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## Emmett Till, Justice, and the Task of Recognition

The act of looking is not only central to the political constitution and manipulation of humanity as the contexts of slavery and lynching reveal. It is also essential to the constitution and manipulation of identity. Involving self-constitution and self-presentation, identity is managed internally, through psychological processes, and externally, through the use of language and symbols. The project of black liberation that this book has traced thus far entails the humane insight of the state and of individuals in positions of relative power. Such insight effects the bonding of the onlooker to the beholden in a relationship of shared humanity. But how does one form such an important bond with another—especially another that the rhetoric of race has stigmatized as the Other—so absolutely and fundamentally distinct from the self?

Recognition is the tool that brings another being before our consciousness and permits us to bestow him with rights and care. In both its political and emotional uses, the act of recognition fundamentally shaped the way that one black boy's death influenced African American identity and civil rights activism in mid-twentieth-century United States. The revelation of Emmett Till's brutal murder and his horribly disfigured corpse drew a striking ideological line between those who refused to recognize black life and victimization and those who recognized the violated humanity and unwarranted suffering that begat Till's death and their own haunted black lives.

Recognition is an essential component to understanding the Emmett Till case. The task of recognition is not only restricted to identifying the dead

black body as human, to humane insight; it is also primarily engaged with identifying whose body is represented—a project that implies the questioning of racial and evidentiary visual identification. Echoing the “danger” implied in the previous chapter regarding the paucity of documentary associations with graphic and plastic images, the danger that underwrites this entire project of recognition—that the image of the black body will not be recognized as human—is exacerbated in the Till situation as a result of the decomposition of Till’s corpse. The recognition of Till’s particular body is not only a recognition of his (black) body’s humanity, but also a recognition and an acknowledgment of Till’s identity as a son and as a black child—two terms that figure his body in specific ways in the various venues—the morgue, the funeral, the courtroom, and the mass media—that it appeared.

The public spectacles—of the funeral, the courtroom procedure, and the final tabloid confession—that distinguished Emmett Till’s murder at the hands of at least two white men in 1954 provide the opportunity to mine the look’s underlying structures for basic information about how we constitute ourselves and others. Exploring those structures leads us to appreciate the important work of recognition and the role of identity in bringing to light a defensible black humanity. By tracing the character of the many looks of the prosecution, of the defense, of Till’s mother and uncle, and of a sympathetic mass media audience, one can better understand how a single image of a dead and tortured black body may serve opposing viewpoints.

## The Murder

The reopening of Till’s case by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 2006 still contains several contested elements, including how many people were involved in the actual abduction and murder. The crux of the story, however, maintains that in August 1954, fourteen-year-old Emmett Louis Till of Chicago, Illinois, was visiting his great-uncle Moses “Mose” Wright, a sharecropper, and other relatives in Mississippi on a summer vacation. Although the details of the encounter are still debated, what is known is that Till had some interaction with a white female shopkeeper, then twenty-one-year-old Carolyn Bryant, at her family store in the small town of Money in Leflore County, Mississippi. Three days later, at 2:30 A.M. on Saturday, August 28, 1955, Bryant’s husband, Roy Bryant, twenty-four; brother-in-law, J. W. Milam, thirty-six; and, according to many accounts, one or two others (including,

perhaps, Carolyn Bryant herself) drove to the home of Moses Wright to abduct Till. Till was taken to Milam's toolshed, where he was beaten. The beating was overheard by an eighteen-year-old black man named Willie Reed who eventually testified at the trial. At some point, Bryant and Milam apparently decided to kill Till. They found a cotton-ginning fan and drove to the edge of the Tallahatchie River, where they say they shot Till in the head, then secured the seventy-pound fan to his neck with barbed wire and threw his body into the river.<sup>1</sup>

Following its discovery on August 31, 1955, Till's body was loaded with racial and legal significance by politicians, local police, and a predominantly black press that recognized the multiple resonances of this singular death. The body was found by a seventeen-year-old white boy, Robert Hodges, who spotted feet sticking out of the water at Pecan Point in the Tallahatchie River. By that time, local Mississippi law enforcement had been made well aware of Till's abduction and disappearance: Moses Wright and his brother-in-law, Crosby Smith, had notified their local sheriff, George Smith, the morning after the abduction, and Chicago police, contacted by Till's mother, Mamie Till, thirty-three, alerted Tallahatchie County Sheriff Harold Clarence Strider. (There are also accounts claiming that Till's cousin, Curtis Jones, also from Chicago, called Sheriff Strider directly to report the kidnapping.) When the body was retrieved from the river and taken to the undertaker, it was so badly decomposed that it could only be identified by a signet ring that bore the initials "L. T."—the initials of Louis Till, Emmett's estranged father. Ostensibly due to the condition of the body, Strider ordered that Till's body be buried immediately, but Jones intervened by phoning Mamie Till in Chicago and notifying her of Strider's order. Mamie Till's own assessment of the situation was that "the main thing [the police in Tallahatchie wanted] to do was to get that body in the ground so nobody could see it."<sup>2</sup> She insisted that her son's body be returned to Chicago. It was, but only on the condition set by the sheriff's office that the casket never be opened. The box containing Emmett Till's body arrived at the Illinois Central rail terminal in Chicago on Friday, September 2, 1955.

## The Mother

The arrival of Emmett Till's coffin and the subsequent opening of the coffin—in defiance of a contract agreed to by the Chicago funeral director A. A. Raynor and Mississippi officials—marked the beginning of a struggle

for recognition of the body that would carry over, in different ways, into several disparate domains, including the funeral viewing and the courtroom case.<sup>3</sup> Great efforts had been taken to ensure that the body would never be seen. When the murderers' attempt to conceal the body in the river failed, local officials stepped in to fulfill the task. When it became apparent that the body of Emmett Till would have to be returned to his mother, the state coroner packed the body in lime to accelerate its decomposition and took the extra step of legally locking the box shut with the seal of the State of Mississippi.<sup>4</sup>

But when the coffin arrived, Mamie Till flouted the edicts and demanded that Raynor open the coffin so that she could see and check the remains. As she explains in her autobiography,

I was not bending. That box had to come open. I mean, I didn't even know what we would find inside. There could have been bricks, mud, someone else's body. I would spend the rest of my life not knowing. Besides, I had heard so many things over the past couple of days, I had to see for myself what they had done to my son.<sup>5</sup>

In her own words, her need to see and to recognize her son was necessary, not optional. We can intuitively understand this response as the desire of a mother to bestow upon her deceased son the caring look of humane insight. Yet another explanation connected with the work of mourning permits us to extrapolate from this specific occasion of death an understanding of the visual encounter with the dead body as a project of compassionate responsibility.

In demanding that the box be opened, Mamie Till articulates a logic explained by Jacques Derrida as the responsibility of the living to the dead. Contemplating the legendary onus encapsulated by Hamlet and Antigone, two literary characters whose motivations are entirely propelled by their imagined responsibilities to their kin, Derrida offers that “[n]othing could be worse for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one *has to know* who is buried where.”<sup>6</sup>

However, as Till's mother soon discovers, the task of recognizing her son's body is not easy. In the Chicago funeral home, Mamie Till's visual project of bestowing a particular humanity—her son's—on this body is influenced by her identity as a mother, an identity that in turn gives the task of recognition the great urgency underscored by Derrida. But her task is frustrated by the body's visual appearance. At a speech given shortly after Till's murderers' acquittal, Mamie Till admitted that “[w]hat I saw in that box was not like

anything I've ever seen before in my life."<sup>7</sup> The detailed description of that initial visual encounter that she offers in her memoirs is wrenching.

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. . . .

From the chin I moved up to his right cheek. There was an eyeball hanging down, resting on that cheek. . . . Right away, I looked to the other eye. But it wasn't there. . . . Dear God, there were only two [teeth] now, but they were definitely his. I looked at the bridge of his nose. . . . It had been chopped. . . .

From there, I went to one of his ears. . . . And that's when I found out that the right ear had been cut almost in half. . . . And I don't know what happened to that part of his ear, but it wasn't on the back part of his skull. I did check. And when I did, I saw that someone . . . had taken a hatchet and had cut through the top of his head, from ear to ear. The back of his head was loose from the front part of his face. . . . I saw a bullet hole slightly back from the temple area. . . . [I]t was that one bullet hole that finally caused me to speak.

"Did they have to shoot him?" I mean, he had to be dead by then.<sup>8</sup>

Her thorough inventory of body parts represents an attempt to metaphorically reassemble the vision before into the body of a unified and recognized human being.

Equally compelling as the encounter that Mamie Till narrates is the language that she uses to describe the encounter. One of her explications of the looking process merits especially close examination for the ways it engages and extends our understanding of how the visual image is connected to identity. In her autobiography, Mamie Till writes, "At a glance, the body didn't even appear human. I remember thinking it looked like something from outer space, something you might see at one of those Saturday matinees. Or maybe that's only what I wanted to think so that I wouldn't have to admit that this was my son."<sup>9</sup> Mamie Till's language here is fascinating in its seamless discussion of looks that constitute knowledge. Her invocation of cinematic metaphor—her reference to "Saturday matinees"—recalls psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's use of the concepts *screen* and *gaze*, concepts that, along with *identification*, continue to prove integral to cinema studies and to psychoanalysis.

To briefly review the relevant points of Lacan's theory of identity: Individuals come to know themselves through the establishment of identities that are relatable and understandable to other people. This process of identification—that is, the process of attaching a coherent image of a Self to one's own Self—is defined by Lacan as "the transformation that takes place

in the subject when he assumes an image.”<sup>10</sup> This transformation or process is not only essential to the Self’s ability to utilize language as a means of self-protection and self-fulfillment, but is also always an imperfect project as it necessarily smoothes over inconsistencies and imperfection in order to create a coherent identity.

Mamie Till’s project of recognition as she stands before her son’s damaged body is first and foremost to reconstruct from the disfigured body something recognizable as that of her son so that his identity can be restored anew. But the challenges she faces in the task are huge, and the reassembling of her son’s identity requires not simply a rote gesture of visual recognition, but also an imaginative recognition, one spawned by looking but spurred on by love. She must look with not only humane insight, but also with a mother’s insight to recognize and eventually mobilize the identity of this ruined body as that of her son, Emmett Till.

The looking that Mamie Till conducts is not only underwritten by a desire to recognize a human being, a desire that characterizes humane insight, but also by a desire to recognize someone she loves. Her act of humane insight is amplified by the love bond that grants the task of recognition its extreme urgency. Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin explains that the uniquely affective love bond, especially the version that forms between the mother and the infant, can have the effect of constituting both subjects through what Benjamin calls “mutual recognition.”<sup>11</sup> In Benjamin’s model, a subject comes to understand herself as an autonomous (if incomplete) being in the world “by being with another person who recognizes her acts, her feelings, her intentions, her existence, her independence.”<sup>12</sup> But the role of recognition in constituting the Self does not end here, for, as Benjamin tells us, recognition is “reflexive; it includes not only the other’s confirming response, but also how we find ourselves in that response,” adding, “We recognize ourselves in the other.”<sup>13</sup>

By privileging love over antipathy, Benjamin rewrites the dialogic of recognition instigated by German philosopher Georg Hegel that has informed and hobbled our understanding of human interaction and power. As Hegel asserts in his contemplation of human consciousness and intersubjective relations, the immediate response to perceiving another being possessing a conscious mind is to vanquish and eliminate that other. Whence this belligerence emerges Hegel fails to say, only offering that it is the power of each to kill the other that stays both hands and results in stalemate. The insertion of unequal power relations into this scheme complicates the work of recognition but does not remove its bitterness and venality. In the “Lord and

Bondsman” dialectic, both parties rely on the other for assurances of identity. The bondsman is, quite famously, an identity in “negativity,” a consciousness that exists not for itself but for the other. Only when the bondsman is able to perceive that the absolute nature of his existence, an existence characterized by service and fear, is not only beholden to the lord but instead to the Lord—a conceptual move that indicates an appreciation of what Hegel calls “the absolute”—is the bondsman truly free. The solution that Hegel saw in the divine is the solution offered by Mamie Till—a bestowing of recognition not by the Father and the Son, but by the mother.

If recognition is based on love rather than animosity, then the kind of recognition that Mamie Till articulates is a model for the compassionate recognition that illustrates the productive and even activist work that looking can involve. It is not misrecognition, then, but the humane insight that animates her son’s identity and allows for mutual recognition that engenders Mamie Till’s compassion for the physical circumstances of her son’s corpse and demise. The animating recognition enacted by Mamie Till registers in Lacanian terms as a fundamental but inevitable mistake. In the Lacanian system, when Mamie Till identifies with her son and registers the marks of pain and suffering evident on his body as tangible to her own, she is making a fundamental, albeit productive, mistake. But it is this “mistake” that constitutes the mechanics of humane insight. Enacting the reflexive component of mutual recognition outlined by Benjamin, Mamie Till “recognizes” herself in the body of her son.

Mamie Till’s humane insight is significantly informed by her ability to perceive via the spectacle of her son’s injured body her own body’s potential response to torture. Mamie Till is compelled to think of her own body and her own body’s limits when she takes visual account of her son’s evident torture and murder: “I paused at the knees. They weren’t knobby knees, they were nice, fat, round knees and rather flat. And they were *my* knees.”<sup>14</sup> Unlike the torturer, who Elaine Scarry tells us in her landmark research on the logic of pain is “so without any human recognition of or identification with the pain that he is not only able to bear its presence but able to bring it continually into the present, inflict it, sustain it,” Mamie Till can see herself in the body of the tortured and imagine herself in her son’s place.<sup>15</sup> Her alignment of her body with his reaches its peak when she is able to identify with his sense of fear as she discovers, suddenly, that she might be able to see with his eyes. Riding in a taxi on the night of the trial’s conclusion, passing through Mississippi back roads, Mamie Till recounts that she “was terrified and could only imagine the horrors that lay around every turn. And then an even more

terrifying thought rushed over me: Was this what Emmett saw, was this what he thought on his last ride in Mississippi in the pitch black of night?"<sup>16</sup> It is by seeing what Emmett most likely saw that she is able to comprehend the depths of his fear.

## The Community

The recognition and identification of Emmett Till's corpse was freighted at every step with implications and even dangers that could affect, one way or the other, every black person with whom he came into contact. Even the decision of when and where to admit to recognizing the disfigured body of Emmett Till as a human body, and as that of Till specifically, bore serious implications in the segregationist South. In a sad repetition of the injunction placed upon slaves not to betray their misery to inquisitive white eyes, the body's discovery precipitated moments when the psychic pain of recognizing the body could not be signaled to those in power.<sup>17</sup> This act of self-preservation—to conceal the experience of pain and vulnerability—temporarily thwarted the political project of making human vulnerability recognizable, but was a trade-off that was absolutely understood by Emmett Till's uncle Moses Wright, who was summoned to identify the body upon its discovery. Rather than let multiply the white dominance made visible during the lynching and repeat the act of submission-under-duress in another location (the morgue), when called to identify Emmett's body, Wright revealed no emotion and behaved in accordance with what Mamie Till calls "the code."

He and every other black person in the Delta knew it and lived by it. Never show emotions. You couldn't show joy. That would be suppressed. You couldn't show anger. That would mean defiance. You couldn't show sorrow. That would mean weakness. I guess as far as Southern whites were concerned, blacks had no feelings.

So Mose . . . dammed up his feelings, as he was so used to doing, holding back until later, until he couldn't hold back any longer.<sup>18</sup>

The emotions that Wright refused to express during the identification were to become, however, foundational to the political movement that Emmett Till's death and public funeral portended. It is the radical difference between black emotion in the morgue and black emotion during the funeral service that makes this case so remarkable in terms of the politics of affect and what Derrida calls "the work of mourning." Both sites stage, each in its own way,

the importance of recognizing the right body at the right time and in the right way.

## The Mourner

Mamie Till orchestrated a political event by inviting a viewing public to an open-casket funeral where they would behold the devastated body of her son. In staging the event, she sought to make universally recognizable and undeniable both her and her son's pain. In a speech delivered shortly after the acquittal of her son's murderers, Mamie Till explained what motivated her decision—her own first view of his corpse. Only moments after seeing Emmett's corpse for the first time,

I said, "Roy [Mooty, Mamie Till's cousin], anybody that wants to look at this, can see it. I'm tired of stuff being covered up." If some of these lids had been pulled off of Mississippi a long time ago, then something like this wouldn't be happening today. So far as my personal feelings are concerned, they don't count. . . . And if my son had sacrificed his life like that, I didn't see why I should have to bear the burden of it alone. There was a lesson there for everybody.<sup>19</sup>

Emmett's body lay in state for four days at the Roberts Temple Church of God. The church was thronged by visitors, primarily by black Chicagoans, who had followed the story of the kidnapping and murder through the black press and the mainstream media outlets. Implicitly, it seems, Mamie Till understood the political possibilities of making her son's body visually available to a public already aware of the ongoing threats against black life in the South. Her belief was that, in confronting the disfigured body of Emmett Till, "people also had to face themselves. They would have to see their own responsibility in pushing for an end to this evil."<sup>20</sup> Seeing the brutality enacted upon the body of a young black boy would perhaps make the country acknowledge just how dire the situation was for African Americans in the American South.

Mamie Till understood the power of looking to do what words could not. Her decision to have a public, open-casket funeral and to guarantee that both the funeral and the body were photographed stem from an understanding that people "had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this. . . . 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>21</sup> It seems that even the transformation of the task of looking into a task of recognition—a task whose terms are not only expressed in the language of emotion but also in the language of justice—demonstrates the importance of the image in contesting the validity of unrestrained brutality.

Knowing that the viewing public—the mourners—had little if anything to compare to Emmett after his torture and death, Mamie Till provided photographs of Emmett while alive for comparison. The viewing of the body was thus an orchestrated affair, relying in part on the juxtaposition of visual objects to make its political and affective points. At the viewing, the painful reality that a young black boy’s body could endure such violence that it became difficult to recognize that body as human let alone as Emmett Till was underscored by the photographs taken during Emmett’s last Christmas with his family that were taped to the coffin lid.

The juxtaposition of the photographs that represented Emmett Till alive and the dead body made an emotional appeal to a sentimental aesthetic more commonly associated with memorial photography of nineteenth-century America. At that time, the photograph was a central feature in the mourning process, and in fact these memorial photographs constitute the largest group of nineteenth-century American genre photographs. As collector Stanley Burns explains, “Surviving families were proud of these images and hung them in their homes, sent copies to friends and relatives, wore them as locketts or carried them as pocket mirrors.”<sup>22</sup> The most disturbing images of this genre are also the rarest; they are the premortem photographs. In the earliest days of photography, when most people did not have their portraits taken, photographers appealed to customers with the slogan “Secure the Shadow Ere the Substance Fade,” which united the unpredictability of death with photography’s technical ability to freeze time, as it were, in the image. After a person had fallen ill, however, death often came too quickly to capture the previously unphotographed subject while still alive. A few photographers and families compensated for this by posing their loved ones in positions that suggested life, such as opening the eyes or adding props to indicate sleeping.

The one pair of pre- and postmortem images known to exist illustrates the power of this juxtaposition of life and death. The caption for these images suggests one reason the formal pairing of Emmett Till’s Christmas portraits and his dead body—a pairing that was repeated in the magazines and newspapers that reported on the funeral and trial—yields such affective power.

Burns's caption of the images *Premortem Daguerreotype of Boy Lying in Bed with a Ball* and *Postmortem Daguerreotype of the Same Boy Lying in Bed*, circa 1848, reads:

The first, most unusual, image shows a sick boy in bed with a ball, which symbolized the joy of life in which he can no longer participate. . . .

The second image shows the boy after he has died. . . . The spots on the boy's forehead indicate the development of a childhood exanthema, perhaps chicken pox or measles.<sup>23</sup>

Emmett's Christmas portrait has him posed with an object that represents a similar "joy of life"—a Philco television, which was by 1955 the American home's central vehicle of entertainment. However, his proprietary pose against the television as well as his stylish new outfit, a Christmas gift from his mother, depict a boy who has no idea that his death is imminent—less than nine months away. As one scholar said to Mamie Till, "That photo would come to define him for everyone. It would become so important in telling his story, starting at his funeral, where it had been on display in his casket. How ironic, [the scholar] noted, that the photo seemed to foreshadow something with such profound historical significance: the role that the media—especially television—would play in covering the civil rights struggle, a struggle that would intensify with the coverage of the murder trial."<sup>24</sup>

The spectacle of Till's body in the casket—the second image of this pre-mortem/postmortem visual pairing—like the daguerreotype, shows not only the body but also the signs of its death. It is the visibility of the wound that compounds the affective power of the visual display. The fact that the mark of death on Till's body renders him nearly unrecognizable as human grants this generic dynamic much greater gravity.

The emotional power of the memento mori pictorial genre is premised upon making mortality both visible and meaningful. The genre originated in the seventeenth-century European still-life paintings known as *vanitas*. The genre was adapted to the photographic medium in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because the images produced by photography are understood to offer documentary evidence of the physical existence of an actual body, the existential message of the memento mori—literally, "remember that you must die"—is explicitly linked to a real body—the subject of the memorial photograph. Barring witness of the actual circumstances of another's death—for instance, witnessing an act of murder—the spectacle of corporeal remains are understood by the viewer as proof of the cessation

of life (death as an event) and as evidence of universal human vulnerability. It is the dead body made visible that unites in the mind of the viewer the abstract concepts of life and death via the notions of a humanity defined as such by its vulnerability.

The memorial photograph, therefore, both is and is not allegorical. Its use of allegory directs its viewer to what I am calling the *pedagogical imperative of death*. Its rhetorical strategy relies on the same consensual investment in the idea of a universal humanity that underwrites humane insight and is in part defined by mortality. The photographic medium demands that there actually be a body present in order for it to be represented in the memorial photograph. The mourning for or acceptance of one's own mortality that is the ambition of the memento mori is a visually prompted event—the spectacle of another's body after death. The self-conscious act of mourning, figured by the genre as psychologically productive and cathartic, depends upon the mistake embedded in humane insight—that one sees the dead body as (potentially) one's own. The endurance of the memento mori images demonstrates that the imaging of death and/or violence, and the spectator's humane insight that transforms these images into valuable lessons about human vulnerability, includes the most important lesson—how (not) to die.

In addition to the mourning that these images precipitate, these representations of the mortal body inform the viewer's knowledge of his or her own body's limits. Moreover, as Elizabeth Alexander argues, such images can illustrate the exceptional vulnerability of black bodies because they “suggest that ‘experience’ [the specific experiences of vulnerability known as pain and death] can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in muscle memory as knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> Such knowledge may include race-specific knowledge of what spaces the black person can inhabit and transgress, and the limits of his behavior in those spaces.

Death, Derrida adds, is a teacher without peer in its ability to instruct the body and inform identity. “To live, by definition,” he explains, “is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life. And yet nothing is more necessary than this wisdom. It is ethics itself to learn to live.”<sup>26</sup> The human project is not to learn to live, but to learn *how* to live—a query to which Derrida's simple reply is “justly.” Derrida's reference to justice and his call that we heed the ghosts of the dead to develop “a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” is echoed in Achille Mbembe's more pointed call for a “necropolitics” to eliminate “the state of exception” under which minority populations now live to render their “status

of *living dead*” as well as the lives of those who have succumbed to death to crucially inform a just and equitable—in other words, a truly humane—way of living in the near future.<sup>27</sup> These amendments to the lessons of the dead—Derrida’s assertion that the lesson is not merely a matter of individual self-preservation, but a broader project of ensuring individual and even global justice—describes the ideological alteration that Mamie Till made in making mourning a matter of public concern. With this recalibration, the lesson provided by Emmett Till’s death was no longer how African Americans can avoid death at the hands of racist whites, but how all human beings can, in the name of justice, eradicate the racism that causes such deaths.

Mamie Till began this process of the radical recuperation of the dead black body from the debilitating logics of black submission and exceptional vulnerability by literally taking the body back from the hands of racist white officials. In her study of black death and funeral culture, Karla Holloway discusses the cultural importance of African American’s tradition of reclaiming the bodies of dead kin. Holloway discovers that, in the heyday of the segregation era, Jim Crow regulations in the mortuary industry and the logistical necessity of consulting white undertakers “created an additional psychological burden for African Americans when death occurred in their community.”

White violence, including the vicious practice of lynching, was complicit in too many black deaths, and whites were often as disrespectful to black bodies in death as they were in life. . . . So, when black men embraced the burial business, they were responding not only to a business opportunity but also to a sense of cultural responsibility and community necessity. Black families *knew* black morticians—they were our kin, our neighbors, our fellow congregants in Sunday worship service.<sup>28</sup>

This insistence on placing the body of a deceased loved one in the care of another who would respect and, in two senses, properly preserve that body indicates, in its own way, a kind of justice through “just treatment”—exactly what that body was denied in life. The practice of reclaiming kin for burial preparation marks not only a final gesture of corporeal control—the body is wrested from those who might disrespect it—but also represents a practical maneuver. Through her many conversations with members of the funeral industry, Holloway discerns a pride in the skill of black undertakers and embalmers who, in their work on black bodies, are not only equipped to meet “the challenges of the varieties of skin tone among black folk but also . . . [can manage the] repair job that masks the residue of violent death.”<sup>29</sup> These black undertakers are charged with making, and thought to be in a

better position to make, the dead and maimed black body recognizable to the mourners as human and as kin.

Most significant to this discussion of looking and humane insight is how this racialized mortuary tradition also enables the mourner to take the visible body back by taking the body “in” through the act of sight. Much like the witnessing that “consolidate[s] group affiliations” through the spectacle of brutalized black bodies, this visual gesture of recognition affirms community and kinship bonds.<sup>30</sup> This gesture of “taking in” is aided substantially by the craft of black mortuary, by which I mean that industry’s training in and objective of facilitating an open-casket funeral by rendering the body recognizable, looking as it had in life. This morbid realism enables the “final social encounter” to produce the empathy that results from the mourner’s recognition of a shared humanity.

And yet it is precisely this refusal to acquiesce to “retouching”<sup>31</sup> the disfigured body—what amounts to the aesthetic realism of the mortuary industry—that made Emmett Till’s funeral a political event and an activist gesture. I am arguing here that the funeral and mortuary industries have cultivated a form of realism that demands that one see the dead body either as it appeared in life or not at all (closed casket). Visually beholding and recognizing the body in this way is essential to the mourning process that has been codified by a North American funeral industry. By inversion, the Till funeral relied on the effects of this form of realism by presenting a body that seemed not to be what it was said to be.

An important facet to knowing that the body is properly cared for is the essential knowledge that the body has been buried and will stay buried, enduring no further insult and degradation at the hands of its enemies. What I am calling here *further insult* is what forensic pathologists refer to as *overkill*—the violent physical gestures (repeated stabbings, beatings, post-mortem dismemberment) that visibly and metaphorically ornament the simple act of killing. To call those who defile a corpse “torturers” misses the point that the aggression is not about exerting power over a living body, but about performing a ritual demonstrating privilege over the dead body. In such instances, the extinguishing of life is not enough; the murder operates to kill not only the person, but the metaphysical bond—humanity—that connects him to his victim as well. Ashraf Rushdy explains this desire with respect to lynching, wherein it was understood that “the corpse was an object to be tortured, mutilated, collected, displayed. To snuff out life was rarely enough: more ritual was required.”<sup>32</sup> Rushdy adds that “[e]ven a mob that had already hanged, maimed, and burned a man might still feel compelled

to exhume his body in order to inflict further *indignities*.<sup>33</sup> The motivating threat here extends from the body's potential to signify as human even in death and inspires the ritualized act of stripping the body of its dignity.

In the Till funeral as in any funeral, the excessive violence of the murderers is countered by the mourners whose respect for the body and for the life it once contained acts as a sort of antidote to the previous acts of mistreatment. The act of mourning violent death operates in a figurative sense like the mortician's retouching, covering up the mistreatment of the body with its own articulate compassion. In its refusal to admit any covering up of the wounds or their source—racist violence—the Till funeral represents a radical departure from the standard. The mourner's compassion was not elicited through a visual presentation of the body as it appeared in life. On the contrary, it was elicited from mourners over and over again through the display of a body so unrecognizable that, as we have seen, even his mother admits to having initially had trouble recognizing it as the body of her son.

The mechanics of the act of mourning precipitated by visual confrontation is altogether thrown into question by the Till funeral. Although it can, with some certainty, be said that the effect of mourning (a product of empathy) is a consequence of the visual encounter with the actual body and not (only) its representation in photographs, the act of mourning is really encouraged by the guarantees offered by the funeral rituals themselves and, in this case, reinforced by mass media sources, including the mass-reproduced photographs, the captions of which declare that the body (re)presented in the coffin at the church altar is in fact the body that should be mourned.

## The Mass Media Mourner

Other spectators besides Mamie Till and those present at the funeral were made mourners via mass media publication of the photograph. The publication and republication of photographs of Till's body in the black magazine *Jet* and the black newspaper *Chicago Defender* duplicated the mourner's viewing position. Perhaps more conspicuously than the lynching photographs of the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition that are discussed in the previous chapter, the pre- and postmortem photographs of Emmett Till position the photographs' viewers as spectators whose looks were politicized and empowered.

The seemingly passive occupation of looking was, in this visual scenario and at this historic moment in the history of African American civil rights, transformed into the empowered surveillance project of watching. We need not and, indeed, should not think of the image viewer as passive, but as

## Boys Never Told Grandfather About 'Incident'

who escaped after the crime, told JET:

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

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

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



*Mrs. Bradley got first look at brutally battered son in undertaker's morgue. More than 600,000, in an unending procession, later viewed body (r.).*

Figures 7 and 8. *Jet* magazine photo spread on the murder of Emmett Till, September 15, 1955. Courtesy Johnson Publishing Company, LLC. All rights reserved.



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

actively self-restraining. Recalling the repressive work of Emmett Till's uncle Moses Wright's self-restraint, we may understand watching to be motivated by an interest in self-preservation. We can, therefore, through this approach, come to appreciate differently the alternative activist solutions performed predominately by black women, and, specifically, black mothers, including Mamie Till, during the civil rights movement. The consequence is to call into question what Robin D. G. Kelley identifies as "the common claim that black mothers and grandmothers in the age of Jim Crow raised their boys to show deference to white people."<sup>34</sup> By understanding these women's instructions as preservationist acts of restraint, we can no longer accuse these women of "emasculating' potential militants," but appreciate them as "arming their boys with a sophisticated understanding of the political and cultural terrain of struggle."<sup>35</sup>

Here, it seems necessary to discuss how the image of Till postmortem moved spectators to action.<sup>36</sup> It would seem that the distorted appearance of Emmett Till's body almost made its presence and its visual availability irrelevant for the purposes of public mourning. And yet the mourning for Till's body *is* augmented by its visual presentation. It was not newspaper articles and reporter monologues that caused people to faint or to fly into overwhelming expressions of grief. There is, without doubt, a difference between seeing a body and seeing a photograph of a body. Still, it may be that the very unreality of Till's corpse is what made the consequence of this specific act of mourning—political agitation—as reproducible as the photographic image of the body itself.

As several writers confess in their memoirs, a range of these sensations was elicited by the Till photographs. Muhammad Ali describes his encounter thus:

A week after [Emmett Till] 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. . . . 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, and then broke into the shoeshine boy's shed and stole two iron shoe rests and took them to the railroad track. . . . When a big blue diesel engine came around the bend, it hit the shoe rests and

pushed them nearly thirty feet before one of the wheels locked and sprang from the track. . . . I'll never forget the eyes of the man in the poster, staring at us: UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU.<sup>37</sup>

The recollections of another athlete, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, indicate a more subtle but similarly profound response to the postmortem photograph of Till: “I was eight years old when I saw a photo of Emmett’s body in *Jet* magazine. It made me sick. His face was distorted, gruesomely bloated. I had no idea what happened to him, but my parents discussed it at length; and the *Jet* photo left an indelible image I could never forget. . . . The murder shocked me; I began thinking of myself as a black person for the first time, not just a person. . . . [A]ll of a sudden, the color of my skin represented danger.”<sup>38</sup>

The memories of Abdul-Jabbar and Ali, not to mention those of other authors who cite the Till story in their memoirs, bespeak these authors’ strong identification with the body represented in the pictures. The authors’ narrations of their respective responses illustrate how “taking in” the picture of Till’s brutalized body also meant “taking in” that which was not graphically represented in the photograph—a notion of systemic injustice that is determined by America’s abiding racism. Through viewing the photograph, Abdul-Jabbar and Ali also “take back” their racially and sexually marked bodies by acknowledging and resisting the social parameters that have been placed on them. Their responses to this sentiment—Ali’s railroad sabotage and Abdul-Jabbar’s self-awareness that resulted in an altering of relationships with his white peers—in effect prevent the story of Till’s murder from ending with the image of his tortured body, but give it the instructional edge that Derrida claims is integral to the relationship of the living to the dead. Ali and Abdul-Jabbar learn about death, specifically the death of a black male youth, and subsequently hold themselves responsible to the image.

## The Courtroom Viewers

During the trial of his murder, Emmett Till’s humanity was officially submitted to the work of justice and to the lens of humane insight. The pedagogical imperative of the image of mortality derives from an impulse for social justice, a desire to make death communicable (what Scarry calls “sharable”), and a desire to make the human being recognizable as a human being. This project of linking justice to a notion of humanity involves imbuing mourning with purpose, and granting the work of mourning a quantifiable goal. The goal—justice—is measured in terms of its responsibility to a notion of humanity

that is operating both rhetorically (as bestowing the identity of humanity) and ideologically (as determining the discourse of justice itself). This dual invocation of humanity complicates things, to say the least. In one regard, as Derrida points out, humanity is “that unconditional dignity . . . that Kant placed higher, precisely, . . . than any economy, any compared or comparable value, any market price.”<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, however, it also provides the terms in which human value is discussed. The confused version of humanity to which the pursuit of justice refers is both an item of (theoretical) exchange and the ideological criteria of the economy of exchange itself. The problem with this dually signifying humanity is that it threatens to invalidate the notion of justice altogether. In other words, the aim of justice is to quantify humanity, but the logic of humanity itself maintains that no single person’s humanity is unequal to another’s. Justice, in this case, can only perform two tasks: to serve as a superficial indicator of what is already known about the value of human life (that all lives are valued equally) or to provide a brazen violation of the essential tenets of humanity (that all human beings’ lives are *not* valued equally in accordance with a notion of universal humanity). These competing definitions of justice and, by extension, of humanity are what are presented to the modern, state-sanctioned arbiter of value—the courtroom.

The prosecution in the case was charged with the task of proving not only Emmett Till’s humanity and his attendant right to justice, but also that justice was being sought on behalf of the right body. In terms of the image, this meant making the image of Till’s body recognizable on two fronts: as the body of Emmett Till and as the body of a human being. During the trial, Mamie Till’s identification of the body and her assertion of recognition were called into question by the lawyers representing Till’s alleged murderers. Mamie Till was asked not only to detail her method of recognizing the body received in Chicago, but also to repeat that act of recognition when presented with more photographs of the body to affirm that every photograph submitted into evidence indeed represented a likeness of her murdered child.<sup>40</sup>

The extent of the body’s disfigurement—its unrecognizability as Emmett Till—was the basis for some testimony that no criminal act had been committed against the boy. One strategy in the defense attorneys’ arsenal was to suggest that Till was still alive and well in Chicago and that the body found in the river had been deliberately planted. On the stand, Sheriff Strider suggested that the body found in the river could have been that of “a negro boy who disappeared over there at Lambert.”<sup>41</sup> To cast upon the prosecution’s narrative the shadow of doubt, the defense suggested in closing arguments that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

and others had staged Till's death. A newspaper at the time reported this proposed sequence of events:

J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant might . . . have abducted Emmett Till in the night.

But if they did, they turned him loose three miles down the road at the Bryant store in Money and told him to walk home. Moses Wright had left his cabin, and driven down the road to Money and met Emmett coming home, and taken him to meet a friend from the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People, and the friend had persuaded Moses Wright to plant his nephew's ring on a "rotten, stinking corpse," which, when fished out of the river, would be identified by simple people as that of Emmett Till.<sup>42</sup>

Defense attorney John W. Whitten exploited this scenario and declared during closing arguments that "[t]here are people . . . who will go as far as necessary to commit any crime known to man to widen the gap between the white and colored people of the United States. . . . They would not be above putting a rotting, stinking body in the river in the hope it would be identified as Emmett Till."<sup>43</sup>

Because the defendants, Milam and Bryant, did not confess their crime before the court, the state was required to make its case using witness testimony and circumstantial evidence. And although the two photographs of Till's corpse that were admitted in the trial offered perhaps the most emotionally compelling testimony, they did not serve as incontrovertible evidence of his murder. The image of the mutilated body that was at the center of civil rights agitation in the public realm was radically stripped of any significance in the pursuit of justice in the Mississippi courtroom when the body depicted therein was decided to be unrecognizable as Till to any legally definitive degree. Paradoxically, the unrecognizability that conveyed such strong claims against racist brutality at the funeral in Chicago and that made it necessary for the spectator to give more than a glance in order to recognize the body as human was, in the courtroom, the grounds for excluding the image as evidence, for denying it so much as a glance, and for making the body and, by extension, the crime against that body invisible or, worse, not identifiable as a crime at all.

The ideas of photograph-as-documentary and the cachet of the photograph as unmediated visible proof were delegitimized in the courtroom by the legal requirements to prove the *corpus delicti* (the fact that a crime has been committed). The photographs themselves were not proof of murder. This missing equation—the crime as fact—prohibits the telling of the story of a crime that resulted in a death. It is a body that cannot be accounted for

in language; it is an unnarrated body. The pedagogical imperative of the spectacle of death is deflected, and an anxious uncertainty takes its place. The absence of a narrative explaining the cause of death means that there is also no hope of learning how that death might have been avoided. Deprived of a material explanation for death, even an explanation as vague as “he was murdered,” death has no lesson to teach the living. The *memento mori* is no longer a reminder; it is an image without affect.

The prosecution’s failure to establish the *corpus delicti* was brought up by defense attorney J. J. Breland during his cross-examination of George Smith, sheriff of Leflore County. Breland used this point as grounds for objection, thereby preventing the witness from relaying Roy Bryant’s confidential admission of guilt. When the court agreed to this point, the prosecution recalled undertaker Miller to the stand. The defense council continued to cast aspersions on the source of the wound above the body’s right ear, suggesting that it may have been caused by “snag in the river.”<sup>44</sup> But two days and four witnesses later, the presiding judge, Curtis Swango, had evidently been sufficiently assured that the death was due neither to natural causes nor to suicide and that the body was indeed that of Emmett Till. He overruled defense attorney Sidney Carlton’s claims that the *corpus delicti* had still not been proven, and the trial was permitted to proceed.<sup>45</sup> The prosecution was therefore able to treat the case as though the crime that had been committed against Emmett was a given, and that their legal responsibility was to convince the court that the two defendants were in fact the perpetrators of the crime.

The prosecution also had to deflect the claims made by a series of witnesses for the defense that the body represented in the photograph was not the body found in the river. Although the body’s extensive disfigurement (which both sides, defense and prosecution, concurred was likely the result of a severe beating) might have helped the prosecution’s case by illustrating the extent of the brutality enacted upon it, it nevertheless had a detrimental effect on the prosecution’s case because it permitted the defense to challenge the prosecution’s claims that the body was indeed that of Emmett Till. More than likely this was the case, for why else would the prosecution insist on entering the postmortem photographs into evidence at all? The defense capitalized on this point when Sheriff Strider was called to the stand. According to the trial transcript, defense attorney John Whitten asked Strider if he “could . . . tell whether [the body] was a white person or a colored person?” to which Strider replied, “The only way you could tell it was a colored person—and I wouldn’t swear to it then—was just his hair. And I have seen white people

that have kinky hair,” adding “if one of my own boys had been missing, I couldn’t really say if it was my own son or not, or anybody else’s. I couldn’t tell that. All I could tell, it was a human being.”<sup>46</sup> State attorney general Robert B. Smith presented Strider with a photograph during cross-examination and asked the witness “if that picture represents the condition of the body taken out of the river . . . ?” Strider confirmed that it did and added that “[a]t the time it was brought out of the water, [the body] was just as white as I am except for a few places around that was just a little darker than other places. And except for that, he was just as white as I am.”<sup>47</sup>

A deconstructive assessment of how the photograph is ideologically figured here as a conveyer of unmediated truth reveals something that at first appears counterintuitive. In rejecting what the photograph represents—Emmett Till’s body—Strider and other witnesses articulate a wholehearted belief in the photograph’s ability to represent “a true likeness” of a body. But their denial and refusal to recognize the body represented in the photograph as the specific body of Emmett Till demonstrate the documentary limitations of photography; namely, that the photograph might not be able to represent sufficiently a body that is constantly evolving—aging, moving, dying, decomposing.

Even if Strider could not recognize the face in the photograph as that of Emmett Till, he could still, with some effort, recognize the face as that of a human being. As has been mentioned, proving Emmett Till’s humanity was a key element to the prosecution’s case, as it is to all civil rights cases. Yet throughout the investigation and the trial, the sheriff exhibited an undeniable disregard for black people’s humanity, exhibited by his insistence on setting up a racially segregated area for the black reporters and his use of a racial slur as a solution to criticisms he received about his unpleasant demeanor.<sup>48</sup> It might therefore be reasonable and critically useful to claim that at least part of the reason Strider could not recognize the body in the photograph as the body of Till is because he could not recognize the body of Emmett Till, an African American boy that was represented in the photograph as the body of a human being in whose name justice could be sought. Strider could not extend humane insight to the image of a black person.

That Emmett Till’s existence as a human being was not recognized by a prosegregationist racist is not in itself surprising. But as my own analysis and other critical work on the uses of lynching imagery have shown, the white supremacists’ exhibition and circulation of visual documents of lynching (both photographs and actual body parts) are underwritten by and served (when they were produced) to reinforce a notion of a powerful and just white

community. As discussed in the last chapter, it is not merely incidental, Shawn Michelle Smith suggests, that these images were often sent as postcards, a transmission so prevalent that it required legislation prohibiting it.<sup>49</sup>

The courtroom demands that Emmett Till be recognized as a justice-deserving human being represented a threat to this idealization of whiteness that claimed as a defining feature its special access to justice, which it both received and meted out. Oddly enough, Strider's own language betrays another oft-cited challenge to racial purity that racial supremacists usually reject. In his admission that the body at the river appeared to him as racially ambiguous, Strider spoke one of the truths of American racial heritage: that a history of miscegenation and racial "passing" has totally undermined any assertions of racial purity. Strider's statement that he has "seen a lot of white men with kinky hair" demonstrates not only his myopia in terms of racial critique, but also the parameters of a racially inflected notion of human beings.<sup>50</sup> That the body in the river was human he is certain; but that the body of Emmett Till—which Strider and the defense have, through a series of rhetorical gyrations, practically reasoned out of existence let alone sight—is human in any sense that he understands (that is, purely white and deserving of justice), he appears to have doubt.

Ultimately, the white jury permitted these doubts to free them from finding the defendants guilty.<sup>51</sup> It took them only sixty-seven minutes to acquit Milam and Bryant, and, as one juror famously remarked, it would have taken them less time had the jury reportedly not stopped for a drink of soda on the way back. It appears that the equation of whiteness and justice with the communal ties of race loyalty—both reducible to recognizing the white body exclusively as human and seeing humanity exclusively in whiteness—is an equation that foreclosed the possibility of Till's body ever being recognized either actually (in the postmortem photograph or the decomposed body itself) or discursively (in the language of justice). Quite literally over Till's dead body, the tribal bonds of Southern whiteness in the United States were strengthened. The acquittal also represented the reinforcement of what Sheriff Strider hoped would be forever preserved when he declared that "we haven't mixed so far down here and we don't intend to."<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, from that very moment, the way of life that Strider cherished would find itself strenuously challenged and legally dismantled. Yet in order for Sheriff Strider's cherished status quo to be preserved, the presumed impotence of the look must not be questioned by the spectator, but unconsciously accepted as a permanent given condition. Without a politicized notion of universal humanity to mediate one's view of a human corpse, one is ultimately

not a mourner, but a voyeur. Neither of these is a particularly proactive position. The jury's failure to indict, compounded by the defendants' confessions in 1956—both events that underwent massive public exposure—only further insulted the peripheral onlookers' (that is, the mourners' and the voyeurs') relative impotence in the discursive realm of justice. To those onlookers who never believed in either the logic of segregation or in the logic invoked in the defense's case, the story's implausible conclusion—*not guilty*—mocked the powerlessness of the spectator and, moreover, reinscribed the alleged powerlessness of the look itself.

Instead of corroborating the juridical decision and the spectator's relative inability to effect narrative resolution, some onlookers of the Till case mobilized their role as onlookers into a political movement: the civil rights movement. This public recognized in the trial's resolution the inadequacy of the court's contribution to the conclusion of the murder narrative and, in so doing, challenged the privilege attributed to the American justice system, and the courtroom in particular, to determine a definitive conclusion.

her caption to one of Ball's photographs the distinctness of African American photographers of lynching: "African American photographers did not shy away from making lynching photographs but often did so by fashioning them into framed narratives. Juxtaposing photographs of the murder scene with images of the victim alive or lying in state at his funeral, these series establish ethical boundaries within which looking at the murder becomes a point of interest" (Goldsby, *Spectacular Secret*, 244). This is arguably what happened in the wake of Emmett Till's funeral, which is discussed in chapter 3.

### Chapter 3. Emmett Till, Justice, and the Task of Recognition

1. This précis is culled from several newspaper accounts, most of which are collected in the anthology *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative*, ed. Christopher Metress (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

2. Mamie [Till-Mobley] Bradley speech in South Bend, Indiana, in 1955, quoted in Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement* (Troy, MI: Bedford Publishers, 2000), 300.

3. Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 131.

4. *Ibid.*, 133. The 2006 report of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, a product of their reopening of the case in 2005, includes statements from the black Mississippi undertaker Chester Miller and an unnamed witness that seem to contradict Mamie Till's assertion. These documents claim that upon learning that the body was to be shipped to Chicago, the unnamed witness "and Chester Miller went to the funeral home in Tutwiler [whence the body had been removed after discovery] and were told they [the Tutwiler funeral home employees] had soaked the body in fluid to preserve it. The body was placed in rubber pouches, placed in a casket and [Miller and the witness] took the body to Clarksdale to the train." Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Prosecutive Report of Investigation Concerning [Redacted]; [Redacted]; Roy Bryant—Deceased; John William Milam, also known as J. W. Milam—Deceased; Leslie F. Milam—Deceased; Melvin L. Campbell—Deceased; Elmer O. Kimbrell—Deceased; Hubert Clark—Deceased; Levi Collins, also known as Too Tight Collins—Deceased; Johnny B. Washington—Deceased; Otha Johnson Jr., also known as Oso—Deceased; [redacted]; Emmett Louis Till—Deceased—Victim; Civil Rights—Conspiracy; Domestic Police Cooperation* (Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2006), 81.

5. Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 133.

6. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 9. (Emphasis in the original.)

7. Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till*, 302.

8. Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 135–36.

9. *Ibid.*, 134.

10. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function [1949]," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 4.
11. Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 16.
12. *Ibid.*, 21.
13. *Ibid.*, 21.
14. Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 134–35. (Emphasis in the original.)
15. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 36.
16. Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 190.
17. On the repression of the emotions of the enslaved, see Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
18. Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 129.
19. Bradley speech in South Bend, Indiana, in 1955, as quoted in Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till*, 304.
20. Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 142.
21. *Ibid.*, 139. (Emphasis in the original.)
22. Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America* (Altadena, CA: Twelvetimes Press, 1990), n.p.
23. *Ibid.*, n.p.
24. Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 159.
25. Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 97.
26. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii.
27. *Ibid.*, xviii–xix (emphasis in the original); Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 40. (Emphasis in the original.)
28. Karla F. C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories: A Memorial* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 16. (Emphasis in the original.)
29. *Ibid.*, 27.
30. Alexander, "'Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?'" 91.
31. Alexander notes, "The caption of the close-up photograph of Till's face read: 'Mutilated face of victim was left unretouched by mortician at the mother's request. She said she wanted "all the world" to witness the atrocity.'" *Ibid.*, 102.
32. Ashraf Rushdy, "Exquisite Corpse," *Transition* 9, no. 3 (2000): 70.
33. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).
34. Robin D. G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 82.
35. *Ibid.*

36. I invoke here the word *moved* in the sense outlined by Jane Gaines in her discussion of the relationship between documentary and activism. “By *moved*,” she writes, “I mean the mix of affect and action that the double meaning of the word implies. I mean everything from it ‘troubled’ or ‘disturbed’ or ‘shocked,’ to it made you ‘get up and do something.’” Jane Gaines, “Radical Attractions: The Uprising of ’34,” *Wide Angle* 21, no. 2 (1999): 109.

37. Muhammad Ali and Richard Durham, *The Greatest, My Own Story* (New York: Random House, 1975), 34–35.

38. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Mignon McCarthy, *Kareem* (New York: Random House, 1990), 205.

39. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xx.

40. Testimony of Mamie [Till-Mobley] Bradley, *Official Transcript of State of Mississippi v. J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant*, Seventeenth Judicial District of the State, September 19, 1955, pp. 185–86, 197–205, and 210–12. This trial transcript is appended to the FBI *Prosecutive Report* as appendix A. All citations of the trial transcript derive from this source.

41. Testimony of H. C. Strider, *Official Transcript of State of Mississippi v. J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant*, Seventeenth Judicial District of the State, September 19, 1955, p. 308.

42. Murray Kempton, “2 Face Trial as ‘Whistle’ Kidnapers—Due to Post Bond and Go Home [1955],” in Metress, *Lynching of Emmett Till*, 108.

43. Sam Johnson [AP correspondent], “Jury Hears Defense and Prosecution Arguments as Testimony Ends in Kidnap-Slaying Case [1955],” in Metress, *Lynching of Emmett Till*, 100. Alas, the closing arguments were not recovered by the FBI and appear to have gone missing before 1962. See Shaila Dewan and Ariel Hart, “F.B.I. Discovers Trial Transcript in Emmett Till Case,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2005, A14.

44. Testimony of George Smith, *Official Transcript of State of Mississippi v. J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant*, Seventeenth Judicial District of the State, September 19, 1955, p. 170. As documented in the 2005 FBI report, an autopsy performed on Emmett Till’s exhumed remains on June 2, 2005, led to the medical examiner’s official opinion that “Emmett Louis Till died of a gunshot wound of the head.” *Prosecutive Report*, 110.

45. Testimony of Jon Ed Cothran, *Official Transcript of State of Mississippi v. J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant*, Seventeenth Judicial District of the State, September 19, 1955, pp. 43–44. See also Ralph Hutto, “Mother, ‘Surprise Witness’ Give Dramatic Testimony: Mamie Bradley Says Corpse Was That of Her Slain Son [part 2, 1955],” in Metress, *Lynching of Emmett Till*, 77, 78.

46. Testimony of H. C. Strider, *Official Transcript of State of Mississippi v. J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant*, Seventeenth Judicial District of the State, September 19, 1955, p. 290.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 291. See also “Sheriff Strider’s Testimony Raises Doubt Body in River Was Till Youth,” *Jackson Daily News*, September 23, 1955, in Metress, *Lynching of Emmett Till*, 99.

48. After facing criticism, his revised cheerful salutation to Mamie Till and her entourage was, “Mornin,’ niggahs.” Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 165.

49. Smith notes, “Lynching postcards fell under section 3893 of the Revised Statutes which forbid ‘lewd, obscene, and lascivious’ materials to be sent through the mail.” Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 197, n. 30.

50. “Sheriff Strider’s Testimony Raises Doubt Body in River Was Till Youth,” in Metress, *Lynching of Emmett Till*, 98.

51. Their guilt is certain. After the trial, Bryant and Milam took advantage of the “double jeopardy” rule that prevented them from being tried again and sold the story of their murder to a reporter who published two articles for *Look* magazine: William Bradford Huie, “The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi,” *Look*, January 24, 1956, 46–48, 50; and William Bradford Huie, “What’s Happened to the Emmett Till Killers?,” *Look*, January 22, 1957, 63–66, 68.

52. John Herbers, “Jury Selection Reveals Death Demand Unlikely [1955],” in Metress, *Lynching of Emmett Till*, 46.

## Chapter 4. Civil Rights and Battered Bodies

1. See Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 67–128, on SNCC’s use of photography. See also Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 20–23, for a description of the television market during the civil rights period.

2. Torres, *Black, White, and in Color*, 15.

3. Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” in *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964; Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 89. Page references are to the 2010 edition. (Emphasis in the original.)

4. Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 69.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Torres, *Black, White, and in Color*, 36–47.

7. For a critical reading of the NBC documentary “Sit-In,” see Torres, “The Double Life of ‘Sit-In,’” in *Black, White, and in Color*, 36–47. Torres argues that the documentary’s retrospective point of view and its narrative identification with reporter Chet Huntley conspire, along with other cinematic elements, to construct a narrative of inevitability in which the civil rights movement stands unquestionably on the side of right.

8. Torres, *Black, White, and in Color*, 39–40.

9. Of course, there were numerous whites involved in the movement, but their involvement in the cause effectively “blackened” them in the terms of the debate and certainly in the eyes of their foes. As black Mississippi lawyer J. Res Brown told