

The Legacy of Emmett Till

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Emmett Till is one of the central figures on the stage of American racial trauma. Along with countless lynched black men who came before him – and Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, as well as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who came after him – Till has symbolized the horror of racism in America. His brutal death and the acquittal of his murders were branded “the Shame of A Nation.”¹ Suffering the quintessential agony for being black, he became the standard bearer for generations of African Americans fighting the calumny and catastrophe of prejudice. As Keith Beauchamp declared in his documentary film on the murder of Till, he was the victim of “one of the most barbaric atrocities committed against a child in the history of mankind.”² Till’s broken body captured in the famous *Jet* photo – with one eye gouged out, his nose broken, and his skull cracked – helped to ignite the civil rights movement. Paradoxically, the tragedy of his life produced the redemption of his death. His mother appropriately subtitled her memoirs “The Hate Crime that Changed America.” In the more than five decades since his murder, Till has become the sum total of various identities, from historical figure to everyone’s child to sacrificial lamb to mythic hero. His identities – and the legacy they carry – are the subject of this issue.

Historically, we may never know exactly what Emmett Louis Till said or did inside Bryant’s grocery store in Money, Mississippi on Wednesday, 24 August 1955, but we can chart the tremendous impact his death has had on the collective memory of civil rights activism. It inspired Rosa Parks, the “Mother of the Civil Rights Movement,” to challenge discrimination in Montgomery on 1 December 1955. Horrified by the *Jet* photo but empowered by Till’s example, numerous young black leaders in the 1950s and 1960s forward – Eldridge Cleaver, Anne Moody, Joyce Ladner, Sam Block, Muhammad Ali – heard and heeded Emmett Till’s plea (and his mother’s) for justice and change, but not without more blood shedding. The timeline of prejudice was not short in the South or in the North. The murder of four young black girls at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham in September 1963, the subsequent brutal attacks at Selma, the pistol whippings, hosings, kidnappings, and deaths of civil rights protesters, and the terrors of racial profiling surfacing in

the Rodney King case in Los Angeles in 1992 – all these followed in the wake and tradition of violence associated with Till. But his legacy also led to reforms beyond the reach of protesters in the 1960s and 1970s. The U.S. Justice Department, and the Leflore County, Mississippi District Attorney, reopened his case in 2004, and even though Carolyn Bryant was not indicted and the case was closed, this legal action put other reforms into motion. Through the Emmett Till Justice Campaign, spearheaded by Alvin Sykes, the Justice Department “created a permanent cold case unit . . . to probe old [civil rights] cases.”³ Emmett’s cries for justice continue to be heard today. His “Name still caught in my throat,” wrote poet Marilyn Nelson in 2005.⁴

Till’s voice has haunted writers since October 1955 when Langston Hughes cried out, “I Feel Mississippi’s Fist in My Own Face.”⁵ Over the decades, Till has become the subject of numerous poems, plays, screenplays, novels, autobiographies, and songs in America and throughout the world. Harriet Pollack and Christopher Metress’s recent collection of essays helpfully explores and interprets the diverse literature written about Till, his family, the Bryants (especially Carolyn), the trial, Mississippi, Chicago, and the cataclysmic reverberations of his death.⁶ Entering the world of metaphor, Till has been fictionalized, rhapsodized, mythologized, and sanctified. In fiction, Lewis Nordan, Bebe Moore Campbell, and James Richardson borrowed from but transformed the details of Till’s life and death. A trunkload of plays have been written about Till, including those by Frank London Brown, Henry Dumas, and one by Toni Morrison which may never be recovered as well as *The Face of Emmett Till*, coauthored by his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley. But Till’s story has especially inspired poets, with iconic works by Gwendolyn Brooks, David Diop, Aimé Césaire, Nicolás Guillén, Audre Lorde, and Marilyn Nelson whose crown of Petrarchan sonnets about Till, ironically, was written for a juvenile audience about the age Till was when he was murdered. Till’s tragedy has also found its way into a variety of musical forms from folk songs (written by Bob Dylan or those performed by Joan Baez) to ballads (by Phil Ochs, Bob Gibson, and Ifa Bayeza) to rap (by Ice Cube and Kanye West). The diverse voices heard in these songs, poems, plays, and stories lamenting and protesting Till’s death testify to the numerous symbolic roles he has assumed and is destined to play in American culture and imagination.

To end on a personal note, editing this issue of the *Southern Quarterly* has reminded me of how much geography I shared with Emmett Till. Like

him, I grew up on Chicago's South Side and rode many of the same bus routes he did. Though I was years younger, he may have passed by me in the Chicago Loop. My alma mater was also his mother's – Chicago Teachers College, South, now Chicago State University at 95th and Martin Luther King Drive. I did my student teaching at a Chicago public school only a few blocks away from 71st Avenue, which was renamed Emmett Till Avenue in his honor. Like him, too, I took the City of New Orleans when I traveled to Mississippi. And like my contributors and millions of individuals worldwide, I honor his memory and close with these lines from Chicago poet Gwendolyn Brooks's "A Bronzeville Mother" describing Mamie Till-Mobley's response to her son's death in profoundly symbolic language:

She kisses her killed boy
 And she is sorry.
 Chaos in windy grays
 through a red prairie.⁷

NOTES

¹ *Chicago Defender* (October 1955), and echoed in "The Shame of a Nation," *Essence* (May 2008).

² Keith Beauchamp (director), *The Untold Story of Emmett Till* (Velocity/Thinkfilm, 2005).

³ Laura Parker, "Civil Rights Case," *USA Today* (March 19, 2007).

⁴ Marilyn Nelson, *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

⁵ Langston Hughes, "I Feel Mississippi's Fist in My Own Face, Simple Says," *Chicago Defender* (October 15, 1955).

⁶ Harriet Pollock and Christopher Metress, eds., *Emmett Till in Literary Memory and Imagination* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

⁷ Gwendolyn Brooks, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon," *Selected Poems* (New York: Harper, 1963), pp.77-80. Reprinted with permission.