plight.) But a powerful, bold, and iconoclastic Till has emerged through a musical and narrative reversal in songs that present him not as victim, but as Civil Rights activist, spokesperson for African American arts, and a mythic boy hero.

E A R L Y T R I B U T E S

The first musical tributes to Till were folk songs written a month or two after the murder trial and composed primarily to advance the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. In fact, they were often associated with Civil Rights marches and rallies and included performances by the Freedom Singers who, as a part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960s, sought to raise awareness about the horrors of racism in the South. In October 1955, Langston Hughes collaborated with composer Jobe Huntley on “The Money, Mississippi Blues,” which was “submitted to the NAACP for use in fundraising campaigns.” Hughes packed his simple words with thundering immediacy: “Tears and blood [fall] like rain/in Money, Mississippi.” Expressing Hughes’s rage, three lines chronicled Till’s fatal story: “Little old boy, just fourteen years old;/shot, kicked, beaten ’cause he was so bold/to whistle at a woman who was white.” As many subsequent songwriters would do, Hughes wondered why the boy was murdered since his father, who served in World War II, “died for democracy.” Voicing the sorrow and fear that Till’s death aroused, Hughes portrayed Emmett as the innocent African American victim fallen prey to the dominion of white bigotry and injustice.

In November 1955, resistance poet Aaron Kramer wrote the lyrics for “Blues for Emmett Till,” while Clyde R. Appleton, active in Civil Rights marches in the 1960s, composed the score. The song first appeared with lyrics only in the November 1955 National Guardian; a few months later Sing Out!, a magazine dedicated to publishing Civil Rights protest songs, published it with its musical score. Evocatively appropriate with its single chord structure, Appleton’s music blended the blues with Gospel, anticipating the hybridity of later Till songs. Giving far more biographical details than “The Money, Mississippi Blues,” “Blues for Emmett Till” personified him as a brown “foolish bird” who “flew down South” for the summer expecting to fish in the Tallahatchie, not to be murdered there. Kramer’s avian imagery carries such sardonic warnings as “better not chirp when Mrs. Bryant’s around” and “In Money, Mississippi, to kill a young bird’s all right/If the young bird is black and the killer is white.” Through a deceptively simple pattern of repetitions and rhymes, “Blues” satirically captures a down-home southern aphoristic quality. Attacking Mississippi’s brand of justice, the song asserted the “Jury
knows who killed him—knows the place and time/jury knows just who killed him, that terrible midnite time/But his face was crushed so bad, it couldn’t be called a ‘crime.’” Beneath these bitter words lay the legal crux of the case against Bryant and Milam. The defense argued that since the body was mutilated, rendering it unrecognizable, charges could hardly be brought against these men. But after proudly confessing their crime in Look, there was no denying their guilt. Like Hughes’s “Blues,” Kramer’s finger-pointin’ song challenged listeners to think about racial injustice in Eisenhower’s America.⁶

A third early song, also intended to mobilize listeners to fight for Civil Rights, was titled simply “The Death of Emmett Till” and published in the December 22, 1955, issue of the African American newspaper, the California Eagle. Mrs. A. C. Bilbrew, “a widely known choral director, pageant producer, and songwriter,” who was “active in community affairs and an ardent NAACP worker,” wrote the “tragic, heart-rending folk song” in two parts. The Ramparts, with vocalist Scatman Crothers, released the 78 rpm record on the Dootone label in 1956. Like Hughes and Kramer, Bilbrew sought the largest possible audience to vindicate Till’s murder and to champion Civil Rights in America. But, although Dootone “readied” the song “for nationwide distribution,” it “did not become very popular given the explosive racial climate,” even though the radio stations that did play it “were bold indeed for the times,” according to Bob Hennessey of Jukebox. Till’s legend spelled terror for young African Americans from the 1950s onward, as Civil Rights activist and author Anne Moody testified in her powerful narrative Coming of Age in Mississippi, and as Black Panther Party members Assata Shakur and Bobby Seale expressed.⁷

Symbolizing Till as the sacrificial victim, as Mamie Till-Mobley had done, “The Death of Emmett Till” contains the lachrymose refrain “We won’t see little Emmett any more.” We learn that he was an only child who had polio and that when Emmett went to buy bubble gum, “he said goodbye” to Carolyn Bryant and agreed with his “little pals” that she was “good looking.” At that juncture, Scatman Crothers blew a calm, gentle whistle, a reminder of Emmett’s innocent adolescence, rhetorically disputing white racist narratives of Till as a sexual aggressor who deserved what happened to him. Part II of “The Death of Emmett Till” continued as “two bad men” abducted Till, who cried out, “Mama, save me.” Till’s Uncle Moses was able to identify the body only by Louis Till’s signet ring that “little Emmett” was wearing. Jumping to the trial, Bilbrew pointed to the two murderers who “sat and chewed,” a horrifying picture of their cocky assurance that they would be exonerated.

Bob Dylan recorded a song by the same name during his Freewheelin’ Sessions of 1962, a musical tribute that became one of the most famous songs about Till. Like earlier protest composers of the 1950s, Dylan wrote about Till to advance Civil Rights. Initially, he sang it for a Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) benefit
Roy Bryant and his half-brother, J. C. Milam, savagely murdered Till—cracking his skull open and gouging his eye out—and threw his body, with a seventy-five-pound cotton gin fan tied around his neck, into the Tallahatchie River, where it was found three days later. Photograph of the prosecution team with the cotton gin fan (above), courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress. Photograph of J. C. Milam and family with defense attorney J. W. Kellum (below), courtesy of University of Memphis Libraries/Special Collections/Memphis Press-Scimitar.
in February 1962, and it soon became a staple of Dylan’s concert tours in 1962–
1963, including a performance of the song on the influential Billy Faier Radio
Show in New York in October 1962. Further popularizing Dylan’s “The Death
of Emmett Till,” Joan Baez included it on her 1963 album alongside other Civil
Rights songs such as “We Shall Overcome,” and Coulson, Dean, McGuinness,
and Flint, the four-man blues band, recorded it on their 1972 album Lo and Behold.
Written for a new activist generation of the 1960s grappling with growing racial
tensions and protests, Dylan’s “Death” zeroed in on the murderers far more than
other songs had done and omitted any reference to the incident in the store or to
the notorious “wolf whistle.” Instead, the first four stanzas lamented the “tortures
. . . too evil to repeat” that the Bryants inflicted on Till. Stepping “through a
Southern door,” Till was “dragged into a barn” where the “screaming inside” con-
trasted with “laughing sounds” heard “on the street.” Like Hughes, Dylan linked
Till’s innocent blood to a Mississippi downpour—so much blood shed from the
brutal beatings; Till’s killers “rolled his body down a gulf of bloody red rain.”
Saturated with highly emotional, alliterative language, “Death” then attacked
the “mockery” of the trial. “The smiling brothers walk[ed] down the courthouse
steps” while little Emmett’s body “floats in the foam of a Jim Crow Southern sea.”
Dylan’s accusation that the jury “includ[ed] men who helped the brothers” even
anticipated the reopening of the Till case in 2004 by the Justice Department. In
the spirit of the decade of protest, Dylan’s last two stanzas exhorted listeners to
change America—“This song is a reminder to remind your fellow man” that the
“ghost-robed” KKK is committing the same atrocities today. If listeners ignore
the song’s plea for social justice, their “eyes [will be] filled with dead men’s dirt,”
a harrowing reference to Till’s hasty burial in Mississippi, and perhaps to the fate
of other black victims. That crime, as well as the reprehensible cover-up of the
trial described in Dylan’s song, became the rallying point for a horrified nation as
a southern crime became a national mandate for reform and redemption.8

CONTEMPORARY BANDS, PERFORMING ARTISTS,
AND THE MEMORY OF EMMETT TILL

The memory of Emmett Till as innocent victim has also inspired several con-
Wenberg, and Tamer Eid (later replaced by Derrick Decker), formed Emmet [sic]
Swimming, intent on protesting the tragic murder of the guiltless youth. Watts
explained the significance of the group’s choice of name: “The idea . . . was basi-
cally that a 14-year-old boy should be swimming in the river, not dying in it.”
As the band’s bio reveals, “Emmett’s name evoked a myriad of strong emotions:
anger, frustration, and introspective self doubt. Emmet Swimming delves into
these and similar emotions with their wild imagery and haunting melodies.” One

Emmett Till in Music and Song 121
of their early songs, the self-titled “Emmet Swimming,” although never recorded, remains popular on tour. “I found it an interesting story from an innocent standpoint,” noted Watts, who described innocence lost as a common theme in his songs. The band, which has had major releases over the years, is well known for “their intense live songs and their seemingly contradictory mix of upbeat music and somber lyrics.” Like many of Dylan’s heirs, Emmet Swimming has been popular on college campuses, continuing to raise social and racial consciousness.

Perhaps the most ambitious musical tribute to Till in the 1990s comes from the Canadian blues trio bluesmyth that composed a trilogy on his life and death. Their name, like their music, combines “blues and smith (smyth) for the symbolic forging of solid blues music with heavy metal overtones [with] hidden Gospel and soul influences.” Their trilogy, “The Story of Emmett Till,” begins with the instrumental “Innocence Bound,” in which “the twelve-string guitars and a swirling organ give the song an angelic sound,” suggesting “the young, guiltless life of Emmett Till.” “Innocence” has an optimistic feel in the style of progressive bluegrass. But the lyrics and the music for bluesmyth’s second song, “Run For Your Life,” project a distressed Emmett fleeing his demonic murderers. The refrain, “Run, Emmett, you run/The Devil he’s at your back,” repeats four times. The choice between good and evil is a prominent theme of this and other bluesmyth compositions.

Musically, “Run” has the flair of southern rock, reminiscent of the Allman Brothers, and the “pulsating bass and drums and murky side guitar” combine with terrifying lyrics to represent the frenzy and fear of the young Emmett trying to escape. It is significant that bluesmyth imagined that Emmett would try to escape or that he even had a chance to do so. But their composing a song on such a possibility speaks to some imagined agency on Till’s part, allowing us to see him not just as a helpless captive but as a struggling, resistant victim. The song encourages listeners that we must all resist the 1955 Mississippi brand of justice. But as Emmett’s Uncle Moses claims in The Face of Emmett Till, a play coauthored by Mamie Till-Mobley, “No matter how far y’all runs, Mississippi gonna always follow ya.” The last song in the trilogy—an instrumental titled “The Phoenix”—is a raucous tribute to the blameless child whose death inspired a movement and pained the conscience of Americans. With its hard-driving rhythms racing through hammerhead drums and guitars and its harmonic dissonance, “Phoenix” has the feel of forging stone, a millennial eulogy for the boy called Bo, musically reborn for a new age.

In the new millennium, some fifty years after Till’s gruesome murder, several independent artists and groups composed and recorded powerfully charged protest songs about him, his mother and uncle, his assailants, and especially the state of Mississippi. In 2004, pop folk singer Dave Balson included “Still Emmett Till” on his album Talk Is Sheep, a title reflecting Balson’s desire, in his words, to
In the tradition of Dylan, Ochs, and Robert Johnson, all of whom he acknowledges as influences, Balson has performed “Still Emmett Till” on the streets of Chicago, Till’s hometown, and at festivals and fundraisers, hoping “to reach deep into and stir the soul and conscience of [his] listeners.” Skipping over the incident at the Bryant store, Balson begins “Back in 1955 Emmett Till took a trip” to “The great sovereign hate-filled state of Mississippi” where they “dragged up his mangled body.” The trial was “a mockery” because Till’s killers were “set free by a jury of white men.” Balson then directs this poignant question to his listeners today: “What have we learned” from the “the sick and twisted heads” that executed this crime? That “Southern law was written in Southern skies” (also referenced in Kramer’s early song that personified Till as a little “brown bird”). For Balson the sky becomes a national whiteboard broadcasting Mississippi’s culpability and shame.12

In 2006, Big Blind released its album *Comin’ Across the River* with “The Complete Ballad of Emmett Till.” Despite the promise of its all-encompassing title and

![Emmett Till and his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.](image-url)
a running time of five minutes and fifteen seconds (making it one of the longest songs on Till), Big Blind, like Balson, concentrated on the aftermath of the murder and the tragic heroism of Till’s mother and uncle. According to songwriter and lead guitarist Andrew Duden, “The Complete Ballad” has “a soulful feel . . . [where] the repetitively simple chord structure of the verses are reminiscent of ‘For What It’s Worth’ by Buffalo Springfield.” While Duden identifies this prominent contemporary group as a musical source, their “Complete Ballad” also incorporates intense biblical imagery. In the spirit of a jeremiad, Duden intends their ballad to “wake up the entire nation,” imploring: “Don’t turn your back on your wrath, Lord/for the boy I cry out for.” “The Complete Ballad” abounds with tears, sorrow, and vengeance for wrongdoings to Till, universalizing him as “Someone’s son, someone’s daughter” in the opening stanza. In the second stanza Duden depicts Till-Mobley as the Mater Dolorosa, for words about Till’s death “were like arrows/piercing all over Mamie/Her eyes were so full of tears . . .” (echoing Luke 2:35 when Simeon’s prophecy tears Mary’s heart). In stanza three, Uncle Moses on the “witness stand” is “Like an old prophet of doom/Lightning shot out of the end of his pointed finger/and electrified the court room.” His “Thar he,” which he “cried in a whisper,” ends up “Cursing them murderers to damnation.” Big Blind dips into the Old Testament to fulfill the prophecy in store for the “three sinners of Tallahatchie County” (Roy and Carolyn Bryant and J. C. Milam) in the final stanza, and beseeches God to “Send fire upon the walls of Tyre/Like the good shepherd Amos said.” More than just a bigoted state as in other songs, Big Blind’s lyrics demonize Mississippi as an infamous site of blasphemy and abomination.

Mississippi continued to occupy a central place in Till’s tragedy in two beautifully crafted songs recorded in 2007. Off-Broadway actor and songwriter Bristol Pomeroy recorded “The Emmett Till Story” for his ironically titled album, Bedtime Stories, hardly a collection of soothing lullabies. Unlike other composers, however, Pomeroy denies being influenced by other songs about Till and attributes his inspiration to having performed in James Baldwin’s play Blues for Mister Charlie, which presents a story much like Till’s, and to seeing Keith Beauchamp’s 2005 documentary, The Untold Story of Emmett Till. “The emotional gravity of the case” unfolds in Pomeroy’s folk song as “each verse builds upon the previous one.” Portraying Till as “a dear young son whose life had just begun” and who “went down to Mississippi one August night,” Pomeroy avoids references to what may have occurred inside the store to concentrate on the murder and trial instead. In the narrative style of the southern vernacular, Pomeroy begins, “Two men came a-calling and took the boy down to the water/Teach him about their wives and daughter,” alluding to stereotypical notions of protecting virginal womanhood from black sexual predation. Pomeroy onomatopoetically records the murder as “Bang, bang, bang went the sound of the gun/The boy never had a chance to run.” A few lines later, we are transported to the trial where for “the two men/
There wasn’t a damn thing they couldn’t say,” knowing that they would “walk free.” And with one line, “Bang, bang, bang went the judge’s gavel,” Pomeroy powerfully equates, in sound and sense, the gun with Mississippi “justice.” The refrain throughout “The Emmett Till Story” laments these linked crimes—“Shame, shame, what a shame.”

One of the most piercing songs about Till is Ben Bedford’s “Land of the Shadows” (also from 2007), because it tries to explain exactly what happened inside Bryant’s store and why. Bedford noted that “Land” was written on October 2, 2007, “the very same day that Tallahatchie County made their first official apology.
to the Till family of Chicago.” Reminiscent of Pete Seeger, Bedford describes himself as an “American Portrait Songwriter,” attempting “to capture the subjects of [his] songs much like a photographer or painter.” Although Bedford claims that the “core” of his song is “the story of a mother losing her child,” actually only one line touches Mamie—his death “gonna tear his mama’s heart apart.” Instead, “Land” gives listeners a graphic picture of how Till looked, what he did, and the consequences he suffered. Bedford’s Till is flirtatious but innocent, a typical 1950’s teenager: “Emmett flashed her a smile from across the room . . . against his smooth brown skin they were shining white . . . He winked and he whistled and stepped into/the glaring glint of the afternoon,” lines that point to his light-heartedness, his boyish attempt to be a roué. Not surprisingly, after leaving the store “With his cousins down that dusty road/He didn’t think on it, how could he know/They were just teenage boys seeking girls and fights.” A little cocky and naive, he had flirted harmlessly with a white woman, which was no crime given “his 14 years of wrong and right.” For Till, brought up in Chicago, race was not a threat but a natural condition of life; he was just a “Northern boy didn’t mean a thing,” and he had “only seen Mississippi in magazines.”

Bob Dylan recorded “The Death of Emmett Till” during his Freewheelin’ Sessions of 1962, a musical tribute that became one of the most famous songs about Till. Further popularizing the song, Joan Baez included it on her 1963 album alongside other Civil Rights songs such as “We Shall Overcome.” Dylan and Baez at the Civil Rights March on Washington, August 28, 1963, courtesy of the U.S. Information Agency and the Collections of the Library of Congress.
But Till is immersed in the “land of shadows,” a brilliant, polyvalent metaphor for Mississippi, 1955. “Shadows” refers to the countless forgotten black bodies lynched in racist Mississippi, as well as the border world between light and dark, the land where Emmett finds himself. “Land of the Shadows” resonates with the racial and cultural taboos Emmett did not notice but for which he forfeited his life. He never bargained for the type of “fight” he would have in Mississippi. Going through Uncle Moses’s “rough hewn door without a sound,” Bryant and Milam seized Till, and they were “Two white boys, he wouldn’t give no fight.” Emmett’s smile dashed across the room “like a sulfur match in the growing gloom.” Tragically, when Till tries to be charming, even flirtatious, the results are harrowing, explosive. Incensed by what the boy from Chicago said and did, the diabolic Bryant and Milam, “who smelled like cigarettes, dry leaves, and fear,” pulled Emmett “from sleep/where he prayed to the Lord his soul to keep,” and dragged him away in “that two-ton Chevy on a starry night.” The references to smoke and a stealthy death in the night characterize the hellish deeds of Emmett’s killers.

“Land” continues to depict Emmett as victim through its imagery. “The river runs muddy in the summer time/they pulled a rusty wheel from an old turbine/didn’t look like nobody in the morning bright.” The dark imagery of mud, rust, as well as the “old turbine,” a fearsome evoking of Till’s fate, represents a world of shadows which the “morning bright” could not dispel. But Bedford goes deeper into Till’s mythos as scapegoat than Hughes, Kramer, or Dylan ever did. Stripped of his smile, his identity, he “didn’t look like nobody,” which, as we saw, was precisely the defense’s argument in explaining away the possibility that the corpse pulled from the Tallahatchie could ever have been Emmett. Defaced beyond recognition, Till’s identity (and rights for a just trial) could be handily erased; in the process, he fell into “perpetual objectification,” to quote Bayeza. “Land” pulsates with these racist codes that terrified African Americans in the South for years. Jim Crow reduced black bodies to nobodies (invisible) in this segregated world, because they were not significant enough to merit even personhood. Of all the songs about Emmett Till, Bedford’s “Land” ranks as one of the most daring, poetic, and artfully crafted.

Bodacious, another contemporary rock band, also depicted Till as victim through its “The Ballad of Emmett Till.” Based in California, members of Bodacious originate from Louisiana and Texas. Critics describe their style as “roots, rock, swampy blues, & chicken fried funk”—today’s southern indigenous musical forms. Wayne Whitzell wrote the lyrics, sung in the “Southern vernacular,” with flowing rhymes, stereotypically country diction, and rock sounds: “last time Mamie/saw her boy alive/little Emmett/wearin’ his daddy’s ring/told his mama/don’t worry ’bout a thing.” In a bluesy style, Bodacious covers most of the incidents in the Till tragedy. At the center of the song is the attack on southern justice, satirized through Whitzell’s bone-chilling plays on words—“Killed a boy
in Money/No one paid the price/In Mississippi.” On the incident at the store, Whitzell’s “Ballad” evokes the tone of the catastrophic colloquial, the vernacular of southern revenge: “But he whistled at Dixie/as she walked out of the store/she said I’m gonna get that boy and/he won’t be whistlin’ no more.” In the pun on “Dixie,” Carolyn Bryant becomes both the symbol and the embodiment of a prejudiced South. “When you shoot your mouth in the Jim Crow South/They shoot you in the head,” a wincing internal rhyme that resonates. The “Ballad” ends with a repeated plea from the “Tallahatchie child”: “Help me, Mama.”

But unlike other songwriters, Bodacious immortalized Emmett—the “Tallahatchie child”—through the sounds that frequently symbolize the South. “He never really died/When a midnight train passes over an old railroad tie/And each an’ ev’ry blues song from B.B. to Buddy Guy/You can hear lil’ Emmett/in ev’ry flat five cry.” Rather than eulogizing him as an innocent boy from Chicago ignorant of southern tortures, as in Kramer’s or Dylan’s tributes, Bodacious assimilates Emmett into the southern landscape by inscribing him in the rhythms and voices of the South, including the music of legendary Mississippi bluesman B.B. King and Louisiana-born Buddy Guy (like Emmett, a Chicagian). The “flat five” is a
trademark of the blues, referring to the distinctive chord where the last note is played as a flat, creating more harmonic tension and a harsher sound consistent with the pain of blues laments. Serving their listeners a slice of southern elegiac sounds to memorialize “lil’ Emmett,” Bodacious apostrophizes him not only as a harmless “little boy” but as a reclaimed southern one.

EMMETT TILL IN FILM SOUNDTRACKS

Two contemporary filmmakers also mourn a victimized Emmett through the musical scores that accompany their documentaries. In January 2003, Stanley Nelson directed an Emmy-winning episode of the PBS series “American Experience” titled *The Murder of Emmett Till*, with music and arrangements by Tom Phillips. Andre Braugher’s narration and Phillips’s music underscore the pain and horror of original news footage and interviews. Throughout the documentary, Phillips’s low tympani beats, mournful harmonicas, and taut guitar strings convey suspense and dread, mounting in intensity as we learn about Till’s fatal rendezvous in the store and his abduction from a “house dark as 1,000 midnights.” When his body is found in the Tallahatchie, we hear the Gospel keening of the celebrated black women’s ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock in their arrangement of the spiritual “Old Ship of Zion.” Nelson also incorporates blues and jazz tunes, such as Robert Johnson’s “Sweet Home Chicago” and Duke Ellington’s “Come Sunday,” into the documentary. When audiences witness Till’s funeral at Roberts Temple Church of God in Chicago, a haunting blues piano accompanies the throng of mourners we see in news clips.

Beauchamp’s 2005 documentary, *The Untold Story of Emmett Till*, includes more than twenty musical pieces by composer Jim Papoulis. Unlike Nelson, Beauchamp relies exclusively on film footage and interviews with Till’s family, friends, and Civil Rights activists and historians to show that the real heroes of the time were the victims who suffered unto death the prejudices of the southern white establishment. Papoulis’s compositions took audiences back to those harrowing times: “I tried to evoke the feeling of the participants rather than score the action. I feel it is more genuine that way.” Avoiding synthesizers, he preferred simple, heartfelt chords in the tradition of Gospel and used only voice, piano, and guitar. Many of his songs featured eighty-year-old Civil Rights-era singer Odetta (Gordon), widely known for her album of prison songs, *Take This Hammer*, many of which Leadbelly later made famous. “I asked Odetta to emote from her heart the pain of that era,” Papoulis recalled. “Most of her recordings were done in only one take since she just felt the pain so deeply after seeing the footage.” He also scored his nine-year-old daughter’s voice to sing or hum as a section of the band in eight or nine songs to “create a subtle reminder of the innocence that is within us all.” Her young voice is riveting at the beginning of Beauchamp’s documentary, capturing
Papoulis’s Till so tenderly: “I saw him more as an innocent victim. He was a well-behaved young man who was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

EMMETT TILL AS AN AGENT FOR CHANGE

In the last decade songwriters have increasingly represented Emmett Till less as victim and target of white hate and more as an agent for change, but this approach began some thirty years earlier during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. An early transitional song that attempted to recast Till was “Too Many Martyrs,” which Phil Ochs and Bob Gibson recorded in 1963 and originally titled “The Ballad of Medgar Evers,” linking Evers and Till as Civil Rights heroes. Historically, Evers already had been part of the Till legacy. At the trial, Evers joined “forces with black and white journalists to round up eyewitnesses to strengthen the prosecution’s case.” “Too Many Martyrs” at first encouraged listeners to think the song would be about Till: “In the state of Mississippi many years ago/A boy of 14 years got a taste of southern law.” Like Till, Evers came of age at fourteen in a racially vindictive Mississippi but the second stanza made the subject’s identity clear: “His name was Medgar Evers and he walked his road alone/Like Emmett Till and thousands more whose names we’ll never know.” Pairing the two, Ochs and Gibson introduced a crucial shift in the Till legacy by linking and memorializing Till and Evers together, two sensational deaths that furthered the Civil Rights Movement.

To be sure, their murders had profound similarities and carried enormous influence, and “Too Many Martyrs” strengthened the providential connections between them. Like Till, Evers “became a man who became a cause/The cause became the hope for the country and its laws.” When the assassin’s bullet went through Evers’s “left side/it struck the heart of every man.” Likewise, Till’s gruesome lynching tortured America. Even though the tribute concluded with the prospect of better days, Ochs and Gibson realized that such hopes ran counter to the vengeful temper of the times. Waiting for reforms, paradoxically, “The country gained a killer and the country lost a man.” Just as Evers’s murderer was at large, so Till’s remained as well. Thus, ostensibly intended as a eulogy for Evers, “Too Many Martyrs” also was a lament for Till.

A bolder Emmett appears through a powerful key image in Jon Koonce’s “Emmett Till” (2007), performed solo on acoustic guitar with a violin counter. Citing Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger as influences but sounding like Dylan or even a young Johnny Cash, Koonce describes himself as a “musical primitive of sorts” whose compositions center on Civil Rights. A colloquial narrative of a ballad (“Gather ’round me people”) in a 4/4-time signature, Koonce’s “Emmett” attacks Mississippi where, however sweet the magnolia, “a stench of murder” remains and “when a white man come to get you/You ain’t never coming back.” His
Big Blind’s “The Complete Ballad of Emmett Till” abounds with tears, sorrow, and vengeance for wrongdoings to Till, universalizing him as “Someone’s son, someone’s daughter” in the opening stanza. In the second stanza Duden depicts Mamie Till-Mobley (here) as the Mater Dolorosa, for words about Till’s death “were like arrows/piercing all over Mamie/Her eyes were so full of tears . . .” Photograph courtesy of University of Memphis Libraries/Special Collections/Memphis Press-Scimitar.
indictments of a racialized America surpass that of many other musicians: “A stain of blood remains/On the soul of this nation/As long as murderers walk free/And the law is forsaken.” As Aaron Kramer did, Koonce personifies Till as a bird and in the process evokes Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for which Till likely served as a workable model for Lee’s Tom Robinson; in “Emmett” the Bryants came to “kill the mockingbird.” “Perhaps there is some similarity in the female accuser of Till and the defendant’s accuser in Lee’s novel,” Koonce explained, “but Till’s murder was set into action by Emmett’s alleged whistle. Mostly it was the whistle.” Even though he mourned Till as an “innocent child,” Koonce’s avian image transforms Emmett’s character. Mockingbirds are deadly accurate soothsayers. They speak horrible truths about how “savage words can cut” and how the “injustice . . . remains.” Through his new mockingbird persona, Till becomes far more accusatory and fearsome than as the fledgling brown bird in Kramer’s “Blues.”

Resurrecting him from the shadowy Mississippi Delta to contemporary cities and towns, numerous rappers have also changed and shaped Till’s identity. Through their talk-on-the-beat monologues, rappers have transformed Till’s traditional status as the child victim of white aggression to a figure of black resistance and conscience, while themselves projecting the aggression and swagger that a bigoted white community punished Till for allegedly displaying in the Bryant store in 1955. Ice Cube’s controversial 1993 hit “Cave Bitch,” for example, enlists Till in the rapper’s condemnation of the sexual games these “white bitches” play at the expense of black men. Inevitably, he concludes, “sooner or later the bitch’ll yell rape/Soon as daddy found out you a jigaboo/He’ll kill like he did Emmit [sic] Till.” In the rapper’s pulsating rhymes, Till’s name is invoked in the same spirit as characters from a bygone, repressive era but whose fates will no longer be endured by a strong black man who scorns white women. “Yeah, it gotta be black,” Ice Cube proclaims, resisting and reversing the stereotype responsible for Till’s death—miscegenation and white society’s fear of a sexualized black man threatening a perpetually virginal white womanhood. As Ice Cube announces, white women no longer set the standard for beauty for black men; black women do. In such a recontextualization Till’s legacy has undergone a radical change in the black community. Ice Cube replaces the dread that kept so many black Americans in fear over the decades at the mere mention of Till’s name with contempt for the expectation of deference to white women. He will not allow white society to impose Till’s tragedy on him. Till’s name does not frighten him.

Hip-hop star Kanye West also recasts Till’s role as a powerless martyr in his popular song “Through the Wire.” Composed after West was in a near-fatal automobile accident that required his jaw to be wired shut, “Through the Wire” documents the physical ravages he suffered from the accident and the emotional trauma it caused him and his family. The title alludes to the singer’s defiant attitude—
spitting through the wire refers both to Kanye singing and to his spitting back at Till’s killers who used a wire to tie a gin fan around Till’s neck. It is an epiphanic moment in his performance: “Imagine how my girl feel/On the plane, scared as hell, her guy look like Emmett Till.” Yet the emphasis in “Through the Wire” is not on racial crimes or their perpetrators, Bryant and Milam’s ilk, or the unjust trial but on Emmett Till as connoting a talented young African American man’s fear of disfigurement. Though he mentions Till only once, he shares Till’s personal nightmare—having his body mutilated, his life and career erased. West’s fear of being de-faced, as Till was, links “Through the Wire” with Ben Bedford’s “Land
of Shadows.” Moreover, the extent of Till’s perceived defiance prefigures the anger found in the Black Power Movement and contemporary rap music as well. Directly addressing residents of his and Till’s hometown—“Chi-town, what’s going on?”—West angrily vows to “make music that’s fire/spitting through the wire.” Musically and historically, then, the hip-hop artist has joined the new millennial Till generation as heir and avenger.31

IF A BAYEZA’S LANDMARK BALLAD

Unquestionably, though, the most complex musical tribute to a liberated Emmett Till is Ifa Bayeza’s The Ballad of Emmett Till, which played from April 26 through June 1, 2008, at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. Bayeza’s Ballad is a landmark script in the music and mythology of the Civil Rights martyr. Bayeza classified her work as “a deconstructed, reconstructed jazz play,” while the Goodman playbill similarly characterized it as a “jazz interpretation of the past and present.” Continuing Till’s history in balladry, she “elevated it to the stature of a modern folk epic.” As Bayeza explained:

In writing The Ballad of Emmett Till, I was essentially creating the quest of the boy hero—for glory, respect of peers, respect of the father, and for manhood. Metaphorically, the story hints at the African American communal cultural memory of abduction. In my mind, these two ritual moments collide and conjoin in the life journey of Emmett Till. In many traditional West African societies, boys on the threshold of manhood are ritualistically abducted by a spirit figure, very often in a “monstrous” form. They are taken to the bush, circumcised, and schooled in the rudiments of the warrior class. After these rituals, often in the form of physical and mental tests, they return to their communities as new men.

The practice of chattel enslavement introduced another abduction ritual—the stealing of children, which continued from the continent to the slave trading Southern states . . . Emmett, as the young interlocutor, enters this world to undo it. He goes to slay the dragon, the giant . . . But his heroic quest . . . is aborted by the mental and physical shackles of slavery. Though Emmett dies in the pursuit, he succeeds in the goal. Mythologically, I am not telling the story of the victim, but of the unwitting hero.4

Through different musical genres (with a cappella melodies by Kathryn Bostic), Bayeza dramatizes the heroic—rather than only the tragic—elements of Till’s life and death. As she affirmed, African Americans “use song as a source of solace and insurgency.” While jazz undoubtedly played a major role in expressing and bridging the various parts of the Ballad, Bayeza’s opera opens with and subsequently incorporates “bluesy Gospel” music with a variety of songs, evoking both the reli-
The most complex musical tribute to a liberated Emmett Till is Ifa Bayeza’s The Ballad of Emmett Till, which played from April 26 through June 1 last year at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. Bayeza’s Till was “cocky and irrepressible,” as well as “romantic and beautiful.” Bayeza’s production, featuring (left to right) Kristina Johnson (as Carolyn Bryant), Joseph Anthony Byrd (as Emmett Till) and Samuel G. Roberson Jr. (as Simeon Wright), photographed by Peter Wynn Thompson, courtesy of the Goodman Theatre.

Unlike Kramer’s frightened child, Bayeza’s Till was “cocky and irrepressible,” as well as “romantic and beautiful.” Although critics faulted her for a lengthy stage narrative, which includes an excruciating scene dramatizing the Bryants beating and subsequently murdering Till, the music expressed her desire to present events through Emmett’s eyes. In early scenes of the Ballad, a carefree Emmett dances to lively rock ’n’ roll. As Bayeza stressed, “Emmett has personal songs, improvised like his life. The essence of freedom—he’s duwop, bebop, blues, unbridled.” But as the Ballad moves to Till’s terrifying kidnapping, the painful cries of the family

Emmett Till in Music and Song 135
and the angry threats of his killers fill the stage. Toward the end of the *Ballad*, an eerie jazz score accompanies Till’s ghost (dressed in white pants and shirt) walking shoeless around the courtroom, commenting on the warring testimonies about his life and death. Thanks to Bayeza’s *Ballad*, the grand dreams of Till’s hopes dispel the nightmares of history. Her musical presented a startling new image of Till—a death-in-life and life-in-death Emmett.26

Over the last six decades, the music and lyrics memorializing Emmett Till’s murder in Mississippi have reflected the nightmares and dreams of the times in which they were written. His funeral on September 4, 1955, at the Roberts Temple Church of God on Chicago’s south side included a genesis musical tribute. Renowned evangelist Goldie Haynes sang “I Don’t Know Why I Have to Cry Sometimes,” while a twenty-five-voice woman’s choir performed a medley of Gospel tunes to sing Mamie’s fourteen-year-old boy to rest. But his ghost would not rest. An iconic event in American trauma, Till’s murder inspired early songwriters to rally their communities to protest the horrors of segregation. Folk songs by Bob Dylan, Langston Hughes, Aaron Kramer, Joan Baez, and later artists, such as bluesmyth and Ben Bedford, have represented Till as the quintessential victim, as did the musical scores accompanying two major documentaries of his life and death. But other artists have sung about a different Emmett, not the victim but the inevitable victor in the Civil Rights battle (as in the Ochs and Gibson’s “Too Many Martyrs”), a mocker in Jon Koonce’s “Emmett Till,” the emboldened black man/artist in rap, and the mythic boy hero in Bayeza’s *Ballad*. As American race relations have evolved, so has the tragic story of Emmett Till, and there is no telling where and how cultural memory will represent him in music in the future.

NOTES

I am grateful to Devery Anderson, Christopher Metress, and Bill Ferris for reading an earlier draft of this essay and for giving me the benefit of their criticism.


3. Email interviews with Ifa Bayeza, June 10 and 29, 2008.

4. See Davis W. Houck and Matthew A. Grindy, *Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press* (Jackson:


10. Information about bluesmyth comes from their blog at http://www.myspace.com/bluessmyth.


12. Email interview with Dave Balson, October 15, 2009. “Still Emmett Till” is available from Dave Balson: dave@davebalson.net.

13. Information about Big Blind comes from an email interview with Andrew Duden, February 2, 2009; “The Complete Ballad of Emmett Till” is available at http://cdbaby.com/bigblind/. In Luke 2:21–35, upon presenting the child Jesus in the Temple, Mary and Joseph are greeted by a wise old holy man, Simeon, who predicts that their son will be the rise and fall of many in Israel and that “a sword shall pierce through [Mary’s] soul also that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” Like Mary, Mamie would lose a son so that the world might be enlightened and saved.


21. Email interview with Jon Koonce, June 12, 2008; “Emmett Till,” It Can Never Happen Here (Portland, OR: Moon Records, 2007); for more information, see http://www.jonkoonce.com; Patrick Chura, “The Historicity of To Kill a Mockingbird,” Southern Literary Journal 32 (Spring 2006):

22. Ice Cube, “Cave Bitch,” Lethal Injection (Los Angeles: Priority Records, 1993). PS 53876; other tributes to Till from rappers including Vigalantee and Metoyer (“Who Killed Emmett Till”), can be found on YouTube as well as other Internet sites. The Emmett Till Legacy Foundation (http://www.emmetttillefficiencyfoundation.com/) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, encourages young people to compose rap and hip-hop memorials for Till.

23. Kanye West, “Through the Wire,” The College Dropout (New York: Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004), at http://www.thestateofhiphop.com/kanyewest–throughthewire.html (accessed May 30, 2008). This same tone runs through an album entitled Emmett Till’s Revenge (New York: Ankh Ba Records, December 2007), containing performances by such hip-hop artists as Labtekwon, Supremes, and Chinchilla. In 2008, Rap artist Vigalantee released a single dedicated to Emmett Till, “Bars Free Style-2 Rips the Mic,” that “told how he was murdered and how it started a movement.” Claiming that he was ordained “to speak the message,” Vigalantee asks his listeners when “you last heard Emmett Till/The name should not be a mystery/When was the last time your kids read black history?” and incorporates visual images of a chained black man, photos of Till wearing his fedora and of him in his coffin, and of drugs as a warning to black audiences that allowing their children to watch violence on entertainment sites only begets fascination with murder. Instead, he insists that with education and focus “We are creators.”

24. Email interviews with Ifa Bayeza, June 10 and 29, 2008.


The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till

(after the murder,
after the burial)

Emmett's mother is a pretty-faced thing;
the tint of pulled taffy.
She sits in a red room,
drinking black coffee.
she kisses her killed boy.
And she is sorry.
Chaos in windy grays
through a red prairie.
LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE LYNCHING OF EMMETT TILL

An Annotated Bibliography

CHRISTOPHER METRESS

The following bibliography lists more than 140 literary works (novels, stories, poems, plays, songs, musical scores, and movie and television scripts) that are based upon—or make significant reference to—the Emmett Till lynching. Annotations are provided for works that were not discussed in the preceding essays, and, where possible, original publication information is given for each entry. This bibliography is designed to aid those who are interested in learning more about the full extent of Emmett Till’s place in literary memory and imagination. The bibliography is also available at http://faculty.samford.edu/~cpmetress/till-bibliography.html. Having this resource on-line enables others to contribute updated information and entries, thus assuring that the bibliography remains current and representative.


Hard rock song with two lines: “If I were black: / hanging from a tree.”


Short poem that asks a series of retrospective questions about the murder, everything from “Where were you when they killed that boy?” to “How did you feel when that all white jury / found those murders / Not guilty?” Accuses the country of indifference, complacency, and hypocrisy.


In this poem by one of the leading historians of the case, Till is remembered as an “only child, a mother’s son” who “moved a sleeping land.” Now, in death, Till is “one of heaven’s angels” who “move[s] us once again.”

Poem reflecting on how, even though the “night cries are gone now” from the Tallahatchie River, “delta lips are [still] red” with racism: “Take a rotting log from the circling river, / Wear it, piercing your heart, in remembrance.”


The play opens with Mamie Till-Mobley preparing to deliver a speech at the dedication of the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama (5 November 1989). From here, the play moves back and forth across time as it recounts Till’s kidnap- ping, his subsequent lynching, the return of his corpse to Chicago, and the trial of his murderers. Relying heavily on documentary sources and Mamie Till-Mobley’s memory of the events, the play occasionally works with a split stage—for instance, as Moses Wright gives his court testimony about Till’s kidnapping, that kidnapping is reenacted elsewhere on stage. In addition to the play’s most powerful scene, in which Till-Mobley remembers opening the casket at the train station, other scenes of note include a re-creation of Till’s beating and a series of scenes depicting Till-Mobley’s conflicts with Roy Wilkins and the NAACP over the role that organization would play in seeking justice for Emmett’s murder. In the closing scene, Till-Mobley’s plea to remember the civil rights martyrs who “paid the ultimate price . . . for the freedoms we enjoy” is followed by a full-cast rendition of “Woke Up This Morning with My Mind on Freedom.”


Poem that reflects on the death of Mamie Till-Mobley. After recalling the “litany of injuries” marking Till’s corpse, the poem concludes, “When Mary holds the dead Christ in her arms / she has seen everything / but the Resurrection.”


Condemnation of southern racism by a left-wing southern poet. The racist per- sona claims that “Our Negroes here are satisfied” until they head up North and “come back with notions.” Although the persona concludes that such Negroes “somehow get spoiled / and need the fear of God / thrown into them again,” he is against what “ignorant rednecks do.” It was “unnecessary / to beat that little Negro boy to death.”
Sure, “he was uppity,” but a “good horsewhipping should have been enough.” The “better sort of people” in Mississippi “love our Negroes” and “the violence you hear so much about” comes from the “poor white trash.”


Song retelling what happened to Till, whose “name will be a legend we all know.” When Till agrees that Carolyn Bryant is good looking, saying “Whee! You’re right,” that “remark cost him his life.” The two white men at trial “grinned and smoked and chewed / As the fearful witnesses all did testify.” In the end, however, it was to no avail, and we “won’t see little Emmett any more.”


This novel reimagines the events leading up to and immediately following the kidnapping and lynching of Emmett Till. When fourteen-year-old Clement, visiting from Chicago, goes into a grocery store in Money, Mississippi, to buy a root beer, he puts his nickel on the counter. When the white woman working the register demands that he pick it up and put it in her hand, Clement laughs at her and walks away, telling her that “Slavery’s been over;” A few days later, four white men show up at Jeremiah Johnson’s house, demanding to see the boy from Chicago. When they try to force entry, however, Jeremiah and his son Enoch kill three of the men and vow to take up arms against any local whites who try to seek retaliation. After Clement is eventually kidnapped and killed, the remainder of the novel deals with how Jeremiah and Enoch organize the black community into a “liberation movement” willing to use violence to overturn the social order. In the novel’s penultimate scene, an armed black community confronts local whites, and when a white man fires on one of the black men, the armed community fires back, killing a young white boy and the sheriff, and affirming Jeremiah’s threat that “For every Black funeral, it’s gon to be a white one.”


Story about a black Chicago reporter assigned to the Till trial. Having to face Deep South segregation for the first time, the reporter comes to understand both the depths of racial hatred felt by whites and the modest but growing resistance being expressed among blacks. When a local racist marks him as an outside agitator, the
reporter must flee Mississippi before the trial is over. Although incredulous when he learns of the verdict, the reporter is in the end comforted somewhat by the lingering image of local blacks “standing on the lawn day after day in the white sun—in the shadow of the Confederate soldier—unafraid, dead set on showing Mrs. Bradley we’re behind her.”


Poem addressed to Mississippi, pointing out the hypocrisy of those in the state who praise America but deny rights to the likes of Emmett Till. This poem by a Newark, New Jersey resident, expresses lingering outrage over “that horrible night,” warns Till’s killers that one day they “will hang [their] heads in shame,” and questions how we can still call this country “the land of the free.”


Play reviewed in the *Los Angeles Times*, 16 December 1994. This unpublished play is characterized as a “brutal tragic comedy” about the marital breakup of a black sitcom writer and his white wife.


An older narrator recalls being “frightened by Billie’s song” into “Learning a grief / That is a racial.” He then remembers how with Till’s lynching “the strange fruit was given / A face, a body like my own—.” Now, years later, he sees a “boy’s body / Swing-ing from a tree” and wonders if one day “fear” will die, “That one word, if we could grasp it, / Which might stop a child from becoming strange fruit.”


Inspired by Till’s lynching, this four-stanza poem meditates on the fears that southern black women feel after giving birth. The poem’s mother wonders if she should “Teach [her son] of the Stars and Stripes / And a nation’s glowing spark, / Or of the Klan and the blinded vet / To whom the world is dark?”


Beginning with “river jordan run red,” this five-section poem uses the image of a river to recount how Till’s lynching “quickly courses thru / the front page news” and reveals a fragmented national psyche. Till’s whistle, “a smooth long all-american hallelujah” that stirs up a “whole tributary of intolerance,” calls into question the prom-
ise of America. Interspersing lists of rivers (“the colorado the columbia the connecticut the cumberland”) with indictments of American exceptionalism (“oh say Emmett Till can you see Emmett Till”), the poem also explores the redemptive power of Till’s lynching: the opening image of “river jordan run red” is echoed in the concluding lines “on that third day / he rose / and was carried forth to that promised land.”


Employing a series of surreal images drawn from the circus, the poet reflects on Mamie Till as a “Sidewalk Barker in yellow silk” who “shook that tiny skull until / pity bled from our eyes.” Poem ends in melancholy as we see her “charming fewer / and fewer” and glimpse her “once or twice, lying in the tracks / of the tilt-a-whirl, full of quarters / among the weeds that sprung from [her son’s] grave.”


Letter cast in the voice of Emmett Till as he begs God to avenge his death. Asking God to let his “tortured and mutilated face and [his] agonizing scream . . . haunt [his murderers] continuously both day and night,” Till hopes for a similar torment for all those who clapped “their hands with glee as they beheld my murderers escape the just penalty.” Requesting that God put a curse on the Sumner courthouse—“that house of mockery”—so that all who enter it do so with grave “misgivings lest some evil befall them,” Till urges that God move quickly and “stay not thy hand, lest those who have done this deed further pollute this land.”

Cooper, Mary Carson. “A Tribute to Emmett Till.” Cleveland Call and Post, 22 October 1955.

Short poem by a reader from Akron closes with the lines, “It’s time all Negroes did fight back / With their own lynching team!”


Prose poem characterizing Till as “more child than man” who died for “attempting to climb the pedestal where his white woman stood.”


Reflecting on all the black “men and women weighed with anchor and anvil, battered beyond recognition” in the Mississippi, this prose poem seeks to debunk the 1950s mythos surrounding the “Eisenhower years of barbecue and cocktail hours.”


Told from the perspective of a young black man who has always lived up north (whose identity is, at first and only momentarily, conflated with Till’s), this poem.
expresses anger against southern Negroes “sitting / in backs of buses / bags of food / in their laps / bladders tight / in silence sweating.”


Short prose poem that attributes the beginning of a bus boycott in Memphis to “the people who walk, Emmett Till in their memory.”


Poem about the “lessons that are never taught in / school,” in particular how Bryant and Milam (the “good men”) pistol-whipped Emmett Till. Juxtaposes this unspoken history with the stories of other good men (Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner) whose lives also go untold.


Poem condemning President Eisenhower for not wishing “to legislate the heart.” Points out that “it is the heart that ties the fan to the / body / of Emmett Till.”


Brief prose poem that remembers Till as a “snappy fellow in good clothes” who “if he lived long enough would have gone to fat in his late twenties from beer, liquor, soul food and lack of exercise.”


Brief poem that fuses the language of Langston Hughes with recollections of Emmett Till’s photo in Jet magazine.


Told from the perspective of a black domestic, this poem contrasts the lives of white people in Money, Mississippi—who “sing / the praises / of the lord and keep / his world and word”—with the lives of blacks, who live in forced segregation.


Poem in which the persona recalls viewing the corpse of Emmett Till.


Poem proclaiming, among other things, that “in America everywhere / on death row / we are / Emmett Till Medgar / Evers / the Strange Fruit / that Billie sings.”


Poem in which Moses Wright recalls the moment he saw Till’s ring and “knew that [it] was my nephew / pulled from the river like so / many others.”

Till is twice mentioned in this litany of ennobling and disgraceful reasons for why the poet considers the South central to his sense of identity.


Till’s photo in Jet magazine surfaces in this poem about racism in Baltimore.


Prose poem depicting Till as “made tough on the streets of Chicago” and not understanding “dark children of Southern blacks” whose “words are so measured they melt in the mouth.”


Young adult novel (grades 6–8) that tells the story of Hiram Hilburn, a white boy who has grown up with his grandparents in Mississippi but whose civil-rights minded father moves him away to Arizona so that he will not adopt the racist ways of his home state. The summer Hiram turns sixteen, he is allowed to visit his aging grandfather. Here, he renews some of his childhood acquaintances and meets Emmett Till (whom he saves from drowning). When Till later turns up dead, Hiram suspects that his boyhood friend R.C., now a racist bully, has helped Milam and Bryant commit the murder. Hiram is served with a subpoena to testify in court, but Hiram’s racist grandfather will not allow him to attend the trial, especially if Hiram testifies against white men in favor of a “colored boy who didn’t know his place.” Against pressure, he decides to testify, but in the end he is not called to do so. When Hiram sees the courtroom celebration following the not-guilty verdict, he feels sick and wants “to get out . . . of Mississippi, and back home where things and people weren’t so crazy.” After the trial, Hiram learns that his grandfather helped to kidnap Till. When Hiram returns to Arizona, he keeps this secret but now understands why his father had to break with Mississippi and the past.


In late 1955 (November?), Dasher attended an NAACP rally in Baltimore. In a letter to Glouster Currant of the NAACP, received 1 February 1956, Dasher says that, “at the rally I presented a group of young fellows who are known as the ‘Honeyboys,’ to sing a song that I had written as a campaign song in memory of the late Emmitt [sic] Till.” Dasher notes that he is enclosing a copy of the song, but the song was not found in the files.

This free-verse poem alternates between depictions of “Mr. and Mrs. XX”—a white Mississippi couple who attends the Till trial—and “the echo of a boy's voice” that emerges from Till's grave in Chicago. As Mr. and Mrs. XX go on with their lives after the trial—wondering to themselves “what was all the shouting about”—the voice from Till's grave “grows louder.” Whereas the white couple finds it easy to forget, Davidson proclaims that Till's “death becomes part of our living flesh. / His killing a waking cry of our conscience.”


According to a playbill, this “new play based on the Emmett Till Case” was directed by the author and had a scheduled run of three performances. The cast list, containing such characters as “Will Price” and “Judith Mason,” suggests that the play obliquely refers to the Till case. No known transcript exists.


This earliest-known poem about the case recounts Till's funeral, where “Ten thousand heard the service which gave him / To the cool earth.” The memories among those ten thousand vary: some remember Till as “a nice kid with his cap slung back on his head; others remember how he was “sweet / on a girl lived down the block.” The poem ends with an ironic turn, depicting how Till's buddies leave the funeral “Whistling a low moaning blues;” while later that night in Washington “someone remarked / about the need for a strong colonial policy.”


In their memoir With Ossie and Ruby: A Life Together, Davis and Dee recall writing and performing a play about Till's murder (staged for Local 1199 in New York City as part of the union's 1956 Negro History Week celebration). Sidney Poitier also starred. All attempts to recover a script of the play have failed.


Claiming Till as “My bright eyed son,” the poet wonders what Till “would have grown to be.” The answer is “Black and strong . . . / Proud like me . . .”


The contents of this play are unknown, and the only evidence that it existed is a flyer found in the NAACP papers. According to the flyer, “the whole story was never told in the newspapers,” and “Unless this story is told, the valiant efforts of the few Negroes and Poor [sic] whites struggling in the South will be useless.”

Poem recited during an autobiographical one-man show entitled A Few Useless Mementos For Sale (originally produced in 1979 as Fragments from a Broken Window at the American Renaissance Theatre, New York). Near the end of the drama, the main character, a world-weary writer in his late fifties who is holding a rummage sale in his apartment, recalls how, during the 1950s and 1960s, “the world was outdoing me in its madness.” In particular, he recalls the assassinations of JFK, Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, and the “memory of Emmett Till.” He then recites his poem, in which he condemns the “mouths white with agreement” that “turn so quickly to evening tea.”


Although unmentioned in this work by French West African poet Diop, Till is clearly the boy depicted as killed for gazing “on a mouth on breasts on a body of a white woman.” The American South is described as a “country where one places one hand on the Bible / But where the Bible is not opened.”


Song dedicated to Till, “Who should never be forgot,” who serves as “A reminder to the racists who make this world rot.” DJ’s retelling relies heavily on Huie’s Look narrative; Till, who “went down to Mississippi all strong and lean,” is cast as a defiant hero, a role model for current black youth. Claiming that Till boasted “I’m better than you” to his murderers, DJ pleads that today’s black man must “remember those words and hold your head high.”


This initiation story involves two young black boys who, upon crossing a bridge in rural Louisiana, begin to discuss the Till murder. When one threatens to scare the other’s little sister and throw her into the river, the other boy recounts his version of the lynching. This version is filled with widely inaccurate exaggerations (including dozens of robed Klansman and a three-day stoning), suggesting that Till’s story has become a larger-than-life example of the racial hatred all black children must learn about as they cross from adolescence into maturity.


Recounting the details of the lynching and the trial, the song is notable for its activism and its errors. Dylan not only claims that Milam and Bryant confessed to
the crime before the trial started, but he also asserts that “on the jury there were men who helped the brothers commit this awful crime.” The song ends with a call to action, for if “we gave all we could give / We could make this great land of ours a greater place to live.”


A haunting lyric that opens with “a whistling / Through the water” and imagines Till as one who “swims forever, / Deep in treasures, / Necklaced in / A coral toy.”


Crying out for “Our bloodied boys / Sunk link by link” into the “Tallahatchie, the Mississippi, and the Pearl,” this poem affirms the memory of those who have been martyred: “From swollen prayers we rise to fiercely shake a chain of days / That blurry hang across that dying scrawl.”


The thirty-ninth and final episode of the acclaimed network series moves back and forth between the early 1960s and the early 1980s. Lilly Harper, now a grandmother, is trying to educate her indifferent grandson about his heritage (in particular the racial injustices of the past). To do so, she tells the story of Elden Simms, a black youth from Detroit who was lynched in her Georgia hometown for being “uppity” to a white woman. Lilly’s father is the only one who can identify the two white men who killed Elden and, in a scene reminiscent of Moses Wright, he does so at the trial. Fearing for their lives, Lilly and her daughter have to flee the Bedford family household. The episode ends with the grandson now understanding the sacrifices that were made by the civil rights generation.


Short poem by a reader from the Bronx who encourages subscribers to write to their congressman. “Remember the pen is mighty as the sun,” she exhorts, “So write and fight and make it plain / That the Emmett Tills have not died in vain.”


Surveying a desolate Mississippi landscape (where one “almost expect[s] / To see a black man’s hand” rise out of the “idle” swamp), this poem’s narrator wonders “why Emmett’s mother / Would ever even bring / Him for a visit.”

Poem by a regular contributor to the Daily World. Focusing on the whistle—prompted by the “boundless joy” Till must have felt to be so “Far from the State Street slum” of Chicago—the poem concludes with Till’s soul lingering “at the beautiful gate [of Heaven] / Where one can wolf-whistle to God.”


Poem from the perspective of Carolyn Bryant as she recalls many years later what happened on that fateful day. With sleep haunted by images of Till, she recalls how she was offended by his “nasty sound” but “did not say / take him to the river.” Staring at her from “the magazine / years old,” “the crack in [Till’s] face / is a question mark,” and in her dreams she both erotizes the young boy (smiling “into his slender throat”) and tries to comfort him with soothing hushes.


Poem expressing horror over the killing but also an abiding faith that God “knows who and where his murderers are / And in His own way and His own time, / They will be brought before the Judgment bar.”


Poem written after the murder of 2Pac Shakur. According to Giovanni, “this generation mourns 2Pac as my generation mourned Till as we / all mourn Malcolm.” Shakur’s memory “will not go away,” just as “Emmett Till did not go away.”


An interview poem recounting the story of Daisy Bates, who recalls how Till’s murder “rang a resounding bell” and “put some iron in our backbone.”


Prose poem opens with Giovanni’s memory of Till’s murder, which she calls the “defining event of my generation.” Unable to “make sense” of what happened, Giovanni asks questions that mark the beginning of her “civil rights journey.”


Prose poem about how Shakur’s “spirit will flower and who like Emmett Till and Malcolm X will be remembered by his people for the great man who could have been.”


Reflecting on how “hands must be very important” to women’s lives (and how
“wives and mothers are not so radically different”), Giovanni remembers: “I saw a photograph once of the mother of Emmett Till . . . a slight, brown woman with pill-box hat . . . white gloves . . . eyes dark beyond pain . . . incomprehensively looking at a world that never intended her son to be a man.”


In this prose poem tribute to Gwendolyn Brooks, Giovanni calls “Bronzeville Mother” the “most brilliant work on the murder of Emmett Till.”


In this tribute to Hansberry, Giovanni ruminates on the fate of black Americans since 1619, issuing a list of things she wishes would have been different. Among them, she writes: “I wish we had been enslaved . . . at the same rate we were being set . . . free . . . It would be . . . an entirely different story . . . I wish the battleships . . . had sailed down the Mississippi River . . . when Emmett Till was lynched . . . at the same speed they sped to Cuba . . . during the missile crisis.”


Prose poem in tribute to Rosa Parks and to the Pullman Porters “who organized when people said they couldn’t.” Among other things, it imagines the porters who “welcomed a fourteen-year-old boy onto their train in 1955” and who later “got Emmett’s body on the northbound train” back to Chicago.


In this poem, Giovanni includes Mamie Till Bradley among those “greatest heroes [who] probably have no idea . . . how heroic they are.”

“Goodbye to Dixie, Chicago Here We Come.” Unpublished poem. Referred to in Jackson Clarion-Ledger, 8 November 1955.

Sent to columnist Tom Ethridge by a resident of Bright Bank Plantation, Midnight, Mississippi, this poem was supposedly written by an “exasperated Chicagoan” (Ethridge’s words). According to Ethridge, some sample lines read: “Tell all the folks to board the bus . . . the Mayor’s done give this town to us. He’d sell his very soul for votes . . . man, it’s fun to sow wild oats! Romp all over a white man’s place . . . guarded by cops while you spit in his face!”


In the wake of King’s assassination, the narrator tries to remember King’s words
but can only recall “three little / girls malcolm X medgar evers / emmett till and the
soft / touch I had die last night.” Proclaiming “non-violence is dead,” the poem con-
cludes with “Lord strike their ass / for they know what / they do.”

Guillén, Nicolás. “Elegías a Emmett Till.” Propósitos [Buenos Aires], 21 August
1956. 3. Reprinted as “Elegy for Emmett Till,” in Man-Making Words: Selected
Poems of Nicolás Guillén, translated, annotated, and with an introduction by
Robert Márquez and David Arthur Murray, 87–91. Amherst: University of
Massachusetts Press, 1972.


Emmett Till is mentioned in the opening lines of this short play adapted from
Holland’s memoir of the same name. A performance of the play is noted in the New
Yorker (5 September 1988), and Cleanora Hudson-Weems mentions it in Emmett Till:
The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement (Troy, MI: Bedford, 1994).

Huff, William H. “The Emmett Till Case.” Baltimore Afro-American, 21 January
1956.

Short poem written by Mamie Till Bradley’s legal counsel in an attempt to ex-
plain why he withdrew his support from her NAACP-sponsored speaking tour.

———. “Let’s Have that Anti-Lynching Bill.” Pittsburgh Courier, 15 October
1955.

Short didactic poem urging readers to think of “a youngster’s body floating / Where his own race is kept from voting” and “combat the filibuster against the
antilynching bill before Congress.

Hughes, Langston. “I Feel Mississippi’s Fist in My Own Face, Simple Says.” Chi-
cago Defender, 15 October 1955.

Story about how Simple feels in the wake of the Till lynching. Berating his fellow
blacks for staying down South in the first place, Simple begins to express his anger
about how blacks should respond to the lynching. When he suggests that blacks
ought to “get themselves an arsenal,” the narrator accuses him of “advocating race
war.” Responding that “there’s no race peace there,” Simple grows angrier and angrier
as he begins to relive the lynching. Finally, he exclaims, “I do not want to talk about
it anymore, so do not ask me what I would do if I was there, nor how I would protect
myself because I might be forced to show you, so do not ask me.”

———. “Mississippi—1955.” Daily Worker, 26 September 1955. Earliest version,
“Emmett Till, Mississippi, and Congressional Investigations,” is in an unpub-
lished draft dated 16 September 1955 in Hughes, 317, James Weldon John-
son Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
Another draft dated 23 September 1955 is in file C, 13, box 18, Papers of the
NAACP, Library of Congress.

Blues song with lyrics by Hughes and music by Joe Huntley. Attached to a 4 October 1955 letter to Henry Lee Moon (file C, 13, box 18, Papers of the NAACP, Library of Congress), the song was submitted to the NAACP for use in fundraising campaigns. It incorporates some of the language of “Mississippi—1955” and works off variations of the line “I don’t want to go to Money, Mississippi.” Characterizes Till as a “little old boy” who was “beaten because he was so bold” and wonders why Mississippi would do this to the child of a man who “died for democracy.”


Huie’s screenplay relies heavily upon his 1956 Look magazine account. While visiting his black kinfolks in Mississippi, Chicago-born Bobo Wilson brags about his white girlfriend, whose picture he carries in his wallet. Highly sexualized in Huie’s screenplay, Bobo (who is seventeen in this script) is dared to enter a local store and ask a white woman, Clara Matlock, for a date. Because “the picture has trapped him,” he “must enter the store.” Innocently holding her hand “for a beat,” Bobo tries to save face, but Clara is alarmed and grabs a pistol. Soon, according to Clara’s husband Ray, “every nigger in the Delta is talking about it,” and so he and his brother Big Matt Matlock must do something. The screenplay then cuts to the trial, much of which is seen through the eyes of Thomas Darnell, a famous magazine writer from Alabama who also serves as the movie’s narrator. (In his trial scenes, it should be noted, Huie often diverts from the historical record.) The screenplay ends with a post-trial flashback. Darnell has secured a confession from Big Matt Matlock, who now narrates how Till was kidnapped and murdered. Echoing Huie’s Look account, Big Matt tells how the two men beat the boy mercilessly while he defiantly asserts that “I’m as good as you are. . . . An’ you know som’pin. I got a white girl.” After we witness Till being shot in the head, the screenplay ends with a close-up of the “questioning face” of Darnell, who muses, “the question which caused Big Matt to murder Bobo . . . still tortures many white men. What should a white man do when a Negro youth reaches for the hand of a white girl?”


Some scenes are rearranged and/or deleted, but the most significant changes involve the way the murder is recast and how the screenplay ends. Instead of being saved until the final scenes, Till’s murder is placed early, in its appropriate chronological sequence. This version ends with the not-guilty verdict. Immediately after-
ward, in full view of others in the courthouse lobby, Darnell asks the two men if they murdered Till, and they proudly confess that they did. Instead of ending with Darnell’s musing on “what should a white man do when a Negro youth reaches for the hand of white girl,” the screenplay now ends with the image of Big Matt having to plow his own field and ostracized by the white community for publicly confessing to the crime.


Song warning a “white bitch” who wants a “Mandingo” to “ease back.” Unattracted to her “Stringy hair—no derrier—frontin’ and fakin’ with your silicone pair,” he warns black men against this “cave bitch” who is “looking for dark meat” because “sooner or later, the bitch’ll yell rape.” And “Soon as daddy found out you a jigaboo / He’ll kill you like he did Emmett [sic] Till.”


A Los Angeles native, Jackson submitted this poem to Roy Wilkins and the NAACP “to use as they see fit (or throw away).” For most of the eleven stanzas, Jackson recounts the kidnapping and murder from the perspective of Milam and Bryant, who plead that “We let the Till boy go free.” In the end, however, Jackson warns, “woe to the men and the women of Money,” and “Woe to their children for they’ll reap the fruit / That grew when men murdered a boy.”


Black narrator of this brief poem asks a white waitress for sugar and is met “with / bloodthirsty / smile.” No direct mention of Till but for the title.


Surrealist poem refers directly to Till only in the title. By indirection, the poem uses Till as a metaphor for the redemptive powers of suffering as it tells the story of an unnamed Mississippi woman who is dreaming of transcendence in her world of mundane poverty.


This poem points out the hypocrisy of American freedom in the wake of Till’s lynching, for despite the claims of our democracy, “Death is our law! Murder our order of justice.” It concludes with a call for “Justice against the beast men! / Black men, human men wrestle down the terror beast deep / down in Mississippi.”

Comparing Till to a bird whose “feathers were all brown,” the singer bemoans that in Mississippi such a bird “Better not chirp when Mrs. Bryant's around.” “Slow down when you pass a courthouse, and laugh about that word— / Laugh about ‘Justice,’ friend, and cry for the young brown bird.”

Loeb, Chas. H. “Refugees.” Cleveland Call and Post, 8 October 1955.

This poem, submitted as an “editorial in rhyme” by a Call and Post columnist, reflects ironically on the Cold War policy of having “a fund for displaced Poles / . . . [and] every poor assorted coot / Who wants to try the way of life / We call democracy,” while blacks are denied similar protections. “Who cries out when little kids / are lynched—and lynchers freed?” Loeb asks. “Should foreigners get all the breaks / While our own citizens catch hell?”


Opens by wondering how southerners, “made in [God's] image,” could “become / lower [than] the venomed rattler that crawls.” Ends by calling for a “Hercules” to wash America’s “garments clean of Southern slime.”


Jazz instrumental. No lyrics.


Accompanied by three muses (and by brief appearances from such figures as Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and Arthur Ashe), an elder Mamie Till-Mobley narrates her son’s story. Beginning with Christmas 1954 and concluding with the aftermath of the trial, the play draws its title from Amiri Baraka’s 1966 poem “Jitterbugs,” which condemns white racism for making “this star unsafe, and this age, primitive.” Against the bleakness of Baraka’s poem, however, Maly’s play offers hope. In the closing lines, Bryant and Milani’s Look magazine confession is followed by the appearance of Rosa Parks, who claims, “When I was on that bus, I thought of Emmett the entire time.” According to one of the muses, the story of Mamie and her son “is about the power one woman and one child can have over this star unsafe.” This hopeful vision is confirmed when, at the very end, Emmett and his mother come together on stage for the first time and a “young Mamie” recites a few lines from Countee Cullen’s “These are no wind-blown rumors,” a sonnet affirming the power of love to endure even in the face of death.

In this brief “fiction,” published in an editor’s column, Bruno Hauptman returns from hell to meet with Bryant and Milam after their acquittal on kidnapping charges. Hauptman wants to know how two “ignorant country bumpkins” escaped punishment when he had “to pay with [his] life.” Hauptman’s problem, the locals tell him, is that his crime didn’t exploit race and keep “niggers from getting too biggity.” Hauptman responds, “Now I understand . . . The boys in Hades will be glad to hear this and they’ll tell you so themselves when you come down. We’ll be waiting for you.” Upon saying this, he vanishes.


In an October 15 column in the Chicago Defender (“White Reader Admires Negro’s Fight Against Bigotry, Bias and Hatred”), Albert Barnett discusses a letter he received from McAllister and notes, “The poem sent in by Mr. McAllister will be printed in this column next week.” It was not.


Brief poem noting the paradox between a “proud nation” that “boast[s] / Of democracy, justice and brotherhood” and “the gasping death groans / Of a black boy hanging from a tree.”


According to the play’s author and producer, “The Guardian begs the question of where was Emmett Till’s guardian angel during his time of need” and “examines why divine powers allowed such a tragic event to occur.” An earlier version of the play was known as “Heaven’s Child: The Legacy of Emmett Till.” All attempts to secure a script of either version have failed.


Poem condemning “Dirty Money town,” “Bloody Money town,” “Rotten Money town,” “Evil Money town” for its sanctioning of Till’s murder. Ends with a call to “Bring home the body of Emmett Till / From that terrible Money town. / Bring home the body of Justice / With her blood-stained shining crown.”


Beginning “Must I write / of Emmett Till / problems plaguing / Black Folks / Still,” the poet asks to be freed of history. Confessing that “Emmett Till sleeps / in
my bed / haunts me with his swollen / head," she begs to write of "flowers please / ducklings / swans and / honeybees." Someone else must express the "violent rage / that I can't capture / on my page."


Poem that imagines "a river of righteous men" taking vengeance for Till's murder by seeking to "topple" the "altar" of white supremacy.


Radical poet Millet retells the bloody and racist history of the Mississippi River so that "The blood cries out / speaking truth to your lies / Mississippi."

This retelling is interspersed with images of the Till case, from the cries of young Emmett ("Why have you done this to me?") to the strength of his mother ("the blood of your child / rose up in you for their damnation"). Poem ends by asking Mississippi what it will do, where will it hide, when "the avenger comes among you?"


If print or recorded versions of the play exist, they are not being made available to the public, and thus these details about the drama are drawn from a handful of newspaper accounts and reviews. According to Margaret Croydon, "Toni Morrison Tries Her Hand at Playwriting," (New York Times, 29 December, 1985), "the characters and the action shift back and forth in time and place, and there is a play within a play. The nonlinear story involves an anonymous black boy who was murdered. In a dream state he suffers the pain of remembering his death 30 years before. Seeking revenge and a place in history, he summons up the perpetrators of his murder, as well as his family and friends, all to be characters in the dream. But his ghosts refuse to be controlled by his imagination; all see the past in their own way, as the boy doggedly searches for a meaning to his death—and thereby his life. At one point he is challenged by a member of the audience, a black woman who rejects his dream and provokes a confrontation on sexual issues." According to Harlow Robinson, "Dreams of a Prophetic Past: Novelist Tony Morrison Tries Her Hand at Playwriting," (American Theatre, January 1986, 17–19), all of Emmett's ghosts—unlike Emmett—have aged thirty years and are "marked by their experiences of the last three decades." The black woman who challenges him is a "sassy" woman in her early twenties named Tamara, and her confrontation "exposes Emmett as both less and more than he pretends to be." Requests to secure a script from the playwright have been denied, and the play's producers—the Albany Capital Repertory Theatre—confirm that, after the 1986 production, Morrison collected all records of the play and refuses to release them.


Early in this novel, a group of black men in a barbershop overhear radio reports
about a “boy [who] had whistled at some white woman, refused to deny he had slept with others, and was a Northerner visiting the South. His name was TILL.” Some men are silent; others condemn TILL for his brashness; still others defend him for being a man. All agree, however, that TILL’s murderers will never be convicted, and the scene ends with the men beginning to “trade tales of atrocities, first stories they had heard, then those they’d witnessed, and finally the things that had happened to themselves.” Eventually, this “litany of personal humiliations, outrage, and anger turned sicklelike back to themselves as humor.”


A heroic crown of sonnets (fifteen interlinked sonnets, with the last sonnet comprised of the first lines of the preceding fourteen) accompanied by illustrations. Marketed as “juvenile poetry” but rich in meaning, these poems explore how, “like a haunted tree / set off from other trees in the wildwood / by one bare bough,” TILL’s presence informs America’s racial memory. For Nelson, “Emmett TILL’s name still catches in my throat,” and she confesses her desire to put him in a “parallel universe” where he would “live through a happy childhood.” But knowing that she cannot free him from the “obscene theft” of his life, she explores ways to gather honest flowers for a wreath that will not let us forget that theft, for such “Forgetting would call for consciencelessness.” Instead, “we must bear witness to atrocity” and remember TILL as he was “dragged along, blood spattering” upon “white petals as he, abandoning all hope, gasped his agonizing last breath.” If we forget this, we risk “unforgettable shame.”


Unpublished first novel by the author of The Milagro Beanfield War, written while he was a sophomore at Hamilton College. In a 2001 memoir, Nichols confessed, “The plot of Don’t Be Forlorn is seriously warped by the weight of catastrophically maudlin writing. Mawkish stereotypes and an absolute lack of subtlety abound on both sides of the race question; my writing is outlandishly melodramatic . . . But my story does indicate a desire for social justice.” Despite Nichols’s misgivings, the novel manages to convey an important message about the need for compassionate identification with those who suffer injustice, especially in the conversion of Carter Fitzgerald, the white lawyer who seeks to convict the men who have murdered young Laury Emmons, a well-educated northern black boy who has been too bold in his talk with a local white girl.


This poem of fragments connects TILL’s lynching to the Birmingham church bombing, reflecting on racism as the “complexion of the end of the century.”


This song begins with the image of a man who sees Emmett Till, his “friend,” “a hanging” because “color was his crime.” The “blood upon his [Till’s] jacket left a brand upon his mind.” In the next stanza we learn that this branded man is Medgar Evers, and “he walked his road alone / Like Emmett Till and thousands more whose names we’ll never know.”


In this poem by an award-winning Greek writer known for his outrage against social injustice, the narrator addresses Till directly and bemoans the shallowness of an age marked by “the assured careers of the young who drive / hot rods crammed with corruption.” While “Toughs with silk shirts / and high-school diplomas encircle us / beat up their mothers / smoke hashish and gulp gin,” the narrator and Till “write verses, / our thirst still unquenched by the cataracts of silence.”


Poem describing a one-sided classroom lecture about American history. Praising “Plymouth Rock / The Pilgrims, the Mayflower,” the teacher neglects to mention “Those who came on the slavers’ ships,” and when the teacher professes that “all men are created equal” the poet asks “But what of the slaves? What was the sequel?” Wondering “How many boys in Chicago” have learned of Garrison, Turner, Vesey, Tubman, and John Brown, the poet urges us to remember “this boy with a shattered head / Who died in a muddy river bed.”


Poem “saluting” Milam and Bryant and “all self-anointed / men / who dole out freedoms to other / men.” Poet decries “all things / Worthy of my confusion.”


A male narrator enters a beauty salon and overhears two women—one black, one white—joke and “small talk” about their men. When the white one jokes about her man looking “like he’s black” because he dresses in “bright colors,” the narrator hears the “history squeezed into the silence” that follows. The image of Till “carrying / on his back the seventy-five-pound cotton-gin fan, lashed / with barbed wire / to his neck, across the ruts of the night field / to the Tallahatchie River” rises up between the women, and Till’s story becomes like a river whose “floodwaters overflow the casual / conversation” of us all.

Narrator of this brief poem recalls how his father gave him a piece of rope his own father found near “the pass from Money where Emmett / Till was killed.” The rope then begins to tell “moaning narratives” of the “black boys and / black men” who have met death at the hands of lynchers.


Although “the lad had done no wrong,” “prejudice was strong,” and “Ghoulish hate went wild / To lynch a helpless child!” On the eve of the trial, the poet waits “to see what fate / A crime like this shall rate.”


Brief, ironic poem by the famed lyricist begins with the question, “Is your town a good place to / Raise a boy?” (referring to the slogan of Sumner, Mississippi). No mention of Till, but by allusion the poem mocks “true democracy” in Mississippi.


In this satirical send-up of 1980s feminism, Reed has his protagonist, the black playwright Ian Ball, write a play called Reckless Eyeballing, which is about how a southern white woman demands that the corpse of a black boy be dug up from its grave and put on trial again. The boy, Ham Hill, is clearly a stand-in for Emmett Till, and although Ball has written the play to appease his feminist critics, the play gets recast and much goes awry. In Reed’s complexly plotted novel, the Ham Hill story serves to implicate white and black feminists (in particular Susan Brownmiller and Alice Walker) for perpetuating self-interested caricatures of violent and sexualized black men.


Freelance journalist Jamal Peterson travels to Mississippi to cover the Till trial. Deeply moved by the heroism of local blacks and angered by the intractable racism of southern whites, he returns to Detroit determined that “Emmett’s death be a lighting rod for justice and a ramrod against oppression and injustice everywhere.” Soon after the trial, strange events begin to occur in the Delta as Emmett’s ghost begins to mete out its own justice (for instance, one by one, the jurors suffer misfortunes). As Jamal grows more involved with the civil rights movement (covering the Montgomery bus boycott and other events), he almost loses his own life. Through all his tribulations, however, Jamal is strengthened by his memory of Till’s sacrifice. When he returns to Mississippi in 1975 for a statue dedication in honor of the slain boy, he learns that blacks throughout the Delta have drawn a similar strength from Till’s memory.

A poem of mourning in which the narrator wonders if “this boy died / only a symbol of gigantic wrongs unredressed.” Urging remembrance and a rejection of violence, the poem closes with pity for “those diseased in mind / those sick in private darkness.”


Reviews note that this play tells the story of the civil rights movement through the eyes of children, with particular emphasis on Emmett Till and the Birmingham church bombing. Script unavailable.


According to the notes, this violoncello solo “is an abstraction of those events in the life of Emmett Till.” The work is divided into eight episodes, ranging from “Emmett in the womb” and “Emmett’s birth” to “Emmett’s ascension” and “The cry of our mothers.” Wanting the musician to “communicate what you feel about this moment in history,” Roper warns that “If you feel nothing, it might be more wise to not play the piece.”


Story dealing with a white woman’s memory of her racist uncle, a northerner “unmatched in his hate.” As she grows older and thinks of what happened to Till, who “whistled at a white woman standing on the hot sidewalk and before the sun went down . . . [and] was buried in concrete,” she understands that her uncle “could have done it if he had been in Mississippi with the mob,” could have been one of “those men who went home and ate their suppers in the heat with wet concrete on their pants, bragging, in my uncle’s voice.”


Set in Demorest, Georgia, this unproduced teleplay explores the aftermath of the murder of a nineteen-year-old black man, Henry Clemson, by a twenty-year-old white man, John Kattell. At first, the local police hope to cover things up, but when the Atlanta papers pick up the story, local law enforcement charges Kattell with murder. Led by the town lawyer, Demarest rallies around Kattell, an unlikely bully. Soon, secrets about the town’s dark past begin to emerge, in particular the lynching thirty years earlier of a black man who allegedly raped a white woman. After Kattell is acquitted, he confesses to his crime, and, after being mocked by his lawyer’s father, he stabs him with the same knife he used to kill Clemson. When Kattell tries to escape through the stunned crowd, the sheriff warns him to stop but is forced to
shoot him down. This teleplay was rejected by the sponsors of the U.S. Steel Hour, and Serling was forced to revise it heavily so that all references to race and the South were omitted.


In this revised version (the result of at least four rewritings, one of which included the unwelcome addition of a wolf-whistle to the alleged crime), Serling’s story is no longer set in the South; instead, the murder happens in a small New England village. As the story opens, the town is awaiting the jury verdict in the case of John Kattell, an angry white man in his early twenties who has murdered Moses Chinik, a seventy-seven-year-old arthritic Jewish grocer, after a scuffle in Chinik’s store. Kattell is clearly guilty, but the national press coverage of the trial is making the town defensive in the face of outside agitation. When the jury acquits Kattell, his lawyer has an angry confrontation in the town square with his own father, who accuses his son of acquiescing to prejudice and defending a guilty bigot. Kattell overhears this accusation and attacks the father, but then a northern Jewish newspaper man accuses Kattell of preying on the defenseless and challenges him to a fight. Kattell senses that the town is turning on him and, knife in hand, falls to his knees and begs for forgiveness. Serling’s final direction captures the teleplay’s explicit moral: “The camera starts a slow dolly away from Kattell until he remains a tiny dot in the middle of a loneliness. What we are looking at is John Kattell’s desert, the one he’s going to live in for the rest of his life.”


Final version of Serling’s heavily revised “Untitled Original Draft” of 19 June 1957. Set in the 1870s Southwest, this story is about a Mexican American teenager named Pancho Rivera who is awaiting trial on charges that he robbed the store of a white man, Jerry Paul. Paul leads a mob that strings up the young boy from the town flagpole. This lynching recalls a similar one in which the town sheriff participated. This past lynching, however, has none of the black-white racial overtones of Serling’s original draft, and no one in town can quite remember why the man was lynched (rather than saying he was lynched for whistling at a white woman). The story ends with the sheriff killing Jerry Paul.


The story of the trial and acquittal of Jerry Paul, a twenty-three-year-old white
merchant accused of killing a Mexican American teenager who was allegedly trying to rob Paul’s store. The story is set in a contemporary Southwest town, where most people know that the teenager and Paul’s wife were attracted to each other. A reporter covering the trial learns that another lynching took place in town many years ago, this one involving a “colored man” who “whistled at a girl or something like that.” In a fate similar to John Kattell’s in Noon on Doomsday, Jerry Paul watches as the town turns on him in the wake of his acquittal. In a final public confrontation, Paul strikes a man dead in a bar fight and, fleeing, is shot in the back by the sheriff. Commissioned by Playhouse 90 in 1957, the teleplay was rejected by sponsors. Later, with revisions, it was produced as A Town Has Turned to Dust.


This poem asks how Mississippi will “wash the boy’s blood” from its hands after acquitting Till’s murderers.


Older white poet recalling how “I was not yet eight / when the news hit and can remember my parents at dinner / . . . / shaking their heads in passing and saying it was a shame / but the boy should have been smarter.” Needing “a revelation to lift me from the misery of remembering,” the poet claims he has long been haunted by Moses Wright’s court testimony liker a poem / mimic some reverse To Kill a Mockingbird.” The poem ends, however, with the poet wondering if all this remembering is “an exercise in sham shame” or something true and genuine.


Black narrator of this poem traces her anger to Till’s face “bloated, beaten, / burning in my mind / every time I climb the stairs / to my house.” Addressing a white friend, she tells how she hears “white laughter gurgling / from courtrooms / when they say you’re free / to kill niggers whenever you like,” noting that the difference between black and white is that “You are free.”


A group of performance pieces by Spicer and other local multimedia artists. For
best details, see www.dogonvillage.com/african_american_news/Articles/00000252.html (accessed 1 August 2006).


Long, handwritten poem sent to the NAACP for use in fundraising purposes.


Poem castigating Mississippi for a killing that will reflect poorly upon American efforts to promote democracy: “Bow your head low, Mississippi, / For the damage you have done / To the efforts of our country / In its fight for everyone.”


Poem hoping that good will come from Till’s murder, for “Somewhere there shines / The morning that will see such horrors gone, / When men with hearts of beasts will be unknown.”


Recollection of a slow dance that took place during the “summer they dragged / Emmet [sic] Till’s almost body out of the Tallahatchie.” The two dancers are left “holding each other up, / finding our rhythm in those blues.”


Poet wonders if his readers are able to imagine “a black son, walking / down a mississippi highway headed / home” and to “feel the four hundred years.” “Can you awake to see / yourself / dead like he died?” the poet asks. “Can you, can you, / can you save one black son / who god didn’t save?”

Untitled play. Performed at the Jewish Cultural Club, 924 E. 123rd Street, Cleveland Ohio, 8 October 1955.

In a letter to the editor of the Cleveland Call and Post (15 October 1955), Jerry Gordon, chairman of the Ohio Labor Youth League, mentions the performance of this play. No known transcript exists.


Poem published on the louderARTS Project webpage by a middle-school creative writing teacher who tells his young students about the lynching. When Vargas urges them to see Emmett Till “as every facet of prejudice you face,” the students respond
by seeing all the Emmett Tills in their own lives: their friends who have been shot, beaten, and mistreated. When one student responds, “Emmett Till could have been / Martin Luther King,” the poet is “met by a face stretched with sadness / eyes lost.”


Story about the development and disintegration of a close friendship between the narrator—a nameless black woman from Georgia—and Luna, a rich white girl from the North. The two meet in the summer of 1965 during a voter registration drive in Georgia, and a year later they share an apartment in New York City. It is here that Luna confides to the narrator that she was raped by a black civil rights worker the previous summer, and while the narrator believes her, she reflects on the historical privileges that give Luna, a white woman, the power to destroy, on her word alone, the life of a black man. These reflections lead her to think of, among other things, the lynching of Till, and force the narrator to question confinements of race and gender.


Poem wondering about the identity of the young Chicago white girl whose picture Till allegedly had in his wallet. “More than likely she was Irish / or Italian, a sweet child who knew him / only as a shy clown,” and Till that day in Mississippi was “just showing / off, showing the rustics / how it was done.” But Till “paid the price of / not innocence but affection,” affection for a girl “who must by now be an older / woman in Chicago, a woman / who will never know.”


Poem comparing Till’s lynching to the sentencing of Robert Earl May Jr., a fourteen-year-old black boy convicted of a crime. With the haunting refrain “Don’t be fourteen / black and male in Mississippi,” this poem characterizes Till as a “guilt-offering to blue-eyed susans.”


This loss-of-innocence poem recalls how the days of “grandiose memories,” when children could “run wild / And free in the woods,” ended in the summer of 1955, “When fear paralyzed” and left children “with no space to run.”

Poem from Mamie Till Bradley’s perspective as she laments her son’s death and hears God commanding her not to weep but to “find a way.”


Poem that wonders whether Too Tight Collins truly did witness Till’s murder. If so, the poet pleads, Too Tight “should speak / And not stand by / Shaking in the shadow / Of Truth.”


Written two weeks after West was in a near-fatal car accident in October 2002 and had his jaw broken in three places and his mouth wired shut. West sings about a public appearance and asks, “just imagine how my girl feel / On the plane scared as hell that her guy look like Emmett Till.”


Several times in this novel, fifty-year-old Robert Jones remembers “the photograph of a black boy’s face that turned me to stone.” In particular, he recalls seeing the Jet magazine photo in 1955 and trying to “read the story squinting, eyes narrowed to avoid Till’s cramped face.”


This innovative, ninety-five-minute, one-man, multimedia stage show weaves together some of the most important source material about the case with imaginative re-creations of key events. Wiley plays a dozen-plus characters, from William Bradford Huie, Moses Wright, and Mamie Till to Wheeler Parker, Carolyn Bryant, and Willie Reed, as he tells the story from different perspectives and time periods. All the while, the story is played out against a background of shifting media images. The result is a moving and sophisticated drama that raises important questions about historical memory and the power and obligations of retelling.


Although Wright’s final novel doesn’t directly mention Till, many critics have noted the presence of Till’s lynching in the fate of Chris Sims, best friend to the novel’s protagonist Fish Belly. After Chris is discovered in a hotel room with a white woman, a white mob lynchers him. At his father’s mortuary, Fishbelly takes a long hard look at Chris's brutalized corpse, in particular his “bloated head and torso.” Throughout the novel, Fishbelly is haunted by Chris’s face—with its “mouth, lined with stumps of broken teeth... an irregular, black cavity bordered by shredded tissue that had once been lips.”
A Statement on the FBI Report

On February 27, 2007, a grand jury in LeFlore County, Mississippi, declined to issue an indictment against Carolyn Bryant-Donham for her alleged role in the lynching of Emmett Till. The indictment for manslaughter was brought by District Attorney Joyce Chiles, who based her charges on a three-year FBI investigation that yielded more than 8,000 pages of evidence. A month after this grand jury decision, the FBI released its report to the public, and it is currently available at http://foia.fbi.gov/till/till.pdf.

The FBI’s 464-page report is not a literary representation of the case, but it does contain significant material for those interested in how the Emmett Till narrative continues to circulate in the contemporary memory and imagination. Although the text is highly redacted and is thus difficult at times to decipher (for privacy protection, the names of all living persons are covered over), the report includes two sections—“Timeline” and “Sequence of Events”—that offer new ways of conceiving what happened between the evening that Till was kidnapped and the morning when his body was discovered. Moreover, the report also contains a section on “Admissions.” This section begins with a summary of one of the ur-narratives of the Till case—Huie’s “Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi”—and then presents new evidence intended to challenge that narrative. Of particular interest are revelations that J. W. Milam told several people about his role in the murder and that Roy Bryant was audiotaped making a confession to a confidential source in 1985. Moreover, Leslie Milam twice acknowledged his role in the crime, once as a deathbed confession. Finally, the report also includes a retyped trial transcript. For years, this transcript was feared lost, and its inclusion in the FBI report recovers for scholars an important primary document.
Introduction

In August 1955, fourteen-year-old Emmett Till left his home in Chicago to visit his extended southern family in Money, Mississippi. The beginning of his stay went well, but on 24 August, barely a week into his visit, Till and group of friends visited Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market. The exact details of what happened remain cloudy, but at some point Till entered the store and interacted with Carolyn Bryant, a white woman and the wife of the store’s owner. It quickly became apparent that something had gone dreadfully wrong, and Till’s friends rushed him from the store as Bryant went to her car to get a gun. For three days, nothing more happened, but then Carolyn’s husband, Roy Bryant, and Roy’s stepbrother, J. W. Milam, struck out in the dead of night for the home of Till’s great-uncle, Moses Wright. The two white men forced Till from the house, and he was never seen alive again. Three days later, Till’s bloated and disfigured corpse surfaced downstream in the Tallahatchie River, and Bryant and Milam were arrested for murder. When Till’s body was returned to Chicago in a sealed casket, his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, demanded that it be opened, insisting as well on an open casket funeral. That viewing, lasting several days and drawing tens of thousands of mourners, shocked the nation, and when Jet magazine and the Chicago Defender published photographs of Till’s maimed face, the upcoming trial of young Till’s murderers became an international media event, with more than seventy newspapers and magazines sending reporters to Mississippi. Against all reasonable evidence, but not unexpectedly, the all-white, all-male jury acquitted Bryant and Milam, after deliberating for barely an hour. African American newspapers and magazines, joined by a chorus of support from the mainstream press and liberal political organizations, called for national protests and boycotts throughout the South, while an apologist southern press grew increasingly defensive. Tensions grew worse when, a few months later, Bryant and Milam, safe from further prosecution, sold their confession to a Look magazine reporter. For many historians of the civil rights movement, the lynching of Emmett Till and the brazen acquittal of his murderers, predating the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott by just a few months, helped to ignite the black freedom struggle on the 1950s and 1960s.

General Overviews

Although Till’s lynching was a major news event in its day, scholars were slow to assess its impact. Few of the central works on African American history in the 1960s and 1970s mention the case, and it is all but ignored in early assessments of the civil rights movement. In fact, the only substantial history of the lynching produced during this period was Whitaker 1963, a master’s thesis that remains a valuable and oft-cited resource. It was not until the mid-1980s that the lynching reemerged as a seminal moment in civil rights history. Although Simpson 1981 appeared early in the decade and called for a reassessment of a “forgotten” civil rights case, the turn begins not with a scholarly book or popular history, but with a brief fifteen-minute segment in the opening episode of the influential documentary Eyes on the Prize (Hampton 1987). Aired in January 1987, the episode situates the African American response to Till’s lynching as the heroic “first step” needed in response to the Brown v. Board of Education case, highlighting the courage of Till’s mother and his great-uncle Moses Wright. Perhaps more important, however, was the documentary’s decision to show the famous casket photos published in Jet and the Chicago Defender, giving white
America is first access to those influential images. Within a year, Whitfield 1988, the first full-length study of the events, was published, providing the most thorough retelling of Till’s murder and trial in twenty-five years. Whitfield also established an important scholarly precedent, insisting that any understanding of the lynching must address its literary legacy in poetry, song, fiction, and drama. Hudson-Weems 1994 builds on the author’s 1988 dissertation, and unlike Whitfield, much of her work is based on extensive interviews, making it a different kind of resource. Hudson-Weems is most notable for being the first to interpret Till’s lynching as the spark to the modern civil rights movement, an influential idea. Metress 2002 appeared a time of renewed interest in Till, providing an anthology of primary documents that not only recovered the extensive and combative press coverage, but also reintroduced some of the unresolved controversies about the lynching—controversies that had largely been forgotten but would soon reemerge. Renewed scholarly interest was matched by renewed public interest, leading to new documentaries and the development of important websites, such as PBS’s *American Experience*: The Murder of Emmett Till and Devery Anderson’s *Emmett Till Murder*. Scholarship on the case culminated with Anderson 2015, which is certain to remain the definitive history of the case for decades to come.

**American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till.**

Companion website to the documentary film directed by Stanley Nelson (see Nelson 2004, cited under Documentaries). With solid background material on race relations, lynching, sharecropping, and segregation, the site is an excellent introduction for undergraduates, preparing them to understand the context for Till’s lynching. Also provides a valuable timeline and links to primary sources, including a transcript of the film.


The definitive work about the lynching. A magisterial history that combs every known resource to determine not only the facts of the case, but also its enduring legacy. Valuable in countless ways, but none more so than in its judicious weighing of evidence to sift through the distortions and mistruths that have long plagued historical understanding.

**Emmett Till Murder.**

A website built around Anderson 2015. Valuable for providing a comprehensive “who’s who” of those involved in the case, as well as transcriptions of some of the most important primary sources, including early investigative works by Huie, Adams, Dixon, and Hicks. A helpful next step for those just learning about the story.

**Hampton, Henry, prod. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years.* PBS Video, 1987.**

There is an influential fifteen-minute segment on Till in the opening episode (“Awakenings: 1954–1955”) of this landmark documentary series, which first aired on 21 January 1987. By contextualizing Till’s murder as the “first step” in the civil rights movement, and signaling out Moses Wright and Mamie Till-Mobley as heroic figures paving the way for Rosa Parks, the episode did more than any other source to reignite interest in this case.


Based on a 1988 dissertation, makes the then-not-yet-widely embraced claim that Till’s lynching sparked the civil rights movement. Along with Whitfield, one of the first to draw attention to the case’s literary legacy, and valuable as well for extensive author interviews with Till’s mother and cousins.

Anthology of more than one hundred documents. Starting with the press coverage of the kidnapping and trial, and providing generous selections from the most important investigative journalists, concludes with excerpts from memoirists and poets who have helped to position the lynching in our historical and literary memory.


Early scholarly assessment of the case. Noting that “most have forgotten the trial held in Sumner during a muggy week in September 1955” (p. 199), Simpson calls for historians to reexamine how the “activist energies” triggered by the case may have inspired the civil right movement.


Crucial first scholarly attempt to assess the case. Author interviewed many key white Mississippi participants in the case, and had access to the trial transcript, making this thesis the sole source for all trial quotations until the transcript was rediscovered in 2004. Essential reading for understanding how later scholars will grapple with the case.


The first book-length study, this influential work set the direction for much to follow, situating the lynching within the context of the early civil rights movement and probing the enduring effects of the murder in our racial and literary imagination. Best place to get an initial overview.

back to top

Users without a subscription are not able to see the full content on this page. Please subscribe or login.

How to Subscribe

*Oxford Bibliographies Online* is available by subscription and perpetual access to institutions. For more information or to contact an Oxford Sales Representative click here.
THE TILL SAGA

now and again
Remembering Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi

The ruins of a country store suggest that locals have neglected the memory of Emmett Till’s murder. The nostalgic restoration of a gas station next door presents a disturbing countermemorial.

Nearly fifty years passed between the 1955 murder of Emmett Till and its first public commemoration in the Mississippi Delta. When the memorials finally emerged, so too did accounts of a long-enforced silence. In her gripping memoir Coming of Age in Mississippi, Anne Moody says that she was haunted by Till’s murder, but never allowed to speak of it openly.1 Outside the Delta, Till’s story was passed down by writers like Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, Bob Dylan, Langston Hughes, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and Lewis Nordan, and it figured prominently in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “dream” speech in Detroit in June 1963 (though not in the more famous version delivered two months later in Washington). But in the place where it occurred, Till’s murder was seldom discussed publicly.2 Architectural historian Dell Upton observes that even as the civil rights movement began to be commemorated across the South in the 1970s, memorials were concentrated in “Alabama, Georgia, and other places where the great, telegenic mass demonstrations were held, rather than, say, in Mississippi, the scene of quieter, less visible efforts and of more sinister, more random, and less restrained violence.”3

In 2005, the silence was broken with two blue roadside markers designating a 30-mile stretch of Highway 49E as the “Emmett Till Memorial Highway.” In the years that followed, the Delta experienced an unprecedented memory boom. More than $5 million was spent on the production of a significant commemorative infrastructure, including dozens of roadside markers, a museum, two restored buildings, an interpretive center, a walking park, and a community building. These works are unevenly distributed, ideologically inconsistent, and frequently vandalized, and yet they ensure that, at last, the memory of Till’s murder has a material presence in the landscape of the Mississippi Delta.

While seemingly major parts of Till’s story (such as his murder site) have gone uncommemorated, relatively minor elements have been affectively charged. Where was Till’s body dropped in the water? Where was it recovered? From where was the gin fan stolen that weighted his body in the river? If these questions have been debated with an intensity out of proportion with their historical significance, it’s because the economic well-being of entire towns hinges on the answers given. As Till’s story is passed down through generations, its plot is shaped by the conditions of remembrance in the Delta as much as by the distant facts of 1955. Now the story is in the hands of the legislators, county supervisors, funding boards, nonprofit organizations, private foundations, small-town mayors, anonymous citizens, ex-cons, and mid-level bureaucrats who oversee the new commemorative works.
There is a world of controversy, patronage, nepotism, and enduring racism behind the surface of those historical markers.

Some controversies are fueled by forensic debates over what precisely happened to Emmett Till. Others are motivated by the simple fact that stories of Till’s death are one of the few Delta commodities not controlled by agribusiness. And in many cases, the desperate pursuit of revenue has fueled an even more desperate creativity with Till’s story, unsettling the plotline of a murder that was ambiguous from the start. By studying this commemorative infrastructure and its controversial appearance on the landscape of the Delta, we can see with a newfound clarity how race, place, and memory work through one another — and how they are transformed in the process. 

The first sign on the Mississippi Freedom Trail, reverse side. [Pablo Correa]

The Freedom Trail

In 2011, the Tourism Division of the Mississippi Development Authority announced the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Trail, commemorating 25 places that played a significant role in the state’s civil rights history. Today these sites are marked by cast aluminum signs, mounted on seven-foot posts, with an oval-shaped crest emerging from the top. The front features a raised-letter surface; the back is a printed, black-vinyl sheet with explanatory text and photographs. At a cost of $8,000 apiece, the signs were designed by Hammons and Associates, a graphic design firm in Greenwood, and cast by Sewah Studios in Ohio.

My point in rehearsing these details is that none of them — from the post height to the crest shape to the local design firm or distant industrial forge — were developed for commemorating the civil rights movement. They were borrowed from the well-established practice of blues commemoration in the Mississippi Delta, a massively successful experiment in tourism and economic development. Indeed, the Freedom Trail was originally proposed as an extension of blues commemoration. The design recalls the circular crest of the Blues Trail signs, which replicated the shape of an LP vinyl record.

In any case, the tourism boosters who created the Freedom Trail were convinced that the most important of these 25 sites was Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market in Money, Mississippi — the country store where Emmett Till whistled at Carolyn Bryant on August 24, 1955, three days before her husband, Roy Bryant, and an unknown number of accomplices snatched the fourteen-year-old boy from his uncle’s home, tortured him, shot him, attached his body to a cotton-gin fan with a length of barbed wire, and sank him in the river. From the perspective of the Mississippi Development Authority, the “murder and funeral of Emmett [sic] Till” was “the genesis of the [civil rights] movement, giving Rosa Parks the strength to sit down and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. the courage to stand up.” In a symbolic gesture, the ruins of the abandoned store were designated as the starting place of the Freedom Trail. Surviving members of the Till family joined veterans of the Mississippi freedom struggle in a ceremony to unveil the first trail marker.
That might seem strange to people who remember coverage of the murder trial in September 1955, where focusing on the grocery store was a racist strategy used by defense lawyers to get Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam acquitted. Prosecutors argued that the plotline of the murder began at the site of the abduction, the homestead of Till’s uncle Moses Wright on Dark Fear Road. By starting their story at the Wright residence, three days after the events at the grocery, prosecutors were trying to keep Till away from Carolyn Bryant, keep Bryant herself from testifying, and thereby avoid the suggestion of a “justifiable homicide” — the notion that murder could be a fitting punishment for a black boy who insulted a white woman. Defense lawyers argued, rather, that the events of Bryant’s Grocery formed the “essential background for a later happening.” Judge Curtis Swango ruled in their favor and allowed Bryant to tell her story, and although she would later confess that this was a lie, she testified in court that Till forcibly held her hand, asked her for a date, grabbed both of her hips, and propositioned her with “unprintable words.”

9 The judge dismissed the jurors during this testimony, but they got the gist of it. Nine of the twelve later confided that they voted to acquit not because they believed the men were innocent (they did not) and not because they doubted the identity of the body (which was the open argument of the defense), but rather because of what happened at Bryant’s Grocery. “The simple fact was that a Negro had insulted a white woman. Her husband would not be prosecuted for killing him.”

Today few people remember the debate about whether the store should be considered the origin point of Emmett Till’s murder. The processes of commemoration have changed the meaning of the store, and the old racially charged geography that enabled his killers to go free is now advanced by the Mississippi Development Authority and put in the service of the state’s “epic struggle for equality.” The moment the Freedom Trail sign went up, it was no longer racist to say that the murder began at the store.
The Forensic Tradition

Not insignificantly, the ruins of that grocery store are owned by the children of Ray Tribble, an unrepentant juror from the 1955 trial. The family also owns the beautifully restored Ben Roy’s Service Station, immediately to the south. After the trial, Ray Tribble excelled in business. He and his family bought farmland around Money, and in the mid-1980s purchased the two-story building that once housed Bryant’s Grocery. By 2003, when two of the children acquired the gas station, the family owned everything in Money except the Baptist church.

Perhaps hesitant to let the crumbling grocery store become a monument to their patriarch’s complicity, the Tribbles have rejected numerous offers to buy the property and have allowed it to fall into ruin. The iconic front porch collapsed in the early 1990s, the interior floors were gone by the end of the decade, and Hurricane Katrina claimed the roof and a large part of the north wall. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the store draws an ever-increasing number of tourists who want to see the place at which many believe an ill-timed whistle set in motion the civil rights movement. It seems the greater the ruin, the more potent the memory site.

A mere 67 feet away, Ben Roy’s Service Station has followed a different trajectory. Although it has no historic connection to Emmett Till’s murder, since 2011 it has been actively written into his story. Two months after the Freedom Trail ceremony at the grocery store, Tribble’s children won a Mississippi Civil Rights Historical Sites grant to restore the gas station, reasoning that its covered portico was a good place for tourists to gaze at the grocery and learn civil rights history. That was apparently enough for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History to give $206,360.80 earmarked for civil rights to the restoration of Ben Roy’s Service Station. And thus, both buildings are now inescapably a part of Till’s story.

After the trial, black sharecroppers refused to patronize Bryant’s Grocery, and it was almost immediately put up for sale. It remained a country store for the next three decades, known as Wolfe’s, then as Young’s Grocery and Market, but it is still remembered as Bryant’s, thanks to the historians who have normalized the legal narrative established by the defense at the murder trial. From William Bradford Huie, to Steven Whitaker, to Stephen J. Whitfield, to Devery Anderson, to Timothy B. Tyson — for 60 years the most influential voices shaping Till’s story have begun their narratives at Bryant’s Grocery.

That’s not to say that historians believed Carolyn Bryant’s testimony or endorsed the suggestion of a justifiable homicide. The opposite is rather the case. While the inclusion of Bryant’s Grocery in Till’s story is no longer controversial, questions about what precisely happened there are as all-consuming as they were in the 1950s. Did Till really assault Carolyn Bryant? Did he proposition her? Did he whistle at her? These are forensic questions, focused on determining precisely what happened, and they are the definitive model for Emmett Till commemoration. The most recent, most comprehensive, and most respected scholarship on the Till murder is motivated by an ever-more-determined investigation.
to figure out what happened inside the store.

Consider Devery Anderson’s *Emmett Till* (2015), currently the authoritative history of the murder. Seven years before the book was released, Anderson published a detective entry in *Southern Quarterly* titled “A Wallet, a White Woman, and a Whistle: Fact and Fiction in Emmett Till’s Encounter in Money, Mississippi.” The book tellingly ends with a long appendix, “Piecing the Puzzle,” which provides a question-and-answer guide to the most controversial elements of the murder. Anderson proceeds as if a detailed ledger of misdeeds exhausts the obligations of memory. He even divides his extensive list of sources by their proximity to 1955: primary sources are considered in main text, while secondary sources are relegated to footnotes. 18

The most recent forensic pursuit is Timothy Tyson’s acclaimed *The Blood of Emmett Till* (2017). That project began in 2008, when Carolyn Bryant contacted Tyson and told him that she had lied under oath about what happened in Bryant’s Grocery, and specifically about her testimony that she was assaulted: “That part’s not true.” 19 Tyson then rewrote the story of Emmett Till based on a new account of the events at Bryant’s Grocery.

Although these two books are very different, together they demonstrate how strongly the forensic approach to commemoration has taken hold. While Anderson and Tyson circle continuously around Bryant’s Grocery, they never feature the store itself. The grocery was the *site* of their inquiry and even the *inspiration* for it, but not the *object* of their inquiry. The only relevant questions were who did what to whom? How can guilt, blame, victimhood, and responsibility be distributed?

![Railroad tracks in Money, Mississippi, in 2005.](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Railroad_tracks_in_Money,_Mississippi,_in_2005,_Flickr_Commons.jpg)

The placelessness of the forensic tradition is evident, too, in the histories written by people who visited the store in the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, when it was owned by J. L. “Bud” and Rita Young. We know little about the proprietors except that they kept a country store in the building that once housed Bryant’s Grocery. This simple act, however, had profound commemorative ramifications. In good repair, the building itself attracted zero attention, allowing those who visited it to become entirely absorbed in forensics. It’s startling how many people could visit Young’s and call it Bryant’s — as if the material history of the place were unrelated to questions of commemoration.

For example, Richard Rubin’s *Confederacy of Silence: A True Tale of the New Old South* (2002) purports to be the true story of the year he spent in Greenwood, Mississippi, just a few miles south of Money, in 1988. A native New Yorker with an Ivy-League history degree, the recent graduate headed south to work for the *Greenwood Commonwealth* newspaper. It was to be a personal adventure. From his perspective, the Mississippi Delta was “pure mystery, an abyss at the bottom of America.” 20 The book’s title refers to Rubin’s sense that he could not get along in Delta society unless he kept his progressive racial views to himself. Silence, he suggested, was the cost of admission for a liberal. Needless to say, this is the kind of book Deltans have learned to distrust: a northerner dropping in to tell them how racist they are. 21

Rubin was “fascinated with the murder of Emmett Till,” and he returns to it throughout the book. In 1987, as a junior in college, he had seen *Eyes on the Prize*, the celebrated six-hour documentary that stressed the role of Till’s murder in sparking the civil rights movement. Rubin was captivated by Till’s
story, and he developed a “burning desire” to visit Mississippi for himself. He became preoccupied with Bryant’s Grocery and visited the store “every few weeks” during the fall of 1988. The store was still open, he wrote, selling Vienna sausages, sardines, and deviled ham. He would park across the street from Young’s Grocery and “just stare at it for a few minutes,” before slowly making his way toward the entrance, while speculating about what happened inside. He would examine the front porch where, he claimed, Till bragged about his biracial sexual prowess. Then Rubin would “saunter on into the store itself and greet the clerk behind the counter.” This, he reports, was so much “meaningless conversation,” a cover for the author’s silent forensic calculations: “she stood there, a little to the left, probably, and he stood here, right on this spot where I am right now.”

We know that Rubin’s story is fabricated, because Young’s had been closed for at least three years when he arrived in 1988. He would have found the porch sagging and no longer enclosed, the sign gone, the windows broken or missing. Rubin, however, could not admit the extent of the damage. His fiction required an inhabitable store, so that he could forget its material status and focus on the forensic questions. He even occasionally seemed to forget that the building itself had changed hands. This is nowhere clearer than in his fictional one-person boycott of Young’s Grocery. He claims that he would leave without buying anything — as a protest against Bryant’s! “I did not wish to patronize the place, no matter what it was called these days.” The ownership had become literally interchangeable, which was only possible because Rubin so completely disregarded the building and its history.

Ruins

Only after the Tribbles bought the store from the Youngs and let it fall into ruin did the building itself come to the foreground of historians’ attention. The conspicuous disrepair of such an important place (Ray Tribble’s daughter, Annette Morgan, called it the most historic site in the country) seemed to signify that the events of 1955 had been ignored and untended. Visitors began to see the murder of Emmett Till in light of persistent racism in the Mississippi Delta, effectively extending the chronology of Till’s story. Just as a decade’s worth of pilgrims visited Young’s store and misnamed it Bryant’s, a subsequent generation visited the Tribble building and found it haunted. Ruins, Mary Carruthers observed in a different context, “all but [shout] that they have been preserved for the chastisement of future generations.” The more the store crumbles, the greater the evidence of unaddressed racism mounts.

By 2000, when Paul Hendrickson profiled the building for a Washington Post article titled “Mississippi Haunting,” the floors were completely gone. In contrast to those who visited the store during the Young era, Hendrickson focused on the building itself. He described the broken plate glass, the rafters fallen to the foundation, and the rodents scurrying among the debris. A second-story toilet, still bolted to the brick wall, hung suspended in space, “with only air beneath, a ludicrous sight.” While Hendrickson found the ruins beautiful, he wrote, “beauty of the building has to do with its look of extreme fragility. A good cough would knock it over.” To his mind, the ruins were a poignant commentary on the uncommemorated murder and an indictment of bigotry in the contemporary Delta. “There is no plaque from a state historical commission,” he wrote, which seemed to confirm the
And yet, for Hendrickson, that was only half of the story. Despite the material evidence of neglect, the building still gestured to the facts of 1955. This is why he had come to Money; he wrote, “why I’m standing now on this spot. I am trying to dream my way into the brutal murder of Emmett Till. I am trying to imagine what some of it was like.” Imagine it he did. After contemplating the ruins, Hendrickson proceeded to cover the same ground as earlier writers — the whistle, the alleged violation of sexual taboos, the kidnapping, torture, and death. But this was not simply an opportunity to rehearse the facts of the murder. Hendrickson was attuned to the symbolic complexity of the ruins and saw in them both a call to memory and evidence that the call had been ignored.

The ruins of Bryant’s Grocery, 2015. [University of Washington]

The same patterns play out across the Delta. Like the ruins of Bryant’s Grocery, tales of Till’s murder are ignored but never erased from the cultural landscape. The longer they are ignored, the more obvious the neglect becomes; and yet, the more obvious the neglect, the more urgently the ruins discharge their commemorative function. In 2003, Hendrickson republished his article as the prologue to Sons of Mississippi: A Story of Race and Its Legacy, where the title shifted from “Mississippi Haunting” to “Nothing Is Ever Escaped.”

In 2007, Robert Jenkins, a community development expert from Virginia, learned of the neglected store on a business trip to Jackson. He offered to buy the property and restore it, only to be rebuffed by the Tribble family, who, he claims, proposed selling the bricks one by one to African Americans. One year later, a local insurance agent named Billy Walker was so embarrassed by the ruins (“a disgrace” to the local community) that he, too, tried to buy the store. Neil Padden, a Nashville businessman with connections to Congressman John Lewis, offered six figures in 2010 but could not close the deal. As Sherron Wright (the great-niece of Moses Wright) summed up the situation, not selling the store, the Tribbles are, in effect, holding the building hostage. “They just want history to die,” she said.

In 2009, two residents of Jackson, a retired businessman and a doctor, visited the ruins of Bryant’s Grocery on a tour of civil rights sites organized by the Mississippi Center for Justice. Months later, they set up a dinner with their tour guide at the legendary Mississippi blues joint Po’ Monkey’s to ask what could be done about commemorating the site. By the time they had finished their beers, $4,000 had changed hands. While the full story of how that initial gift grew into the larger project of the Mississippi Freedom Trail is too complex to relay here, the essential point is that it started with the haunting power of the ruins.

Since its installation in 2011, the Mississippi Freedom Trail marker has accentuated the symbolic power of Bryant’s Grocery. The sign emphasizes, if not exaggerates, the site’s historical importance, framing it as the origin point of the American civil rights movement, and that makes its disregard more palpable. In June 2017, the Freedom Trail sign was vandalized, the black vinyl either erased with acid or scraped from the aluminum with a blunt instrument. Although it was quickly replaced, the vandalized sign was a perfect analogue to the ruins of Bryant’s Grocery. Journalist Jamil Smith saw this clearly, tweeting that the vandal “tried to, quite literally, erase history.”

Attempts to erase Till’s story become part of the story itself. The ruined store ensures that when Till is remembered today, the Delta’s will-to-forget is remembered as well.
Countermemorial

Which brings us back to the countermemorial of Ben Roy’s Service Station, whose 2014 restoration was funded by a Mississippi Civil Rights Historic Sites grant, a one-time initiative coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Rides. The program also funded preservation projects like the Mississippi Freedom Trail, the headquarters of the Council of Federated Organizations in Meridian, the Medgar Evers house in Jackson, the Amzie Moore house in Cleveland, the Vernon Dahmer house in Hattiesburg, and the second-district Tallahatchie County Courthouse in Sumner (home of the Till trial). In fact, Ben Roy’s was the only funded project that was not a civil rights site.

Importantly, the MCRHS grant program was nested under a state congressional bill supporting projects demonstrating “the state’s attractiveness as a tourism destination.” Thus, the same bill that funded civil rights commemoration also funded a horse show on the Gulf Coast, renovations to the home of Elvis Presley, and the restoration of the home of Confederate icon J. Z. George, who signed the ordinance of succession, defended the disenfranchisement of African Americans, and backed the racist state constitution of 1890. With tourism as the ultimate driver of state funding, the capacity of Ben Roy’s to attract visitors was just as important as its link to the civil rights movement. Indeed, in the case of Ben Roy’s, the potential to attract tourists was its link to the civil rights movement. Mary Annette Morgan (granddaughter of Ray Tribble and the family’s grant writer) used the indiscriminate movement of tourists between the two buildings to state her claim for civil rights money:

In this day and age, tourists to Mississippi and to the Delta region want to get “off-the-beaten-path.” They want to experience history hands-on and see places where events took place and where legends lived and died. Today, without any investment in the site, hundreds of visitors travel to the site just to see the ruins of the Bryant Grocery building and to experience the nostalgia of small town Money. Just imagine if we could make Money, Mississippi more of a destination, instead of just a disappearing ghost town. How many more visitors would travel to Money if there was actually some type of cultural center for them to see and to experience?

Remember, the gas station was not the site “where events took place.” Nor did “hundreds of visitors” travel there. These claims could be true only if Ben Roy’s and Bryant’s Grocery were counted as the same site.

The lead architect on the project was the Greenwood firm of Beard and Riser. Dale Riser wrote portions of the grant application and helped Morgan build her case that tourism could provide Ben Roy’s with a retroactive civil rights history:

It is not inconceivable, in fact it is very likely, that the events that transpired at Bryant’s Grocery on that day in August of 1955 were discussed underneath the front canopy of the adjacent service station; rehabilitating that service station will allow new and future generations of Mississippians, Americans, and others to meet under that canopy and discuss the events surrounding the death of Emmitt [sic] Till and the civil rights era in a new light.

Morgan and Riser concluded that Ben Roy’s could serve as a “visitor center,” an “interpretive space,” or “cultural center” where tourists could engage the history of civil rights. But what would that “new light” help us see? Not just a disappearing ghost town, Morgan wrote. Ghost towns are haunted, after all, and that was the frame Hendrickson used to set up his study of American racism. Against this vision of a haunting at Bryant’s Grocery, the proposal to restore the gas station posited “the nostalgia of small town Money.”
In order to make Ben Roy’s into an “interpretive space,” the Tribble family promised to restore the segregated bathrooms on the north side. During the 1950s, the gas station had two bathrooms, marked “colored” and “white,” opening to the outside. Sometime later, the signs were taken down, the exterior doors removed, and the bathrooms reoriented to the inside; one was accessible from a storage room, the other from an office. The grant application included a $6,000 line item to put things back the old way. The restored bathrooms would “display the reality of segregation in the Jim Crow South before the enforcement of Civil Rights legislation.” Indeed, this was the only mechanism connecting the gas station restoration to the Delta’s racial history. The Tribble family emphatically chose not to install interpretive signs about the history of civil rights or the memory of Emmett Till. As Morgan explained to Leflore Illustrated, “We’re going to set it up exactly as it would have looked in the 1950s. ... It’s not going to be a museum with panels and reinterpretations. It’s none of that. It’s the real thing.”

So the commemorative work would be borne exclusively by the building and its collection of midcentury artifacts it housed. Two things about the Tribbles’ collection of southern artifacts deserve mention. First, it did not include the Jim Crow signage that once marked the bathrooms “colored” and “white.” While the Tribbles refurbished the bathroom fixtures and reoriented the doors, they did not put the old signs back, so the unmarked bathrooms could not truly “display the reality of segregation.” Second, in addition to the original artifacts returned to the store, the family collected a variety of extra midcentury items to help refashion Ben Roy’s as a “period piece,” including a vintage sofa, circular washtubs, sewing machine, Hobart meat slicer, Coca-Cola signs, midcentury wheelbarrows, and decorative trunks. While they refused to add signage that could have linked their gas station to civil rights, they were happy to add artifacts that connected it to the charms of midcentury rural America. The cumulative effect is that the restored Ben Roy’s is far more powerful as a period piece than as a civil rights cultural center.

This was by design. While the grant application acknowledged that the restored building would be both “an authentic time period exhibit and [a] visitor’s center,” the emphasis was on its value as a “reminder of an era in the history of Mississippi.” Morgan wrote that the renovation would “allow visitors to step back in time to the summer of 1955.” Risser emphasized the nostalgic value of service stations in the “small-town South” as “the hub of social activity ... a visible ‘front stoop’ for the community.” Although the application acknowledged the “reality of segregation,” it made that reality seem rather charming. On weekend nights, blacks and whites alike gathered to “shed their work-week blues and enjoy the Jukebox at Ben Roy’s.”

While the Tribbles won their civil rights grant by using tourists to blur the distinction between Bryant’s Grocery and Ben Roy’s Service Station, they spent the money in such a way that Ben Roy’s appears not as an extension of the grocery, but as a countermemorial. When all the erasures of race and the investments in nostalgia are accounted for, we are left with a period piece that evokes nostalgia for racially promiscuous front-stoop Saturday nights that may well have never happened. Indeed, the first businesses in the Delta boycotted during the civil rights movement were white-owned service stations. With the help of Medgar Evers, the Regional Council of Negro Leadership distributed 50,000 bumper stickers with the phase “Don’t Buy Gas Where You Can’t Use the Restroom.” Although Ben Roy’s did provide Jim Crow facilities, and thus would not have been a target of the campaign, David and Linda Beito report that the campaign “galvanized ordinary blacks in the Delta.” As early as 1952, before civil-rights activists were contesting sidewalks, lunch counters, bus stations, or
swimming pools, they targeted gas stations as lighting rods of black inequality in the Delta. It is difficult to imagine that a front-porch jukebox could have overcome that charge. Moreover, we know the social habits of at least one black family in Money. On Saturday nights, the Wrights didn’t go to Ben Roy’s Service Station, three miles from their home, but to the segregated streets of downtown Greenwood, which had more to offer. We also know the Wrights believed Ben Roy’s wife failed to treat blacks with respect. 40

Without saying a word — or posting a sign — Ben Roy’s just stands there, beautifully restored, evidence for those who need it of the charms of midcentury Delta life. I cannot look at it without imagining what red-capped Trump supporters might see when they look backward to a once-great America. They see an entire American infrastructure made possible by economies of race but unmarked by legacies of violence. And this is the tragic irony of Ben Roy’s: its restoration was paid for, literally, by the memory of Till’s murder, but the finished product recodes the racial history of the Mississippi Delta and makes Till’s murder seem like an aberration.

The Emmett Till Memorial Commission sign at Grahall Landing, where Emmett Till’s body was removed from the Tallahatchie River, vandalized in 2016. [Maude Schuyler Clay]

In these twin histories of abandonment and preservation, we see how race, place, and commemoration shift together. As soon as the Bryants’ store was allowed to crumble, the forensic fascination of who-did-what-to-whom was reframed as an examination of how racism persists in the Delta. The onset of ruin has transformed the focus of commemorative inquiry: the inattention of the local community is now part of the meaning of Till’s murder. And while the haunted ruins of Bryant’s Grocery suggest that the Delta has not adequately dealt with the murder of Emmett Till, the countermemorial at Ben Roy’s argues that there was not much to deal with in the first place.

Over and over again, we see that the Mississippi Delta is not simply the place where Till was killed or the setting where memory work happens. It is an ingredient part of the work itself.

---

PLACES JOURNAL IS CELEBRATING TEN YEARS ONLINE THANKS TO THE SUPPORT OF READERS LIKE YOU. PLEASE SUBSCRIBE OR DONATE.

EDITORS’ NOTE

This article is adapted from the introduction and chapter 4 of Dave Tell’s *Remembering Emmett Till*, which will be published next week by University of Chicago Press.

NOTES


2. See Harriet Pollack and Christopher Metress, eds., *Emmett Till in Literary Memory and Imagination* (Louisiana State Press, 2008); and Devery S. Anderson, *Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World* and
Propelled the Civil Rights Movement (University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 287-88.  


5. “Mississippi Freedom Trail Markers, Statewide” and “Narrative,” Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS, Folder: Mississippi Civil Rights Historical Sites (MCRHS) Grant #2011-002.  

6. The fact of the whistle may be the least controversial event of the entire episode at Bryant’s Grocery. Although it is not uncontested, we know with virtual certainty that Till whistled at Carolyn Bryant after leaving the store. See Anderson, Emmett Till, 363; and Timothy B. Tyson, The Blood of Emmett Till (Simon and Schuster, 2017). Wheeler Parker, the last remaining eyewitness to the events at the store, has told me in no uncertain terms that the whistle happened.  


11. Ray Tribble has consistently affirmed the jury’s decision to acquit the murderers. In 1980, he told documentary filmmaker Rich Samuels that the “jury was right.” See Rich Samuels, The Murder and the Movement, WMAQ-Channel 5, Chicago, 1985. In 1986, Tribble claimed that the body pulled from the river could not be Till’s: “The body they displayed was in excess of six feet and Emmett Till was less than five feet tall.” See Steve Saltzman, “County Candidates Address Voters League,” Greenwood Commonwealth, March 27, 1986. As recently as 2005, Tribble told The New York Times Magazine that the body had hair on its chest, “and everybody knows ... that blacks don’t grow hair on their chest until they get to be about 30.” Richard Rubin, “The Ghosts of Emmett Till,” The New York Times Magazine, July 31, 2005.  

12. Kyle Martin and Genie Alice Via, “Bryan’s Grocery: What’s in Store?,” Greenwood Commonwealth, August 29, 2005. On Tribble ownership of Bryant’s Grocery, see also Sherri Williams, “Haunted by Murder,” Columbus Dispatch, August 28, 2005; Bob Darden, “Restoring History,” Leflore Illustrated, Fall 2013, 22-23. These sources are inconsistent on precisely which siblings own the store. Note that this chapter is not an inquiry into the racial politics of the Tribble family. While the family has owned both buildings since 2002, and for this reason is featured extensively herein, I have neither the ability nor the desire to gauge their racial convictions or their beliefs about the Till murder. On the one hand, it is tempting to assume that, as owners of the property and descendants of an unrepentant juror, the family aims to minimize the bigotry of their patriarch and maximize their profits. Such impressions have been cultivated by rumors of seven-figure price tags circulated by the mainstream media. The family insists that these rumors have no basis. On the other hand, the Tribble family has long expressed willingness to use their property to commemorate Till’s murder. In 2004, for example Harry Tribble told the Associated Press that he wants to turn Bryant’s Grocery into a civil rights museum. See Lynda Edwards, “Residents of Mississippi Town Say Till Killing Not Often Discussed,” Northwest Italian Times, May 17, 2004. Likewise, in 2005, Martin Tribble spoke out against those who would level the ruins. “Some people want me to take a bulldozer to it. I can’t do that. It’s too important. I respect history.” See Williams, “Haunted by Murder.” After Hurricane Katrina, which inflicted extensive damage on the grocery, the family expressed a desire to stabilize the building before more damage
was done. Kyle Martin, “Bryant’s Grocery Takes a Hit,” Greenwood Commonwealth, September 9, 2005. Finally, after the once-stolen front doors to Bryant’s Grocery were recovered, the family donated them to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. This chapter, then, will make no comment on the political or racial convictions of the Tribbles. The family appears herein in the role once reserved for the buildings themselves in the forensic tradition: as background to an inquiry whose aims lie elsewhere.

13. A nomination form to include Bryant’s Grocery on the Mississippi Heritage Trust’s “10 Most Endangered Historic Places” list notes that there is “opposition to the site’s preservation.” “The opposition comes in the form of the owners [of] the property not willing to restore it or to sell it to some[one] who is interested in restoring it.” “Mississippi’s 10 Most Endangered Historic Places 2005 Nomination Form,” Folder: 083-MNY-002 thru 2008, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS.

14. James E. Young notes that sites of historical destruction often assume “lives of their own.” This has certainly been the case with Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market. See Young, The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning (Yale University Press, 120). “Civil rights devotees from all over the world make pilgrimage to Leflore county to see the ramshackle remains of the grocery store where Till let out his fatal wolf whistle,” according to Tim Kalich, “Till Trial about Drama, Not Justice,” Sun Sentinel, March 23, 2006. As Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites write in the discussion of ruins, “The ruin is a fragment, a trace, a sign of time’s corrosiveness ... a call to memory.” See Hariman and Lucaites, The Public Image (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 127.

15. This is a cumulative figure. On July 22, 2011, the MDAH awarded the project $152,004.80. On January 17, 2014, they increased the amount by $54,536. Both amounts required a 20 percent match. See “Money, Mississippi Historic Storefront Restoration, Phase 1,” MCRHS Grant #2011-11, MDAH, Jackson, MS.


19. Tyson, 6. In August 2018, as this book went to print, the veracity of the confession was being questioned. See Jerry Mitchell, “Bombshell Quote Missing from Emmett Till Tape: So Did Carolyn Bryant Donham Really Recant!,” Mississippi Clarion Ledger, August 21, 2018.


22. Rubin, 2, 9, 179-80.

23. Martin and Via, “Bryant’s Grocery: What’s in Store?”; and Rubin, 179. I reached out to Rubin multiple times by email. Although he once responded and volunteered to speak at the University of Kansas (where I work), he ignored my questions about Bryant’s Grocery and quickly stopped responding to my emails.

24. For a powerful account of the symbolic and affective complexity of ruins, see Young, 119-54.


27. In distinction to the forensic tradition, Hendrickson’s rhetoric is characterized by an insistent **ecomimesis**, Timothy Morton’s term for a rhetorical style by which an author relentlessly situates his or her story within a surrounding environment. Remembering Emmett Till might be characterized as a project of ambient poetics, a term Morton uses to describe a “way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription.” Adapted to memory studies, such an approach asks of every memory practice how it
Remarking Emmett Till


33. “Money, Mississippi Historic Storefront Restoration, Phase 1,” MCRHS Grant #2011-11.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Darden, 23.


38. Ibid.


40. Simeon Wright, with Herb Boyd, *Simeon’s Story: An Eyewitness Account of the Kidnapping of Emmett Till* (Lawrence Hill Books, 2010), 84.

**CITE**


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**
Dave Tell

Dave Tell is Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas and leader of the Emmett Till Memory Project.

University of Chicago Press
Emmett Till Memorial Has a New Sign. This Time, It’s Bulletproof.

The sign, which is the fourth to replace others that were vandalized, is made of steel and weighs 500 pounds.

By Aimee Ortiz

Oct. 20, 2019

Emmett Till’s family stood on the shore of the Tallahatchie River just outside of Glendora, Miss., on Saturday. It was there, that, it is believed, the body of 14-year-old Emmett was pulled from the water after he had been kidnapped, tortured and lynched nearly 65 years ago.

For decades, the spot was unmarked, but in 2008, signs detailing Emmett’s harrowing journey were installed around the region, and for the first time there was a memorial to the African-American teenager whose death galvanized the civil rights movement.

But the sign at the Tallahatchie River location was stolen and thrown into the river.

A replacement was soon marred with bullet holes.

Then came a third, which was hit with more bullets.

Now, there’s a fourth sign, this one made of steel. It weighs more than 500 pounds. It’s over an inch thick, and, the manufacturer says, it’s bulletproof.

The dedication of the new sign opened old wounds for his cousins, including Ollie Gordon, 71, and her daughter, Airickca Gordon-Taylor, 50. They traveled to Mississippi from Chicago, Emmett’s hometown, for the ceremony.

“What they did to Emmett was so ugly that even the Tallahatchie River spewed his body back out so he could be seen and found,” Ms. Gordon-Taylor said on Sunday. She runs the Mamie Till Mobley Memorial Foundation, which is named in honor of Emmett’s mother.

“Vandalism is a hate crime,” she said. “Basically my family is still being confronted with a hate crime against Emmett Till and it’s almost 65 years later.”

The family has never healed from Emmett’s murder, the mother and daughter said.
Ms. Gordon was 7 years old when her cousin was brutally killed after Carolyn Bryant Donham, a white woman, said the teenager had grabbed her and wolf-whistled at her. In 2017, she told a historian that her allegations against Emmett were false.

Ms. Gordon, who was raised in the same house as Emmett, remembers her cousin as a food-loving jokester who protected her like a brother would.

“We grew up like siblings because we were all in the same house together,” Ms. Gordon said. “He was super protective.”

Emmett’s death was confusing for Ms. Gordon when she was a child. She remembers hearing screams in her otherwise peaceful home. It was also her first brush with death.

She said she and her brothers thought that white people were coming to get them.

“We still didn’t really absorb what was going on; we were children,” she said. “When the body came, we started to have nightmares.”

The two white men who were accused of murdering Emmett were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury.

Now, as a grown woman with children, Ms. Gordon still carries the sadness and grief of her cousin’s murder, particularly when she thinks of his mother.

“We didn’t have any counseling, which I think we should have had because I still have these crying episodes,” she said, adding that Emmett’s mother “cried every day.”

“I still have sadness for her pain, losing a child, I can’t imagine losing my child,” Ms. Gordon said.

Dave Tell, a University of Kansas professor who has written about Emmett, wrote the text that accompanies the new sign. He said it has become particularly important to tell Emmett’s story in full through 2019.

“The story of Emmett Till can’t be confined to 1955,” he said, adding that “the bullet holes are important, too.”

“Till's story is still going. It's still very divisive in Mississippi and across the country,” Mr. Tell said.

Memory sites, like the one marked by the new memorial sign, “have become the new lunch counters,” Mr. Tell said, explaining that lunch counters across the South were “where our country worked out its racial politics.”

The new sign was made by Lite Brite Neon, which has locations in Brooklyn and Kingston, N.Y.

The sign is made out of half an inch of AR500 steel and covered in an acrylic panel that’s three-quarters of an inch thick, according to the Emmett Till Memory Project. “The sign is designed to withstand a rifle round without damage,” the project’s site said.

In 2014, Professor Tell began working closely with the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, which grew out of the Emmett Till Memorial Commission. The commission installed the first signs with the actor Morgan Freeman, who helped fund the project.

Ceremonies like the one on Saturday provide the family with a sense of gratification, Ms. Gordon-Taylor, Emmett’s cousin, said.

“O.K., you want to shoot it down? We’re going to put it right back up,” she said. “You’re never going to forget about Emmett Till and that he was here. Our family has never received judicial justice from the state of Mississippi for Emmett’s murder, so, in some form,
Dave Tell, a University of Kansas professor who has written about Emmett, wrote the text that accompanies the new sign. He said it has become particularly important to tell Emmett's story in full through 2019.

“The story of Emmett Till can't be confined to 1955,” he said, adding that “the bullet holes are important, too.”

“Till's story is still going. It's still very divisive in Mississippi and across the country,” Mr. Tell said.

Memory sites, like the one marked by the new memorial sign, “have become the new lunch counters,” Mr. Tell said, explaining that lunch counters across the South were “where our country worked out its racial politics.”

The new sign was made by Lite Brite Neon, which has locations in Brooklyn and Kingston, N.Y.

The sign is made out of half an inch of AR500 steel and covered in an acrylic panel that's three-quarters of an inch thick, according to the Emmett Till Memory Project. “The sign is designed to withstand a rifle round without damage,” the project's site said.

In 2014, Professor Tell began working closely with the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, which grew out of the Emmett Till Memorial Commission. The commission installed the first signs with the actor Morgan Freeman, who helped fund the project.

Ceremonies like the one on Saturday provide the family with a sense of gratification, Ms. Gordon-Taylor, Emmett’s cousin, said.

“O.K., you want to shoot it down? We're going to put it right back up,” she said. “You're never going to forget about Emmett Till and that he was here. Our family has never received judicial justice from the state of Mississippi for Emmett's murder, so, in some form, this is us saying, ‘Until you do right by us, basically, you're never going to forget.’”

Read more coverage on Emmett Till

Emmett Till Sign Is Hit With Bullets Again, 35 Days After Being Replaced

Emmett Till Sign Photo Leads Ole Miss Fraternity to Suspend Members

Struggling for an Emmett Till Memorial That Withstands Gunshots

Remembering Emmett Till: The Legacy of a Lynching

Emmett Till’s Murder, and How America Remembers Its Darkest Moments

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 22, 2019, Section A, Page 13 of the New York edition with the headline: Till Memorial Replaces Sign A Fourth Time. It's Bulletproof.
What happened to the key figures in the Emmett Till case?

| Mississippi Clarion Ledger
Updated 7:23 PM EST Dec 10, 2019

Although the Emmett Till case is considered by many as the catalyst for the civil rights movement, after Look magazine published the account of the kidnapping and murder as given by J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant, the case fell from the news and the players in the saga all fell out of the spotlight. What happened to the key figures in the case in the years after they were momentarily thrust into the spotlight in the summer of 1955?

The only one to emerge publicly at the national level was Mamie Bradley, but it did not happen for 30 years. Things began settling down for her a few months after the murder trial when her speaking engagements ended, yet she never returned to the job he held at the Air Force office in Chicago. Instead, she enrolled at Chicago Teachers College in the fall of 1956 and graduated cum laude three and a half years later. She earned her degree in January 1960 and began teaching, first at Carter Elementary and later at Scanlon School. She retired in 1983 after a total of 23 years with Chicago’s public schools.
On June 24, 1957, after dating three years, 35-year-old Mamie Bradley married Gene Mobley, a union that lasted 43 years, ending only with Gene’s death in 2000. Bradley, who became known as Mamie Till-Mobley, never bore another child but helped nurture Gene’s two daughters after their mother moved from Chicago.

In the mid-1960s, Mobley’s mother, Alma Spearman, formed the Emmett Till Foundation, the goals of which were to build Christian character and a sense of citizenship in young people. It held its first annual banquet in Chicago in July 1966. The nonprofit organization eventually began a long tradition of awarding scholarships to deserving youth annually on July 25 — Emmett’s birthday.

Till-Mobley created an additional way of keeping her son’s memory alive by establishing a performing group in 1973, the Emmett Till Players, made up of children who memorized and recited the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Over the years they performed at schools and churches, and a decade after its founding, Till-Mobley estimated that
over 200 children had been part of the troupe. In 1984, the Emmett Till Players even performed in Mississippi.

In 1975 Till-Mobley earned a master’s degree in administration and supervision from Loyola University, with an additional 45 credits toward a doctorate.

She began speaking nationally about her son after 1985. Although widowed in 2000, Mamie’s life remained eventful for the next three years as she continued her activities with the Emmett Till Foundation. She also traveled and spoke, despite the heart and kidney problems she had long battled. In fact, it was on January 6, 2003, the eve of a planned departure for a speaking event in Atlanta, that she suffered a heart attack. She died that afternoon at Jackson Park Hospital. She was 81 years old. Her memoir, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America*, was published posthumously later that year.
Mose Wright, a LeFlore County farmer, was the uncle Emmett Till came from Chicago to visit in the summer of 1955. Wright testified in the murder trial of
Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam that they were the two men who took till from Wright’s home in the early hours of August 28, 1955.

Moses Wright, the star witness of the trial, moved to Argo Summit, Illinois, just days after the trial, too afraid to continue life in the Mississippi Delta. For most of the 22 years that followed, he lived quietly, outside of the public eye, although he traveled the West for the NAACP speaking during the month of November 1955. A year after the trial he reported that he was working odd jobs and had even gained 13 pounds since moving to the North. “I used to think I couldn’t live without seeing cotton stalks. Man, I ain’t seen cotton in a year, and I’m still living,” he told a reporter. The former preacher had already come to see the impact of the Till case for the fledgling Civil Rights Movement, and stated, almost prophetically, “What happened down there last year is going to help us all.”

Wright eventually found work as a custodian at a nightclub and later as a dishwasher at a local restaurant, working alongside a grandson. Adjusting to the big city after spending a lifetime in the rural Mississippi Delta was not easy. Wright, who left his car behind in Mississippi, never drove again after his move to Argo, but with the proximity of stores and schools, and the availability of public transportation, he didn’t need to. He gave up fishing after leaving the South, but the railroad let him use a little patch of land on which to grow a garden, which he kept up until he was 79. “That was his joy,” recalled his son, Simeon.

In 1970, Moses’s wife, Elizabeth, died, and over the next seven years, his health declined. He eventually had prostate surgery which affected the strength in his legs. Living alone, he did the best he could but in time his eyesight began to wane, and other health problems made it difficult for him to keep up his one-bedroom apartment. One time while home alone he lost his balance and fell. He remained on the floor for a day until his grandson, who had a key to the door, came to check on him. His family eventually placed him in the White Oak Nursing Home in Indian Head.
Park. He died on Aug. 3, 1977. The photo of Wright standing and pointing at two accused killers in Sumner remains a testament to bravery in a Mississippi courtroom.

Prosecution witness Willie Reed, whose testimony placed the murder in Sunflower County and was the source that other men besides J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant were involved in the murder, knew Emmett Till only in death but remained haunted for decades by the beating sounds he heard emanating from a plantation shed on an August morning. “That’s something you never put out of your mind. I remember it like it happened yesterday,” he said in 2007.

After speaking at a few rallies following his late-night move to Chicago on the day the jury issued its verdict, Reed dropped out of sight. He had no contact with any of the other witnesses or Till family members for decades, despite living in Chicago and remaining in close proximity to many of them. He reemerged for interviews in 1999.

In Chicago, Reed obtained a new identity, or more accurately, reclaimed his old one. From the time he was 7 months old until he left Mississippi, he lived with his grandfather, Add Reed, and assumed Add’s surname. In Chicago, when Willie obtained a copy of his birth certificate in order to secure a Social Security number, he discovered that his last name was actually Louis, after his father, Joseph Louis. He went by his legal name of Willie Louis from then on, further obscuring his association with the Till case. In fact, most of his friends only learned of his role as a witness after seeing him on television in 2003. After the trial he was offered a $1,000 scholarship from the Elks Club should he have chosen to attend college, but he never took advantage of that. “I just didn’t want to do it,” he later said with regret.

Around 1959, he began working as a surgical orderly at Chicago’s Jackson Park Hospital and remained there for 47 years before retiring in 2006. While working in the intensive care unit in 1971, he met Juliet Mendenhall, then a nurse’s aide. They married in 1976 and made their
home in the Englewood area. Willie, who suffered from nightmares for several years into their marriage, did not even tell his wife about his role in the Till case until 1983. His 2001 interview for the documentary, The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till, reunited him with Mamie Till-Mobley, whom he had not seen in 46 years. After several years of declining health, Willie Louis died of gastronomical bleeding in July 2013 at age 76.

Levi “Too Tight” Collins, one of the black field hands forced to participate in the kidnapping and murder, never got his life back on track after the case faded from the news. Following the trial, he worked odd jobs in Jackson and Memphis but disappeared again in 1957. Some said he feared revenge from local whites who worried that he might talk or by blacks angry because he hadn’t. “I’m plumb worried about the boy,” his 46-year-old father, Walter Collins, said at the time. “We used to be close. He’d come over to my place almost daily and we’d chat. Now I haven’t seen him but once in three years.”

In November 1957, Collin’s wife Treola and their four children arrived in Seattle at the invitation of Treola’s sister, who borrowed $246 from her minister and sent train tickets by way of the Memphis railroad station. “We had to slip off the plantation to catch the train, but we didn’t give our right names,” Treola explained. “We only had the clothing on our backs. I used an old bed spread for diapers on my 6-months-old baby. We had one loaf of bread and one can of peaches to eat.”

Levi surfaced long enough for the couple to divorce, because Treola eventually remarried in 1960. Levi never resumed a relationship with his children, all of whom Treola’s second husband adopted. Treola managed to create a new life for herself in Seattle, where she bore five more children. Levi was not so lucky. Family members heard enough to know that the case completely destroyed him. He became an alcoholic and schizophrenic, hearing voices and hallucinating. He died in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1992.
Henry Lee Loggins was another black man whose name has been tied to the case as an unwilling accomplice. After spending six months in jail in 1956 for theft of some iron belonging to J.W. Milam, he left Mississippi. At first, he moved to St. Louis, where he had lived a few years earlier, but then moved to Dayton, Ohio, in 1957. He did not surface publicly until July 2001 when historians David and Linda Beito found him and interviewed him over the telephone. For years he made a living in Dayton as a junkman. He later appeared in Untold Story and on a 60 Minutes segment about the case, where he denied any knowledge of, or involvement in, the Till murder. In 2005, Loggins became incapacitated after suffering a stroke but spent time in a nursing home and later at his daughter’s home recovering. He died in Dayton in October 2009. Since 1982, his stepson Johnny B. Thomas has been mayor of the village of Glendora, Mississippi, former home to both Loggins and J. W. Milam.

District Attorney Gerald Chatham, whose impassioned closing arguments in the case captivated everyone present, passed away only one year after his attempt to convict the two half-brothers. Because of notoriety in the Till case, the death of this otherwise unknown country lawyer was noted in the New York Times. Ill health had forced his retirement in January 1956. He suffered not only from high blood pressure but from nose bleeds so severe that he was often admitted to the hospital, where doctors had to pack his head in ice to stop them.

Chatham returned to private practice in Hernando, Mississippi, but on Oct. 9, 1956, he came home after speaking at an event, took a nap, and later that evening died of a massive heart attack.

Hamilton Caldwell, the elected attorney for Tallahatchie County who served on the prosecution team, lived for seven years after the trial. He was out of office and serving as vice president of the Bank of Charleston when he drowned in Enid Lake on Sept. 3, 1962. He had been fishing alone in his boat and for reasons unknown, fell overboard as he headed back to shore. He was 64.
Robert Smith, the special prosecutor sent by the governor’s office to aid Chatham in the state’s case against Milam and Bryant, went back to his law practice in Ripley after the trial. He rarely talked about the case. “I’ve come to understand that not a lot of people in those days would have taken that case,” said son Fred in 2003. “I know now it took a lot of courage.” Bobby Elliot, a former law partner of Smith’s, remembered how surprised people were that Smith agreed to do it. “That wasn’t the popular thing to do back then.”

On Dec. 4, 1967, he was at work in Chancery Court and appeared fine. Yet privately, he was masking unbearable pain and went home later that morning and shot himself. Although he did not allude to his father’s suicide, Smith’s son, Bruce, explained in 2005 that his father had been battling alcoholism. “He had a sad life in a way, in his later years.” Smith’s obituary noted that he had helped with “important criminal cases” in his career, but it failed to mention the Till trial in particular.

The five defense attorneys who represented Milam and Bryant remained in Sumner. Sidney Carlton, former president of the Mississippi State Bar Association, died first in 1966 at age 50 after suffering a heart attack. Eighty-year-old Jesse J. Breland, the oldest member of the team, died one year later at Washington County General Hospital in Greenville after a long illness.

J.W. Kellum was one of three members of the defense team who lived for at least four decades after the trial and witnessed Mississippi’s transformation to an integrated society. In 1979, he sat for an interview, alongside civil rights activist Amzie Moore, for the PBS series, Eyes on the Prize. “As far as a fair trial is concerned,” Kellum said, there was no proof that his clients “were the criminal agent.” Had there been a conviction, he believed the Supreme Court would have overturned it. Kellum said this during a new era, however, and he noted with pride that blacks then served on juries, and that more were practicing law. “I would say that Mississippi now is part of the New South.”
Kellum, a self-taught lawyer who never attended college, passed the state bar exam in 1939 and practiced law until his death in July 1996. The year before he died, Kellum insisted that for him, the Till affair was “just another case over the desk.” He said that he asked Milam and Bryant early on if they were guilty of the murder, and both denied that they were. “I believed them,” he insisted, “just like I would if I was interrogating a client now. I would have no reason to think he’s lying to me.” Forty years after representing them, he claimed he still believed in their innocence. “I would have to see something ... But they told me they did not [commit the murder]. They told the other lawyers that they did not.”

After his wife Ruth died in 1992, Kellum remarried. He died four years later.

John Whitten also practiced law until the end of his life. Betty Pearson, a Sumner resident angered by the acquittal, refused to speak to Whitten for over six months after the trial. Yet in 2006, she remembered him as “a wonderful man,” one whom she remained close to for the rest of his life.

At Brelan’s request, Whitten maintained the firm’s name as Brelan and Whitten after his partner’s death. The firm continues to this day, still housed in the same office where Milam and Bryant talked to reporter William Bradford Huie.

Toward the end of his life, Whitten worked in his law office occasionally, but by then his son John Whitten III did the bulk of the firm’s legal work. He had been suffering from Parkinson’s disease since the late 1980s and died in February 2003.

The last surviving member of the defense team was Harvey Henderson, who continued to practice law, albeit part time, up until his death in October 2007. He was active in his local community, was a lifelong member of the Sumner Rotary Club and had also served as its president.
The West Tallahatchie School District retained him as its attorney for over 50 years, and he also served as the legal counsel for Mississippi’s first chapter of Habitat for Humanity, which was formed in Tallahatchie County. He refused all requests for interviews about the Till case.

Judge Curtis Swango, who impressed spectators with his fairness during the trial, remained on the bench of Mississippi’s 17th judicial district for the next 13 years. In 1968, a respiratory condition sent him to the hospital, followed by several months of treatment for tuberculosis at the Mississippi State Sanatorium in Simpson County. He died there in December 1968. Divorced and without children, at his death, he was survived only by his mother and a brother. “He was widely praised for his conduct of the Emmett Till murder case in Tallahatchie County,” noted his obituary, “and was recognized as one of the foremost trial judges in the state.”

The two sheriffs in the case remained active in the years after the kidnapping and murder, although each was completing his term at the time. Former Leflore County Sheriff George Smith, who arrested Milam and Bryant on kidnapping charges, wanted to forget all about his role by the time a reporter asked him about it two years later. “I hate to even mention the case, it was the only thing to mar my four years in office,” he said. “Don’t quote me on anything. I don’t want my name ever printed again in connection with the people involved in this case.”

Smith later served a second term as sheriff from 1964 until 1968. This time, he succeeded his former deputy, John Ed Cothran, who had helped with the kidnapping investigation and served as a witness for the prosecution.

Smith, an avid outdoorsman, was a member of the Parker-Gary Hunting Club and was planning a busy season when he died unexpectedly in 1975 at the age of 72.

Former Tallahatchie sheriff Henry Clarence Strider, who aided the
defense at the trial and claimed the body retrieved from the river was not that of Emmett Till, planned to run for the office again in 1959 after sitting out the required minimum of one term, but he changed his mind at the urging of his wife after he barely escaped an assassination attempt in 1957. While he sat in his car outside of a store in the town of Cowart, someone fired a shot at his head, missing him, but striking the metal piece between the window and windshield. Strider claimed that the shooter had been sent down from Chicago by the NAACP for the express purpose of killing him, and that the would-be assassin was known to black workers living on Strider's plantation. Strider also maintained that the governor of Illinois refused to extradite the mysterious gunman back to Mississippi for trial, thus the entire matter was dropped. Still fearing for his life in 1963, Strider declined to run for his former job yet again.

By 1962, Strider was chairman of the State Game and Fish Commission. In February of that year, state officials tried to keep black student James Meredith from registering at Old Miss, and the defiance of the governor, Ross Barnett, made national news. Strider, ever the segregationist, announced during the conflict that 250 supervisors and game wardens were ready to aid Ole Miss in preserving its white-only student body should they be needed.

In February 1965, Strider won a special election to the state Senate, where he represented Grenada, Yalobusha and Tallahatchie counties for the next five years. In addition to his role with the Game and Fish Commission, he was a member of the Public Property, Transportation, and Water and Irrigation committees, and chairman of the Penitentiaries Committee.

In July 1968, Strider admitted on the floor of the state Senate that he had paid for votes during his 1951 campaign for Tallahatchie County sheriff. He disclosed this as the Senate debated a bill that provided for absentee voting for teachers and students. “In those days you didn’t win elections,
you bought them,” he told his colleagues. He said that he paid out a total of $30,000 for blank absentee ballots reserved for people who had indicated they would not be present on Election Day.

Although he is remembered for regularly insulting the black press in the hot, crowded courtroom in Sumner, his election to the Senate after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 forced him to deal with a black constituency who finally had the power of the ballot. Yet Strider would have been happy to rid the Delta of its black citizens. In February 1966, he co-sponsored a bill to relocate Mississippi blacks to other states, as a new farm bill was making it harder for laborers to earn a living. A proposed relocation commission would seek federal funds for the removal of those who wanted to go. “If they (Negro farm workers) feel like they are put upon or have to live in tents and opportunities are brighter somewhere else, we’ll be glad to get them there,” said Strider’s co-sponsor, Sen. Robert Crook of Ruleville. Nothing ever came of the proposal, however.

Like Sheriff Smith, Strider was a hunter. On Dec. 27, 1970, Strider died of a heart attack while on a deer hunt in Issaquena County; his body was shortly discovered by others. Gov. John Bell Williams flew to Clarksdale to attend the funeral. In 1981, a portion of Mississippi 32 was designated as the Henry Clarence Strider Memorial Highway.
Roy Bryant and his wife, Carolyn, Juanita and J.W. Milam celebrate the jury’s acquittal for the 1955 killing of Emmett Till. Months later, they confessed their guilt to Look magazine.

A year after the murder trial, co-defendant J.W. Milam was living on a farm between Ruleville and Cleveland. Several months after that, William Bradford Huie interviewed the brothers for a follow-up article to his “confession” piece from a year before. It, too, appeared in Look magazine. In the accompanying photographs, both men appear happy, but it was obvious that the smiles were only a façade. Huie described them as having “been disappointed,” explaining further that, “They have suffered disillusionment, ingratitude, resentment, misfortune,” but as yet, no guilt. Few had pity on them, even those who had earlier been supportive. Milam owned no land and could not get his former backers to rent to him. He was finally able to rent 217 acres in Sunflower County with the help of his brother-in-law and secured a $4,000 furnish (the funds to plant a cotton crop) from a Tallahatchie County bank where one of his defense attorneys, John Whitten, sat on the loan committee.
Blacks would no longer work for Milam, and he was forced to pay higher wages to whites for the same work.

For three years after the trial, Milam held several menial plantation jobs. In 1958 he was living in a tenant house on a plantation owned by a Citizen’s Council member. On Valentine’s Day, the New York Post reported that Milam had been seen standing in a bread line waiting to receive rations from the Welfare Department. The black Pittsburgh Courier picked up on the story, also. The director of the Washington County welfare department would not confirm or deny the Post report, but Milam adamantly declared it false. Despite admitting to hard times a year earlier when talking to Huie, Milam bluntly told an inquiring reporter for Jet magazine, “Quote me as saying the New York Post is a g----d liar. I’m standing here with’a ass-pocket full of money.”

The Milams later moved to Orange, Texas, but returned to Greenville after only a few years. They would make their home at 615 Purcell St., where J.W. would live out the rest of his life. The house was a converted into African American Methodist Church in Greenville’s black section.

Milam would have a few run-ins with the law while living in Greenville. In 1969 he was convicted in City Court for writing a bad check and fined $55. Three years later the same court fined him $300 and sentenced him to 60 days in jail for using a stolen credit card. Four months after that, he was convicted of assault and battery, fined $30, and sentenced to 10 days in jail.

By the time the Milams returned to Mississippi a decade after the Till trial, the outrage over the murder had subsided, and they were able to live quietly, for the most part. Milam eventually found work as a heavy equipment operator but that ended due to declining health. After a very long and painful illness, he succumbed to cancer on New Year’s Eve, 1980 at age 61. He and his wife Juanita were rumored to have divorced at some point, but this was not true.
Because J.W. never held a permanent job, Juanita began working as a hairdresser at the Greenville Beauty Salon in the 1960s, where she remained until owner Thelma Wood retired and closed the shop around 1990.

Although she enjoyed a long and steady career, Juanita’s life was never the same after the murder of Emmett Till, and she appeared genuinely sad most of the time. Her depression had not been a part of her life prior to the notorious lynching that thrust her family into the spotlight. Despite her personal suffering, she was generous with her family and friends and managed to maintain many of her life-long interests. She was an avid reader and football fan. An active Methodist, she bought a keyboard and learned to play a few hymns to help her congregation enjoy the benefit of music.

Juanita never remarried after J.W.’s death, nor did she allow herself any further romance. She later sold her home on Purcell Street and eventually moved to Ocean Springs, Mississippi. After J.W.’s death, Juanita became estranged from Roy and Carolyn Bryant, and they never spoke again. Juanita and Carolyn saw each other, but did not speak, at the funeral of Milam and Bryant sibling Dan Milam, who died in 1999. Juanita stormed out of the service after Milam and Bryant family members became involved in a confrontation over blame in Emmett Till’s death.

Juanita, who was politically liberal, maintained interracial friendships, and her best friend for many years was a black neighbor woman. Juanita suffered a stroke in 2008, and in October of that year, her oldest son, Horace “Bill” Milam, died at age 57. After several years of declining health, Juanita died in Ocean Springs on Jan. 14, 2014, at age 86.

Roy Bryant’s life, like that of his brother J.W.’s, was filled with hardship. After a black boycott forced the closure of his store three weeks after his release from jail, the family moved to Indianola, in Sunflower County. There, Roy reportedly found work as a mechanic. After laboring at odd
jobs for 75 cents a day, he attended welding school nine miles away in Inverness, at the Bell Machine Shop. In 1985 Bryant reported to the Clarion Ledger that his welding made him legally blind. He suffered from optic nerve degeneration in both eyes, and his left eye was further damaged after a small piece of steel became lodged in it.

Bryant had other ambitions before settling on welding school. In May 1956, the Delta Democrat-Times, responding to rumors that Bryant had become an Indianola policeman, learned that he had sought a job with the local force, but was turned away. “He applied with us,” confirmed Indianola police chief, Will Love, “but he does not work here.”
cousins of Till, said authorities should take a fresh look at the killing of Till since Carolyn Donham, then wife of Roy Bryant, who was at the center of the case, is now quoted as saying she lied in a new book.

Six months later on Nov. 19, Roy and Carolyn Bryant were riding as passengers in a car driven by Carolyn’s 18-year-old brother, James Holloway, in Greenville, when they were involved in a head-on collision at about 1:45 a.m. The second vehicle was driven by a black airman who was stationed at the Greenville Air Force Base. All three were treated for minor injuries at Greenville’s General Hospital and released. The four-paragraph article in the Delta Democrat–Times reporting the accident mentioned nothing of the Bryants’ notoriety in the Till case, although the Chicago Defender shortly learned of the story and reported that fact. That same day, perhaps for reasons brought on by the accident, Carolyn gave birth to her third son, Frankie Lee.

By the fall of 1957, Roy was working as a welder in Morgan City, Louisiana. The Bryants shortly moved to Orange, Texas, where a daughter was born two years later. Because Carolyn had been sick with the measles during her pregnancy, her daughter was born deaf. Sometime later, the family relocated to Vinton, Louisiana, just thirteen miles away, where Roy continued to weld for a steel company. They bought a home there and lived in Vinton until returning to Mississippi in 1973.

When Roy, Carolyn, and the two youngest children left Louisiana in 1973 and returned to Mississippi, they relocated to Ruleville, in Sunflower County. Roy went back into the grocery business by taking over a small store that had been run by family members.

At some point, Roy and Carolyn Bryant’s marriage developed serious problems, and it became unbearable for Carolyn. Even her mother-in-law, Eula Bryant, saw it. Eula, whom Carolyn described as tough and outspoken, asked Carolyn in front of Roy many times why she stayed
married to him. Eula died in August 1974. A year later on Aug. 15, Carolyn left Roy and two months after that, filed for divorce. Their divorce papers describe Roy as having been guilty of “habitual cruel and inhuman treatment of her and of habitual drunkenness.” Perhaps Roy’s demons had concerned his mother because she had once endured similar abuses from her second husband, Henry Bryant. Carolyn asked for sole custody of their daughter, the complaint read, because “said child needs the care and guidance which only a devoted mother can give.” Roy failed to dispute any of the allegations. When the divorce was finalized two months later on Oct. 28, 1975, sole custody went to Carolyn. Roy was granted visitation and ordered to pay $75 per month in child support beginning Nov. 1. A lump sum of $6,300 for alimony was due by Dec. 1.

After their return to Mississippi, the Bryants managed to continue a low-profile existence, despite living in close proximity to the land of the Till murder. In fact, in 1977, both Roy and his brother, James Bryant, were listed as two of five challengers to Ruleville’s incumbent aldermen. In the end, the brothers lost, each receiving the least number of votes of all the candidates. James garnered 53 while Roy received only 45. The winners received between 270 and 530 votes. Roy married Vera Jo Orman, an accountant at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman, in May 1980. They remained in Ruleville.

In 1978, Roy Bryant lost his permit to handle food stamps for one year because he was allowing customers to purchase non-food items with their coupons. In 1982, the Inspector General’s office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture learned that Bryant had been purchasing food stamps at a discount for cash and then selling them back to the government at full value. In October 1983, Bryant was indicted on five counts of food stamp fraud, pleaded not guilty and was scheduled for a December trial. On Dec. 7, however, Bryant changed his plea to guilty on two counts in exchange for the government dropping the rest. Bryant returned to court for sentencing two months later, and through the pleadings of his attorney, he was given only three years probation and
ordered to pay a $750 fine. Bryant had retained state senator Robert L.
Crook of Ruleville as his counsel. Crook told the court that 53-year-old
Bryant “is a good citizen of Ruleville, who is disabled and has been in
very poor health a number of years, who has attempted to work despite
that circumstance, and to be gainfully employed in the course of running
his own store.” He was caring for both his wife and disabled sister and
was an honorably discharged veteran of the Army. As to the charges
against him, however, “He knows he has made a mistake.”

Bryant promised to obey the law respecting food stamp regulations
going forward but found himself unable to resist the temptation to
repeat the same violations only a few years later. In February 1987, he
was again caught purchasing food stamps at a cash discount, and this
time, his sister, Mary Louise Campbell, who worked as a cashier at the
store, was indicted along with him the following September as a co-
conspirator on six counts of food stamp fraud. Bail was set for Bryant at
$10,000, and for Campbell at $5,000. Campbell pleaded guilty to count
four on Nov. 23, and Bryant pleaded guilty on counts five and six.
Campbell did not receive any prison time, but Bryant, having been
convicted four years earlier for the same crime, received a two-year
prison sentence and was ordered to turn himself in to the attorney
Clinton pardoned Campbell. Bryant served eight months of his term.

Bryant attended the first town meeting of the administration of Shirley
Edwards, the town’s first black mayor, and complained of burglaries at
his fireworks store and poor performance by police in stopping it.
Reminiscent of his actions in his most famous dirty deed, Bryant had no
trouble taking the law into his own hands and threatened to do so. “If I
catch one out there this big [raising his hands two and a half feet off the
floor], I’m going to twist his damn head off.” Edwards did not hesitate in
telling a reporter that “Bryant is a vicious man ... If my people did not
deal or trade with him, he couldn’t stay here.”
Bryant began battling cancer and diabetes. Beginning around September 1993, he underwent radiation treatments for the next year and lost 35 pounds. Two months before his death, he spoke for two hours to a reporter for the Palm Beach Post but refused to say much about the Till case. He again denied that he had anything to do with the murder and matter-of-factly said, “I have no idea” who killed the Chicago youth when the reporter asked. Bryant believed that his acquittal in the Till case meant that people should leave that past alone. The case that brought him worldwide notoriety in 1955 was to him, “just something in the past. You have to leave it alone, live your life. You can’t just sit around and cry over spilt milk.” His frustration was caused in part by the occasional threats he received by crank callers. “They say: ‘We don’t like what you did a few years ago. We’re comin’ over to get you.’ I say, ‘Well, bring your g----d ass on over—what’s taking you so long?”

Bryant died of cancer on Sept. 1, 1994, at the Baptist Hospital in Jackson. When Vera Jo Bryant died in May 2012, her obituary mentioned nothing about her marriage to Roy, and only listed her parents and a brother as family members who had preceded her in death. She was, however, buried next to her infamous husband whom she was married to for 14 years.

Within a few months of the murder, another brother, Leslie Milam, who ran the plantation on which Emmett Till was murdered, was “requested” to leave because many of the black laborers working there were leaving the farm out of fear. He shortly found a new job on a plantation in the nearby town of Cleveland. Fifteen years later in February 1971, he was arrested, and four months after that, convicted of illegally possessing over 500 methamphetamine pills, popularly known as speed. He was sentenced to one year at Parchman state prison. His defense attorney was J.W. Kellum.

Although never charged or tried, the biggest burden he carried throughout his life was his involvement in the Emmett Till murder. On
Thursday, Aug. 29, 1974, local minister Macklyn Hubble received a call from Leslie’s wife, Frances. Hubble, who had been pastor of the First Baptist Church in Cleveland, Mississippi, since 1962, knew the family, and Frances asked him to come to the Milam home at Leslie’s request. When he arrived he was ushered into a room where he saw Leslie laying on a couch, near death. Frances left the room and Hubble pulled up a chair. Leslie, so weak that he could barely whisper, was nevertheless anxious to talk and immediately told Hubble that he wanted to get something off his chest. He proceeded to confess that he had been involved in the murder of Emmett Till, which had occurred 19 years and one day earlier. Leslie provided no details of the crime, but Hubble could see that he was remorseful. Leslie Milam died the following morning. Hubble officiated at the funeral a few days later.
This is an undated file photo of Mrs. Carolyn Bryant, who was a storekeeper in Money, Miss., in 1955. Mrs. Bryant was involved in an incident in the small rural community that resulted in the lynching death of a 14-year-old boy named Emmett Till.

AP

Carolyn Bryant is perhaps frozen in memory as the 21-year-old local beauty working behind a counter in a country store where Emmett Till fatefully crossed her path in 1955. She turned 84 years old in July 2018.
and has, for decades, been a devoted mother and grandmother and enjoys a close relationship with her family. Carolyn, for her part, has wanted only to live quietly, out of the spotlight.

She learned American Sign Language and became very proficient at it so that she could communicate with her daughter. On one occasion, her skills allowed her to come to the rescue of a deaf woman who had been in a car accident, comforting her until paramedics arrived. She also was quite talented at making jewelry, which she sold at arts and craft shows until the early 2000s.

Like Mamie Till-Mobley, Carolyn experienced the pain of losing a child, or in her case, two. In September 1995, her firstborn, Roy Bryant Jr., passed away of cystic fibrosis. In April 2010, Frank, her youngest son, died of heart failure. Her faith in God sustained her through these two losses, and she believes her sons are now together. She says she places God first and her children second in her life.

Two months after Frank’s death, Carolyn put her home in Greenville up for sale and moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, to live with her surviving son. She brought along her dog, a 16-year-old Shih Tzu, but by July 2012, the dog had died, but her son surprised Carolyn with another of the same breed.

Lasting romantic love eluded Carolyn, however. After her divorce from Roy Bryant in 1975, she remarried at least twice. In 1984 she wed Greenville resident Griffin Chandler, an employee at U.S. Gypsum. The marriage ended three and a half years later with Chandler’s death. The widowed Carolyn soon married again, this time to former Leland police officer David Donham. In 1988, Carolyn began attending Mississippi Delta Junior College in Moorhead and took classes as a part-time student until 1990. The Donhams eventually divorced. With the help of her brother, Thomas Holloway, Carolyn moved to Brookhaven into a small home after her divorce, where she lived until Thomas died in 2000. After that, she returned to Greenville to be near Frank.
In June 2010, Carolyn joined Facebook, establishing a profile with a username that kept her actual identity hidden. Five months later, she both posed and answered the question as to what constitutes the real qualities in a man. Her answer was that they must be ethical and stand up for a good cause. If this seemed to hint of her first husband’s attempt to preserve the sanctity of her white womanhood, which propelled both her and him into the public eye, she was quick to add that a real man will respect others and refrain from bullying.

With the encouragement of her daughter-in-law, Marsha Bryant, Carolyn agreed to write her memoir. However, Frank Bryant’s death took a toll on her and the project stalled. When the FBI investigated the case from 2004–5, Carolyn became a focus. In February 2007, Joyce Chiles, district attorney for Sunflower County where the murder occurred, called a grand jury to hear evidence against Carolyn for possible manslaughter charges. In the end, the racially mixed jury refused to indict, citing a lack of evidence. “I feel like the district attorney used us as scapegoats,” said black jury member Otis Johnson. “To me, it seems like they just wanted to put on a show and go through the process to make people happy.”
Carolyn Bryant Donham, 84, seen in this image from video taken in 2004 by a "60 Minutes" video crew, is quoted in a 2017 book, “The Blood of Emmett Till,” as saying she lied about Till accosting her in 1955. 

AP

A year later, Marsha Bryant arranged for Carolyn to meet with historian Tim Tyson, and, for the only time besides speaking to the FBI a few years earlier, Carolyn granted two recorded interviews. It was during these sessions that she allegedly recanted her courtroom testimony that Emmett Till grabbed her by the waist and propositioned her. “Honestly, I just don’t remember. It was fifty years ago,” Tyson says she told him before he set up his recorder. “You tell these stories for so long that they seem true, but that part is not true.” Marsha Bryant, however, says she was present for the interviews and that Carolyn never said these words or otherwise recanted. Carolyn suffers from rheumatoid arthritis, is losing her eyesight, and mostly relies on a wheelchair. She has said
privately that the Emmett Till case has kept her a prisoner.

Devery S. Anderson is the author of Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement. This article is a condensed and updated version of Chapter 10 of the book.

Updated 7:23 PM EST Dec 10, 2019
12 Deaths in Mississippi Tell a Grim Story

The only way to “fix” a problem like the American prison system is to end it.

By Jamelle Bouie
Opinion Columnist
Jan. 31, 2020

Twelve people have died in Mississippi state prisons since the start of the new year. Nine deaths occurred in the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman. At least one was a suicide. Most were a result of violence between inmates: beatings, stabbings and other fatal altercations.

State officials have promised to stop the violence. After news of two of those deaths broke last week, Gov. Tate Reeves, a Republican who took office earlier this month, said he would work “around the clock” with the state Department of Corrections to “respond immediately” and prevent new incidents “going forward.”

What’s striking about this situation is how little of it is new. The Parchman prison, which dates to 1904, has a long and infamous history of violence and abuse. It also has a history of reform. But no amount of change has been able to break the cycle of brutality. And why would it? The history of Parchman is a prime example of how dehumanization and neglect are intrinsic to separating people from their freedom.

TWITTER CHAT
Jamelle Bouie answered questions about this column on Twitter.

The Mississippi of the late 19th century was a rigid apartheid state, its criminal justice system defined by cruel, gratuitous punishment. Black suspects bore the brunt of state violence. Often arrested for petty crimes like theft, gambling and “vagrancy” — traveling without a work permit or evidence of a job — black Mississippians were given hefty fines and lengthy sentences. They were then leased out to private companies for de facto slave labor on railroads and plantations. Conditions were abysmal.

“The prisoners ate and slept on bare ground, without blankets or mattresses, and often without clothes,” writes the historian David Oshinsky in “Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice.” “Convicts dropped from exhaustion, pneumonia, malaria, frostbite, consumption, sunstroke, dysentery, gunshot wounds, and ‘shackle poisoning’ (the constant rubbing of chains and leg irons against bare flesh).” In the 1880s, Oshinsky notes, the annual mortality rate for Mississippi's convict population ranged from 9 percent to 16 percent.

Convict leasing was on the wane by the turn of the last century, but Mississippi’s white elite was still obsessed with “Negro crime.” Enter Gov. James K. Vardaman. Elected in 1903 on a demagogic platform of rural chauvinism and white supremacy — he promised to tax the planters, give aid to the (white) poor and turn back “social equality” — Vardaman was a kind of reformer. He opposed convict leasing as a public giveaway to wealthy landowners and an oppressive burden on impoverished offenders, including blacks.

“Vardaman would spend a lifetime fighting to deny blacks political rights and social equality,” explains Oshinsky, “Yet he also believed that Negroes who accepted their lowly place in the human order should be protected from abuse.”

Vardaman wanted a prison that would socialize black criminals into, as Oshinsky paraphrases the idea, “proper discipline, strong work habits, and respect for white authority.” He also wanted it to turn a profit. Under his leadership, the state cleared thousands of acres near the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta in an area called Parchman place, named after the family that had owned it for years. Workers planted crops and constructed prison buildings. The Parchman Penitentiary was born. By the 1910s it was self-sufficient, operating on the same principles as an antebellum plantation, with black convict laborers supervised by white overseers, although the share of white prisoners would increase with time.

Parchman would, in short order, become notorious for its hard labor and brutality. (The blues musician Bukka White immortalized
his experience of the prison in a 1940 song, “Parchman Farm Blues.”) Inmates slept on dirt floors. Violence was common. In 1954 officials added a maximum security unit where one prisoner recalled, “they just beat the living crap out of you.” Serious reform would come after the Civil Rights movement with Gates v. Collier, a class-action lawsuit filed in 1971 on behalf of four inmates but constructed with testimony from hundreds of prisoners. They attested to murders, rapes, beatings and tortures — one inmate, Danny Bennett, died after he was shocked with cattle prods and left unconscious under the sun in 100-degree heat. They also spoke to poor conditions, from open sewage and polluted water supplies to “kitchens overrun with insects, rodents, and the stench of decay.” A federal judge would describe the prison as “unfit for human habitation.”

Decided for good in 1974, Gates would essentially create minimum standards for incarceration in the United States. At Parchman, this meant desegregation and civilian guards, freedom of worship, minimum living space and an end to forced labor. It also spurred the state of Mississippi to create a Department of Corrections to oversee its penal facilities.

But reform had limits. New facilities and professional staff doesn't change the fact that prisons are a place of confinement, where society isolates many of its least-wanted and most vulnerable members. By the 1990s, according to a report from the American Civil Liberties Union, death row prisoners at Parchman — renamed Mississippi State Penitentiary — reported “profound isolation, unrelied idleness and monotony, denial of exercise, intolerable stench and pervasive filth, grossly malfunctioning plumbing, and constant exposure to human excrement.” H.I.V. positive prisoners in the general population told lawyers from the A.C.L.U. that they “were living in squalor, categorically segregated from the rest of the prison population, and barred from all prison educational and vocational programs and jobs.” Assaults between inmates, often part of rival gangs, remained common.

Parchman is hardly alone in its history of violence and neglect. If anything, it's just an extreme example of conditions that occur throughout American prisons. Even so, there's worse. Last year, the Department of Justice released a 56-page report on the Alabama prison system, where guards are few and far between and where prisoners experience high rates of homicide and sexual assault, where — The New York Times reported — “One prisoner had been dead for so long that when he was discovered lying face down, his face was flattened.” The nation's jails — local facilities where arrestees are placed pending trial or sentencing — aren't much better. According to the most recent data, a 2015 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1,053 people died in local jails in 2014. The leading cause, suicide, accounted for 35 percent of those deaths.

Change, for Parchman and other facilities, will almost certainly come. We should understand, however, that reform is only ever temporary. There's only so much you can do within the paradigm of incarceration. A prison may or may not be humane, but it will always be dehumanizing. The isolation, the lack of liberty — the separation from family and community — are antithetical to human life. In which case, the only way to “fix” a problem like the American prison system is to end it. But for an unequal, racially stratified country like ours, that destination is on the far horizon, if it's on the horizon at all.

More From Jamelle Bouie

Opinion | Jamelle Bouie
Mitch McConnell's Complicity Has Deep Roots  Jan. 28, 2020

Opinion | Jamelle Bouie
The Iconic Man With a Gun Is a White Man  Jan. 22, 2020

Opinion | Jamelle Bouie
Another Thing Tom Steyer Is Wrong About  Jan. 17, 2020

Opinion | Jamelle Bouie
Trump Likes Farmers Better Than Some Other Welfare Recipients  Jan. 14, 2020

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.
Photos
1. Emmett Louis Till
2. Amanda Bradley, Willie Reed, and Add Reed
3. Mourners viewing Emmett Till’s body at Robert’s Temple Church of God in Christ
4. Mamie Till
5. Mose and Simeon Wright
6. Mamie Till, Gene Mobley, and Emmett Till captured by David Jackson
7. Mourners outside Robert’s Temple Church of God in Christ
8. Emmett and Mamie Till
9. Mamie Till
10. Emmett Till
11. Simeon Booker for Jet magazine, Clotye Murdock of Ebony magazine, L. Alex Wilson of The Tri-State Defender, and Steve Duncan of The St. Louis Argus covering the trial
12. Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market
13. Roy Bryant, right, and J.W. Milam, second from right, leaving the courthouse
14. Walter Reed, Willie Reed, Mrs. Mamie Bradley, mother of Emmett Till, Michigan congressman Charles Diggs, Dr. T.R.M. Howard, and Amanda Bradley, at the trial Emmett Till’s murder
15. Mose Wright testifying in court
16. Jury of 12 White Men
17. Sheriff Clarence Strider serving Mamie Till with a subpoena
18. Roy Bryant, Carolyn Bryant, Juanita Milam, and J.W. Milam
19. J.W. Milam, Roy Bryant, and Defense Attorney
20. Simeon Wright
21. Judge Curtis Swango
22. Carolyn Bryant
23. Sheriff Clarence Strider
24. Mose Wright’s house near Money, MS
25. Simeon Booker
26. Mose Wright