

CHAPTER 4

COMICS AND EMMETT TILL

QIANA WHITTED

ON THE FIRST SATURDAY in September 1958, just as the school year was getting underway, the editors of the *New York Age* announced the debut of a comic strip for younger readers called *Tommy Traveler in the World of Negro History*. Most headlines in the *Age*, a black weekly newspaper, chronicled the continuing battle for justice and equal rights for African Americans across the country, along with local political news, reports on social events, crime, and editorial opinion. Current events, however, were not the main focus of the comic strip created by the *Age* staff artist Tom Feelings. His series sent a self-determined black youth from the late 1950s back in time with the help of an elder's magic library where he could interact with ancient philosophers of African descent, black Revolutionary-era heroes, fugitive slaves, and prize-winning athletes. Readers were even invited to see Tommy as their emissary to Egyptian pharaohs and high-seas adventurers. Appearing weekly on the opinion page and occasionally in the "Teen-Time U.S.A." section for nearly a year, the *Age* strip reenacted black people's past victories in an effort to bolster a sense of cultural pride in their descendants: "Watch for 'TOMMY TRAVELER,' newest little hero, as he starts discovering for himself and America's 16,000,000 Negroes the significant and vital role the Negro has played throughout the history of the world" (*New York Age*, 12).

Given the triumphant aims of the series and its interest in "all the great events where the Negro has played a prominent role," the November 22, 1958, comic about Emmett Till stands apart. Tommy's visit to Money, Mississippi, in the ten-panel strip sharply contrasted with his previous jaunt, to Colonial America, where, over the course of eight Saturday installments, he helped a free black woman named Phoebe Fraunces save General Washington from being poisoned.¹ Instead, only three years separated Tommy from the late-August evening in 1955 at Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market, where he joins a group of black boys gathered outside. Among them is Till, the fourteen-

year-old whose brutal murder at the hands of adult white men would come to embody the shocking consequences of American racism and the urgent needs of the civil rights movement. What could Emmett teach Tommy in his final hours about race, sexuality, and adolescence that would add to his understanding of Negro history? What did Feelings hope young readers of the *Age* would gain from this all-too-short glance back in time?

As one of the earliest comics considered in this essay, *Tommy Traveler* exemplifies the challenge of imagining Emmett Till through a visual storytelling medium. My reading of these representations scrutinizes the wide range of narrative and aesthetic strategies developed not only by Feelings in the *Age* comic strip, but also in single-panel comics by Jackie Ormes and Ollie Harrington, and several comic books and graphic novels published over the last two decades, including: *March: Book One* (2013), *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White* (2012), *Bayou* (2005), *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995), and *King: A Comics Biography* (1993). Empathic identification guides the majority of these depictions: Till's suffering is transferred to other youths in ways that exalt his childhood innocence while signaling the end of their own. In other instances, the comics attempt to reclaim his immaturity as a teenager, a right granted ostensibly to young white boys, whose mistakes were more likely to be "laughed aside as teen-age boisterousness" in the 1950s.²

I argue that the startling invocations of Till's image in comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels illustrate the racial and gender socialization of children during the civil rights era in ways that pointedly draw attention to how black male youth are denied the social protections of childhood. In the process, these comics further substantiate the claims about Till's rhetorical function as a body unwilling to "stay in its place," through sequential narratives encoded with what the scholars Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca describe as the "visual vocabulary" of the incident: the store signs from Bryant's Grocery; the seventy-pound cotton-gin fan that held Emmett's body at the bottom of the Tallahatchie River; the photographs of his unrecognizable corpse tucked into a suit in his coffin. Harold and DeLuca's careful scrutiny of the discourse surrounding the particular circulation of Till's image in African American communities combines Julia Kristeva's theories about abjection with the history of lynching photographs: "In a sense, the mythical 'selfness' of African American people changed as they *embraced* and centralized Emmett. They refused to see his body as one more threatening message from racist white America. Many embraced, rather than feared (or, perhaps, more precisely *through the fear*), Emmett in all his abjection and made his body *mean* differently. Emmett Till illustrated that their very *bodies* were at stake" (280).

not afraid of white people, Till sticks his determined face in the doorway of the country store where the owner's wife, Carolyn Bryant, is working alone inside. It is Tommy who speaks up then, saying to another boy, "Hey! You better call your cousin back. Before he gets in real trouble." A distant view of Till approaching the white woman in the final panel is surrounded by a silhouette of Tommy and his friends around the door. Beneath the image, an abrupt narrative conclusion follows: "The rest of this story doesn't have to be told and it will not be forgotten for it struck a hard blow against the democratic ideals this country stands for, in the eyes of the whole world!" (28).

The story that "doesn't have to be told" in the comic strip dominated the headlines of newspapers across the country and abroad for months. Subscribers to the *Age* would have been aware that Till was kidnapped that night in August 1955, then shot and dumped into the Tallahatchie River over disputed accusations that he flirted with Carolyn Bryant, possibly whistled at her or called out "bye, baby" after buying bubble gum from the store. Feelings does not reproduce the publicized image of his mutilated corpse, perhaps assuming that even younger readers would recall Mamie Till Bradley's anguish over her son's murder or the chilling account of Till's last moments given by his killers, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, the husband and brother-in-law of Carolyn Bryant, who detailed the murder in a *Look* magazine interview shortly after being acquitted of the crime. The readers may have taken part in one of the nationwide rallies held to protest the verdict.⁴

What the comic strip focuses on instead is the adolescent impulsiveness of Till and his friends. Their boasts are at the heart of Tommy's visit to the South, and the racial dimensions of Till's self-aggrandizement are made all the more ominous by white fears about miscegenation. Though time-traveling magic allows readers to interact with this living version of Till, the comic strip's conceit cannot stop the Chicago teenager's bragging or "call him back." Nothing that Tommy does can keep Till from entering Bryant's Grocery. What, then, are we to make of Tommy's unequivocal warning about "real trouble" or the fact that this warning is ignored? Why is there no mention of the men who are responsible for the killing? Is Feelings suggesting that Till could have acted differently?

Further complicating the comic's message is the depiction of Carolyn Bryant. During Tommy's visit, she gazes into the distance from the store's doorway, and over the course of three panels, her figure becomes a kind of fetish object, as still as the scenery around her. Separated by only an arm's length from the boys taunting Till in the strip, Bryant's face remains silently contemplative and unresponsive. At one point, a close-up of her face takes up nearly half the panel; she wipes sweat from her brow in a melodramatic

gesture while behind her, Till's friend says, "I bet you're scared to say anything to white folks anyplace!" Till's intense gaze regards her like prey in the final panels, where the full image of her face and body are turned toward the viewing reader. Given how frequently Bryant's attractiveness was praised in the mainstream southern press (see Houck and Grindy, 60), Feelings's decision to display the white woman in this way may help demystify her physical appearance in the "safe space" of the black newspaper's comics page. Or perhaps it is an indictment in line with the front-page photograph of Bryant in the *Chicago Defender* captioned: "The Cause of It All" (September 17, 1955). Bryant's inclusion in the comic is a reminder of the way that she, too, acts as a rhetorical text through which white-supremacist ideology is embodied, not only in the ambivalent depiction of her involvement, but also in the illustration of her physical form.

Ultimately, the time-traveling adventure's clearest and most urgent lesson is for Feelings's titular hero and, by extension, young readers of the *Age*. Tommy's status as a "spectator" may aptly characterize his interaction with Frederick Douglass and Crispus Attucks in other stories, but by no means is he a bystander in 1950s Mississippi. Appearing nearly indistinguishable from the youth gathered outside Bryant's Grocery, particularly in the comic's original black-and-white publication, Tommy is just as much at risk as any other black boy in America, subject to the same stereotypes of criminality and lasciviousness that are routinely associated with black men. Arguably, Till calls the entire premise of the comic strip into question, revealing the dangers of the youthful curiosity denied Tommy when he too travels away from home. As the reporter Robert Elliott said of the thousands of mourners at Till's funeral in his September 10, 1995, article in the *Age*: "Most of them were thinking it is no crime for a boy to whistle at a pretty woman. They were thinking, 'My son might do it—or yours'" (2).

Indeed, social psychologists and criminal justice scholars in recent years have cited the Till case to demonstrate how the implicit dehumanization of blackness has historically affected the degree to which black children are denied "the privilege of innocence" when compared with white children (Goff et al., 539). According to the study led by Phillip Atiba Goff and Matthew Christian Jackson on the "consequences of dehumanizing black children," the perception of black male youth is particularly damaging: "Black boys are seen as more culpable for their actions (i.e., less innocent) within a criminal justice context than are their peers of other races. In addition, Black boys are actually misperceived as older relative to peers of other races" (540). The photographs of Emmett as an infant and a child, shared by Mamie Till Bradley alongside her son's death portrait, helped counter these misperceptions among the public,

just as the newspaper account of the funeral mourners in the *Age* strives to reassert Till's humanity through sympathetic descriptions of what it considered to be a youthful indiscretion.

Tommy Traveler takes a different approach in its aim to protect black sons by turning Till's actions into a cautionary tale that uses his boastful words and Bryant's passive face to signify the South's social dangers. While the final panel's message stresses the political implications of Till's murder in a context that stretches beyond the moral boundaries of the nation to "the eyes of the whole world," the comic's field of vision is reserved for the interaction *between* black male youth. The comic does not hold Till responsible for his own death; instead, it underscores the value of the youth's intuitive knowledge ("I don't think I'm going to like it here") and behavioral strategies ("You better call your cousin back") in actively negotiating the social realities of racism. Such a strategy was in keeping with other stories that Feelings went on to write and illustrate after 1959, including his contributions to the Golden Legacy series of African American history comics as well as award-winning picture books that emphasized the importance of giving black children a cultural education and instilling in them a strong, communal sense of identity.

Feelings uses Till's murder as an opportunity to teach, but other African American cartoonists took a more satirical approach to the disputed elements of the case and its aftermath. In the October 8, 1955, installment of *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* by Jackie Ormes in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the little black girl named Patty-Jo gestures to what is presumably the kitchen of their upscale apartment and says to her older sister, Ginger: "I don't want to seem touchy on the subject . . . but, that new little white tea-kettle just whistled at me!" (9). As Ginger listens with a shocked expression, she hides behind her back a newspaper, the word "Till" the only legible part of the headline. Ormes uses Patty-Jo's misunderstanding of the incident to mock the claim that Till's "wolf whistle" warranted his death, perhaps comparing Bryant's spurious accusation to the shrill sound of the "white tea-kettle." Further, by making the accuser in this scenario a young black female and the whistle originate from a white source, *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* brings to mind the extensive and more socially "acceptable" sexual assault of black women by white men, which can be traced back to slavery.

Published two weeks later in the same paper, Ollie Harrington's *Dark Laughter* series further demonstrated the reach of the Mississippi incident in motivating Till's mourners across the country to become more socially and politically active. The editorial cartoon depicts a well-dressed minister holding a storefront church service before the scowls of an angry congregation. One particularly exasperated woman stands up in the front row and demands: "Well, we appreciates all that fire an' brimstone that them archangels is

goin' to unload on 'em but look here Reverend what are WE goin' to do about Mississippi?" (9). Harrington turns a critical eye to figures of authority in the comic to stress the need for African American leadership against southern racism to be stronger than otherworldly platitudes. That the call comes from a woman of faith is not insignificant, given Mamie Till Bradley's candid public appeals on behalf of her son and his memory. The 1950s comics of Harrington, Ormes, and Feelings provide valuable insight into details about the Till case that were being negotiated within black communities: how to evaluate the complexities of the teenager's behavior and the sexual politics of the accusation against him, and the most effective means of attaining justice for Till and other black boys across the nation.

TO THE QUESTION raised by the parishioner in Harrington's *Dark Laughter*—"what are WE goin' to do?"—the first volume of John Lewis's 2013 graphic memoir offers his lifetime of service during the civil rights movement as a response. In *March: Book One*, Lewis details his experience growing up in Alabama during Jim Crow before going on to participate in demonstrations across the South as a Freedom Rider and as chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. A U.S. congressman from Georgia since 1987, Lewis uses the comics form to describe the influence of the 1955 lynching on his own development as an adolescent only a year older than Emmett. Lewis recalls the moment earlier that summer when *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed segregation in public schools and when the radio in his home broadcast the social gospel of Martin Luther King Jr. for the first time. Amid these hopeful developments, the news of Till's death was harrowing. Shaken by the chilling proximity of another young black boy's suffering in a southern town that could have been his own, John Lewis is a Tommy Traveler full grown.

The first of four panels in the one-page scene opens with small handwritten white words layered over a deep swath of black ink: "That August, an incident occurred which no one could ignore." Beneath the narration is a long shot of the river and a mangled image of Till's drowned body tied to the large gin fan that held him under the water. The wide panel that follows shows Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam congratulating each other in court, alongside Lewis's words: "A black farmer named Moses Wright witnessed the two white men dragging Emmett Till from his relatives' home, and had the courage to testify against them in open court. The all-white jury found those two white defendants not guilty" (57). The panels are a succinct summation of the details that affected young John Lewis most profoundly, affirmed in no small part by its juxtaposition to the previous page's picture of him lying awake at night with his brothers in their shared bed. Adjacent to the boys, Till's grisly corpse is just

off center, alone in the middle of the next page with his arms angled stiffly in an empty embrace that is further mocked by the image of two killers hugging each other below. Lewis uses stark terms to sum up the incident as an example of how racial injustice endangers the most vulnerable segment of the American population: “Emmett said ‘Bye, Baby’ to the woman behind the counter. The next day he was dead” (57).

The artist Nate Powell, along with Lewis and his cowriter, Andrew Aydin, takes a different approach from that of Tom Feelings by making Till’s dead body the focus of the page and by using the corpse as a visual metonym for the motives driving the civil rights movement. Indeed, the comic draws collective meaning from Lewis’s personal mourning by placing the murder in a chain of events during what he calls a “watershed year” that included the US Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown* and the start of the Montgomery bus boycott. Asked why she refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus, Rosa Parks told a *Time* magazine reporter, in part: “I thought about Emmett Till, and I couldn’t go back” (quoted in Young, 27). An analogous reading of Till as cultural trauma in *March: Book One* further shifts the sexual politics of the case to the larger consequences of what outraged Till’s killer: the inability of African Americans to “stay in their place.” The *Look* magazine interview claims that Till was defiant until his last breath in refusing to deny that he had “had” white women, leading Milam to declare: “As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place. Niggers ain’t gonna vote where I live. If they did, they’d control the government. They ain’t gonna go to school with my kids. And when a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he’s tired o’ livin’. I’m likely to kill him” (quoted in Huie, 50).

In juxtaposing Till’s alleged transgression to voting rights and desegregation, Milam confirms the historian Dora Apel’s claim that “sex between black men and white women was so loathsome to white southerners and politicians because it was conflated with their fear of black enfranchisement and the social equality that would destroy the racial hierarchy that kept white men in political, social, and economic power” (26). *March: Book One* reinforces this idea, condensing the series of events into a verbal cause (“Bye, Baby”) and a visual effect (the body), while the remainder of the volume shows Lewis working to convert the fears from his childhood years into a willingness to endanger his own body on behalf of equal rights for African Americans.

As Lewis’s graphic memoir indicates, representations of Till in comics demonstrate how the lynching functioned as a crucial part of the socialization process for black children during the 1950s and 1960s. As they learned the strict but unspoken codes of behavior between black and white people in the South, the invocation of Till’s name quickly signaled the dangers of



FIGURE 4.2. John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell, *March: Book One*, 57. © 2013 Top Shelf.

racialized sexual desire, particularly for black boys. This is certainly the case in *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White* by the writer and artist Lila Quintero Weaver. The comic addresses Weaver's experiences as an immigrant from Argentina who relocated with her family to Marion, Alabama, amid the civil rights protests during the 1960s. Weaver takes on the observational mode of an international "outsider" to detail her first encounters with the social norms in Marion, including a scene that illustrates the interactions between men and women of different races. In the first of two adjacent panels; an older white man referred to as "Mister Green" grins at two black women walking nearby. A young black man over Mister Green's shoulder stands in silent shock, hat in his hand, as the white man asks, "Say is that your cousin Louise? Ooh wee! She sure has grown up!" The second panel attempts to reverse the scenario, with two black males discussing a white woman in the distance. The older man scolds, "You out of your mind? Don't you even look at white girls! You want to end up like Emmett Till, for crying out loud?" To which the younger replies, "No, sir" (69).

While the scenario's dynamics of power extend to the white man's freedom to openly leer at the young black women, silence is the key to the survival of a black boy denied the privilege of innocence. And in the final panel, the older man hopes that the boy's averted gaze will keep him from suffering Till's fate. The hard lesson echoes the talk that Mamie Till Bradley testified to having with her son before he left Chicago for Mississippi: to say "yes, sir" and "no, ma'am"; "to humble himself"; and, as Ruth Feldstein explains, "'to know his place'—or, to know his race—and that being polite and respectful was itself constructed by race" (100). Likewise, it is telling that the white woman in Weaver's comic is at such a distance that she has none of the distinguishing features of the black women in the preceding panel. Instead, the artist's pencil abstracts her whiteness and objectifies her femininity in a plain outline of her body in profile, a stand-in for all Carolyn Bryants. Such generalizations allow Weaver to draw larger conclusions about race relations in the region and to call into question the notion that any town in the Deep South, as the oft-quoted sign outside Sumner, Mississippi, claimed, was "A Good Place to Raise a Boy" for African Americans during Jim Crow (Houck and Grindy, 72).⁵

In making the case for how childhood socialization in the South was influenced by the threat of miscegenation during the 1950s, the historian Renee Christine Romano singles out *Brown v. Board of Education*, the US Supreme Court decision that cited the social and psychological development of black children as a significant factor in declaring public school segregation unconstitutional. She explains: "Although the claim that 'miscegenation' would

be the inevitable result of racial integration had been part of white southern politics since Emancipation, this reaction was exacerbated in the 1950s by white southerners' fears that they were losing the ability to socialize their own children, because of both potential federal meddling in southern schools and the cultural 'miscegenation' of emerging youth culture" (146). Comics like Weaver's *Darkroom* and Lewis's *March: Book One* situate the hostility that motivated Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam within this larger resistance to civil rights. In their childhood narratives, Till functions discursively as one of the most urgent points of reference for how race, gender, and sexuality are learned.

Weaver's father is a photographer, ironically enough, but while snapshots of her family punctuate the comic, photographs of Till do not appear. Taken before and after his death, the wide circulation of photos were crucial to Mamie Till Bradley's visual counternarrative of Till's innocence outside the courtroom, refuting Bryant and Milam's depiction of the teenager as "the classic black stereotype of a brute and sexual predator, lusting after white flesh" (Ifa Bayeza, quoted in Kolin, 117). Most chilling were the images of Till's corpse from his funeral, authorized for distribution by Bradley and initially reprinted in *Jet* magazine and in black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*. Bradley's refusal to allow Mississippi to bury her son's body, along with the international media attention given to her public mourning, helped ensure that Till's story would not remain hidden. According to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, "she wanted the people to see the corpse and to 'realize the threat to Negroes in the Deep South and to what extent the fiendish mobs would go to display their unbridled hate'" (Coleman, 4).

The semiautobiographical graphic novel *Stuck Rubber Baby* by the writer and artist Howard Cruse is one of the few comics that speaks directly to the symbolic resonance of Till's photograph and its empathetic reach. Observations about dead bodies open Toland Polk's coming-of-age story in Alabama, and the decorum of his loved ones' funerals is dislodged by the image of Till in *Jet*. When Toland, a white southerner, is invited to look at what his friend refers to as the "nigger magazine" he found in the trash, it is presented as "somethin' gross" for them to gawk at in secret. Instead, Toland lingers long over the photo and internalizes Till's injury: "Something in my brain permanently blew a fuse when I saw that picture. I had nightmares. I was worried about my skull" (Cruse, 2). The comic shifts from Toland's stunned face to the surreal image of his head exploding first in jagged electric currents and then as flat pieces of skull and brain matter. Once his father opines that black skulls are tougher than those of white people, Toland worries even more.

As Gary Richards argues, Toland's story is both a "white southern racial



FIGURE 4.3. Howard Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby*, 2. © 1995 Howard Cruse.

conversion narrative” and a “coming-out novel”—the events of the civil rights movement serve as a backdrop for him to accept his homosexuality (164). Though Toland explains offhandedly that he “just had a fixation about skulls” (Cruse, 4), his identification with Till generates self-reflective anxieties about his body that racialize his supposedly illicit sexual desires. Fragmented pieces of skull return at a pivotal moment near the end of the comic after a white gay friend is lynched and accused of being a “nigger-loving queer” (181). Toland struggles to eulogize his friend and ends up publicly acknowledging his sexual orientation at the funeral. Before the multiracial group of mourners, some of whom had been recently injured in a bomb blast, Toland begins to think critically about the intersections of privilege and oppression that circulate through his racial and sexual identity. To convey his grief and emotional dis-

ress, Cruse depicts “a violently exploding skull that replicates the image the teenage Toland projects for himself after seeing graphic photos of Emmett Till” (Richards, 167).

After Toland encounters the *Jet* magazine during his formative years, the photos come to signify for him the depth of his own vulnerabilities to social forces that seem beyond his control. Cruse’s protagonist is not alone in these fears, as Harvey Young explains in his discussion of how the photos of Till affected an entire generation: “The juxtaposed images offered unrelenting testimony to the perils that lurked outside the home and led to the self-awareness, or the colloquial ‘loss of innocence,’ of many black youth, who may not have been targeted as the primary readership but nevertheless saw Till’s reprinted photographs. The picture rendered them subject to the violence directed at the Chicago teenager” (24–25). Toland is not the magazine’s intended reader, of course. And his efforts as a white male to identify with African Americans throughout the story are not without their shortcomings, as Richards points out. Yet his interaction with the visual image of Till marks a growing self-awareness that helps facilitate his “conversion” as a white southerner, allowing him to identify with the abjection of the racialized other in a way that productively influences his behavior. Toland and Lila Quintero Weaver, as outsiders observing black southern communities, speak to the “multiplicity of meaning” that Till’s body was made to convey in the aftermath of his death (Harold and DeLuca, 276).

COMICS LIKE *March: Book One* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* depict Emmett Till’s death as a way of enabling children to bear witness to the country’s horrors. The writer and artist Jeremy Love takes a different approach in *Bayou*, creatively imagining elements of the 1955 incident from the victim’s perspective. The comic seeks not only to reinstate Till’s voice, but also to restore an appreciation for the boisterousness, curiosity, and adolescent insecurity that the youth was never given the opportunity to explore. The narrative’s sustained adaptation of the lynching further accentuates Till’s acts of resistance, turning what his killers criticized as stubborn and reckless behavior into attributes that aid other characters in the larger narrative. The name “Emmett” is written next to one of Love’s early sketches of this youth, but in issues of the fantasy series, which first appeared in 2005, the character’s name is Billy Glass.⁶

Billy is a southerner, not a visitor from Chicago, and physically he looks much younger than Till. The story takes place during the 1930s in the fictional town of Charon, Mississippi. But when Love’s protagonist, a young black girl named Lee Wagstaff, is ordered to swim into the bayou to retrieve Billy’s dead body, the reason she is given sounds disturbingly familiar: “I heard Aunt

Lucy say he whistled at a white woman” (Love, *Bayou*, 1:7). The whistle takes on added significance when Lee’s white friend, Lily, comments: “My mama said Billy Glass deserved what he got. She said a n***** boy got no business whistlin’ at no white woman” (1:10). Lee’s face is stricken by the remark and in the uncomfortable silence that follows, Lily lets out a whistle of her own. Love calls our attention to the sound with an image of two small eighth notes leaving Lily’s mouth. The illustration is a visual manifestation, as I have previously written, of the “white privilege that attends Lily’s ability to whistle freely, carelessly one could argue, in spite of her naïveté as a child repeating her mother’s words” (Whitted, “Sound and Silence”). Lily’s disconnection from the reality that Billy represents is further underscored by her question to Lee about whether his corpse looked “like that Frankenstein picture we saw that one time” (1:10). But Lee knows that there is more to her friend Billy than his mutilated body or the Frankenstein-like composite of racial stereotypes that his killers have made of him. What she doesn’t tell Lily is that in the swamp, she also encountered his butterfly-winged spirit watching her. In dreams, he even speaks to her. And later, when her father has been accused of kidnapping Lily and Lee is determined not to let the white racists of Charon “do [him] like Billy Glass,” the murdered boy becomes her guide on the quest through another world (1:54).

Indeed, Billy initiates Lee into an alternate reality where Br’er Rabbit and the other animal characters of African American folktales battle the living manifestations of racial caricatures. In the comic, Jeremy Love and the colorist Patrick Morgan adopt the kind of vivid color palette associated with the style of the animated portions of Disney’s *Song of the South*, in an effort to undermine the film’s whimsical approach to black subjugation. Central to Love’s revision is the creation of a realm where the victims of racial trauma interact with Lee and other “fleshly brothers and sisters” who need help (2:79). The young girl quickly befriends a gentle swamp monster named Bayou on the other side, but even he cannot protect her from the threat of the ghostly “Bossman,” who has abducted Lily. Billy surfaces when Lee is most at risk, such as when she suffers an injury early in the narrative that Bayou cannot fully heal. Billy’s face is grim as he reveals that her days are numbered, but when Lee expresses concern for Lily’s safety, he interrupts:

“Ha ha ha you got a few days to live and all you can think about is some damn white girl. Whatta bunch of horse s%\$*!”

“Hush, Billy glass! If you woulda learnt to watch your mouth I wouldn’t ta had to fish you out that water!”

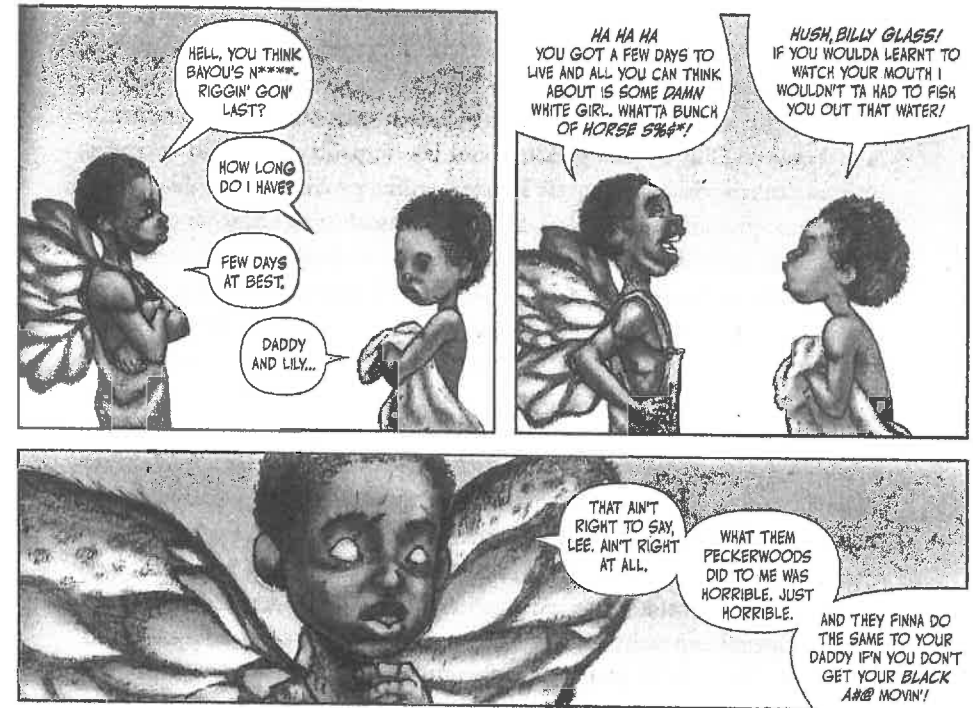


FIGURE 4.4. Jeremy Love, *Bayou*, 1:107. © 2005, Jeremy Love.

“That ain’t right to say, Lee. Ain’t right at all. . . . What them peckerwoods did to me was horrible. Just horrible. . . . And they finna do the same to your Daddy if’n you don’t get your black a#@ movin’!” (1:107)

With the wide amber-colored wings of a monarch butterfly stretched out behind his overalls in one panel, Billy throws back his head in irreverent laughter, while in the next panel, his glowing eyes widen with hurt at Lee’s remark about the cost of not watching his mouth. Love has stated that Billy’s wings, like the mosquitoes and ladybugs in the story, were chosen for their regional significance and not as an allusion to angels or fairies (Love, “Artist Presentation”). Yet the trope of the angelic white child, most notably associated with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s heroine Eva, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), may shape readers’ assumptions of the redemptive force of Billy’s character. Eva’s sanctifying purity and innocence is made all the more powerful by the juxtaposition of her whiteness with the black child in Stowe’s novel, the dehumanized pickaninny caricature, Topsy. In her study of images of race and

American childhood, the critic Robin Bernstein notes that “in many cases, angelic white children were contrasted with pickaninnies so grotesque as to suggest that only white children *were* children” (16).

Given these cultural associations, the metonymic tether that Love maintains between Billy’s spirit presence and his humanity *as* a child is crucial, bringing otherworldly power to a more earthly, profane reality that is conveyed through the butterfly wings and an autumnal palette of colors, through Billy’s attire and his refusal to “watch [his] mouth.” He doesn’t hesitate to call the perpetrators “peckerwoods” (2:65) or to encourage Lee to keep fighting, though his own face still bears the marks of the deep trauma that ended his life. Indeed, the suffering at the heart of Love’s depiction of Billy remains the primary frame of reference for the comic’s larger consideration of racial abjection as a source of power and subjectivity. Darieck Scott characterizes the nature of this resourcefulness, generated in response to the senseless, unpredictable absurdity of racism, as a model of resistance that may seem “counter-intuitive” (11). Yet he suggests that “within the black abject—within human abjection as represented and lived in the experience of being-black, of blackness—we may find that the zone of self or personhood extends into realms where we would not ordinarily perceive its presence; and that suffering seems, at some level or at some far-flung contact point, to merge into something like ability, like power (and certainly, like pleasure) without losing or denying what it is to suffer” (15). While writers such as James Weldon Johnson, Amiri Baraka, and Toni Morrison are the primary focus of Scott’s analysis, the fantasy landscapes of *Bayou* also provide unconventional realms of personhood for African American children, ones that operate in ways similar to what Scott describes, merging the experience of unjust racial suffering with newly discovered creative abilities and wonderland pleasures. Furthermore, it is through the tensions between Billy’s agency and his victimization, somewhat reminiscent of Feelings’s efforts in *Tommy Traveler*, that the construction of childhood in Love’s comic enters into a critical dialogue with the Till case.

In the 1956 *Look* magazine feature, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam devote a great deal of attention to the idea that Till never showed fear during their confrontation and would not stop talking back. According to the journalist William Bradford Huie, “Bobo wasn’t afraid of them! He was tough as they were. He didn’t think they had the guts to kill him” (50). This sentiment carries over into what Milam describes as his final exchange with the fourteen-year-old:

MILAM: “You still as good as I am?”

BOBO: “Yeah.”

MILAM: “You still ‘had’ white women?”

BOBO: “Yeah.”

That big .45 jumped in Big Milam’s hand. The youth turned to catch that big, expanding bullet at his right ear. He dropped. (Huie, 50)

In a flashback from the second volume of *Bayou*, the reader learns that Billy Glass was hanged rather than shot before being dumped in the river—a detail in line with the comic’s 1930s setting and the illustration of the lynching postcard that follows. But Love’s adaptation retains Till’s alleged defiance. Billy mocks his assailants despite his beaten and bloody face, saying, “Thu-That the best you peckerwoods can do? Why don’t you loose me, n’en we see” (2:66). After a white fist is shown punching Billy’s jaw repeatedly, he spits back a mouthful of blood. Even his final curse to the white man that pulls the rope around his neck reinforces his unapologetic refusal to know his place and “keep his *body* in line” (Harold and DeLuca, 271).

This violent exchange opens up a discursive space where assertions of black manhood and virility become a weapon of resistance. Rendered physically powerless, Billy pushes back against the accusation about his sexually suggestive whistle in order to verbally emasculate his kidnappers and bring the white woman’s promiscuity into question: “Ya’ll ain’t nuthin but a bunch o’ pink fat hogs! No wonder Miss Maylene was givin’ me the eye!” (2:67). Comics that foreground Till’s innocence and the transformative effect of his image on children, such as *March: Book One* or *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White*, rarely venture into this contentious territory. By contrast, in *King: A Comics Biography*, the writer and artist Ho Che Anderson stages a private conversation between Martin Luther King Jr. and his fellow civil rights activist Ralph Abernathy, who denounces the white racists that killed Till as “them cricket-dicked good ol’ boys . . . fine specimens of what the South has become” (35). Grainy inset photographs of Till and his corpse rupture the surface of the page and contrast with the abstract outlines of the two speaking figures. As the reader is confronted with these documented images of Till’s physical trauma, King expresses his irritation with black people, like the preacher at Till’s funeral (if “church gabble” is to be believed), who suggest the Chicago youth brought about his own death, “cause he didn’t know how to act ‘round White folks down here.” Their reactions bring to mind the frustrations voiced in the Ollie Harrington comic strip over the initial failure of church clergy to lead. Abernathy goes a step further in emasculating the preachers who failed to defend Till’s fearlessness, saying, “They s’posed to have some stones in they pants” (35).

Billy doesn’t back down either, but *Bayou* makes clear that his confronta-

tional stance before the lynch mob is unsustainable. After his death, the scene takes a poignant turn as he sits with his knees clutched to his chest and refuses to leave his material form “to rot in the bayou” (2:73). A black female ancestral figure named Mother Sista appears to Billy on a spectral plane to reclaim him, saying, “Honey, that body is just a vessel. If you cling to it, bad things will happen” (2:74). The flashback returns to the start of the comic with Lee swimming down to find his corpse. Billy’s golden-eyed spirit watches in relief; he has not been abandoned. And like his onetime counterpart from Chicago, he will be cared for as part of a sacred, loving community in the afterlife while continuing to influence the well-being of those left behind. This is how Love makes Emmett’s abject body *mean* differently. Through the lens of the fantastic, *Bayou* takes Till’s memorialized image and reimagines the dimensions of his humanity through the character Billy Glass, an adolescent who is mischievous in his interactions with friends, bold in the face of his mortality, and yet all too vulnerable and afraid of the unknown.

Comics began telling the difficult story of Emmett Till within weeks of his funeral. Many of these texts explore the impact of the hate crime on the racial and gender development of other children during the 1950s, lessons made all the more insistent by the heavily circulated visual corroboration of the damage done to his body. Worth emphasizing, however, is the point made by scholars, including Harold, DeLuca, and Young, that what provokes the “reflexive shudder” in us as viewers is not just the single photograph of his corpse, but the “juxtaposition” and “dialogue” between all the images of Till disseminated in the media, from the baby portraits and smiling snapshots beside his mother to the final picture from his coffin (Harold and DeLuca, 274; Young, 24). Together these images construct a staggering graphic narrative that during the civil rights era “produced *real* sensations and *real* social relations” (Harold and DeLuca, 277). It should come as no surprise, then, that young Emmett would find another home in the creative interpretations of comics, a medium where juxtaposed visual and verbal sequences can offer their own narrative testimony to Till’s suffering.

NOTES

1. Also marking the comic strip’s difference is the fact that the subtitle, “in the World of Black History,” was deleted from the 1991 color reprint of the Emmett Till story, further suggesting that the incident was not far enough removed or celebratory enough to be labeled as “history” in the manner of Tommy’s other adventures. (“Black” replaced the term “Negro” in the 1991 reprint as well.)

2. From a reader’s letter to *Look* magazine following the interview with Roy Bryant and

J. W. Milan: “Can you in any number of ‘unbiased’ versions change the single deadly . . . fact that had Emmett Till been a white boy, his approaches to Carolyn Bryant . . . would very probably have been laughed aside as teen-age boisterousness?” (Chisholm).

3. These works include the essays and autobiographical writings of Martin Luther King Jr., Muhammad Ali, Eldridge Cleaver, Anne Moody, Molefi Asante, Julian Bond, and Jesse Jackson; the creative writings of Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Bebe Moore Campbell; and the songs written and composed by Langston Hughes and Jobe Huntley, Aaron Kramer and Clyde R. Appleton, Scatman Crothers and the Ramparts, and Bob Dylan.

4. The reprint of *Tommy Traveler*, published over three decades later, doesn’t assume the reader’s knowledge of the case and replaces the entire last panel with the following text: “For the ‘crime’ of whistling at a white woman 14-year-old Emmett Till was kidnapped and lynched in Sumner, Mississippi, by two white men who were charged and acquitted of his murder, the all-white jury citing the authorities supposed inability to identify Till’s decomposed corpse, found at the bottom of a river” (Feelings, reprint, 9).

5. The comic *Still I Rise: A Graphic History of African Americans*, by Roland Laird, Taneshia Nash Laird, and Elihu “Adofo” Bey attempts to convey a similar message by depicting Till on the street outside the store in formal dress, politely greeting Bryant, whose face remains hidden, with “How you doin’, Miss?” A white male observer responds, “That nigger sassed the wrong woman” (181). The emphasis on Till’s respectability may be intended to heighten the tragedy and the devastating race hatred that motivated his killers, yet the imagined exchange and the generic illustrations of the comic ultimately flatten out the complexities of the 1955 incident.

6. Love also intended Glass to allude to the 1944 case of George Stinney Jr., a fourteen-year-old South Carolina youth who was wrongly convicted and executed for the murder and rape of two white girls (Love, “Artist Presentation”). Billy Glass therefore becomes a composite of young black boys who were subject to racial victimization, the Till case being the best-known example. For additional analysis of *Bayou*, see Whitted, “Of Slaves and Other Swamp Things.”

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