

The Funeral That Shook The Consciousness Of The Nation: The Impact Of Emmett Till's Murder On The Civil Rights Movement

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Abstract

The present paper discusses Mamie's resistance and emergence against the brutality meted out to her teenage son while visiting his cousins and uncles on vacation in Mississippi. The article highlights that an open-casket funeral of Emmett Till turns a docile mother into a tireless racial activist. In addition, it examines the impact of the open (glass-top) casket of Emmett Till in the emergent politics of the black civil rights movement and the abolition of slavery in the United States. In August 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American boy from Chicago, visited his family and relatives in Mississippi, where racism was abundant and explicit. Till was accused of wolf-whistling and flirting with Carolyn Bryant, a white shopkeeper. He was abducted from his great uncle Moses Wright's home in Money at midnight and allegedly murdered by Carolyn's husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, John William Milam. The murderers and the cause of the murder remain mysterious even today. On 2nd September 1955, Emmett's body was shipped to A. A. Rayner Funeral home, Chicago by train. The casket was delivered closed, with the state seal of Mississippi, and there were directives not to open the casket. Mississippi officials hoped that their seal would conceal the facts behind Till's murder. When Mamie Till saw the disfigured body of her son, she was resolute to have an open-casket funeral to showcase the brutal violence inflicted on her son's body and face to the whole world. Mamie Till demanded that the¹ coffin be opened against the directive. Under Mamie's inclinations, Rayner positioned the body in a glass-topped coffin. Her determination inspired one of the pivotal events in the history of the contemporary civil rights struggle. When Till-Mobley opened the casket, photographer David Jackson of Johnson Publications snapped a shot, published immediately in Jet and the Chicago Defender. She brought to the attention of the nation the practice of lynching by allowing magazines to publish uncooked images of her son's corpse. Mamie demands that the country should see not just the wounded body but what Emmett's lynching holds in the collective memory. The death of Emmett was compared to an earthquake, and Mamie made use of its aftershocks to raise solidarity and consciousness among the blacks about hate crime. It shook the nation's consciousness and changed its perception of African-Americans in the United States.

Keywords: Race, lynching, Jim Crow, Civil Rights Movement, Open casket funeral, Collective memory, Solidarity and Consciousness.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines race as

The modern meaning of the term race with reference to humans began to emerge in the 17th century. Since then it has had a variety of meanings in the languages of the Western world. What most definitions have in common is an attempt to categorize peoples primarily

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by their physical differences. In the United States, for example, the term race generally refers to a group of people who have in common some visible physical traits, such as skin colour, hair texture, facial features, and eye formation. Such distinctive features are associated with large, geographically separated populations, and these continental aggregates are also designated as races, as the "African race," the "European race," and the "Asian race." (Wade et al.)

Race is a social construction and a discriminatory institution based on skin color, physical attributes, and lineage. Americans developed racial supremacy to justify their new economic system of capitalism. The hierarchical social structure of segregation such as Jim Crow Law and sharecropping served as the basis for a deepening racial division. It has been nearly a century since slavery was outlawed in 1954. Black Americans, however, were still subjected to severe violence, including physical abuse and lynchings. Lynching was often carried out under the justification of an accused offence but without a formal trial. The majority of these horrific killings and physical assaults went unpunished, and the police did not probe them. In the wake of World War II, the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizen's Council were the two U.S. hate organizations that aggressively sustained the white supremacist agenda. The Klan members despised Black people and were against any equality. The Klan lynched African Americans throughout the 1920s to maintain their white supremacy. Nott and Gliddon, in their book *Types of Mankind*, quoting Michael Rowe, explain:

Human progress has risen mainly from the war of the races. All the great impulses which have been given to it from time to time have been the results of conquests and colonizations....those group of races hereto fore comprehended under the generic term Caucasian, have in all ages been the rulers; and it requires no prophet's eye to see that they are destined eventually to conquer and hold every foot of the globe... the superior races ought to be kept free from all adulterations, otherwise the world will retrograde, instead of advancing, in civilization. (Agassiz et al.)

Lynching, a mob violence, was a constant fear for a large number of African Americans who were growing up in the South during the 19th and 20th centuries. Lynching was a violent crime committed to terrorize black people. Its overarching societal goal was to uphold White dominance in the political, social, and economic arenas. Lynching had been a practice since slavery, but it gained impetus during Reconstruction as prosperous black towns appeared throughout the South, and African Americans started to gain a grip in the political and economic spheres through voting, starting businesses, and running for public office. This surge in black prominence alarmed many white people, especially white landowners and impoverished white people. Lynchings were often carried out in front of the general public. Similar to guillotine killings during the Middle Ages, lynchings attracted larger groups of white families and were frequently publicized in the media. They represented a form of vigilantism in which white males from the South saw themselves as defenders of their culture and white women.

In basic terms, systemic racism involves white-generated discrimination and other oppression directed at people of color that is spread throughout a society. This racism is systemic in that it embodies wide-ranging racist ideas and practices that infiltrate and thread through most societal institutions, organizations, and networks. White racism is deeply embedded in U.S. social institutions, which reflect and shape racial group relations and positions in society's white-constructed racial hierarchy. (Elias 21)

In the U.S., a movement undertaken by African Americans for the eradication of racial segregation in the middle of the 20th century demanded social equity through sit-ins,

boycotts, protest marches, freedom rides, and petitioning legislators for legislative action. The protestors encountered resistance to their voices on numerous fronts, including lynching, physical violence and arrest. By the end of the 1960s, African Americans' rights and liberties were legally protected, and the civil rights movement had dramatically altered public policies and laws in the United States. In 1955, the killing of Emmett Till catalyzed the increase in opposition and action that gave rise to the Civil Rights movement. Many who would have stayed on the sidelines were forced into the fight by the sight of Till's mutilated body.

While the primary purpose of that march was to ensure civil, economic and voting rights for black people across the nation, Mississippi was at the fore being internationally criticized for their racially charged violence; their Jim Crow laws and the assassination of civil rights activist Medgar Evers in their capital city on 11th June, 1963. Fifty years later, as thousands attended the anniversary of that historic march on Saturday, 24th August – including the parents of Trayvon Martin – many believe Till's death remains an integral part of the fight for civil rights. (Kermit)

Racism is intensely entrenched in all facets of society, producing communal, economic, and political inequalities even in contemporary society. Black protests have taken many forms in the 20th and 21st centuries, such as boycotts, demonstrations, sit-ins, militant confrontations, and some social protests. The movement # BlackLivesMatter, in which black people fight for their equality, gained worldwide attention following the manslaughter of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2013. Protest has long been one of the many essential means of opposition against white supremacist ideology. Crump states that in reaction to George Floyd's murder and Black Lives Matter, 15 to 26 million Americans have participated in demonstrations, according to the July 2020 New York Times article titled "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History." The protests have spread around the world, inspiring a rejection of Black oppression and White supremacy in public spaces from Tokyo to Paris. After the lynching of Floyd, protest was held worldwide against the exploitive behaviour of police officers against Black suspects. On 26th May 2020, the day after the murder of Floyd, protests began in Minneapolis and spread across 50 States in the U.S. and globally. The New York Times declares that the protest for Floyd was the largest in the United States since the Civil Rights Era.

The criminalization of blacks is regardless of the age factors. In August 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago, was visiting his family and relatives in Mississippi. Chicago was a reasonably free state compared to Mississippi, where racism was abundant and explicit. He was allegedly blamed for wolf-whistling at Carolyn Bryant, a young white woman married to Roy Bryant, owner of Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market, Money Mississippi. Till was blamed for having sexual advancement with Carolyn in Bryant's shop. He was also criminalized and murdered just because he was an African-American boy. After the suspected incident of wolf whistling, Emmett Till stayed at Moses Wright—his uncle's house. Two white men, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, arrived at 2:30 a.m. on 28th August 1955 and carried Till away by force. Wright claimed to have seen someone in the car, possibly Carolyn, who had assisted in Till's identification during that fateful night. After two days, Till's body was found in the Tallahatchie River by two boys who were fishing in the Graball Landing, Mississippi. The only thing that allowed Moses Wright to recognize the body was an initial ring that had belonged to Emmett's father, Louis Till. Mamie, horrified by the way her son's body was disfigured but resolved that it would never happen again, made the unexpected choice that Emmett would have an open-casket funeral.

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. ... Suddenly, as I stood there gazing down at the body, something came over me. It was like an electric shock. In fact, it

was terror. I felt it through every bone in my body. I stiffened. ...And it was not because this body looked like something out of a horror movie. It was because I was getting closer to discovering, to confirming, that this body had once been my son. (Mobley 134).

Approximately one hundred thousand people assembled at Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ, Illinois, to see Emmett's body, and it was there for four days for people to view. "I was told that every fifth person or so had to be assisted. Nurses were on hand to help. People were falling out, fainting. Extra chairs had been set up outside to assist the people who didn't have the strength to go on. I could only imagine the reaction if they had seen what I had seen." (Mobley 142)

On 2nd September 1955, Emmett's body was shipped to A. A. Rayner Funeral home, Chicago, by train. The casket was delivered closed, with the state seal of Mississippi, and there were directives not to open the casket. Mississippi officials hoped that their seal would conceal the facts behind Till's murder. Mamie learned that undertakers on both ends and her relations had signed papers keeping the box closed, which would have covered up the ruthless violence of racial misconduct. But Mamie fought tooth and nail for the Chicago mortician to open the box.

"They're getting ready to bury Bo's body." "No," I insisted. "I want the body here. I'll bury Bo." We contacted Uncle Crosby and he promised to take care of everything, vowing to get Emmett's body back to Chicago if he had to pack it in ice and drive it back in his truck. ... Aunt Mamie suggested that we call A.A. Rayner, one of the biggest and most highly respected black funeral directors in Chicago. Mr. Rayner agreed to handle everything and told me ... getting the body back was going to cost thirty-three hundred dollars. Oh, God. That was devastating. I wasn't even making four thousand a year. But I didn't have to think about it more than a second, really. "Mr. Rayner," I said, if I live, I will pay you. And if I don't live, somebody else will pay you. (Mobley 130)

Mamie Till demanded that the coffin be opened against the directive. In accordance with Mamie's inclinations, Rayner positioned the body in a glass-topped coffin. Her determination inspired one of the pivotal events in the history of the contemporary civil rights struggle. Photographer David Jackson of Johnson Publications escorted the body to the Rayner funeral home. When Till-Mobley opened the casket, Jackson snapped a shot, published immediately in *Jet* and the *Chicago Defender*. She brought to the attention of the nation the lynching of her son by allowing magazines to publish uncooked images of her son's corpse. Mamie demands that the country should see not just the wounded body but what Emmett's lynching holds in the collective memory.

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. ...it had been choked out of his mouth....

From the chin I moved up to his right cheek. There was an eyeball hanging down, resting on that cheek. It looked like it was still attached by the optic nerve, but it was just suspended there. I don't know how I could keep it together enough to do this, ... Right away, I looked to the other eye. But it wasn't there. It seemed like someone had taken a nut picker and plucked that one out. (Mobley 135-36)

In many cultures, after the demise of a loved one, the family holds a wake or viewing of the departed in the family home, funeral home, or church before the service and burial. Ritual practices for wakes or viewings change by cultures and generations within a culture. In the African American and Afro-Caribbean cultures, respectfully dressing the dead ones

is a significant characteristic of death services. The body is cleaned and dressed, and the family grooms the hair. More recently, specialized undertakers have been given these tasks for many relatives, especially the younger generation. (Brooten et al.). Mamie Till Bradley demanded a glass top for her son's coffin and urged the undertaker not to prettify him after witnessing how severely her son had been battered. She cries, "Let the world see what I've seen" (Mobley 139). A few cried, and some fainted by viewing the distorted body of Emmett Till. His mutilated body, a testament to the killers' heinous acts, affected everyone. Around the world, media carried the image of Till's mutilated body, and more than 50,000 people flocked the Chicago streets outside the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ.

The phrase "secondary burials," which is mainly used by anthropologists and archaeologists to describe a wide range of burial customs spanning many civilizations and regions, is not specific to African Americans or African people. Any burial with several stages and a lapse in time followed by a subsequent step can be referred to as a secondary burial. Due to various circumstances that prohibited them from receiving funerals at the time of death, some Southern African Americans staged secondary burials in the 1920s. A large number of African Americans moved from the South to the North due to the Great Migration, which took place from 1916 to 1970 in the U.S. "The vast majority of time that African Americans have been on this continent, they've been primarily Southern and rural. That changed with the Great Migration, a mass relocation of 6 million African Americans from the Jim Crow South to the North and West, starting in 1915. ... The Great Migration was a watershed demographic change in our country's history" (Latson). In many cases, families experiencing financial difficulties were unable to raise money for an unexpected death. On the other hand, friends and relatives were unable to travel great distances. Owing to the prolonged investigations on the death of Emmett Till and its subsequent excavation of the corpse of Till on 1st June 2005 by the federal authorities for investigation. Till was given a second burial, which is not an African American custom. The second burial of Till ironically symbolizes that the truth behind Till's murder gets buried for the second time.

Two African American activists had been killed in Mississippi a few months before Till's killing. On 7th May 1955, George Washington Lee, one of the first African Americans registered to vote in Humphreys County, Mississippi, used his pulpit and printing press to urge others to vote. After attempting to cast his ballot in Belzoni, Reverend George Lee, an NAACP field worker, was shot and murdered at close range while he was driving. On 13th August 1955, Lamar Smith, a black farmer, was shot and murdered in front of the county courthouse in Brookhaven, Mississippi, in broad daylight in front of witnesses and the local sheriff. They were both involved in efforts to register Black voters. Regarding either murder, no one was taken into custody. The demise of Emmett Till and Mamie's emergence profoundly impacted Mississippi's Civil Rights advocates. Together with NAACP field workers Ruby Hurley and Amzie Moore, Medgar Evers, an NAACP field officer in Jackson, Mississippi, at the time, pushed the organization's national leadership to become involved. They carried out a covert search for black witnesses who were prepared to face a significant risk to come forward. Following Till's murder, several brave local leaders spoke up. Civil rights activist Dr. T.R.M. Howard, a physician in Mound Bayou, was already well-known throughout Mississippi for his advocacy.

Mamie's courage and protest unsettled people with psychological resistance to physical action. "The real reason Rosa Parks didn't get up from her seat that day wasn't because she was tired like everyone wants you to believe," Beauchamp said. "But it was because she had Emmett Till on her mind, and she was tired of what was happening" (Joyannreid). The Montgomery bus boycott started just three months after Till's body was recovered from the Tallahatchie River. On 1st December 1955, forty-three-year-old Rosa Parks declined to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She was arrested and fined fourteen dollars for breaking the code of the Jim Crow system. The African American bus rider in Montgomery boycotted the municipal buses immediately

after Rosa Parks was arrested. The boycott contributed to the founding of the Montgomery Improvement Association, which was headed by Martin Luther King Jr., a young, little-known preacher from the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church at the time. The boycott persisted for a year and brought the civil rights movement and Dr. King to the consideration of the world by leveraging his exceptional oratory abilities to spread his message through speaking engagements around the nation, King solidified his position as a critical player in the civil rights movement during the year-long boycott.

Dr. King did not mention the eighth anniversary of Till's death to the hundreds of thousands gathered before him at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on 28th August 1963. Instead, his "I Have a Dream" speech spoke to the broader institutional discrimination --police violence, political and economic disenfranchisement and more -- that allows for deadly racist terror to flourish: ... Both Till and Dr. King's legacies echo into the present day as Black America continues to resist racist oppression for a future that, despite the past's stubborn persistence, realizes Dr. King's dream. (Rao)

In 1963, King was invited to partake in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom as the founder and head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Approximately 250,000 people assembled in the nation's capital for the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which took place eight years to the day after Till's passing on 28th August 1963. During the march, King gave his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech, establishing his legacy in the annals of the civil rights movement. "Many believe Emmett Till's murder galvanized the modern-day civil rights movement," he said. "That's why 1955 is so significant when you talk about the civil rights movement or the black resistance movement in the United States. Rustin understood that [Till's] was a shocking case and he was able to see people gathering together and fighting injustice. And he wanted that same type of feeling with the March on Washington" (Joyannreid). Historians claim it was no coincidence that A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin scheduled their historic March on Washington on 28th August, the day Emmett Till was killed. For Black Americans, the eight years that had passed since the 14-year-old boy's death were still very much vivid in their memories. The idea that two white men from Mississippi could kill and torture a young black kid without being caught did justice to the calls for justice that many Black people had been making for a long time, particularly in Mississippi state. This made Randolph and Rustin plan the March on Washington on 28th August 1963. The march's main goal was to secure voting, economic, and civil rights for Black Americans nationwide. A. Philip Randolph, Director of March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on 28th August 1963, pronounces that:

Fellow Americans, we are gathered here in the largest demonstration in the history of this nation...It was not until the streets and jails of Birmingham were filled that Congress began to think about civil rights legislation. It was not until thousands demonstrated in the South that lunch counters...were integrated... The March on Washington is not the climax of our struggle but a new beginning not only for the Negro but for all Americans who thirst for a better life.

As a field officer for the NAACP, Medgar Evers rose to prominence in Mississippi as one of the state's most well-known activists. He initiated voter registration drives, coordinated boycotts of white-owned businesses that practiced discrimination and assisted in the investigation of the murder and disappearance of multiple African Americans, most notably Emmett Till. His family had been the target of death threats since the mid-1950s, and their home was firebombed in May 1963. Only a few weeks later, on 12th June, Edgars was shot in the Jackson, Tennessee, driveway. The legislation that eventually became the Civil Rights Act of 1964 gained more support due to the outcry following his death.

The struggle for our emancipation is a history of strong women who by their courage, commitment, and craftiness made America honor her creed of "... life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness ..." for all. Magnificent women: Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Constance Baker Motley, Madam C. J. Walker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Gertrude Johnson Williams, mother of John H. Johnson. In that tradition of a high league of service has stood Mamie Till-Mobley. She was an emancipation heroine. (Mobley xi)

Mamie Till's relentless efforts triggered unparalleled national and international rage towards white supremacy. Several hundred thousand people participated in Till's murder demonstrations in Chicago and other major cities in 1955. With the concurrent Montgomery Bus Boycott, the expanding coalition of black organizations, labour unions, and churches that participated in the marches contributed to the beginning of the civil rights movement. Rosa Parks' decision to make history on a bus in Montgomery was partially motivated by the Till murder to fight for justice. Furthermore, the Freedom Riders and protestors at lunch counters branded themselves the "Emmett Till generation" in the early 1960s. Emmett Till served as the catalyst for the civil rights movement, inspiring everyone from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. He also served as the terrible inspiration for some of the greatest songwriters in history, including Len Chandler, Phil Ochs, Emmylou Harris, and Bob Dylan.

Mamie empowered the media to broadcast the lynching of her son to the entire world. She turned the crucifixion into a resurrection through her influential writings and speeches, which she delivered throughout her life. Until she died in 2003, Mamie kept giving speeches around the nation to mothers of other Black children who had died in battle, ensuring that her son's tale would never be forgotten.

I think about that dreadful day at A.A. Rayner's when I had to examine Emmett's horribly disfigured body. How could I ever forget that? I remember how I thought about Emmett in that shed, how no one had answered his call, I know now that I was wrong about that. God answered the call when he embraced Emmett and showed the world what race hatred could do' how much better we should be than what we had become. So much good has come of that. And I have answered the call in all my life's work, nurturing young minds, providing much-needed guidance. And in that, there is redemption. (Mobley 282)

According to Jesse Jackson SR., the civil rights activist, the Brown v. Board of Education broke the legal back of segregation, and the manslaughter of Emmett Till broke the emotional back of segregation. Thus, Emmett's death and Mamie's courage served as the backbone to resist racism in the U.S. The death of Emmett was compared to an earthquake, and Mamie made use of its aftershocks to raise solidarity and consciousness among the people about the hate crime that changed America. Mamie's constant resistance and revolt paved the way for the modern-day civil rights movement.

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