

SAMUEL K. ROBERTS

Giving Up the Ghost of National Myth and Dangerous Fictions

At the sixty-year anniversary of Emmett Till's lynching, it is appropriate that we think about his image and the historical relationship between race and the media. The horrible and now well-known postmortem photograph of Emmett Till, first published in *Jet* magazine on September 15, 1955, was the product of two decisions. One, of course, was that of John H. Johnson, *Jet*'s editor and publisher, to run the picture. More important and more brave, however, was Mamie Till Bradley's own editorial decision of a sort, to have in Chicago an open-casket funeral for her son, to display to the world and compel it to look at the visitation upon her family of the Southern horror, as Ida B. Wells had characterized lynching over sixty years before. As Bradley herself put it, nearly fifty years later, "I couldn't bear the thought of people being horrified by the sight of my son... But on the other hand, I felt the alternative was even worse. After all, we had averted our eyes for far too long, turning away from the ugly reality facing us as a nation. Let the world see what I've seen. I know, because I was guilty of the same thing. But to let that continue..., well, that was too much for me to bear." The depth of Bradley's courage – not only to stand unbent and unbowed before that coffin, but also to make her voice heard around the world – is almost unfathomable. No one in that family went untouched by Emmett's murder. Moses Wright, Till's great uncle and host in Money, Mississippi, provided the dramatic testimony against the killers, brothers Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, an act for which he would have to flee Mississippi permanently. To 21st-century eyes accustomed to twenty-plus megapixel brilliance, the *Jet* photo is grainy grayscale undifferentiated except in shade. And yet it is still one of the most gruesome things I have ever seen, its vividness emanating from our knowledge of the acts and decisions, despicable and courageous, which brought it into being.

Conventional wisdom, which is to say national mythology, is that the lynching of Emmett Till – and, more specifically, the circulation of his image -- was a catalyzing event in the modern Civil Rights Movement, when white America was forced into awareness of the dehumanizing violence and brutality of Southern Jim Crow mores. Like so much national myth of the Black Freedom Struggle (and in U.S. history generally), there is something discomfitingly comfortable about this narrative. First, if white mainstream press coverage is any indicator, as Brian Thornton has argued, it is not entirely clear that white America's awareness was heightened to the level current popular memory suggests, certainly, at least, not immediately after Till's murder. Compared to the dozens of black newspapers and magazines which continued to raise questions before, during, and after the farcical trial of Till's murderers in November, 1955, white American press coverage was fairly anemic, and few white papers would republish the image of Till's brutalized body, even while it circulated widely among black readers. The January, 1956, publication in *Look* magazine of William Bradford Huie's interview with Bryant and Milam featured the two men's confession, rendered in horrifying matter-of-factness and self justification, eliciting concerned editorials in several Northern white papers, but there was not nearly enough uproar to move anyone in the federal government to take notice. The U.S. Department of Justice waited nearly five decades to reopen the Till case, in 2004, well after the 1980 and 1994 natural deaths of Milam and Bryant, respectively. Mamie Till-Mobley (since remarried), who died in January, 2003, never saw justice for her son.

On the other hand, it is true that Till's murder and the travesty of justice two months later motivated millions of African Americans in the Black Freedom Struggle. Until then many blacks outside the

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South and even in the South had not been fully aware of or cognitively did not allow themselves to confront the degree of violence which was always possible in places like Money, Mississippi. Antiracial violence in the South was not rare or unknown; it just often simply was too horrific or dangerous to speak of, and thus gradually forgotten. People disappeared in the night, and their families could face reprisal simply for mentioning it in mixed company, let alone requesting an investigation. Even full-scale campaigns of ethnic cleansing, such as the pogroms in Wilmington, NC, 1898 or Tulsa, OK, 1921, had gone so uncommemorated and unmemorialized that they became unremembered. In 1955 and after, Emmett's image in death reached icon status among African-Americans, and Mamie Bradley's courage and injunction to no longer "avert our eyes" was catalytic to organizers, political leaders, writers, artists, and millions of ordinary citizens.

History does not repeat itself, and the difference today is that we have far more images of the beaten, brutalized and slain than at any moment even in recent history. This, of course, is not because white extrajudicial violence against women, men, girls, and boys of color necessarily is particularly higher today (we have no truly useful historical or current data, even regarding police killings), but rather because we have more citizen journalists, either deliberate or conscripted by conscience, to deliver the images and reportage to the public. Even while corporate and mainstream media today, as it did then, ignores brutality's victims or dismisses them as "emotionally volatile" (women) or "thugs" (men), black social and digital media has proven a powerful intervention to that trend. However, what has not changed is the required participation and commitment to the painstaking and calculated work of organizing and coalition building. The sharing of information is important, but the medium is not the message, in the same way that Till's image on its own did not make a movement. Each of us should try our best to take the information we consume and translate it into action as leaders, as followers, as volunteers, as contributors, as writers, as artists, as human beings whose voices will be heard.

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