

## To Let See. The Shocking Picture as a Social Mobilization Weapon

Beatriz Martínez Sosa

*Universite de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour*, [beatrizmtzsosa@gmail.com](mailto:beatrizmtzsosa@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), and the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Martínez Sosa, Beatriz. "To Let See. The Shocking Picture as a Social Mobilization Weapon." *Artl@s Bulletin* 10, no. 1 (2021): Article 7.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

# To Let See. The Shocking Picture as a Social Mobilization Weapon

Beatriz Martínez Sosa

*Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour*

## Abstract

This paper analyses the role that Emmett Till's postmortem pictures had in the emergence of the modern civil rights movement. When they circulated in magazines, newspapers, and television in 1955, African Americans mobilized all over the U.S., so the pictures worked as a mobilization weapon. I intend to develop some hypotheses to explain this effect. To this end, the paper comprises four parts: an outline of the murder case; an analysis of the pictures' formal and semantic features as well as the discourses and context where they were released; an examination of Till's figure as a martyr through the effects that his pictures caused in his contemporaries; and finally, a reflection on censorship towards the massive circulation of shocking pictures.

## Résumé

L'article analyse le rôle des photographies post mortem d'Emmett Till dans l'émergence du mouvement des droits civiques aux États-Unis. Lors de leur circulation dans de magazines, de journaux et à la télévision en 1955, elles se sont transformées en outils de mobilisation pour les Afro-Américains, qui ont protesté partout dans le pays. J'ai l'intention de développer quelques hypothèses pour expliquer cet effet. L'article comprend quatre parties : un compte-rendu du cas ; une analyse des aspects formels et sémantiques des photos ainsi que des discours et du contexte ; une analyse de la figure de Till en tant que martyr et des effets produits chez ses contemporains ; finalement, une réflexion sur la censure envers la circulation massive d'images bouleversantes.

*Beatriz Martínez Sosa is a designer and art researcher. She works in visual communication since 2007. She is currently preparing her dissertation for a Ph.D. degree in Art Theory and Esthetics at the University of Pau, France. Being a museum enthusiast, she has taken the art exhibition as the central subject of her research, focusing on the application of a linguistic framework for its study. [beatrizmtzsosa@gmail.com](mailto:beatrizmtzsosa@gmail.com).*

## “Let the world see what I’ve seen.” The Case of Emmett Till

For some historians, the modern civil rights movement began in 1954, with the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* Supreme Court decision of desegregating public schools.<sup>1</sup> For others, Rosa Parks performed the first act of the movement, when in December 1955 she refused to give her seat in the bus to a white man. However, between a legal proceeding advocating for racial integration and a non-violent act of civil disobedience, there is one event that showed in a brutal way that racism was at the core of American society and that during the following months filled the streets of outraged African American protesters tired of mistreatment and injustice.

In August 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American boy, was spending his summer holidays with some relatives in Mississippi. He came from Chicago, and even though segregation in those days was part of daily life all around the United States, Till’s mother had advised him about the substantial differences between the North and the South of the country. It was in that South of Jim Crow laws<sup>2</sup> that an innocent prank will cost him life and the evidence of his murder will trigger a social movement.

Emmett Till was riding around with his cousins and friends in the town of Money, Mississippi. They stopped by a grocery store, where he had a brief chat with the shopkeeper, a white young woman called Carolyn Bryant. It seems that Till’s friends dared him to ask her for a date and that he whistled at her, but the facts in this event have always remained uncertain. Three days later, the woman’s husband, Roy Bryant, and her brother-in-law, J. W. Milam, kidnapped Till from his relatives’

house.<sup>3</sup> They drove him to Milam’s toolshed, where he was brutally beaten. Then, the men took him next to the Tallahatchie River and shot him in the head. Finally, they tied a cotton gin fan to his neck and threw the corpse to the river. When a fisherman found it, it was in such a state that it was very hard to identify. Allegedly, this is the reason why the County sheriff ordered the Emmett Till’s immediate burial. But his mother, Mamie Till Bradley, refused and demanded her son’s remains to bury him in Chicago. This was the first of a series of actions that Bradley would take against an authority willing to remove all traces of racial violence.

Although she got the body, the sheriff made sure that the casket remained sealed, putting a legal warning on it. But again, she would not accept to conceal the crime, so back in Chicago, she asked the funeral director to open the casket and then, in an unpredictable act of protest, she decided that instead of sealing it again and hide the horror of what she saw, she would make it public, “for all the world to see.”<sup>4</sup> Then she said to the funeral director that she wanted an open-casket funeral. When he suggested retouching the face of the boy to make it more presentable, Bradley, determined not to minimize the injuries, refused, and said: “Let the world see what I’ve seen.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, during the four-day viewing of the open, glass-enclosed casket, thousands of members of the community were confronted to and overwhelmed by the view of Emmett Till, including journalists and photographers. Several newspapers and magazines, popular among the African American people, such as *Jet* and the *Chicago Defender*, published

<sup>3</sup> According to certain witnesses, there was a third man the night of the kidnapping but his identity has never been proved. See “Where is Third Man in Till Lynching?,” *Jet Magazine*, September 29, 1955, 8-10.

<sup>4</sup> Emmett Till’s case was the origin of the exhibition “For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights,” which took place at the ICP (International Center of Photography) in New York in 2010. The exhibition was a comprehensive collection of 230 pictures, posters and objects, aiming to show the importance of visual communication in the fight for African Americans’ civil rights in the United States. See Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 309. The funeral director did retouch the boy’s face despite his conversation with Bradley. Later she will declare: “You would have to have seen Emmett when I first saw him to really appreciate what Mr. Rayner had done before my son’s body was viewed by the public and photographed for public view. What I had seen was so much worse than what other people would ever see,” *Death of Innocence*, 312.

<sup>1</sup> This decision exacerbated the tensions in the South. White southerners responded with violent acts of intimidation towards the African American population. See Anne Sarah Rubin, “Reflections on the Death of Emmett Till,” *Southern Cultures* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1995): 48, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26235389>.

<sup>2</sup> The name Jim Crow comes from a character of a minstrel routine created by Thomas Dartmouth Rice around 1828. It was a stereotypical depiction of the black man and by 1838 it was already an epithet for African Americans. Thus the segregation laws were named after this character. These laws set up the rules for interracial social interaction, based on pseudo-scientific arguments. See “Who Was Jim Crow?,” Ferris State University, accessed May 9, 2020, <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/who/index.htm>.

pictures of the funeral, including close-ups of his face, looking unrecognizable, completely disfigured.

*Jet* published Till's funeral pictures in its September 15 issue. It sold out and for the first time in the magazine's history, they reprinted an issue.<sup>6</sup> In the following weeks, the magazine kept the coverage of the story, publishing articles in the next four issues.

Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam were arrested and indicted for murder. The trial took place in September 1955 in a segregated courtroom. Both pleaded not guilty and were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury, after a one-hour deliberation. Four months later, with a \$4,000 deal for an interview and aware of the Double Jeopardy rule (which prevents anyone from being prosecuted twice for the same crime),<sup>7</sup> they would confess their crime in *Look* magazine, bragging about it. They wanted to teach a lesson of "don't mess up with white men's women." This reaction is coherent with a study that sociologist Gunnar Myrdal published in 1941: "Myrdal and his researchers ask white southerners to choose what they believe blacks most want from integration. The number one item on their list: 'intermarriage and sexual intercourse with whites.' This category ranks last for blacks."<sup>8</sup> The story took a turn fifty years later, when in an interview with writer Timothy B. Tyson, author of the book *The Blood of Emmett Till*, Carolyn Bryant confessed to him that she made up the story about Till's lewd behavior.<sup>9</sup>

Local and national media widely reported the murderers' trial.<sup>10</sup> It currently remains as a shameful

case of impunity. Thelma Wright Edwards, Till's cousin and his oldest living relative, is still hoping for justice. According to an article published in *The Guardian* on April 25, 2020, "a reinvestigation of the boy's murder that has been carried out by the FBI over the past three years could be wrapped up in weeks. For Thelma and the rest of the Till family, a decades-long struggle for justice is fast approaching its conclusion."<sup>11</sup> But if until this day no one has been punished for the crime, Emmett Till's murder had other important consequences.

## The Picture as a Weapon

Once the shocking picture is published, its circulation is ensured, because it touches an instinctive and universal characteristic in human beings: the morbid fascination for tragedy and the grotesque. The initial resistance to see the evidence of some horrible event comes together with curiosity, which will ultimately prevail, because the picture is there and we are outside, safe, it cannot hurt us. Furthermore, mass media has made us so used to see war and crime pictures, constructing representations of this kind of events in our minds, that seeing a shocking picture may not be particularly shocking after all. Pictures are produced and shared in a much higher volume than what we can process, over-exposition to pictures reduces our capacity to actually see them. Also, we may become insensitive, over-circulation causes a depletion of meaning. As Susan Sontag notes, the repeated exposure to these images reduces the sense of reality of the event:

To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize. An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never

<sup>6</sup> "The Murder of Emmett Till," Library of Congress, accessed May 9, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/murder-of-emmett-till/>

<sup>7</sup> "Double Jeopardy," Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School, accessed May 9, 2020, [https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/double\\_jeopardy](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/double_jeopardy). "The Double Jeopardy Clause in the Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution prohibits anyone from being prosecuted twice for substantially the same crime."

<sup>8</sup> "The Murder of Emmett Till," American Experience, PBS, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/till-timeline/>

<sup>9</sup> When Tyson asked Carolyn Bryant about her sexual assault allegations against Till, she answered: "That part's not true," and then: "Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him." See Timothy B. Tyson, "The Legacy of the Lynching of Emmett Till," American Experience, PBS, August 27, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/legacy-lynching-emmett-till/>

<sup>10</sup> "Sixty to seventy newspaper reporters covered the proceedings from Sumner, Mississippi, while all three television networks flew film footage to New York for broadcast on the national news because mass-media outlets were wired to produce information in print and picture nearly instantaneously." Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 296. For a detailed analysis of the presence and role of the media in the trial see Davis W. Houck, "Killing Emmett," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 225-262, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41939981>.

<sup>11</sup> Ed Pilkington, "Will justice finally be done for Emmett Till? Family hope a 65-year wait may soon be over," *The Guardian*, April 25, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/25/emmett-till-long-wait-for-justice>.

seen the photographs . . . . But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real.<sup>12</sup>

So certainly not all hard-to-see pictures produce a social mobilization and with African American people this consequence was even less likely to come since, as Elizabeth Alexander asserts, “Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries.”<sup>13</sup> The spectacle of lynching, specifically, was part of African Americans’ collective memory, enhanced by the widespread use of photography.<sup>14</sup> But despite this, Till’s pictures stood out. This was not just another lynching. Here, the victim is not anonymous and the pictures do not show the dramatic moment of torture or agony of the just-perpetrated lynching. They show the aftermath, there is nothing spectacular or “heroic” on them; what we see is the extreme passivity of the murdered boy lying in the casket, disfigured, being exposed many days after his death. So the first reason for the impact caused by these pictures is their singularity. They showed something well-known but differently.

The media coverage of the funeral and the trial put the inequities towards African American people in the foreground, as photographs, and given the sociopolitical context they were hard to ignore, so people’s reactions transcended the mere compassion produced by images of tragedy. If we make a comparison between Till’s pictures and other images of tragedy, such as war pictures, we may assert that the latter cause empathy, even pain, but these feelings are passive as they show something happening sufficiently far, always to *someone else*. The second reason that may explain the power of Till’s pictures is identification, because contrary to war imagery, his pictures felt close, as a real threat. More than empathy, they cause “somatic identification,”<sup>15</sup>

and rage. This identification has not necessarily to do with being African American, but with being part of a vulnerable minority that lives in constant danger. Because geopolitical issues are precisely located, allowing us to see the distance that separates them from us, but minority issues have no boundaries, they exist within the people, as fate. Also, war is an event, racism is a way of living. What Till’s pictures showed was, on the one hand, the precision of boundaries—North and South—and on the other hand, the randomness of systematized hate. In other words, they were a terrible reminder of the dangers nearby, any African American could be next.

In effect, a picture stands out of the mass when it speaks to some particular people about a particular reality. To be moved—and mobilized—we must feel threatened; it is the *that-could-be-me* feeling that all of Till’s cousins and friends must have felt after seeing him in the casket and, more widely, the feeling of the coming of age generation of the time that was touched and felt concerned by the pictures.<sup>16</sup> This implies that the pictures must *feel* authentic, be contemporary to the viewers and they should not present aesthetic qualities since “aestheticizing suffering is inherently both artistically and politically reactionary, a way of mistreating the subject and inviting passive consumption, narcissistic appropriation, condescension, or even sadism on the part of viewers.”<sup>17</sup> In conclusion, the pictures should *look* as literal depictions of reality.

The pictures met these conditions because Till’s mother turned personal grief into a political act. John Berger’s distinction between private and

<sup>12</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 20.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004), 177.

<sup>14</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century lynching photographs were commonly distributed as prints and postcards. The exhibition “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America,” organized at the New-York Historical Society in 2000 (and then touring to several cities) featured the James Allen and John Littlefield collection of this memorabilia. See “Without Sanctuary,” accessed November 5, 2020, <https://withoutsanctuary.org>.

<sup>15</sup> This expression is borrowed from Assaf Pinkus study “Visual Aggression: The Martyrs’ Cycle at Schwäbisch Gmünd,” *Gesta* 52, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 43-59, <https://doi.org/10.1086/669684>.

<sup>16</sup> There are numerous testimonies of African American writers and activists that recognize the effect produced by the pictures in their youth. Some books inspired by the case are *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) by Anne Moody, *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* (1992) by Bebe Moore Campbell, and *Wolf Whistle* by Nordan Lewis (2003). Some other authors wrote about Till in their autobiographical works, such as Shelby Steele in *The Content of Our Character* (1990) and Charlayne Hunter-Gault in *In My Place* (1992). In poetry we can mention “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” by Gwendolyn Brooks and “Afterimages” by Audre Lorde, and finally, Tony Morrison’s play *Dreaming Emmett* (1986). For an analysis of Emmett Till as literary character see Christopher Metress, “No Justice, No Peace: The Figure of Emmett Till in African American Literature,” *MELUS* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 88, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3595247>.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Reinhardt, “Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique,” in *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, ed. Holly Edwards (Williamstown: Williams College Museum of Art in association with the University of Chicago Press, 2007), 14.

public photographs helps us to understand the relevance of this decision: “The private photograph . . . is appreciated and read in a context *which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it.*”<sup>18</sup> Till’s postmortem pictures belonged to the private, they are the kind of images that used to remain in the family circle only. When the open-casket pictures circulated, the continuity with context went with them. Conversely, war and crime pictures produce passive effects because they are “public photographs,” isolated from context, they are documents that have no links with viewers’ memories, no identification.

Then, in a country where the victims of racism were treated as second-class citizens with no rights, Emmett Till stood out as an individual. This was possible because of the above-mentioned formal features of the pictures and the consistent discourse that came along with them. Because of this, they became evidence, this is the third reason for their political power. In effect, because of its indexical nature, the photographic picture, as opposed to painting, is not a mere representation, it implies a sense of objectivity that validates its evidential function. As Roland Barthes notes, “The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.”<sup>19</sup> Even though a picture is also the result of a point of view that could distort reality, the circumstances where Emmett Till’s pictures came from set up a framework to support them as *real*.

Because contrary to photojournalism, these pictures were not the work of a photographer seeking for tragedy—that may outrage viewers more for the lack of sensitivity and “good taste” than for the actual tragedy showed—and whose framing is always subject to manipulation. Till’s own mother permitted and encouraged them, so this validated their authenticity. With her actions she changed the

course of the affair, defying authority, mass media and ultimately the entire country since she made all of them see. In her analysis of the circulation of war pictures, Susan Sontag notes that “To display the dead, after all, is what the enemy does.”<sup>20</sup> We reserved the dignity of anonymity to the people on our side, mainly in consideration for the family. So by showing her son’s remains, Bradley disrupted this implicit rule, provoking a confrontation with a fact that viewers could no longer pretend that did not exist and condemning at the same time the efforts to make it invisible. In fact, Emmett Till’s pictures had a double political address: to white people, to make them feel uncomfortable, and to African Americans, to make them part of the grief and indignation.

Instead of asking for a respectful and romanticized image of her son, Bradley shared the horror. More than this, she demonstratively shared two contrasted images of her son, as she pinned onto the casket three pictures of the boy looking healthy and happy. So the juxtaposition intensified the contrast with the dreadful reality that words could only evoke. However, this does not mean that words are unnecessary. As important as the pictures are the discourses that surround them and the media that distribute them, for as Allan Sekula claims, “the photograph, as it stands alone, presents merely the *possibility* of meaning. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the pictures certainly let us see, but with the pictures alone, see is all we can do. Even more, Till no longer resembles himself, his facial features have been obliterated. So, paradoxically, we cannot see *him* and he no longer expresses anything. To reconstruct his image, viewers needed other pictures and also other words. Therefore, it was the inevitable paralysis of the picture—the boy’s dead body—that produced a life after, not metaphorically but strictly out of the frame, in the real world: from being moved by to being mobilized for a cause. In this regard, the

<sup>18</sup> John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 55.

<sup>19</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections On Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 88-89.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004), 64.

<sup>21</sup> Allan Sekula, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 457.

role of Bradley was essential because she provided the pieces to articulate a discourse that, distributed with the support of the media, helped to give cohesion to the emerging movement. Timothy B. Tyson expresses this point with precision:

Before the response to Emmett Till, “the civil rights movement” was a far-flung network of local movements across the South that were very loosely affiliated only in that they knew about each other . . . all of them operating almost entirely independently.

Mamie Till Mobley and her family and friends were able to leverage Black Chicago’s political and cultural muscle, which in turn became an organizing engine of a national movement.<sup>22</sup>

This leads us to the fourth reason for the power of these pictures: context. If we analyze one magazine where Till’s pictures were first published—*Jet* and the now historic issue of September 15, 1955—the first thing we see is an attractive African American woman wearing provocative clothes. This was the pattern for almost every issue of “The Weekly Negro News Magazine,”<sup>23</sup> at least during the 1950s and 1960s: female beauty on a colorful background surrounded by headlines. In the beginning, headlines were mostly about shallow topics, such as beauty, celebrities, and fashion, but later the magazine also featured political issues, increasing the contrast between what they were more proud of as a community and what they were concerned about. So there is a visual tension that only gets more intense when we open the magazine, for if we pay attention to the advertising—bleaching cream, hair cream—and the highly aspirational articles,<sup>24</sup> pride has a touch of ambiguity and there is a certain trivialization of segregation<sup>25</sup> rather than a critical point of view. This ambiguity was, in fact, a sign of African American people’s reality, since no matter how

proud one is of their origins, nobody would choose the less favorable side.

So *Jet* confronted its readers with two sides of African American life: idealization and reality, and in *Jet* and other similar magazines, these sides were intertwined. Both subjects may even share the same page. This was a projection of their actual lives, so the magazine spoke directly to them, in a time when they were open to receive the message. As Leigh Raiford notes, “unlike an earlier corpus of lynching images, the photographs of Till were greeted by a culture not only willing but desiring to look. They emerged in a new visual climate in which photo magazines had disciplined audiences to look at and understand images as not only illustrative and demonstrative but as the embodiment of truth.”<sup>26</sup>

Here, “the embodiment of truth” was not meant to exist, but with the pictures taken at the funeral, the event got fixed in time and its original context with it. Then, a secondary context is set when the pictures are first published. This is not the evidence of the event proper anymore, but the evidence of its circulation in that time, it tells us about the discourse that media used to speak to its audience. As time goes by both contexts merge so that as present-day viewers we can only understand the political role of the pictures through the media discourses that delivered them.

These reasons help us understand the community’s immediate reactions. In the months following the publication, African Americans all over the country took part in protest rallies and Mamie Till Bradley became the spokesperson of a now public cause, gathering hundreds of people willing to hear her story.<sup>27</sup> Because of these conditions, the role of Emmett Till went further than of an innocent victim, he became the embodiment of an unsought fate. Maybe this is why he remains in the memory of the African American community as a martyr of the civil rights cause.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Tyson, “The Legacy of the Lynching.”

<sup>23</sup> *Jet* Magazine used this slogan from the first issue of November 1951 until the issue of June 3, 1954.

<sup>24</sup> “10 ways to get a mink coat” - November 1, 1951; “What is the perfect figure?” - June 26, 1952; “How to become a Paris model” - August 28, 1952; “Does mixed marriage produce better babies?” - March 19, 1953.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, the magazine had a Weekly Almanac where “Pin-up of the Week” was followed by “Suicide of the Week” (April 24, 1952), “Jazz of the Week” came after “Tragedy of the Week” (May 1, 1952), and “Race Relations Ruling of the Week” shared the page with “Jim Crow of the Week” (June 5, 1952).

<sup>26</sup> Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 88.

<sup>27</sup> See Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), 86-110.

<sup>28</sup> See Myisha Priest, “The Nightmare Is Not Cured’: Emmett Till and American Healing,” *American Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (March 2010): 1-24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40664719>. As Priest affirms in this paper, “the civil rights movement raised Till’s body like a banner.”

## A Modern Martyr

The impact that Emmett Till's pictures had on African American people can be easily compared with the impact that martyrs' iconography had in early Christianity. Christian iconography has made us used to the representation of suffering, sacrifice, torture, and agony, but, can we consider Emmett Till a martyr? First, there was no actual sacrifice. Till was not a noble, innocent boy willing to sacrifice for his people, nor was his death a deliberate means to benefit others. There is no sin and no expiation, or at least, the sin was not recognized by the victim, for although his mother warned him about the dangers in the South, he was too young to take any warning so seriously or to see where the limits were; his actions were innocent and unwitting.

Yet, we may consider Till a martyr for other reasons. The first among them is persecution. Martyrs are men and women persecuted because of their faith, their salvation lies in the denial of such faith and the imposed adoption of the dominant one. Till was persecuted for something that was not of his choice (his race)—but in the end, for a martyr faith is not a matter of choice either. Actually, “not having a choice” is a key sign, a martyr is supposed to be following a superior will, he or she is the “chosen one,” for mysterious, often incomprehensible reasons.

Another sign of martyrdom is the sense of collectivity. This was first embraced by Till's mother. During one of her speeches she declared: “When something happened to Negroes in the South, I said: ‘That's their business, not mine.’ . . . Now I know how wrong I was. The murder of my son has shown me that what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of us all.”<sup>29</sup> In effect, Emmett Till was tortured and murdered not because of who he was as an individual but because of who he was as a member of a community: a black man who dared to approach a white woman. His punishment was meant to teach a lesson. Although, if that was the case we may ask, why did

<sup>29</sup> Bradley speech at NAACP rally (September 15, 1955), as quoted in Jacqueline Goldsby, “The High and Low Tech of It: The Meaning of the Lynching and Death of Emmett Till,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 245, doi:10.1353/yale.1996.0016.

the murderers try to get rid of the corpse instead of showing it and making it a public warning? We can just speculate, but one thing for certain is that even in the Jim Crow era, racial crimes were still crimes. According to Harold and DeLuca:

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.<sup>30</sup>

Lynching was a demonstration of power and also a way to “inscribe one sort of ideology on the body.”<sup>31</sup> In this case, we may infer that even though Bryant and Milam meant to hide their crime from the public sphere, it would not remain a secret affair. So much so that when they could safely talk about it, they found no objection to express the intentions that drove them and ultimately confess their crime. Somehow, the spectacle of lynching was performed through the media, but contrary to the event happening in a public square for the amusement of white people, here the photographs reproduced in magazines and newspapers gave black people a voice, turning the representation of white supremacy into a proof of the brutality permitted and concealed with impunity by segregation laws. Also, seeing Till's pictures produced a reflection about all the photos that were *not* taken, the anonymous victims of lynching.

<sup>30</sup> Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca, “Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 269, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41939982>.

<sup>31</sup> This expression is used by Brent D. Shaw when referring to the trials to Christian martyrs. Brent D. Shaw, “Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 311, <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.1996.0037>.

In the end, Emmett Till was an involuntary martyr, turned into an icon of racial violence and whose sacrifice did actually bring vicarious benefits, helping to trigger the civil rights movement, as author Clenora Hudson-Weems claims in her book *Emmett Till: The sacrificial lamb of the civil rights movement*. Her research contributed to bring Till's case to the forefront and give it its place as "the catalyst of the movement."<sup>32</sup> As she asserts, "most historians mark the beginning of the modern civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s with the rebellious act on December 1, 1955, of the established mother of the movement, Rosa Parks."<sup>33</sup> Notwithstanding, by the reading of the testimonies compiled in Hudson-Weems' research it is not hard to presume that the encounter with Till's pictures left a much stronger mark on African Americans at the time.

Rosa Parks herself was one of them. After being arrested, accused of violating the segregation rules for refusing to give her bus seat to a white man, she would declare: "I thought of Emmett Till, I just couldn't move."<sup>34</sup> This action marked the beginning of a protest against segregation on buses. African American people in Montgomery (Alabama) got organized and resisted riding them for more than a year, causing the bankruptcy of the company (they represented 75 percent of bus riders in the city). This event, later known as the "Montgomery bus boycott," was taken to court, and finally, segregation on buses was declared unconstitutional.

Another African American, Muhammad Ali, a boy of the Emmett Till generation, relates in his autobiography:

Emmett Till and I were about the same age. A week after he was murdered in Sunflower County, Mississippi, I stood on the corner with a gang of boys, looking at pictures of him in the black newspapers and magazines. 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. . . . 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.<sup>35</sup>

Had Till been buried in Mississippi and never seen again as authority planned, the civil rights movement would have emerged anyway, it was a matter of time. But what these pictures did was to put a face in the foreground. As Harold and De Luca assert "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."<sup>36</sup>

Mamie Till Bradley did not "want his death to be a vain thing." Rather than passively acquiesce in her son's destiny, she engaged on a mission because if his death could "further the cause of freedom then I would say that he died a hero."<sup>37</sup> She explains her reasons in her book:

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 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.

So I wanted to make it as real and as visible to people as I could possibly make it. I knew that if they walked by that casket, if people opened the pages of *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender*, if other people could see it with their own eyes, then together we might find a way to express what we had seen.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See Clenora Hudson-Weems, "Resurrecting Emmett Till: The Catalyst of the Modern Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 2 (November 1998): 179-188, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2668088>.

<sup>33</sup> Hudson-Weems, "Resurrecting Emmett Till," 182.

<sup>34</sup> "How Rosa Parks's Protest Sparked a Momentous Chain of Events," *Smithsonian Magazine*, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/videos/category/history/how-rosa-parkss-protest-sparked-a-momentous/>

<sup>35</sup> Muhammad Ali and Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), 24-25.

<sup>36</sup> Harold and DeLuca, "Behold the Corpse," 282-83.

<sup>37</sup> Mamie Till Bradley's testimony from the documentary *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*, directed by Keith Beauchamp (THINKFilm, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 139.

Her actions were not free of controversy at the time as they will not be nowadays but the important thing is that by making her son's remains open to the public view, she let people not only see, but be part of a public discussion on bigotry and hate and to reflect themselves in it. So, in this case of martyrdom, we do see a voluntary sacrifice, of a mother, who chose the collective cause over personal interests.

### The Importance of Letting See

Before the conclusion of this essay, I want to propose a reflection on mass media and censorship. In an era when we produce and share millions of pictures every day, we can hardly think of a magazine publishing Emmett Till's pictures if the crime occurred today. While aestheticized pain depictions are common, hard-to-see pictures are systematically banned from massive publication due to ethical reasons—allegedly, at least. But it is important to consider that censorship often is a sign of denial rather than a sign of respect, since as long as there is no photographic evidence of the event, it may not have happened.

If Bradley had accepted the decisions of the authorities, she only would have imagined what happened to her son. People who knew him would have kept a nice memory of the boy, surrounding his existing pictures in the sweet nostalgia for the loved ones that are gone. In other words, another racial crime without consequences. Instead, Bradley let see pictures that troubled a nation, that possibly scarred an entire generation of African American teenagers for life,<sup>39</sup> serving as a reminder of their vulnerability and a call to action.

Still, censorship may have affected Till's case, denying him his place in the history of the civil rights movement. According to Rayfield Mooty, Till's relative, "Historians will talk about the good and the bad,

<sup>39</sup> Speaking only of a portion of this generation (black writers), Elizabeth Alexander contends that: "For black writers of a certain age, and, perhaps, of a certain proximity to Southern roots, Emmett Till's story is the touchstone, a rite of passage that indoctrinated these young people into understanding the vulnerability of their own black bodies, and the way in which their fate was interchangeable with that of Till." Alexander, *The Black Interior*, 192.

but they don't want to deal with the ugly. . . . The ugliness of racism is not a White man's telling a Black woman to give him her bus seat—bad as it is—but the confident home-invasion, kidnapping and murder of a fourteen-year old Black youth and the exonerated by jury of the youth's apparent killers."<sup>40</sup>

Certainly, Emmett Till's story is not "photogenic," it cannot be commodified, it is the ugliest side of segregation, for obvious reasons, and it also exhibits the ugliness of the justice system, which is incompatible with the image of "American exceptionalism"<sup>41</sup> promoted by the nation. Therefore, to be able to see, especially when it is hard to do so, is definitely relevant for the progress of justice.

### Conclusion

As we have seen, these pictures were powerful because of several conditions. The first one, the unusual depiction of lynching, made viewers really see it and identify. Then, these pictures became evidence of *one* horrible crime but also, because of the discourse that presented them and the context where they were released, they became the representation of many other crimes, turning Emmett Till into an icon of struggle. Because of Mamie Till Bradley activism, her son went from a victim of lynching to a martyr to fight for.

She engaged in a triple fight against the invisibilization attempts of the authority: when she recognized the identity of her son<sup>42</sup> and demanded his remains, refusing to bury him in Mississippi; when she insisted on opening the sealed casket to see what the murderers had done to him by; and finally when she decided to share what she saw, permitting to take photographic evidence, so the crime could be visible for more people for a longer time. This was

<sup>40</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till: The sacrificial lamb of the civil rights movement* (Troy: Bedford Publishers, 1994), 75. As quoted in Hudson-Weems, "Resurrecting Emmett Till," 181.

<sup>41</sup> This expression is borrowed from Susan Sontag: "That this country, like every other country, has its tragic past does not sit well with the founding, and still all-powerful, belief in American exceptionalism." Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 88.

<sup>42</sup> The Tallahatchie county sheriff expressed his doubts about the identity of the body found in the river, even though a ring belonging to Till's father was found in the finger of the victim. See "Will Mississippi 'Whitewash' the Emmett Till Slaying?," *Jet Magazine*, September 22, 1955, 10-11.

a fight for identity, memory and representation, three privileges that segregation saved for white people. The political instrumentalization of the pictures, encouraged by Bradley and made possible by local and national media, proved to be effective: protesters took to the streets and their actions would lay the foundation for a social movement. As Raiford asserts, “the 1955 circulation of the Till postmortem photographs offered a refocusing of the liberatory and galvanizing potential of visual technology for black political communities.”<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, to contemporary viewers the pictures do not depict reality but history. That is, Till’s image has become a representation, it is now the signifier of something rather than the evidence of it. So the shocking picture has an expiration date as a weapon of mobilization; its power to move may be everlasting, but its power to mobilize is subject to time and context.

Contrary to Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King Jr., Emmett Till did not become an icon of the civil rights movement. His image remained only in the memories of the viewers, not in posters or postcards. This is because to understand his iconic role we should see his postmortem pictures and they are the counterpart of a pop, ready-to-commodify image. These pictures do not depict hope or courage but fail, they are a reminder of the things that go wrong in the country. Within a few months Emmett Till’s case felt into oblivion,<sup>44</sup> but the civil rights movement had already ignited. Then, as we have seen, the most affected generation was not old enough to react, but they kept Emmett Till in their minds and the effects would become manifest years later, either as literature or activism.<sup>45</sup> Then the martyr became a hero.

<sup>43</sup> Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare*, 89.

<sup>44</sup> Metress, “No Justice,” 88.

<sup>45</sup> For a compilation of testimonies of this generation see Rubin, “Reflections” and Alexander, *The Black Interior*, 189-94.