



PROJECT MUSE®

Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till

Harold, Christine.

DeLuca, Kevin Michael.

Rhetoric & Public Affairs, Volume 8, Number 2, Summer 2005, pp.
263-286 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: 10.1353/rap.2005.0075



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/rap/summary/v008/8.2harold.html>

BEHOLD THE CORPSE: VIOLENT IMAGES AND THE CASE OF EMMETT TILL

CHRISTINE HAROLD AND KEVIN MICHAEL DELUCA

The widely disseminated image of Emmett Till's mutilated corpse rhetorically transformed the lynched black body from a symbol of unmitigated white power to one illustrating the ugliness of racial violence and the aggregate power of the black community. This reconfiguration was, in part, an effect of the black community's embracing and foregrounding Till's abject body as a collective "souvenir" rather than allowing it to be safely exiled from public life.

We do not know what the body can do.

Spinoza

Society is concerned to tame the Photograph, to temper the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it.

Roland Barthes

If the men who killed Emmett Till had known his body would free a people, they would have let him live.

Reverend Jesse Jackson Sr.

I had to get through this. There would be no second chance to get through this. I noticed that none of Emmett's body was scarred. It was bloated, the skin was loose, but there were no scars, no signs of violence anywhere. Until I got to his chin.

When I got to his chin, I saw his tongue resting there. It was huge. I never imagined that a human tongue could be that big. Maybe it was the effect of the water, since he had been in the river for several days, or maybe the heat. But as I gazed at the tongue, I couldn't help but think that it had been choked out of

Christine Harold is Assistant Professor of Speech Communication at the University of Georgia in Athens. Kevin Michael DeLuca is Associate Professor of Speech Communication at the University of Georgia.

his mouth. I forced myself to move on, to keep going one small section at a time, as if taking this gruesome task in small doses could somehow make it less excruciating. . . . From the chin I moved up to his right cheek. There was an eyeball hanging down, resting on that cheek. . . . It was that light hazel brown everyone always thought was so pretty. Right away, I looked to the other eye. But it wasn't there. It seemed like someone had taken a nut picker and plucked that one out. . . . [His nose] had been chopped, maybe with a meat cleaver. It looked as if someone had tenderized his nose."¹

When Mamie Till Bradley entered Chicago's A. A. Rayner and Sons funeral home in 1955 to identify the mutilated corpse of her 14-year-old son, Emmett, she could not have prepared herself for what she would see. Less than two weeks earlier, she had put her son on a train to begin a journey that would take him from Chicago to Money, Mississippi, where he was to spend two weeks of his summer vacation visiting his relatives. As they said their goodbyes, she gave the precocious teenager a quick lesson in how to behave as a young black man in the South: "[do] not hesitate to humble yourself," she advised the boy, "[even] if you [have] to get down on your knees."²

The facts remain hopelessly inconsistent as to whether or not Emmett took his mother's advice when he bought a pack of bubblegum from Carolyn Bryant, the 21-year-old wife of a Money shopkeeper, on the evening of August 24, 1955. While most descriptions of the event agree that Till wanted to impress his new Mississippi friends by taking their dare to flirt with Bryant, they differ over the degree to which he made good on the wager. By some accounts, he "made advances [and] tried to block her path" and even "put his hands on her waist, and in a lewd manner propositioned her."³ Another account suggests that Till merely said, "Gee. You look like a movie star."⁴ Bryant herself testified that Till "called her 'baby' and another unsavory name, and 'wolf whistled' at her."⁵ Till's friends recall that he simply said 'bye, baby' as he exited the store."⁶ Despite the disparate versions of the exchange between Emmett Till and Carolyn Bryant, one fact is indisputable: the events of that evening led to one of the most brutal and most publicized race murders in American history.⁷

Although there is increasing evidence the killers did not act alone, most people familiar with the Till case believe that the boy was slain by the two men charged with his murder: Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, Carolyn Bryant's husband and his half-brother. Even the jurors "later confessed that not a single member of the panel doubted the defendants were guilty of murder."⁸ However, the all-white, all-male jury found the two brothers not guilty after little more than an hour of deliberations. *Emerge* magazine reports that they would have rendered an innocent verdict even sooner, but the town's sheriff-elect sent a message to jurors telling them "that they should wait a while before

announcing their verdicts to make it ‘look good.’”⁹ Amazingly, Bryant and Milam later confessed to the murder to a journalist for *Look* magazine in exchange for \$4,000.¹⁰

In 1955, the photographic image of Emmett Till’s corpse put a shocking and monstrous face on the most brutal extremes of American racial injustice. The grainy image was widely circulated in the black press, and thousands of mourners viewed his body directly at the funeral home. The imagery of the Till case—the grisly image of his corpse, but also the image of a happy Emmett in his Christmas suit, the image of his mother’s anguished face as she watched his casket lowered into the ground, the image of Till’s elderly uncle publicly identifying one of the murderers in the courtroom, bravely declaring “dar he,” and images of the segregated Mississippi courtroom in which African American community members, journalists, and a congressman were herded into an unventilated corner in the sweltering summer heat—became a crucial visual *vocabulary* that articulated the ineffable qualities of American racism in ways words simply could not do. As we will suggest, the imagery of the case, and that of Till’s corpse specifically, served as a political catalyst for black Americans in the then-fledgling civil rights movement.

The visceral imagery of the Till murder refuses to be filed away in a dusty archive of American civil rights history. In 2004, nearly 50 years after the original trial, the Justice Department reopened the Till murder case. U.S. senator from New York Charles Schumer, a champion of the reinvestigation, has said, “The murder of Emmett Till was one of the seminal moments in our nation’s civil-rights movement and the failure to bring his murderers to justice remains a stain on America’s record of reconciliation,” and hence he and others called on U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft to “fulfill the promise he made at his confirmation hearings to fully enforce America’s civil-rights laws. In this rare instance, justice delayed may not be justice denied.”¹¹ The case of Emmett Till continues to demand justice, largely because his killers were never punished for the crime, despite their post-trial confession. As we will suggest, however, the haunting images surrounding the case should not be overlooked as a crucial component of its continued rhetorical force. As Schumer suggests, they continue to “stain” America’s dream of itself.

Renewed interest in the case has been sparked, in part, by the investigative work of documentary filmmaker Keith Beauchamp, who spent most of the 1990s researching the case for his film *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*. Beauchamp interviewed a number of eyewitnesses who claim that as many as ten people may have been involved in the Till murder, some of whom are still alive.¹² In 2003, PBS aired another documentary, *The Murder of Emmett Till*,

as part of its *American Experience* series, and Random House published Mamie Till-Mobley's *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America*. Mrs. Till-Mobley passed away while touring in promotion of the book, less than a year before her dream of the case's being reopened was realized.

These projects came on the heels of the powerful book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, a collection of photographs that continues to tour U.S. museums and galleries. The *New York Times* review of the book rightly describes the timelessness of such graphic images:

These images make the past present. They refute the notion that photographs of charged historical subjects lose their power, softening and becoming increasingly aesthetic with time. These images are not going softly into any artistic realm. Instead they send shock waves through the brain, implicating ever larger chunks of American society and in many ways reaching up to the present. They give one a deeper and far sadder understanding of what it has meant to be white and to be black in America. And what it still means.¹³

In other words, lynching images, such as those of Emmett Till, are too visually provocative, too viscerally challenging, to be contained by time or distance.

In this essay, we explore the role of a particular image that has had an electrifying effect on many Americans. The "shock waves" produced by the corpse of Emmett Till in the mid-1950s continue to reverberate powerfully in the memory of those exposed to it. We suggest that they do so, in large part, because of the forcefulness of the image of the human body in peril. The dissemination and reception of this image—of the severely mutilated face of a child—illustrates the rhetorical and political force of images in general and of the body specifically. In what follows, we will first describe the rhetorical function of this image by exploring the dissemination of the photograph of Emmett Till within the context of the racial lynching tradition in the United States. We will then discuss the ways in which the images of the case served as a call to action for many of the African Americans who visually "consumed" them. Finally, we will explore the ways in which the African American community reinterpreted the horrible imagery of this brutalized black body. Whereas the black body in pain had traditionally served as a symbol of unmitigated white power, the corpse of Emmett Till became a visual trope illustrating the ugliness of racial violence and the aggregate power of the black community. We suggest that this reconfiguration was, in part, an effect of the black community's embracing and foregrounding Till's abject body rather than allowing it to be safely exiled from communal life.

THE BLACK BODY AT RISK: IMAGE RHETORIC AND RACE

It would not be going too far to say that [Mrs. Till Bradley] . . . invented the strategy that later became the [Southern Christian Leadership Council]'s signature gesture: literally *illustrating* southern atrocity with graphic images of black physical suffering, and disseminating those images nationally.

Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and In Color*

The received rhetorical history of the civil rights movement has largely been a story of a people mobilized by the great speeches of charismatic leaders, most famously Martin Luther King Jr., but also Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Fannie Lou Hamer,¹⁴ and others. In addition to this traditional story, we want to suggest that bodies, perhaps more than eloquence, moved a nation. Black bodies were at stake—their meaning, their treatment, their possibilities. Black bodies at risk were a crucial rhetorical resource for transforming the meaning and treatment of black bodies at large. Young African Americans in Birmingham, for example, being mercilessly battered by high-pressure fire hoses and attacked by police dogs, put on display the lengths to which institutionalized racism would go to maintain its dominance as well as the risks black citizens were willing to take to challenge it. Further, in an age when the “public screen” was emerging as a dominant venue for political action, American audiences were forced to confront the visual tropes of racial strife as never before.¹⁵

It is tempting to say that bodies at risk call out to an innate human empathy, but even the most cursory review of the historical record belies any such comforting notion. The record of atrocities in the twentieth century suggests that bodies at risk—even mutilated and tortured bodies—can inspire even greater barbarity. Although bodies at risk can have multiple meanings, they are undoubtedly a potent source of rhetorical power. That is, competing social groups will contend over the meanings of bodies. The witnessing of bodies retains a privileged authority, but the meaning of those bodies, what mute bodies say, is a site of political struggle. In the twentieth-century United States, black bodies comprised the bloodiest battleground.

Arguably, the regime of Jim Crow was the second act of the Civil War, a war over the meaning of black bodies continued by other means. Blacks were now “free,” which, for many whites, made them all the more necessary to control and subordinate. Lynching was the most violent instrument of control. In her analysis of torture, Elaine Scarry argues that regimes create bodies in pain to make real their power and to anchor their ideological belief systems: “The physical pain is so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality of

'incontestable reality' on that power that has brought it into being. It is, of course, precisely because the reality of that power is so highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used."¹⁶ As in torture, violence against black bodies materializes ideological beliefs. The uncontested reality of black bodies in pain was used to confer the status of uncontested reality onto the belief in white supremacy.

Under Jim Crow, lynched black bodies were offered as evidence of white supremacy. They were the "strange fruit" swinging in the Southern wind of racial hatred; their "bulging eyes and twisted mouths" mutely testifying to the horrible extremes of white power.¹⁷ As the images in *Without Sanctuary* make clear, however, lynched and mutilated black bodies, far from inspiring sympathy, primarily inspired revelry and celebration among participating whites. Lynchings were public spectacles, carnivals of atrocity, so-called "Negro Barbecues," attended by prominent citizens, business leaders, elected officials, church members, judges, rednecks, peckerwoods, women, and children. Kodaks clicked as whites sought to preserve the moment and share it with others in the form of postcards. As the back of one such postcard reads, "This is the barbeque [*sic*] we had last night. My picture is to the left with a cross over it. Your son, Joe."¹⁸ Another reads, "This was made in the court yard in Center Texas he is a 16 year old black boy. He killed Earl's Grandma. She was Florence's mother. Give this to Bud. From Aunt Myrtle."¹⁹ In these lynching pictures, crowds of whites pose with the mutilated bodies. The crowd is often dressed in their Sunday best. Many smile for the camera. Women and children are present. Lynching was an *event*, an occasion to see, to be seen, and to memorialize for others.

Whites also clambered for keepsakes more grisly than the pictures. Before the Holbert couple was burned to death in Mississippi in 1904, for example, "The blacks were forced to hold out their hands while one finger at a time was chopped off. The fingers were distributed as souvenirs."²⁰ Two thousand white Georgians watched an equally gruesome scene, the lynching of Sam Hose: "before saturating Hose with oil and applying the torch, they cut off his ears, fingers, and genitals, and skinned his face. . . . Before Hose's body had even cooled, his heart and liver were removed and cut into several pieces and his bones were crushed into small particles. The crowd fought over these souvenirs."²¹ The mobs turned victims' body parts into horrible mementos of the event, corporeal relics intended to preserve, to *re-present* what might otherwise have forever slipped into the past.

Lynched black bodies were spectacles of white supremacy that helped forge white community. They were also messages of warning and terror for black communities. Lynchings were violent acts with an explicitly rhetorical agenda: "The idea, after all, as one black observer noted, was to make an example,

'knowing full well that one Negro swinging from a tree will serve as well as another to terrorize the community.'"²² Lynchings served as a kind of racial terrorism, anchoring white supremacy in a mutilated black body. Often any black body would do. Indeed, family members of an accused black person were sometimes lynched alongside or in lieu of the accused person. When a white mob near Columbus, Mississippi, was frustrated in its efforts to find and lynch Cordelia Stevenson's son, for example, they "settled on his mother, seized and tortured her, and left her naked body hanging from the limb of a tree for public viewing."²³ Often, the pretext of an accusation was not even necessary. When a likely lynch mob participant was asked why a black man had been killed, he replied, "Oh, because he was a nigger. And he was the best nigger in town. Why, he would even take off his hat to me."²⁴ Apparently, one's blackness, even when humbly performed in line with rigid social codes, was the only necessary provocation for violence.

By the time of Emmett Till's murder, lynching was no longer an acceptable public spectacle, though it was still an acceptable community practice. That is, by 1955, lynching had become an invisible public event: everyone in town would know what had happened, to whom, and "why," but it was no longer performed before a large crowd in the public square. Racial violence had gone more "underground"; however, within the context of a long tradition of lynching, even the inexplicable disappearance of a black body made a perverse kind of sense. History had taught both blacks and whites how to fill in the blanks, how to create a narrative around the missing body. Rumor and speculation now performed the rhetorical violence formerly exacted by the public lynching.

The tortured black body nonetheless was still designed to bear witness to white supremacy and black subordination. However, increasingly, this witness was silent or, in the case of Emmett Till, intended to be *absent*. The belated admission of Till's murderers attests to this intention. Kirk W. Fuoss, in his excellent study "Lynching Performances, Theatres of Violence," reminds us that visibility was a crucial component of the power of lynching.²⁵ Indeed, traditional lynchings were spectacles or, as Fuoss suggests, *theatrical events* performed before an audience. Although, as we will discuss, Emmett Till's killers did not intend for his body to be found (to wit: they tied a 75-pound gin fan to his body before throwing it in the river, and, in court, their lawyers argued that the body found was not that of Emmett Till, the boy they admitted only to kidnapping), they did participate in what Fuoss describes as "performance chaining": "I use the term 'performance chaining' to refer to the ways in which one type of performance led to another. The oral recitations of narrative recounting details of the alleged precipitating crime, for example, not only functioned as performances in their own right, they also fomented future performances."²⁶ The power of lynchings continued to be performed

rhetorically through gruesome stories told and retold in both white and black communities.

In the year after their acquittal, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam told their story to William Bradford Huie in a piece for *Look* magazine. According to Huie, the two admitted to killing the teenager. Upon abducting Till at the home of his great-uncle Mose Wright, Milam recalled asking him: "You the nigger who did the talking?" "Yeah," Till answered. "Don't say 'Yeah' to me: I'll blow your head off."²⁷ In his account, Milam continued to characterize the incident as a legitimate effort to maintain white-black social hierarchy. Blaming an unrepentant Till for his own murder, Milam explained, "He was hopeless. I'm no bully; I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers in their place. I know how to work 'em. But I just decided it was time to put a few people on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are going to stay in their place."²⁸ So, when the brutalized body of Emmett Till became dislodged and resurfaced on the banks of the Tallahatchie River, Milam and Bryant were forced to defend themselves against a murder charge. Only after their acquittal could they weave the body back into a familiar and violent story, one meant to remind blacks that "niggers are going to stay in their place."

Milam's account also suggests the difficulty in maintaining a social order anchored in subservient black bodies when interrupted by defiant Northerners unschooled in the intricate social orders tied to race. The gap between Chicago, Illinois, and Money, Mississippi, was untranslatable, a difficult hermeneutic problem for young Emmett. Mamie Till Bradley's instructions to her son on how to act in the South anticipated the interpretive challenges he would face. Allen describes how many African Americans met those challenges: "Within rigidly prescribed boundaries, black men and women . . . improvised strategies for dealing with whites. The choices were never easy; the risks were always great. To survive was to make what a Louisiana black man called a '*pragmatic resignation*' to reality, to watch every word and action in the presence of whites, to veil their inner feelings, to wear the mask."²⁹ As a means of survival, Southern blacks had perfected a complex rhetorical masquerade. They codified a careful way of being among whites that at least provisionally protected them from harm. Milam's rage at Till points to a conflict between seemingly incommensurate codes. Milam claims to have told Till, before shooting him, "Chicago boy, I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddamn you, I'm going to make an example of you—just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand."³⁰

As he stood naked on the banks of the Tallahatchie, Till's last word apparently triggered Milam's wrath: "You still as good as I am? 'Yeah,' Till answered."³¹ That "Yeah" presented, in a word, a remote world obdurate to the

regime of Jim Crow, a world increasingly deaf to the cultural tones of the South. That a young black man dared reject the “yes, Sir” deference expected of him—be it from obstinacy or ignorance—was apparently enough to inspire murderous rage. Till’s body became, in the hands of Milam and Bryant, a rhetorical text, one more installment in the brutal, yet thoroughly American, story of racial violence. Significantly, this specific instance of violence was, for its perpetrators, “caused” by Till’s failure to keep his *body* in line. That is, he supposedly committed (again, the facts remain hopelessly disputed) the worst crime a young black man could: being sexually suggestive toward a white woman. As Milam told Huie in *Look*, “when a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he’s tired o’ livin’. I’m likely to kill him.” Indeed, Milam and his brother-in-law decided to erase Till’s body—as a warning to others that miscegenation, the racial “mixing” of bodies, could be a capital offense. Like all rhetorical texts, however, Milam and Bryant’s horrible message, inscribed on the body of young Emmett Till, could not be made to signify obediently what its authors demanded. Mamie Till Bradley and her growing network of supporters refused to put Emmett’s body “in its place.” Instead, as Till’s corpse (both his physical body and pictures of it) began to circulate among the national black community, it came to signify much more than his murderers could have expected.

Mamie Till Bradley’s decision to display Emmett’s body in Chicago challenged the dominant meaning of lynched bodies in general. Bryant and Milam would, after their trial, try to interpret Till’s murder as another “uppity nigger” put in his place by justified violence. Mrs. Till Bradley preemptively contested that meaning by exposing her son’s mutilated corpse to thousands of mourners in Chicago and the glare of national media attention. In displaying her son’s body, she challenged the meaning of lynched black bodies, thus challenging the validity of a Southern white supremacist social order buttressed by these bodies. By moving Emmett Till’s corpse from a muddy river bottom in the Mississippi Delta to a public exhibition in urban Chicago, Mamie Till Bradley transformed her son from a victim of white racism to an unforgettable symbol that mobilized a generation of activists.

BEHOLD THE CORPSE: THE EFFECTS OF “WITNESSING” EMMETT TILL

People had to face my son and realize just how twisted, how distorted, how terrifying race hatred could be. People had to consider all of that as they viewed Emmett’s body. The whole nation had to bear witness to this.

Mamie Till Bradley³²

In his autobiography *The Greatest*, Muhammad Ali describes standing on the corner with friends as a teenager looking at newspaper pictures of Emmett Till in the black newspapers: "In one he was laughing and happy. In the other his head was swollen and bashed in, his eyes bulging out of their sockets and his mouth twisted and broken."³³ Ali was haunted by the images and says that he "felt a deep kinship" with Till after learning that the two were born on the same day and year. The murder became for Ali a turning point in his consciousness as a young black man living in a racist society: "I couldn't get Emmett out of my mind until one evening I thought of a way to get back at white people for his death. I remember a poster of a thin white man in striped pants and a top hat who pointed at us above the words Uncle Sam wants you. We stopped and hurled stones at it."³⁴ Ali and his friends then placed two iron shoe rests, stolen from an unattended shoeshine stand, on the nearby train tracks, creating extensive damage when a train came shortly after:

I remember the loud sound of the ties ripping up. I broke out running . . . and then I looked back. I'll never forget the eyes of the man in the poster, staring at us. Uncle Sam wants you. It took two days to get up enough nerve to go back [to the tracks]. A work crew was still cleaning up the debris. And the man in the poster was still pointing. I always knew that sooner or later he would confront me, and I would confront him.³⁵

Although we hesitate to construct an uncomplicated, sutured cause-effect relationship between the image of Till's corpse and the civil rights movement, the former clearly played a significant role in spurring the momentum of the latter. For Ali, for example, the image of a glowering Uncle Sam became twisted when juxtaposed with the image of a battered Emmett Till. Rather than a familiar patriarch calling young men to battle, Uncle Sam's "I want you!" was symbolically recoded as a sinister "You're next!" As such, the young Cassius Clay began to see American "values" quite differently. Seeming to anticipate the effect the atrocity would have, Mamie Till Bradley declined the funeral director's offer to retouch Emmett, insisting that her son's corpse be displayed just as it was found:

I knew that I could talk for the rest of my life about what had happened to my baby, I could explain it in great detail, I could describe what I saw laid out there on that slab at A. A. Rayner's, one piece, one inch, one body part, at a time. I could do all of that and people still would not get the full impact. They would not be able to visualize what had happened, unless they were allowed to see the results of what had happened. They had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this.³⁶

As she recalls telling the funeral director, "Let the world see what I've seen."

And the world did see—at least the world that mattered most, the expanding network of African Americans who knew all too well the dangers they faced and yet were beginning to exercise their collective power and do something about it on a national scale. Pictures of Emmett before and after the murder were circulated in *Jet*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, and *Crisis*.³⁷ In addition to the readers of these mainly black press publications, many others viewed the corpse directly at an open-casket memorial that was, again, insisted upon by Mamie Till Bradley. The most conservative estimates put attendance that day at around 10,000.³⁸ But most assessed a turnout of more like 100,000, and "some estimates say as many as 600,000" mourners walked in a steady procession to view the body.³⁹ Christmas photos of a smiling and robust Emmett were attached to the casket, making the corpse all the more horrible in contrast.

Muhammad Ali was not alone in responding to the image as a call to action. The famous trial attorney Johnny Cochran has said that Till's murder was the main cause for his career choice.⁴⁰ Molefi Asante, founder of the first Ph.D. program in African American studies, writes that "My life's pilgrimage, in many respects, has been to seek liberation from the moment of Till's death."⁴¹ Former NAACP chairman and SNCC communications director Julian Bond has said, "My memories are exact—and parallel those of many others my age—I felt vulnerable for the first time in my life—Till was a year younger—and recall believing that this could easily happen to me—for no reason at all. I lived in Pennsylvania at the time."⁴² Audre Lorde, Bebe Moore Campbell, Toni Morrison, and Gwendolyn Brooks have all written poems or whole novels based on the story. Bob Dylan expressed the feelings of many whites of his generation in his song "The Death of Emmett Till": "If you can't speak out against this kind of thing / a crime that's so unjust / Your eyes are filled with dead men's dirt / your mind is filled with dust."⁴³

Martin Luther King Jr. was known on many occasions to use Till's murder as an example of the effects of racial hatred in the South. Clenora Hudson-Weems, author of *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement*, argues that Till's murder was "the epitome of the ugliness and hatred of racism. It made people uncomfortable, but it made people act. If you want to move a people, kill their children. . . . I believe that Emmett Till was the straw that broke the camel's back, that his death sparked the flame."⁴⁴ Robin D. G. Kelley, chair of the History Department at New York University, echoes:

The Emmett Till case was a spark for a new generation to commit their lives to social change, you know. They said, 'We're not gonna die like this. Instead, we're gonna live and transform the South so people won't have to die like this.' And if

anything, if any event of the 1950s inspired young people to be committed to that kind of change, it was the lynching of Emmett Till.⁴⁵

This position abounds in most of the literature on Till. But what exactly is it about this case that evoked such a dramatic response? We suggest that, in addition to the cultural and political milieu at the time (that is, the so-called “camel’s back” was already severely weakened by centuries of abuse and injustice forced on African American people), the *image* of Emmett Till’s monstrous and grisly body could not be ignored. It served as graphic testimony to the brutal race hatred in the 1950s South in a way that written text could never have done. It allowed viewers to become witnesses to what for many had existed only as rumor and legend. Anne Moody writes in *Coming of Age in Mississippi* that before the Emmett Till murder, “I had heard of Negroes found floating in a river or dead somewhere with their bodies riddled with bullets. But I didn’t know the mystery behind these killings then. I remember once when I was only seven I heard Mama and one of my aunts talking about some Negro who had been beaten to death. ‘Just like them low-down skunks killed him they will do the same to us.’”⁴⁶ As we will discuss shortly, the graphic image of Till’s corpse linked up with these tales in a way that produced tangible social and political effects.

As many have noted, a photograph is often seen as a slice of the real, a trace of that which was. As Roland Barthes argues, “in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. . . . Every photograph is a certificate of presence. . . . An emanation of *past reality*. . . . That-has-been.”⁴⁷ The power of Till’s body is intensified not because it is a photo of a corpse, but a photo of the face of a corpse or, *what was a face*. In encountering this face, we are reminded of philosopher Alphonso Lingus’s observation that “In the face of another, the question of truth is put on each proposition of which my discourse is made, the question of justice put on each move and gesture of my exposed life.”⁴⁸ Till’s face-that-was haunted the nation individually and collectively, amplifying calls for justice. But even before the haunting, this face-that-was momentarily impedes thought, confuses, belies detachment, interrupts civilization, and kicks us in the gut.

This kick in the gut, and our reflexive shudder, is intensified by the dialogue between photos. Emmett Till before encountering Mississippi and Jim Crow justice gazes with confident eyes and the serene smile of a young man looking forward to his future. The close shot depicts a sharply dressed Till on the cusp of manhood—white dress shirt, tie, jauntily placed hat. But Till does not become a man, does not see a future. The photo of the bloated face-that-was Emmett Till after Mississippi and after Jim Crow justice is monstrous and incomplete, violating the norms of civilized society. Missing an eye, an ear, and

most of his teeth, and bloated beyond recognition, Till's disfigured face calls the viewer to ask: What happened? Where is justice?

As many have attested, it provokes a physical response that temporarily precedes and exceeds "sense"—a reflexive shudder, an involuntary retching. The basketball star Kareem Abdul Jabbar recalls his visceral reaction thus: "I was 8 years old when I saw a photo of Emmett Till's body in *Jet* magazine. It made me sick."⁴⁹ The writer James Baldwin admitted, "I do not know why the case pressed on my mind so hard—but it would not let me go."⁵⁰ As Reverend Jesse Jackson puts it, "when Emmett Till was killed, unlike with *Brown [v. the Board of Education]* there was no need for definition. It shook the consciousness of a nation. It touched our bone marrow, the DNA of our dignity."⁵¹ Christopher Benson, who co-wrote Mrs. Till Bradley's 2003 account of the case, suggests that Till's "is a story that clawed at our conscience like fingernails on a blackboard. It challenged a nation in the most fundamental way. We looked at the tortured face of Emmett Till and saw what a nightmare the American dream had become for so many of us."⁵² As then, now. Still. The photo of Till's monstrous face—that continues to haunt the American imagination like a ghost that refuses to be exorcised. Its dissonance still disturbs, "like fingernails on a blackboard." Perhaps this is why so many have demanded that the case be reopened, that Emmett Till have another chance at justice.

In the most mundane sense, then, seeing is believing. As Mamie Till Bradley decreed, "let the people see what I've seen." Indeed, John Hartley in *The Politics of Pictures* points out that "The classic *OED* general definition of 'truth'—'that which exists in fact'—is commonly verified by taking it to refer to 'that which can be seen.'"⁵³ The image of Till's corpse documented a tradition of racial terrorism in the most graphic and shocking way. Clearly, the corpse of a martyr serving as an impetus to political action for its witnesses is a well-known narrative to anyone familiar with world history. In the Catholic tradition, to cite the most obvious example, it is precisely the body of Christ—wounded and emaciated—featured as a spectacle for public consumption that grounds followers' faith. To this day, images of the abject Jesus icon continue to be an indispensable focal point for Catholics. This corporeal spectacle serves as a testimony of an injustice ("look at what they've done to our Lord"), a warning of the risk of discipleship, and an ennobling of the martyr who sacrificed his or her life for others.

Similarly, Till's corpse testified to the outrage, the risks, and ultimately the veneration of those who fell victim to racial violence in the United States. Martin Luther King Jr., in a 1958 speech, solidified Till's role as a "sacred martyr" of the struggle for freedom: "Emmett Till, a mere boy, unqualified to vote, but seemingly used as a victim to terrorize Negro citizens and keep them from the polls."⁵⁴ Whether or not Till's murderers meant to deter the black vote,

miscegenation, or something less specific is irrelevant. What concerns us here is the multiplicity of meanings his body was made to convey. As Susan Bordo rightly suggests, “bodies *speak* to us.”⁵⁵ In different contexts, Till’s body spoke to different audiences in different ways. In the context of the African American community, the proliferation of the mortician’s photograph and the open-casket memorial allowed witnesses, in a kind of visual communion, to *consume* the body of Emmett Till and be transformed by doing so. Reverend Jesse Jackson Jr. puts it thus: “Mamie [Till Bradley] turned a crucifixion into a resurrection,” and tells her, “you turned death into living. . . . You awakened the world. . . . You gave your son so a nation might be saved.”⁵⁶

The transformation Jackson describes seems at least two-part. In one way, particularly for African Americans in the North, the image galvanized a transformation from cautious ambivalence into outright fear. In the 1950s, many Northern blacks were new transplants from the South, recent immigrants looking for work in Northern cities such as Chicago. Although the racial climate of the North was not as explicitly violent as it was in the South, African Americans were surely aware of the dangers inherent in white society. For many, Till’s story both reminded Northern blacks of those southerly dangers and blurred any protective divide offered by the Mason-Dixon line. As Till’s body was displayed before thousands of Chicago mourners, any comforting geographical boundaries were forever punctured.⁵⁷

Shelby Steele recalls, for example, that Till was “the quintessential embodiment of black innocence, brought down by a white evil so portentous and apocalyptical, so gnarled and hideous, that it left us with a feeling not far from awe. By telling his story and others like it, we came to *feel* the immutability of our victimization, its utter indigenouness, as a thing on this earth like dirt or sand or water.”⁵⁸ Similarly, Charlayne Hunter-Gault remembers that “From time to time, things happened that intruded on our protected reality. The murder of Emmett Till was one such instance . . . pictures of his limp, water-soaked body in the newspapers . . . were worse than any image we had ever seen outside of a horror movie.”⁵⁹ The Till narrative, made all the more real by its images, provided a grounds for what Elizabeth Alexander calls a “collective identification with trauma.” African American communities have added the story to their folklore tradition in order to pass along an important lesson: “never forget what can happen to a black person in America.” Overwhelmingly, Emmett Till’s story was told less by narratives than by images, images that produced an unforgettable visceral response. The image of Emmett Till helped people to transform the horrible event into a souvenir, a memento to be shared and disseminated rather than stashed away. As we will argue shortly, this memento does not strike us as an effort to *dissociate* from Till (“I am not that”), but to *remember* and to *embrace* Till. Whereas racist

whites increasingly preferred lynching to be practiced as a hidden, underground activity, blacks used Till as a focal point, as an image to foreground in their public memory.

A second transformation that seems to occur from the consumption of this image is, for many, a reconfiguration of that fear into some kind of action. That action may simply be a telling and retelling of Till's story in the hopes of warning future generations of the potential dangers they face. For others, like Muhammad Ali, it was first an adolescent rage followed by a deeper conviction to fight racism on multiple levels. See, for example, Ali's involvement in the civil rights movement, which included his eschewing the white Christian tradition and joining Malcom X and the Black Muslims, and his famous refusal to fight in Vietnam, claiming, "no VietCong ever called me nigger." Or, for Molefi Asante, Robin D. G. Kelley, and countless others, action came in the form of a life devoted to the study and education of black people.

So, does all this imply that the image of Emmett Till garners its rhetorical power simply from its ability to accurately document reality—that his story "speaks the truth" of racial violence? As Jacqueline Goldsby contends, the notion that seeing is believing is certainly one with much cultural currency: "The murder of Emmett Till and the visual codings of it detail the shape public literacy took at this time, and the use of and belief in photography's discursive capacities to represent the 'real' thus becomes one way to explain the power of his death in the public's imagination."⁶⁰ Goldsby argues, however, that the discourse surrounding Till's death was not due to its unquestioned verification through pictures: "On the contrary, the effort to represent the murder demonstrated the limits of tele-photo realism, revealing to the public the anxiety that underlies the genre's appeal: namely, that the 'real' is not spontaneously formed; that the 'real' is a social construction; that, in other words, reality is fiction."⁶¹

We disagree with the assumptions inherent in Goldsby's argument—that the photograph constructs a reality that always fails to reproduce real-world events. Of course images always produce a fragmented reality, but this is only a problem if we expect them to do otherwise, if we assume that we can *ever* experience unmediated reality. All the pictures in the world, shot from every possible angle, will not sufficiently reconstruct the events that led to the death of Emmett Till. We are more interested, here, in what kind of reality was produced by the image of Till's corpse than in how accurately it was able to serve as evidence of a violence that is forever irretrievable. This image did not construct a makeshift reality, or a "fiction," as Goldsby suggests, that merely poses as a reality to which we can never have access. Rather it produced *real* sensations and *real* social relations; it materially produced a new way of being for the African Americans we have discussed in this essay. The image, like the open

casket in Chicago, became a gathering place, a temporary nexus around which people could link themselves to each other in a new network, thus reconfiguring their agency in powerful ways.

Goldsby also wants to suggest that the Till images contribute to what she calls a “high-tech” lynching; not a lynching that depended upon “the coarse end of a rope, the flaming end of a torch, and a crowd of thousands” for its violence, but one that manifested itself on the pages of newspapers and in the ether of television broadcasts. There is a distinct and important difference, however, between the lynch mob witnessing its own barbarous handiwork and a black community passing around magazines featuring Emmett Till’s maimed body—that difference is the witnesses themselves. As we have argued, the African American community’s encounter with the Till image contributed to a powerful political response. The African Americans who consumed the image confronted face-to-face what for many had long been mired in legend. For those who engaged in its visual consumption, the abject body of Emmett Till had significant transformative effects.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS OR, WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ABJECT BODIES?

Till’s body was ruined but nonetheless a body, with outlines that mean it can be imagined as kin to, but nonetheless distinct from, our own.

Elizabeth Alexander

Mamie Till Bradley reports that when Emmett’s body arrived in Chicago from Mississippi it came securely padlocked in a nondescript casket. A State of Mississippi seal had been placed across the lid. The funeral director, the undertaker, and Mrs. Till Bradley’s Mississippi relatives had signed papers agreeing not to break the seal just to get the body out of Mississippi. “Somebody in the state of Mississippi wanted to make sure we didn’t see what was inside that box,” Mrs. Till Bradley recalled. The grieving mother, however, was determined to see her child’s body and would not be deterred. When the concerned funeral directors hesitated to open the casket, she told them, “if I ha[ve] to take a hammer and open that box myself, it [is] going to be opened.”⁶² In the years before Till’s death, lynching had gone “underground” as a public spectacle in the South, no longer acceptable as a community event celebrated by cheering audiences. Of course, it was still an all-too-common practice, but most whites preferred it be confined, like young Emmett’s corpse, to darkness and secrecy. For whites, the lynched body was no longer a souvenir to display, but a rumor to be whispered, an absence to be filled with a knowing glance. In the hands of Mamie Till Bradley, however, her son’s

lifeless body would indeed become a souvenir of sorts. It became a horrible keepsake for a community whose survival depended on remembering that danger was ever-present, no matter how invisible. Mrs. Till Bradley demanded that Emmett's body, in all its grotesque abjection, be revealed and circulated among her community. As we have seen, it was an act that would have tremendous and long-lasting effect.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "abject" as "a state of misery or degradation." Discourses about abjection, most notably those engaging the work of sociologist Mary Douglas and feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, have done much to illuminate the ways in which humans come to self-consciousness through a process of distinguishing themselves from others. Kristeva, for example, argues that the significance of "the abject" lies in its role as something against which we compare ourselves favorably as individuals. She describes the abject as "a jettisoned object," which is "opposed to *I*," and is "radically excluded." For example, an image of the emaciated body of a person living with AIDS may evoke sympathy or, in some cases, fear, but it also fulfills the role of an abject, infected "other" that enables healthy Americans to feel clean, vital, even morally superior. Similarly, the starving bodies of developing countries in ways serve as boundaries or limits that contribute to this country's sense of self as a nation. American identity depends, in part, precisely upon what America is not.

Kristeva, however, indicates that such distinctions and the identities that depend on them are never final. She argues that the self, or "*I*," depends on the abject to constitute its border, to be that which "lies outside, beyond the set." She notes that from its "place of banishment," the abject "does not cease challenging its master."⁶³ In this sense, the abject other never remains subserviently at the margins; it never remains stagnant, creating stable boundaries for the self. Hence, Kristeva introduces a *dynamism* to the concept of identity that gets articulated and rearticulated through the self's dialectical interaction with the abject.⁶⁴

Judith Butler follows Kristeva, granting the abject the important ontological role of establishing the external conditions of subjectivity. She writes that "the subject is constructed through acts of differentiation that distinguish the subject from its constitutive outside, a domain of abjected alterity conventionally associated with the feminine, but clearly not exclusively. Subjects are constructed through exclusion, that is, through the creation of a domain of deauthorized subjects, presubjects, figures of abjection, populations erased from view."⁶⁵ In other words, subjects, for Butler, can only exist by differentiating themselves from non-subjects—those who are denied entry into a particular public sphere. For centuries, blacks served as the abject "deauthorized" subjects that justified white supremacy.

Although Butler proposes a notion of subjectivity that is necessarily dependent on others, it is still, as with Kristeva, through a process of *repudiation*, an often unconscious negation of the other in order to establish the self. Near the time of Till's death, for example, white America, or even Northern blacks, albeit to a lesser extent, could define themselves through their relationship to the abject other that was the Southern black subject. As Till shows, though, the norms, or lines of understanding, created through abjection are not stable. To use Kristeva's words, Till did "not cease challenging [his] master," serving the docile role as abject outsider. As the examples of Muhammad Ali and others illustrate, Till's body forced a reconfiguration of the self along different lines. The utter horror of his death for some who witnessed his corpse surely punctured a sense of a safe, complete self. For others, it simply intensified a vulnerability of which they were already well aware. Either way, the boundaries of the witnessing subject were, in some sense, transformed.

Christopher Benson, Mamie Till Bradley's co-writer on her memoir, notes, "We looked at the tortured face of Emmett Till and saw what a nightmare the American dream had become for so many of us. One newspaper headline got it exactly right when it noted quite simply that [Mamie Till Bradley] had opened a casket and opened our eyes."⁶⁶ The shortcomings of the nation's promises were made conspicuous by the corporeal testimony of a murdered teenager. Goldsby writes:

The mutilation of Emmett Till's body—a child's body—demonstrated to us how uncivil we could be to one another, and it impressed upon us the social cost of systematically denying the political rights of the least amongst us. In that sense, this lynching commands such a prominent place in our collective memory because it performs the function of political myth as described by Roland Barthes.⁶⁷

In a sense, the mythical "selfness" of African American people changed as they *embraced* and centralized Emmett. They refused to see his body as one more threatening message from racist white America. Many embraced, rather than feared (or, perhaps, more precisely *through the fear*), Emmett in all his abjection and made his body *mean* differently. Emmett Till illustrated that their very *bodies* were at stake. Alexander writes in *Black Male* that "Till's body was ruined but nonetheless a body, with outlines that mean it can be imagined as kin to, but nonetheless distinct from, our own."⁶⁸ Similarly, we would not suggest that the experience of viewing this body is easily described as an unproblematic *recognition* of one's self (and hence, one's vulnerability) in the corpse, but more of an inability to ignore the witnessing as an event—a rhetorical event that requires a response. Gilles Deleuze argues that thought, in this sense, is always a response to violence. He writes:

Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think. . . . Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*.⁶⁹

Although, as this quotation suggests, the encounter may not have been one of a recognition of self in other, we argue that an engagement, such as that with Emmett Till, provoked both affect and action because it demonstrated that conventional boundaries—between self and others, North and South, life and death—are irrevocably blurred. This blurring is not necessarily the result of a detached reflection, or contemplation of the viewer, for the force of the image is too strong. Till's head was swollen to three times its normal size, his individual features were indistinguishable, and he was missing an eye, an ear, and most of his teeth. All this was in the frame of a silk-lined casket in a funeral home, a context in which if bodies are shown at all they are almost without exception displayed in a state of tranquility and peace—the body *at rest*, not *at risk*. This visual encounter and the visceral reaction it demands force a reckoning, an active redistribution of knowledge that is different from what had sufficed before.

We contend that the example of Emmett Till shows us that the abject serves a larger function than the “outside” that provides us with a coherent “inside.” As Butler rightly notes, the abject is necessarily *within* each subject. But does its force lie only in its role as that thing (within us) that we perpetually repudiate in order to try and preserve ourselves as pure, unadulterated subjects? At the risk of constructing too neat a narrative on this point, we think we can say that before the death of Emmett Till, Southern racism served as an abject constitutive border for the comparatively safe community Northern blacks enjoyed. When the images of Till's lifeless body made their way into the homes of people across the country, the limits of that constitutive border were pressed upon and demanded a response.

We began this discussion by asking what, if anything, we can learn from abject, violent images. Specifically, why does the horrible image of Emmett Till's corpse continue to compel and horrify us, when the names of so many other lynching victims are long forgotten? At least one response may be that, rather than relegating the abject body of Emmett Till to the borders of their community (as if his fate was an anomaly to black life), African Americans *transformed the abject into a souvenir* of what was an all-too-common consequence of blackness. The white racist community attempted to symbolically solidify its own supremacy by circulating “Negro barbecue” postcards and victims' body parts. Black bodies were forced to play the role of abject “other” to white bodies

through the most violent means. In contrast, the African American community refused to relegate the grotesque image of Emmett Till to its borders. Lerone Bennett, formerly of *Jet* magazine, the first to publish the image, told National Public Radio's Noah Adams that "as soon as [the issue containing pictures of Till] hit the streets, people started lining up at newsstands. Word spread from Chicago to Atlanta."⁷⁰ The object—as it was passed from hand to hand, from neighbor to neighbor, from parent to child—became not something for the community to repudiate, but to embrace. As Robin D. G. Kelley puts it, the "sacrifice" of Emmett Till helped to transform a movement initiated by anger and repudiation into one propelled by love and communion. In his words:

[W]hat I mean by that is into love for the people who they're trying to defend and love for a nation that had for so long oppressed them, but they felt was transformable. They felt that as black people involved in the movement, that Emmett Till's body was sacrificed in some ways . . . that many of the activists who were murdered were sacrificed for the sake of saving the country, redeeming this nation. And I think that's why, you think of something like the non-violence philosophy of the civil rights movement as directly related to the violence meted out on people like Emmett Till.⁷¹

As it did for so many others, the picture became, for Charles Cobb, a Washington, D.C., journalist, a call to action: "Mississippi was kind of a vague part of our family's conversation as kind of like the most dangerous place for black people in the world. That's how it existed. But we had no concrete fix on what that meant until the Till photograph."⁷² As Bennett puts it, "People in the black community have said for years, there's a motto: 'If it wasn't in *Jet*, it didn't happen.'" Barthes's notion that a picture reminds us that "that-has-been" transformed what had been, for many blacks, an unspeakable evil into a tangible reality—verified by the body of a Northern boy. The image of Till's body became a rallying point for a nascent civil rights movement; in effect, *it lynched lynching*. It made explicit that what "polite society" no longer acknowledged was still occurring. It once again made public spectacle of the abused black body, but transformed its meaning by doing so.

One component of the encounter with Till must certainly have been a kind of "Oh, save the grace of God, go I" response that reestablishes for oneself the knowledge that "I am not *that*." However, the potential that it *could be*, and that it happened to anyone at all, linked together those folklore tales of whitehooded Klansmen and "Negroes found floating in a river" with an actual face looking back from the pages of a magazine. The image of Emmett Till did not re-present or bring into being all of those other lynched men and women and their stories that so troubled the minds of black people, but it did serve as a

connecting point, or a hinge, around which centuries of fear and anger converged. Unfortunately, it did so not by contradicting America's racial legacy, but by embodying its excess, testifying to its logical and potentially deadly conclusions. The pictures of Emmett Till's body foregrounded the body at risk; they reconfigured the abjection of white-black race relations by giving it a new visual vocabulary. The abject, black body at risk was transformed, from the dialectical "other" defining and bolstering white power to the grotesque product of that power. A large African American community rallied around Emmett Till's corpse; they visually consumed it, disseminated it, and preserved it as a horrible but precious relic of what must never be forgotten. The brutalized, fragmented body of a teenage boy visually testified not to the absoluteness of white supremacy but to its fraudulence. The victimized black body, which had once been a celebrated spectacle of white hatred, either through public lynchings or, later, portentous "disappearances," was now a powerful symbol of resistance and community. By embracing, consuming, and disseminating the abject body of Emmett Till, the African American community began a public discourse in which *white racism* became the ugly other.

NOTES

1. Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 135–36.
2. Jacqueline Goldsby, "The High and Low Tech of It: The Meaning of Lynching and the Death of Emmett Till," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9 (1996): 249.
3. Hugh Murray, "False Martyr," *American Scholar* 60 (Winter 1991): 455.
4. George E. Curry, "Killed for Whistling at a White Woman," *Emerge*, July–August 1995, 27.
5. Consequently, the case became known as the "wolf-whistle murder." Mamie Till contends that the wolf whistle was likely Emmett's attempt to get over a severe speech impediment: "I taught Bo when you get hooked on a word, just whistle . . . and say it." Quoted in Curry, "Killed for Whistling," 28.
6. Goldsby, "The High and Low Tech of It," 245–82.
7. We have chosen primarily to describe the incident as a "murder" rather than a lynching. Although the Till murder certainly bears some traditional hallmarks of a lynching, it seems to have lacked the *spectacular* and public quality of lynchings. However, as we will argue, the murder can best be understood within a historical context in which lynching had very recently been prevalent. Although his reasoning is not completely clear, it is interesting to note that Hugh White, governor of Mississippi in 1955, said of the case: "This is not a lynching. It is straight out murder." Mamie Till Bradley disagrees, writing in her memoir that Bryant and Milam's post-trial boasting made clear their intent to send a message to other African Americans, "and sending a message to black folks is one of the key factors that distinguishes a lynching from a murder." Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 215.
8. Curry, "Killed for Whistling," 32.
9. Curry, "Killed for Whistling," 32.

10. Henry Hampton, *Eyes on the Prize: Awakenings (1954–1956)*. Public Broadcasting System, 1987, videocassette.
11. Amita Nerurkar, “Lawmakers Want 1955 Mississippi Murder Case Reopened,” *CNN Lawcenter*, CNN, April 13, 2004, <http://www.cnn.com/2004/LAW/04/13/till.murder.case/> (cited August 2004).
12. Laura Parker, “Justice Pursued for Emmett Till,” *USA Today*, March 11, 2004, 3A.
13. *New York Times Book Review*, January 13, 2000, http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/product-description/0944092691/103-7861795-3019038?_encoding=UTF8&n=283155&s=books.
14. It is important to note, however, that much of the power of Hamer’s speeches came from her detailed depictions of the beatings she suffered as a civil rights activist. The body featured prominently, for example, in her account of a 1963 detainment in a Montgomery County jail: “They beat me until I was hard, ‘til I couldn’t bend my fingers or get up when they told me to. That’s how I got this blood clot in my eye—the sight’s nearly gone now. My kidney was injured from the blows they gave me on the back.” “Who is Fannie Lou Hamer?” *Pagewise* history pages, http://nd.essortment.com/fannielouhamer_rgrh.htm (cited February 2005). As Hamer’s famous claim “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired” makes clear, the fight for civil rights cannot be separated from the physical pain and exhaustion African Americans were forced to endure under white supremacy.
15. The concept of the “public screen” is taken from Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples, “From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the ‘Violence’ of Seattle,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 (2002): 125–51.
16. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Remaking of the World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27.
17. We cite, here, Billie Holliday’s haunting and daring “Strange Fruit” (1939), largely recognized as the first significant song of the civil rights movement. See, for more information, David Margolick’s *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).
18. James Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (San Francisco: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000), plate 26.
19. Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary*, plate 55.
20. Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary*, 15.
21. Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary*, 9.
22. Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary*, 16.
23. Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary*, 16.
24. Quoted in Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary*, 26.
25. Kirk W. Fuoss, “Lynching Performances, Theatres of Violence,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 19 (1999): 1–27.
26. Fuoss, “Lynching Performances,” 25.
27. Quoted in Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villord Books, 1993), 435.
28. Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 435.
29. Quoted in Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary*, 31.
30. Quoted in William Bradford Huie, “The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi,” *Look*, January 24, 1956, 46–48.
31. Quoted in Huie, “Shocking Story,” 46–48.
32. In unpaginated picture page (corpse in coffin), Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*.

33. Quoted in Elizabeth Alexander, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 104.
34. Quoted in Alexander, *Black Male*, 104.
35. Quoted in Alexander, *Black Male*, 104–5.
36. Mrs. Till notes that Mr. Rayner touched up the body despite her objections: “looking back on it now, I think he probably felt he had to do something. Emmett was in such bad shape when we got him back. Monstrous condition. But Mr. Rayner did what he could. That tongue had been removed, I guess, and put somewhere. The mouth was closed now. And you could see on the side of Emmett’s head that some coarse thread had been used to sew the pieces back together. . . . The eye that had been dangling, that was removed, too, and the eyelid closed, like on the other side, where no eye was left. I told Mr. Rayner he had done a beautiful job.” Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 140.
37. Goldsby, “The High and Low Tech of It,” 250.
38. Goldsby, “The High and Low Tech of It,” 250.
39. Curry, “Killed for Whistling,” 30.
40. Clenora Hudson-Weems, “Resurrecting Emmett Till: The Catalyst of the Modern Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29 (1998): 187.
41. Hudson-Weems, “Resurrecting Emmett Till,” 185.
42. Public Broadcasting Corporation, *American Experience* home page, “The Murder of Emmett Till,” http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf_remember.html (cited February 2, 2005).
43. Bob Dylan, “The Death of Emmett Till,” Columbia (1963).
44. Quoted in Hudson-Weems, “Resurrecting Emmett Till,” 184.
45. Public Broadcasting Corporation, *American Experience* home page, “The Murder of Emmett Till, Interview with Robin Kelley: Spark for a New Generation,” http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf_kelley_01.html (cited February 2, 2005).
46. Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), 121.
47. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Noonday Press, 1981), 76, 87, 88, 78.
48. Alphonso Lingus, *Foreign Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 173.
49. Quoted in Thomas Doherty, “The Ghosts of Emmett Till,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 17, 2003, B12.
50. Quoted in Doherty, “The Ghost of Emmett Till,” B11.
51. Reverend Jesse L. Jackson Sr., foreword to Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, xii.
52. Christopher Benson, afterword to Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 286.
53. John Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 140.
54. Martin Luther King Jr. “Address Delivered at the Launching of the SCLC Crusade for Citizenship at Greater Bethel AME Church,” from “The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” The King Center at Stanford University home page, http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/papers/vol4/580212-002-Crusade_Launch.htm (cited February 2, 2005).
55. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 124.
56. Jackson, foreword to Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, xiii.
57. Rhetorical scholar William Lewis, in his analysis of the Till case, interprets the regional dynamic quite differently, arguing that the media characterizations of the case problematically

focused too much on the South as the abject racist other to the North. Lewis suggests that the traditional story of Emmett Till's murder—the horrifying picture that sparked a movement—is too romantic and, as such, costs us much in the way of acknowledging more nuanced and enduring forms of racism. He writes that the case “was offered as a demonstration of the horrors of racism, but the simple romantic form of the story as we know it best reassures us too firmly of our own innocence, ascribes guilt too firmly and easily to other people at other times in other places, and fixes the standards of race relations too narrowly within an ambiguously defined context of legal standards and procedures.” We agree that the story’s “romanticism” may too narrowly define racism by its most extreme manifestation, possibly overshadowing other, more prevalent forms. Lewis’s insights are incredibly valuable for understanding the full scope of the impact of the case. Our goal here, however, is to examine the role the image played in motivating activism among African Americans. That is, we are concerned with what effects the imagery surrounding the case *were* (restricted as they may have been) rather than what they *could* or *should* have been. See William Lewis, “1955/1995: Emmett Till and the Rhetoric of Racial Injustice,” *Argumentation and Values: Proceedings of the Ninth Biennial Conference on Argumentation*, ed. Sally Jackson (Annandale, VA: SCA, 1996).

58. Quoted in Alexander, *Black Male*, 102.
59. Quoted in Alexander, *Black Male*, 103.
60. Goldsby, “The High and Low Tech of It,” 273.
61. Goldsby, “The High and Low Tech of It,” 273–74.
62. According to Till, the Mississippi officials had even packed the body in lime, “to make the body deteriorate faster, to make it even harder to identify. I guess those officials down in Mississippi felt a need to do that just in case the seal and lock didn’t scare me off.” Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 133.
63. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.
64. For two lengthier discussions of the rhetoric of abject bodies, see Christine L. Harold, “The Rhetorical Function of the Abject Body: Transgressive Corporeality in *Trainspotting*,” *JAC: Journal of Advanced Composition* 20 (2000): 865–81; and Christine L. Harold, “Tracking Heroin Chic: The Abject Body Reconfigures the Rational Argument,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36 (1999): 65–76.
65. Judith Butler, “How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler,” *Signs* 23 (1998): 12.
66. Christopher Benson, afterword to Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 286.
67. Goldsby, “The High and Low Tech of It,” 247.
68. Alexander, *Black Male*, 105.
69. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 139.
70. Bennett, Lerone. 2004. Emmett Till and the Impact of Images: Photos of Murdered Youth Spurred Civil Rights Activism. Interview by Noah Adams. Morning Edition. National Public Radio, 23 June. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1969702/>.
71. Public Broadcasting Corporation, *American Experience* home page, “The Murder of Emmett Till, Interview with Robin Kelley: Spark for a New Generation,” http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf_kelley_02.html (cited February 2, 2005)
72. Charles Cobb, 2004. “Emmett Till and the Impact of Images: Photos of Murdered Youth Spurred Civil Rights Activism. Interview by Noah Adams.” Morning Edition. National Public Radio, 23 June. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1969702/>.