In the pages of the *Chicago Defender*, alongside those of the other leading “black” newspapers, the drama of Emmett Till’s murder dominated the headlines throughout fall 1955. For nineteen consecutive weeks, the paper presented accounts of the final hours of the teenager’s life, the outcry of Mississippians (of all races) for swift justice against Till’s murderers, the NAACP’s efforts to publicize Till’s tragedy to the nation-at-large, the gradual backlash of white Mississippians who felt slandered by the NAACP leadership and changed their allegiance from Till to the boy’s assailants, and the eventual split between Till’s mother, Mamie Till Bradley, and the NAACP over allegations that she sought to profit from her son’s misfortune. Unfolding in a near-serialized form, the reportage offered enough new detail and, occasional character transformations – the deceased boy into a civil rights icon, confessed murderers into sympathetic individuals, grieving mother into greedy manipulator – to maintain reader interest. Unlike the infrequent updates on, arguably, the most important features of the Till drama which were published by the mainstream press, the sustained attention given to Emmett Till by publications catering to a largely African American readership suggests that the murder and subsequent trial were viewed as significant events within black communities-at-large and worthy of extended attention. While frequent references to Till within the speeches and sermons of civil rights leaders and activists offer evidence that the boy’s murder was used to spark and, thus, ignite the movement toward racial equality on a national level, the teenager’s lingering presence within regional black periodicals suggests a local and, perhaps, more intimate impact. Members of a given community could share in Till’s story as presented to them through the *Chicago Defender* and engage with it in the places – barber/beauty shops, churches, community centers, street corners – where they gathered to discuss the events that had meaning to themselves and their lives. They also could work through the trauma and terror invoked by the image within the privacy of their own homes.

This essay introduces select local encounters and looks at the impact that Till’s murder had on African American youth in the 1950s, who were not the intended readership of the black press but had access to *Jet* and
the *Chicago Defender* among other periodicals. It asserts that the killing not only encouraged a newfound self-awareness among black youth as “black” and, therefore, as being susceptible to violence, but also provided additional motivation toward the formation of political organizations like the Black Panther Party, which advocated a more aggressive pursuit of social reform than the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Till’s influence on “the Party” appears not only in the recollections of members, who were nearly the same age as Till when he was murdered, but also in the Party’s skillful use of images of injustice to raise civic awareness and mobilize a new movement for social reform, efforts to monitor the police, and establishment of community-based, social service programs which sought to create a hopeful future for new generations of black youth.

**The Power of a Photo**

The story of Emmett Till, which has been preserved within countless speeches, sermons, popular literature, documentary films, theatrical plays, and even a musical, remains well known today. Till, a Chicago native and barely a teenager, was sent to rural Mississippi to spend part of the summer with his relatives. He quickly befriended other black youths and, apparently, told them that he had a white girlfriend (or girl friend?) in Illinois. It is not definitively known whether the boys, raised in a Jim Crow environment within which even the most innocuous encounter between black men and white women could result in severe and, seemingly, officially sanctioned punishments, implored their northern friend to demonstrate his ability to attract or, at the least, socially engage with white females or whether Till, unprompted, boldly volunteered to put on a show. What is known is that the object of the boy’s affections on 24 August 1955 was Carolyn Bryant, a married, twenty-one year-old woman who owned and worked in a local grocery store. Bryant’s and Till’s companions’ accounts of the Chicagoan’s performance of Lothario vary slightly. At the most extreme, he walked behind the sales counter and placed his hands on her hips. At the very least, he bought candy from her and elected to hand her the money – thus creating skin to skin contact – rather than placing it on the counter as was custom. All agreed that he whistled at her. Considering that Bryant had determined the encounter not to be worth mentioning to her husband, Roy, the incident would have joined the canon of borderline sexist acts by pubescent boys which, perhaps, are easily forgotten had Till’s cousin, Maurice Wright, not told...
Roy Bryant what had transpired.² Angered by the news, Roy and his half-brother, John W. Milam, raided Till’s great-uncle’s house, kidnapped the boy, tortured him, shot him “execution”-style, used barbed wire to tie his body to a cotton gin fan, and dumped both into the Tallahatchie River never to be discovered. Contrary to their plans, the body floated to the surface and, despite being bloated and unrecognizable, was identified as Till thanks to the presence of a ring, belonging to Till’s father, that was worn by the boy. Although the county coroner sent the corpse to Chicago on the condition that the coffin/crate not be opened within the state of Mississippi and with the suggestion that his mother (or anyone else) not look upon the body and immediately bury it, Bradley staged a public funeral with an open casket and invited the entire world, including the black press, to look upon her son’s body and to “see what they did to my boy.”³ Over ten thousand people streamed past Till’s casket, upon which three pictures of the youthful, vibrant, and living teenager were taped to contrast the decayed, still, and deceased body before them. This powerful juxtaposition was restaged before hundreds of thousands of readers within black newspapers which printed and paired photographs of the living and dead boy. A national outcry ensued. The murderers were indicted and, later, were acquitted on the ground that the unrecognizable body might not have been Till’s and, as a result, that there was not any evidence that a murder had occurred. Bryant and Milam later confessed in a Look magazine interview published in 1956.

While spectacular murders of black people, both male and female, by white individuals and mobs had occurred for centuries within (and across) the United States, the Till case proved extraordinary thanks to Bradley’s concerted efforts not only to openly display her son’s bloated and misshapen corpse but also her maternal grief for the world to see. Although not recognizable as a person – much less a teenager, the face of Till, captured by a photographer and circulated via print media, promptly became a representation of the severity of racial hatred, prejudice, and violence that continued to exist in the nation. It was this powerful photograph of a boy, who had been previously unknown to the nation-at-large, that promoted the realization among the black press’s readership that the future of an entire generation of black youth was threatened by the persistence of societal prejudice. 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.

Although it would be inaccurate to say that the majority of African American youth who were introduced to Emmett Till through the press coverage of his burial were motivated to become involved in the civil rights movement, a significant number of rights activists recall Till’s murder and its effect as the prompts that helped them to fully visualize racial injustice and the severity of race-based violence within the nation. Muhammad Ali, in a much cited excerpt from his autobiography, *The Greatest* (1975), recalled:

> Emmett Till and I were about the same age. A week after he was murdered … 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. His mother had done a bold thing. She refused to let him be buried until hundreds of thousands marched past his open casket in Chicago and looked down at his mutilated body. [I] felt a deep kinship to him when I learned he was born the same year and day I was. My father talked about it at night and dramatized the crime.  

Neither in Ali’s autobiography nor in the various academic studies of that same text is the nature of the dramatization reenacted. Did father and son rehearse and re-play the moment in Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market between Carolyn Bryant and Till, the manner with which her husband kidnapped the boy, and/or the abuse and murder of Till by Bryant and Milam? Regardless of which scene was reenacted by young Cassius and his father, the future heavyweight’s age combined with his presumed role play as Till, encourages efforts to comprehend the Chicagoan’s death on his life. For a moment, Ali became Till, a person whom he easily could have been. Former Mississippi resident and author Anne Moody, who was only a few months older than the Chicagoan when he died, observed in her autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), “Before Emmett Till’s murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me – the fear of being killed just because I was black.”  

Although the author, unlike Ali, does not make any refer-
ence to efforts to “dramatize” the crime, her “fear” anchored itself in the possibility of Till’s assault (and murder) being replayed across her own body. The Chicago teenager’s death triggered the imagination of black youth – prompting them not to think of future utopias but present-day threats. A similar tragedy could await them as well. In scores of other recollections of individuals who are contemporaries of Till and who could have been subjected to Till’s treatment had their situations been reversed, the common themes of shock and fear coupled with a newfound realization of the effects of being black within a prejudiced and violent society appear with great frequency. For example, former NAACP President Julian Bond, a year older than Till, noted that the Chicago teenager’s murder “created a great vulnerability and fear of all things southern in my teenaged mind.”

For those who remained unaware of the threat, the photograph encouraged parents to instruct their children to stay vigilant of the dangers that too might await them. Historian James Horton remembers, “It was Monday morning when my family got the word about the death of Emmett Till. I was barely two years younger than he and in the South for one of the first times that I was old enough to remember. My mother was particularly disturbed by the incident and spent most of the morning counseling me on ‘being careful’.” Horton’s recollection suggests that Till’s teenage contemporaries in the 1950s were not the only ones impacted by the power of the Chicago boy’s published photograph. Whereas some black youth might not have been attuned to the larger political situation that enabled Till’s abuse and the acquittal of his murderers, their parents and adult relatives likely were and it was their obligation to prepare their children for future encounters with racism. The impact of Till’s photograph anchored itself not only in imaginings of a child’s pain but also a parent’s despair and, indeed, grief at the prospect of having to encounter a murdered child. This parental anguish, which is often characterized as a maternal sorrow, appears most clearly in Bradley’s description of how she prepared herself to look upon her son’s corpse.

I decided that I would start with his feet, gathering strength as I went up. I paused at his mid-section, because I knew that he would not want me looking at him. But I saw enough to know that he was intact. I kept on up until I got to his chin. Then I was forced to deal with his face. I saw that his tongue was choked out. The right eye was
lying midway off his chest. His nose had been broken like someone took a meat chopper and broke his nose in several places. I kept looking and I saw a hole, which I presumed was a bullet hole, and I could look through that hole and see daylight on the other side. I wondered, “Was it necessary to shoot him?”

She had to look at her son in fragments – bit by bit – as a protective measure to prevent her whole body from being overwhelmed by the pain of exposure. Despite her best efforts, the photographs of Bradley’s witnessing of the severity of her son’s abuse testifies to her physical and emotional anguish. The images capture her scream, “the phonographic content of the photograph,” as performance scholar Fred Moten has observed. Over half a century after Bradley first took possession of her son’s corpse and a photographer captured her undisguised expression, we can still hear her exclamations – the voicing of her sorrow – recorded in the picture. It was Bradley’s legible grief and Till’s obvious suffering that motivated Rosa Parks, the “mother” of the civil rights movement, not to relinquish her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus at the requests of a white male passenger, the white driver, and the other passengers on the bus. In a conversation with a Time magazine staff writer, Parks allegedly asserted that Till’s murder gave her the motivation to sit down, remain seated, and resist Jim Crow policies: “I thought about Emmett Till, and I couldn’t go back.”

It is Till’s influence on parents and, more generally, black adults in the 1950s that Clenora Hudson-Weems identifies as the impetus for the civil rights movement. In Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb (1994), Hudson-Weems challenges the contention that the national movement toward racial equality at the mid-point of the twentieth century was sparked by either the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision or the 1955/1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott. As the title of her book, the first of several on Till’s influence, suggests, the author views the teenager as a martyr, almost a Christ-like figure, who died to make the world a better place. It was the death of Till that gave new vitality to the campaign for racial equality. It was Till who motivated Parks not to move toward the back of the bus and, through Parks’s decisive act inspired the speeches, boycotts, marches, and sit-ins that became the civil rights movement. It was Till’s murder that helped Roy Wilkins, former president of the NAACP, to see the potential in making the boy’s suffering emblematic.
of black suffering nationwide. Through speeches, he named the Chicago teenager a casualty in the struggle for civil rights. He persuaded both Bradley and Till’s great-uncle, Moses Wright, to travel across the country to share their stories and sorrow. In a 1955 interview, Mamie Till Bradley expressed discernible discomfort at the process of transforming her personal anguish into national inspiration, but, she consented to the NAACP’s requests: “If it can further the cause of freedom, then I will say that he died a hero.”

Whereas the impact of Till’s murder on the late 1950s campaign for civil rights has been well documented, less attention has been given to the influence of his murder on black youth. What effect (and affect) did it have on them and how did it shape their interests in rights activism in the 1960s and beyond? The value of focusing upon the reactions of youth, those ranging from “adolescence into early adulthood,” as sociologist Larry Griffin has observed, is that “[t]hese years … are constitutive of world views and political perspectives that, though, not inflexible, tend to be carried forward as individuals age.” Griffin notes, “one’s sense of self is theorized to be stamped by the historically significant events and changes occurring during this critical time in the development of an individual’s identity.”

While a collage of events deemed historically and personally significant (but, perhaps, not “historically significant” to others) likely comprises the framework through which youth view the society within which they live, Griffin’s study is a valuable reminder of the lasting effects of youthful encounters. We know what Rosa Parks did after reflecting upon Till’s death. What did members of his generation do? The decisions of children and teenagers who were profoundly affected by the Till tragedy determined the direction of the civil rights movement in the 1960s onwards and continue to impact various movements toward social reform and racial equality today.

An Exhausting Spectacle

The bruised and disfigured state of Emmett Till’s corpse reveals that the Chicago teenager was repeatedly punched and, likely, beaten with objects – a gun and possibly an axe; that the boy’s teeth were knocked out; that at least one of his eyes was gouged out; and that he was shot at relatively close range. Based upon Bryant’s and Milam’s published confession, the boy remained alive and conscious throughout the assault until the moment that the gun blast ended his suffering. While Till’s murder certainly was grisly, it was not unique. Throughout the first half of the
twentieth century, thousands of black bodies, especially black male bodies, were the targets of extreme violence by individuals and mobs seeking to avenge an allegation of wrongdoing, often involving a white woman. George Ward, accused of — but never prosecuted for — the murder of Ida Finkelstein was lynched, burned, and dismembered for souvenirs by a white mob in Terre Haute, Indiana in 1901. Bootjack McDaniels accused of — but never prosecuted for — the murder of a white (male) store clerk was tortured with blowtorches by an agitated mob before being shot to death in Duck Hill, Mississippi in 1937. Considering that kidnappings and murders of black men frequently occurred in public before assembled crowds, whose attendance occasionally exceeded more than one thousand spectators, it is worthwhile to inquire why the abuse of Till, which occurred in private and then was later displayed, could motivate an entire movement when the deaths of thousands of others did not.

Whereas approximately three thousand black men and women were publicly murdered between 1880 and 1930, the number of lynching victims decreased with each subsequent decade until “legal lynchings,” unprosecuted murders, were rarely tolerated by local communities in the mid-1950s. What led to this dramatic decrease in murders? On the one hand, the work of activists and social reformers like Ida B. Wells cast a spotlight on the abuse of the black body, especially within the southeastern and midwestern regions of the United States. Wells criss-crossed the nation, receiving countless death threats, and repeatedly asked the following question: “Why is mob murder permitted by a Christian nation?” Her impassioned defense of black individuals, who were violently assaulted as punishment for an alleged or rumored transgression, attracted the attention of the mainstream press which began to report with greater frequency on lynching campaigns throughout the United States. Newspapers, such as the New York Times, chronicled the events relating to specific lynchings, which frequently were publicized in advance, executed in accordance with a pre-circulated program, and rarely resulted in any prosecutions.

Over successive decades, the pronounced press coverage succeeded in creating a national dialogue about the plight of African Americans across the nation. A lynching was no longer a local affair. It attracted widespread attention which necessitated greater demands for investigations, prosecutions, and convictions. In addition, the ensuing press coverage tended to relay the impression that the residents of the town in which the lynching occurred shared the same (racist) beliefs as the individuals accused of committing the murder. A lynching threatened
the reputation not only of a town but also of its citizens. By 1955, the backlash against lynchings was so pronounced that local law enforcement personnel sought to characterize the death of Emmett Till not as a “lynching,” which suggested racial overtones, but as an ordinary murder attributed to the passions (not race-tinged) of Bryant and Milam. In advance of the first trial (murder), there appeared to be a consensus within Tallahatchie and Leflore counties, where the crimes were staged and the body was recovered, respectively, that Bryant and Milam were guilty of murder. There were calls for the two men to be imprisoned and editorials written that declared that their actions were not representative of the Mississippi community within which they lived. Eventually, the media attention directed toward the case, following Till’s burial, coupled with the heightened activism of NAACP leaders, who repeatedly referred to Till’s murder as a “lynching,” motivated many local residents, including members of the trial’s all-white jury, to support, in greater numbers, Bryant and Milam. Hodding Carter II, an editor of the *Delta Democrat Times* accurately predicted the reaction that (white) county residents would have to the NAACP’s negative portrayal of their community and warned Wilkins what could transpire:

> It is becoming sickeningly obvious that two groups of people are seeking an acquittal for the two men charged with kidnapping and of brutally murdering afflicted 14 year-old Emmett Till, a Negro youth accused of “wolf whistling” at a white woman. Those two groups are the NAACP, which is seeking another excuse to apply the torch of world-scorn to Mississippi, and the friends of the two white men.\(^{17}\)

By the time that the trial began, H.C. Strider, the Tallahatchie County sheriff charged with investigating the murder, assigned blame for Till’s death on Till himself: “We never have any trouble until some of our southern niggers go up North and the NAACP talks to them and they come back here.”\(^{18}\) Certainly, the heightened presence of the NAACP in Mississippi throughout the trial served to increase support for the two men, who had become victims in the eyes of many local residents. Despite the fact that the trial continued, the shift in allegiance proved sufficiently apparent that Bradley anticipated the acquittal of Bryant and Milam and elected not to return to the courthouse to hear the verdict.\(^{19}\) Several months later, a
grand jury uninterested in recreating the media circus that existed during the murder trial voted not to indict either man for kidnapping despite the testimony of Wright, who stood up, pointed at Bryant and Milam, and named each – “Thar he” – as the kidnapper. Both trials demonstrated a community’s willingness to condemn its residents as murderers, but not to convict them as racists because such a characterization would reflect negatively on the community itself. This was progress.

On the other hand, race relations within society-at-large had changed. While there was still legal segregation and poll taxes designed to disenfranchise black voters (which included banning them from serving on juries), the threat of black independence (or equality) no longer seemed as dangerous as it did during the Reconstruction years and the opening decades of the twentieth century. The migration of African Americans, seeking employment in the burgeoning industries, led to an influx of black people within urban centers who appeared to succeed in co-existing with white and immigrant residents. The two world wars offered opportunities for black soldiers to reaffirm their roles as citizens of the nation and defenders of liberty. In addition, the increasing national rhetoric against German fascism and race prejudice in the 1930s and 1940s prompted calls for national unity. The championship reign of heavyweight boxer Joe Louis offered Americans of all colors a “respectable” black hero. It was these, among other, factors that contributed to the formal end of legal segregation within the country and contributed toward the 1954 Supreme Court decision that paved the way for desegregation within schools and, later, other public places. Despite the backlash against the court decision and the resulting protests outside of schools which revealed that large segments of the population were resistant to integrationist change, the fact that the decision could be made, enforced, and expanded upon demonstrates a national shift in perspective.

In contrast to earlier “lynching” cases in which unfounded and unproven rumors prompted the actions of murderous mobs, all parties involved in the Till case agreed that the Chicago teenager touched Carolyn Bryant and whistled at her. To all involved – from Bryant to Till’s companions, it was clear that the fourteen year-old did not pose a threat to the shopkeeper. Why was Till murdered? He had violated the expected codes of behavior for blacks in the South. Rather than placing his money on the counter and waiting for the shopkeeper to pick it up, he dared to put the money in her hand. He called her “Baby” instead of “Ma’am.” If he was bold enough to whistle in her direction, then it seems likely that
he looked her squarely in the eye. His young companions on that fateful
day knew that he had committed a series of social taboos and became
immediately fearful that his actions might lead to retribution. In Keith
Beauchamp’s 2005 documentary *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*,
Till’s teenaged friends and relatives acknowledge that they knew that the
Chicagoan had crossed a line. Simeon Wright, Till’s cousin, recalls, ‘No
one knew that he was going to whistle and when he did he scared everyone
in the bunch.” The companions of the soon-to-be-murdered teenager
realized that in the South even the slightest transgression could render the
black body subject to some form of violence. While those children who
were raised in the South likely were accustomed to the mannerisms and
affectations that blacks were expected to perform in their encounters with
whites, the Northern children had to be taught how to behave or, at the
least, to be told to be cautious throughout their Southern visits. Wheeler
Parker, a friend of Till’s who accompanied him to Mississippi that same
summer, remembered his mindset on the day that he boarded the train that
would take him to Mississippi for the summer: “I was very much aware
of what could happen … I don’t know if Emmett was told.”

In their *Look* confession, Bryant and Milam contend that the im-
petus for their actions in kidnapping Till and, later, killing him was not
rooted in any deep offense at the boy’s behavior in the general store but
a larger, societal effort to defend their southern way of life from being
encroached upon and spoiled by the actions of northern blacks who
violated longheld codes of conduct. They wanted to teach a lesson – to
both Till and the larger community of African Americans like Till. They
motivation appears particularly pronounced in their recollection of the
final moments of the teenager’s life. Having stripped the boy naked and
severely beaten him, they asked him “You still good as I am?” This
was the opportunity for the teenager to recant and, perhaps, to save his
life. Instead, Till, according to his confessed murderers, simply replied
“Yes” – not only the answer that they did not expect but also an answer
devoid of the requisite “Sir” at the end. In response, they shot him. It
is impossible to know whether or not this occurred. Witnessed accounts
of blacks tortured to the brink of death in lynching campaigns frequently
end with a confession of guilt, an expression of remorse, and a plea for
death after hours in which the tortured person proclaimed his innocence
before succumbing to the pain. It is conceivable that Till could have
behaved in the same manner and that any reference to this reality would
only worsen the image of Bryant and Milam as brutal killers. However,
the characterization of Till as defiant until his last breath enables both Bryant’s and Milam’s aggression against this new Northern Negro type and, ironically, the “heroic” legend of Emmett Till.

The hyper-visibility of the Chicagoan’s suffering, evidenced by his physical disfigurement, offers insight into the shifting beliefs of the decade. In scores of lynching campaigns, the black body was murdered in public and left hanging, on display, for hours and, in rare cases, days. Photographers recorded the scene of the lynching and sold souvenir picture cards and postcards of the abused, deceased black body. Souvenir collectors dismembered the black body; removing body parts (toes, hair, teeth, fingers, and so forth) to display privately to friends and publicly within display windows and cases. Mamie Till Bradley was not the first mother to recover the tortured body of her son. Thousands of other mothers, family members, and neighbors had to cut down the hanging bodies of loved ones or search the ashes of bonfires for bones in order to arrange a proper burial for them. What distinguished the Till case was that the public display of black bodily suffering was not reserved solely for white spectators. Bradley invited black communities-at-large to look upon her son. She publicized her and Till’s pain. The open coffin funeral coupled with the circulation of Till’s photographs in the pages of black newspapers triggered what can best be described as a new trend and, perhaps, an early moment within American popular media culture of exhaustion by white audiences at the spectacle of black suffering. Southern townships, similar to those that circulated postcards of lynching victims in the heyday of murderous campaigns, now discouraged the display of both Till’s body and image. The public (white) fascination with the abused black body on show had declined and the image of black suffering was reframed almost exclusively for an African American audience. In addition to representing the exhausted interests of residents of select townships, the images proved exhausting to many members of black communities. Whereas local, county and state officials in Mississippi suggested that Till’s body and photograph did not merit a long look – out of fear of aggravating racial tensions, black viewers often found themselves drawn to the picture with their eyes lingering upon the boy’s misshapen face. As the Reverend Al Sharpton, noting the transfixing effect of Till’s abused body, observed in a 2005 interview, “It’s hard to view a corpse and look away.” The boy’s body, both fleshed and imaged, triggered an affective response in black spectators that rendered the suffering of Till, as imagined, personally and physically taxing.
For the contemporaries of Till, black youth whose experience could have been the same as Bradley’s son had they stood before Carolyn Bryant on that summer day in 1955 and either placed a few cents in her hand or whistled in her direction, the photograph of Till often registers, within reflections and autobiographical accounts, as the moment when they realized their own vulnerability and susceptibility to violence. They learned that they could be assaulted and, perhaps, killed for a seemingly insignificant action. Awakened to the threats that existed within society, black youth found themselves newly attentive to the actions of their elders to champion civil rights in a direct, confrontational, nonviolent manner. In public schools and through television coverage of school integration efforts across the country, they experienced the backlash of the Brown verdict. Huey P. Newton, a year younger than Till, noted in Revolutionary Suicide, his 1973 autobiography: “We shared the dreams of other American children … We, too, had great expectations. And then we went to school.” The photographs and news footage of the deployment of the National Guard to enable black youth to attend (and integrate) schools offers a bleak picture of the reality that faced black children and teenagers in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Teenagers, who were the same age as Till, were barred from entering select schools and witnessed, through media coverage, Rosa Parks’s refusal to relinquish her seat, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the Birmingham church bombings. By their twenty-second year, they had seen the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and the 1963 march on Washington, D.C. In short, the most dramatic events of the early civil rights era occurred in their young adulthood. For children, the witnessed violence directed toward the black community became a steady, often recurring part of their formative development. Assata Shakur, a member of the Black Panther Party who was only eight years old when Till was murdered, recalled the repetitive and traumatizing scenes of black suffering which were relayed to (and, perhaps, replayed before) her.

Mostly, when I was young, the news didn’t seem real … only the news concerning black people had any impact on me. And it seemed that each year the news got worse. The first of the really bad news that I remember was Montgomery, Alabama. That was when I first heard of Martin Luther King. Rosa Parks had been arrested for refusing to give her seat to a white woman. The Black people boycotted the
buses. It was a nasty struggle. Black people were harassed and attacked and, if I remember correctly, Martin Luther King’s house was bombed. Then came Little Rock. I can still remember those ugly, terrifying white mobs attacking those little children who were close to my own age … We would sit there horrified.\(^\text{30}\)

The daily trauma of black suffering reprinted within newspapers and transmitted across the airwaves compelled black youth to acknowledge the inescapable reality in which they lived. Although the news updates of occurrences in far off places often seemed fictional, the coverage of black bodies being assaulted within local communities grounded the experiences and the suffering in the everyday and the familiar. Children or teenagers could look at the treatment of protestors in communities not unlike their own and imagine, with ease, that they too would be the potential targets of such violence when they left their houses. The exhausting, physically draining, and emotionally unsettling nature of the images compelled audiences, of all ages, to remain alert to, as Wheeler noted, “what could happen.” It was the frequency of the violence directed toward the black community combined with continuing philosophies of nonviolent protests – even in the face of the most direct and brutal attacks – that eventually exhausted the patience of Till’s contemporaries and spurred movements toward the establishment of more aggressive and, eventually, militant organizations.

**The Need for Self-Defense**

After spending the decade, following Till’s murder, watching black bodies, who had embraced nonviolent philosophies in their pursuit of civil rights, being the targets of violence, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, co-founders of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, sought to establish a socio-political organization with the capability of responding to the increasing levels of aggression directed not only at civil rights activists but also everyday residents of urban communities. Sharing the frustration of former SNCC Chairman Stokely Carmichael, who matter-of-factly stated, “We’ve been saying freedom for six years and we ain’t got nothing,” and inspired by the writings of Frantz Fanon, Mao Tse-tung, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright among others, the co-founders championed Carmichael’s and Charles Hamilton’s “Black Power” ideology, appropriated the black panther symbol from the Carmichael-affiliated
Lowndes County Freedom Organization, and established the Party in October 1966. As numerous scholars and casual historians have observed, the organization began with the goal of curbing police violence – assaults and shootings by law enforcement personnel – within inner-city communities with predominantly black populations. Concerned by the frequency with which black youth were detained, arrested, and brutalized (including being shot) by police officers, Newton and Seale recruited several dozen armed volunteers to “legally patrol the police.” With law enforcement officials not thrilled by the prospect of having their movements followed by armed inner-city youth, they promptly challenged, through local and state legislative channels, the emergent organization’s rights to obtain and possess firearms. In response, approximately thirty gun-carrying Black Panthers visited the California State Legislature in nearby Sacramento on 2 May 1967 to assert their constitutional right to “bear arms.” This move – reminiscent of Rob Williams’s “Negroes with Guns” activities a decade earlier in Monroe, North Carolina – attracted significant press coverage, both regional and national, and introduced the Party to the nation-at-large.

A few months later, a police stop involving Party members and resulting in a wounded Newton and a dead officer, brought renewed attention to the rhetoric and actions of the Oakland-based organization and made the movement to “Free Huey” a cause célèbre over the next four years. Following the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, many viewed the Party as the only significant engine for future social change within the nation. Around the same time, the federal government increased its surveillance of the Black Panther Party and, through the FBI’s counter-intelligence unit (COINTELPRO), worked to internally fracture the Party and damage its community appeal through an elaborate disinformation campaign. The combination of COINTELPRO activities alongside the arrests and murders of the Party’s members led to the gradual demise of the organization. By 1972, the Party had essentially dissolved.

The relatively short six-year lifespan of the Black Panther Party makes it difficult to appreciate its influence on and importance to the struggle for civil rights and social reform. Although the organization attracted the attention of the national press, established over thirty chapters in at least fifteen states, and published a newspaper, Black Panther, with a circulation of 139,000 at its peak, the Party, at the height of its popularity in 1968/1969, had between 2,000 and 5,000 members, according
to varying estimates. As the differential implies, these estimates were not much more than educated guesses by Party insiders. In a May 1969 interview, Eldridge Cleaver noted, “I’m quite certain that there is nobody in the United States, from the FBI to Huey P. Newton, who could tell you precisely the number of members of the Black Panther Party.” The loose organizational structure of the Party combined with poor record keeping – perhaps, as a deliberate strategy to challenge FBI infiltration and surveillance – undermines any attempt to appreciate the full scale and the national reach of the Party’s activism. In addition, the existence of several unaffiliated “Black Panther Party” organizations in the early 1960s, including two in the Bay Area, coupled with the widespread appeal, especially within northern and west coast urban communities, of “Black Power” ideology suggests that expressions of support and/or enthusiasm for either “Black Power” or the “Black Panthers,” as recorded in 1960s press coverage and academic surveys, do not always correlate with expressions of support and/or enthusiasm for the Oakland-based Party.

Consisting of a network of differently placed and locally run chapters which agreed to adhere to a ten point program designed by the Party’s co-founders and to sell copies of the *Black Panther*, the Black Panther Party could best be considered a grassroots, community-based organization that had consented to franchise itself. From this perspective, the measure of its influence and importance can be gained by looking at the activities of specific chapters and the reforms created within particular communities. Based upon the writings of members Mumia Abu-Jamal (Philadelphia chapter) and Assata Shakur (Newark chapter), it appears that the Party’s service oriented philosophy and programming – more than its militarized appearance and rhetoric – accounted for its popularity within their urban communities and formed the bedrock of its lasting influence upon national culture.

In addition, the Party has been praised for spotlighting the presence of institutional racism and prejudice at all levels of local and state government and for mobilizing disaffected youth into vocal proponents for social reform. In an early sociological study of the Black Panther Party, Lewis M. Killian attributes the organization’s achievements to its status as an “extremist” organization. “In creating what often seem to be futile if not suicidal confrontations,” Killian writes, “extremists serve to identify unresolved, and in that sense crucial, issues still facing the movement.” The author contends that the Party’s decision to brandish weapons challenged “the depth of official commitment to equal rights” by asking, “Do
the guarantees of the second amendment apply to black citizens as well as to members of the National Rifle Association?” 38 The value of the confrontations staged by extremist organizations, like the Party, is that they test governmental rhetoric related to the enforcement and protection of rights, liberties and, in short, equality, in a way that non-violent campaigns cannot. In her 2003 article, “Organizing Against Criminal Injustice,” sociologist Heather Schoenfeld asserts that the perceived extremism of the Party assisted in the organization and mobilization of black youth. Noting that “[s]ocial movement mobilization occurs when people feel aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that collective action can address the problem,” Schoenfeld writes that “young people saw the gun as a tool of hope.” 39 The gun enabled national recognition of the plight of those who lived in urban communities and existed as a tool for change. It was this image of optimism offered to the previously disaffected that the author suggests accounts for the rapid growth of the Party and its success in creating social improvement/reform programs. Schoenfeld’s emphasis on the “hope” espoused by the Black Panther Party or, at least, projected upon it by urban residents who witnessed the actions of its members, is intriguing considering that the founders and leading proponents of the Party were teenagers when Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi. They like Ali, Bond, and Moody became aware of their own mortality at an early age and began to anticipate their deaths. Despite the taint of bigotry, prejudice, and racialized violence that colored their youthful experiences and childhood memories, the Party’s leadership and core membership actively worked to create a different lived environment – a hopeful, pride-filled, and optimistic setting – for younger residents of the communities within which they lived.

**Hits and Near Misses**

In his history of the Black Panther Party, Abu-Jamal notes, “If one examined the places of origin of leading members of the organization, despite its founding in California, one could not but be struck by the number of people who hailed from the South.” 40 Huey P. Newton was born in Louisiana, Bobby Seale and Kathleen Cleaver in Texas, David Hilliard in Alabama, and Eldridge Cleaver in Arkansas. They “brought up the rear of the Great Migration” and, as a result, were exposed to the prejudices, racial biases, and expected codes of behavior within that region before relocating to a new urban environment in the North or West. 41 After their own migration, they, like Emmett Till, made return visits to
southern states to see relatives and attend funerals. They too were expected to shift their mannerisms, behaviors, and, perhaps, northern sensibilities to fit the expectations of the places that they visited. Although Hilliard does not reference Emmett Till in his autobiography, *This Side of Glory* (1993), he offers two accounts from his native Rockville, Alabama that resemble the Till tragedy. The first involves a cousin, who killed a white neighbor’s cow that had trespassed onto his property and ruined his garden. That cousin was taken by a group of white men, including his neighbor, who “put him in the back of a pick-up truck and carried him to Jackson where there’s a creek. And dropped him in the creek. Tied his hands behind him and hog-tied him. And they – all of them – had their pump guns and shotguns.” Miraculously, the cousin survived the assault but was compelled to quit his job and work for his neighbor until he had repaid him, in sweat equity, for the cost of the cow. The second involves his brother Van, who had to flee Alabama after a charged encounter with a white person. The cause of his exile was a kiss, witnessed in public, between Van and a woman with whom he had developed a romantic relationship. Hilliard recalls:

One day he was with my cousin Boy Collier and met the woman; she kissed Van in public and held his hand. Boy was terrified. He hurried Van down the street and told him the woman was crazy and that if any whites saw what was going on they would hang him. Then he went to my parents, described the incident, my mother and father insisted Van leave town.

Both instances predated Till’s whistle. However, they gesture toward the legacy of racial violence that enabled murders like the Chicagoan’s and acquittals like Bryant’s and Milam’s. Hilliard’s brother fled the South to avoid death. Hilliard himself would follow.

According to David Hilliard, the adventures of his older brother and cousin were relayed to him by a relative who provided Hilliard, who was born only a few months after Emmett Till, not only an invaluable family history lesson but also a folksy cautionary tale of what could happen to him if he behaved in the same manner within Rockville. The story provided a similar level of affect to Hilliard as Till’s reprinted photographs had on other youth. The terror and potential trauma of the event survived its mediation. Although Hilliard’s brother was not subjected to the vio-
ence directed at the Chicagoan, the history of lynching and racialized violence in the region clearly alerted his parents to what could happen and motivated their decision to send their son away. Van’s northern migration could be considered an escape or, better yet, a near miss. The impact of the “near miss” on Hilliard’s family could have been nearly as strong as an actual assault – since the imagining or anticipation of violence, injury and, even, death already had occurred. Similarly, the reactions to Till’s murder, by his contemporaries who believe that they could have been Till had their situations been reversed, also could be understood as the effect and affect of a realized “near miss.” Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panther Party’s Communications Director, who was serving a jail sentence for marijuana possession when the Till trial occurred, read about the Till trial in both the black and mainstream press. Similar to numerous other activists, Cleaver locates his reaction in a photograph. However, it is the picture of Carolyn Bryant and not Till that triggers his response:

... an event took place in Mississippi which turned me inside out: Emmett Till, a young Negro down from Chicago on a visit, was murdered, allegedly for flirting with a white woman. [...] I was, of course, angry over the whole bit, but one day I saw in a magazine a picture of the white woman with whom Emmett Till was said to have flirted. While looking at the picture, I felt a little tension in the center of my chest I experience when a woman appeals to me. I was disgusted and angry at myself. Here was a woman who had caused the death of a black, possibly because, when he looked at her, he felt the same tensions of lust and desire in his chest – and probably for the same general reasons that I felt them. [...] Two days later, I had a “nervous breakdown.” For several days I ranted and raved against the white race, against white women in particular, against white America in general.44

Cleaver realizes that had he entered Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market on that fateful August day then he too might have been the subject of a late-night kidnapping and murder. Thoughts of this “near miss” combined with his awareness of the interrelated histories of desire and racialized violence within the United States are enough to cause a “nervous break-
down.” For Assata Shakur, who was ten years younger than Cleaver, the terror and trauma of the “near miss” occurred in bombings of churches in Birmingham, Alabama. Bobby Seale, despite referring to the dangers of California street culture during his youth, summarizes the worldview of numerous black youth, including other future Black Panther Party leaders, by tapping into the “near miss” mentality when he wrote, “when I was fifteen, death was on my mind, off and on, very seriously. Death was something that I would struggle to prevent from happening.” The Black Panther Party was designed not only to keep Death at bay but also to protect and serve the black community. Any optimism or hope projected by the organization was connected with efforts to ensure that the future and future generations would not be subject to the same levels of police harassment and race-based violence.

**Patrol the Police**

In an effort to bring attention to the murders of black residents of urban communities by white police officers, Party leaders copied the actions of Mamie Till Bradley, Roy Wilkins, and the editors of select black periodicals by publishing photographs of members allegedly killed by the police in the *Black Panther*. Historian Carolyn Calloway, reflecting upon the layout of the newspaper, writes, “The reader was bombarded with pictures of dead Panthers who had been ‘murdered’ by the police.” The inaugural issue of the newspaper demonstrates the Party leadership’s commitment to continuing this effective strategy of raising awareness. The entire front page and, indeed, the majority of the four-page paper was dedicated to the killing of Denzil Dowell, a teenager who was gunned down by a Bay Area police officer in 1967. With a photograph of a living Dowell, dressed immaculately and mugging for the camera, occupying one-third of the paper’s right column, the *Black Panther* challenges the police department’s account of the incident by repeatedly referring to the “questionable facts” of the case, including: “Denzil was unarmed so how can six bullet holes and shot gun blasts be considered ‘justifiable homicide’?” The attention given to Dowell’s case by the Party, as evidenced by the murdered teenager’s presence in the *Black Panther*, was aimed not only at holding the police accountable for their actions but also, and more importantly, at mobilizing the community into a force with an interest in protecting themselves from outside threats, especially the police.

Despite being the seventh item on the Black Panther Party’s ten point platform, police patrols were the first to be implemented. Historian
Clayborne Carson asserts that “the Party’s” considerable appeal among young African Americans was based less on its program or its leaders’ Marxist rhetoric than on its willingness to confront the police.” Although Carson acknowledges that “maintaining a ‘Macho’ image lessened the Party’s actual ability to effectively organize the black community toward concrete political ends,” the Party probably would not have developed into a national organization without those patrols. David Hilliard writes that the founding members of the Party understood that the presence of black men openly brandishing guns in urban spaces would attract attention. For this reason, they implemented the patrols first and brainstormed the Panthers’ visit to the California State Legislature. The police patrol enabled the Party to gain national exposure within the mainstream press, to publicize police violence against black residents of urban communities, and to raise awareness about an even more troubling policing trend within the nation: the dramatically increasing incarceration rate involving black youth. According to a 1967 study by the federal government, it was estimated that “nine out of ten Black city youths would be arrested at some time in their lives.”

Although the Party’s rhetoric focused upon the negative effects of police “occupation” of urban communities, the racially biased law enforcement system that they critiqued also existed in rural and, in many cases, southern townships. The Till tragedy offered evidence of such systemic racism. In addition to Sheriff H.C. Strider’s remarks on the negative effects of the NAACP on “our southern niggers,” the Tallahatchie sheriff also devised the defense strategy for Bryant and Milam. Challenging Moses Wright’s identification of Till’s body and Leflore County Sheriff George Smith’s belief that the recovered corpse was indeed Till, Strider publicly proclaimed – and later testified at the trial – that the corpse found in the Tallahatchie River likely was not the Chicago teenager. He contended that the alleged murderers should not be found guilty of murder when there is not evidence of a murder.

A New Hope

The Black Panther Party was a youth driven organization. The co-founders were in their late twenties and the Party’s membership fit squarely within Larry Griffin’s definition of youth, from teenagers to early twenties. To put this in perspective, Emmett Till would have been twenty-five years old, the same age as Hilliard and Newton, in 1966 – had he not been killed by Bryant and Milam. While it would be pure
conjecture to say whether Till would have become a member of the Party had he lived or whether the Party would have ever existed had he not died, the core membership of the Black Panther Party consisted of individuals like Till – urban residents of primarily “northern” cities who had first-hand experience with the racial politics (and policies) of the South – and individuals who were haunted by the Till tragedy – youth who were made aware of their mortality and susceptibility to violence at a young age. With the 1965 Voting Rights Act often considered to be the end of the civil rights movement, the Party arrived on time with a youth-centered call to create a new grassroots effort that would determine the next wave of social reform. It was time for Till’s generation to take the lead in the march toward racial and social equality.

While the Party’s leather jacket and beret uniform certainly appealed to a generational sense of “cool” and the opportunity to publicly carry guns empowered urban residents who had been consistently harassed by the police, another draw to the Black Panther Party was its concerted efforts to rehabilitate neighborhoods though the implementation of community assistance and youth outreach programs, most successfully its free breakfast for children program. Such programs answered Stokely Carmichael’s and Charles Hamilton’s call to develop a social movement that would respond to the “conditions of poverty and discrimination in the black community, that is a function of institutional racism” in addition to reacting to acts of “individual racism” such as the Birmingham bombings and Till’s murder.53 “Getting up early to serve neighborhood kids and spending some time with them before they were bundled up for school gave many Panthers a real example of what we were working for – our people’s future,” recalled Abu-Jamal.54 In contrast to the experience of their own youth, the Party’s leadership crafted an optimistic support network for children and young adults who would continue the movement for reform into future generations. This aspect captured the attention of James Baldwin, who, in his foreword to Seale’s autobiography noted the differences between the Party’s leadership and himself: “I did not go through what Bobby, and his generation, went through. The time of my youth was entirely different and the savage irony of hindsight allows me to suggest that the time of my youth was far less hopeful.”55 This newfound optimism anchored itself not only in the witnessing of racial violence, such as Emmett Till’s murder, by black youth but also the concerted efforts of members of Till’s generation to prevent the recurrence of such tragedies.
I presented an early version of this paper at the Center for Comparative Studies on Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University in March 2008. My conversations with Heather Schoenfeld assisted my reading of the Black Panther Party. The phrase “near miss” was suggested to me by Jennifer L. Eberhardt.

2 Davis W. Houck (2005: 233).
4 Muhammad Ali (1975: 34-35); Despite Ali’s claims, the former Heavyweight boxing champion was born on 17 January 1942 whereas Till was born on 25 July 1941.
5 Anne Moody (1968: 107).
6 Moody worked with both the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). She is one of a few black female activists who identify Till’s murder – as opposed to Rosa Parks or the Birmingham church bombings – as being personally significant events in their lives. It is conceivable that the race/gender issues of the Till case, in which a black boy was killed for flirting with a white woman, may have lessened their sympathies for the Chicagoan. It is also possible that female teenagers felt more kinship with women and girls who were subjected to violence. This is an area that would benefit from further study.
7 Julian Bond (2005).
11 Austin Ramzy (2005).
13 Larry J. Griffin (2004: 545).
14 Ibid.
17 Whitaker (205: 202).
19 Ibid.
21 Obviously, there were tensions, racial incidents (involving violence), housing segregation and other forms of rampant discrimination in the destination cities at the end of the “Great Migration.”
23 Ibid.
26 Huie (2008).
27 Harvey Young (2005).
Carmichael’s emotional outburst anchors itself in two contradictory emotions – desire and hatred – which manifested itself in thoughts of rape in response to “the historical fact of how the white man has used the black woman” (Soul on Ice 26). Although Carmichael likely would have acted in a more assertive manner than Till, who stood before Carolyn Bryant, his actions most certainly would have prompted a similar response in Bryant and Milam.

Published works cited


Black Panther. Oakland, CA.


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