Continuing Bonds and Emmett Till’s Mother

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In August of 1955, Emmett Till was a lively, clever, street-smart 14-year-old from Chicago who arrived in rural Mississippi to spend time with his mother’s relatives. He was fond of humor, liked to wear flashy clothes, enjoyed being around people, and was known to be a happy-go-lucky youth. The story goes that while he was in a store, he whistled at a white woman, the wife of storeowner Roy Bryant, who was not present. The woman, Carolyn Bryant, testified later under oath that Emmett asked her for a date, made crude gestures, chased her, grabbed her by the waist with both hands, and used obscene language, until one of his cousins ran in and pulled him out of the store.

The facts of what actually happened in the store will probably never be fully known, as several historians have pointed out (Anderson, Whitfield). But it seems clear that most of Carolyn Bryant’s story was not true. Whatever did happen in the store, the results were hideous indeed. A few days later, in the dead of night, Roy Bryant and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, apprehended Emmett in front of his family, sat him down between themselves in an old pick-up truck, drove him away to a secluded area, and murdered him. The police investigation was bungled, and the subsequent murder trial became a national laughingstock. Reporter James Hicks said of the trial, “The laxity of the courtroom was something you couldn’t imagine. I mean, they drank beer in the jury box.” The jury’s deliberations lasted only 67 minutes, but they did not even need that much time. As one of the jurists famously remarked, “If we hadn’t stopped to drink pop, it wouldn’t have taken that long” (Whitfield 42).
The verdict of innocence sent shock waves through the African American community, especially in the south. Civil rights leader Marion A. Wright stated a year later that “The shot that blew out his brains is heard round the world” (286). Photos of the defendants brazenly leaving the courthouse were reprinted throughout the nation. Even though they were never convicted, it was common knowledge that Bryant and Milam committed the crime, especially due to their smug, highly-publicized confessions in *Look* magazine several months later. As time passed, the case developed into a huge story in the national media. According to Simeon Booker, who covered the story for *Jet* magazine, “it was the first time the daily—meaning white—media took an interest in something like this. I remember one of the jokes among our press corps down there was that, hell, they’d go lookin’ for Till’s body, they would find bodies of a lotta other blacks who’d just been thrown in the river. Because that was the custom, that was the procedure” (Fayer et al. 7). Booker’s anecdote is not far-fetched. In May of 1955, the Rev. George Lee was murdered by shotgun blast to the face in the nearby town of Belzoni. His death was officially ruled a traffic accident. One week before Emmett’s arrival in Mississippi, in nearby Brookhaven, Lamar Smith was shot to death outside the courthouse in broad daylight, and in front of many witnesses. A murderer was never convicted. Countless other examples could be mentioned, and almost none of these murders ever went to trial, even though there were often eye-witnesses (usually, other African Americans).

Despite a plethora of similar incidents, the Emmett Till situation is commonly referred to as the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in America. Of course, attempts to locate a “beginning” of any social phenomenon, especially one as sprawling as the Civil Rights Movement, are difficult. Nowadays, it is common to refer both to the “long” civil rights movement, as well as the “long sixties,” historical phrases recognizing that these eras spill over the boundaries that traditionally have marked their beginnings and endings (Hall). And yet it is undeniable that many who lived through that period of American history do point most often to Till’s murder as a primary origin of the movement.

For example, Amzie Moore called the Till case “the beginning of the civil rights movement in Mississippi. . . . From that point on, Mississippi began to move” (Raines 235). Probably the landmark achievement in the public knowledge and memory of the Civil Rights Movement today is the outstanding documentary series, *Eyes on the Prize*, which was
aired for the first time on PBS in 1987. Henry Hampton, who produced the series, has explained that for him personally, it all began with the Till case, and thus does that series begin with a lengthy segment on it in the first episode. According to Hampton, “The first thing I remember was Emmett Till. He was my age and the fact that somebody could come and take him away and kill him, it just seared me. It was one thing my parents couldn’t protect me from” (Whitfield 97). And it was not just African Americans who recalled the Till case in such terms. Robert Patterson, a leader in the White Citizens’ Council movement which tried to maintain the status quo of segregation, has stated that “[the Civil Rights Movement] all started probably with a case of a young Negro boy named Emmett Till getting killed for offending some white woman” (Raines 299).

All of this attention to the Till case should make us wonder: Why did that particular case galvanize the nation? A response might begin with the concept of “cultural trauma,” which “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 1). The term “trauma” derives from the Greek word for mark, or wound: a bodily disfigurement, or scar. Obviously Till’s murder “marked” the memory of African Americans. Over 140 works feature literary representations of Till, and many of them depict his murder as having changed their authors in fundamental ways (Metress, “Literary Representations”). The importance of recalling the long-lasting effects set in motion by collective trauma was reaffirmed recently, when Michael Eric Dyson commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of Till’s birth by urging his listeners to take up the “sacrament of remembrance” (Metress, “On That Third Day” 26). As in W. E. B. Du Bois’s emotional tribute to his dead son in *Souls of Black Folk*, remembering Emmett Till can become a means by which we make “communal choices to remember . . . and renew our hearts and illumine our minds” (269). Till’s premature death should, in a similar manner, be remembered redemptively: and if so, it can illuminate our thinking and renew our hope in a better world.

In this regard, more attention should be paid to the heroic efforts of Emmett’s mother, Mamie Till-Mobley (known as Mamie Bradley or Mamie Till-Bradley in 1955), whose solemn belief in the possibilities of redemptive memory was the unrecognized engine of hope at work in the memorialization of her son. Philip C. Kolin has done much to
focus on Mamie’s heroic efforts, including her attempts to dramatize the life story of her son and what he calls Mamie’s “theology of her son”: a “figuration of the crucified Christ” (81). Through her dedication to this mission, it was no accident that Emmett would be remembered as a cultural symbol of white atrocities. Moreover, relating the “cross to the lynching tree” had become by that time a common trope in African American culture (Cone). Mamie embraced the redemptive possibilities of her son’s death—and she moved almost immediately to propagate her vision. It worked, and this element has become commonplace in analyzing Emmett’s lynching. As in the case of W. E. B. Du Bois’s mythic depictions of lynching victims, “Time and again in memoirs, essays, histories, poems, and novels, Till’s brutal slaying is reconfigured as a Christlike sacrifice and young Emmett is reconceived as a savior and redeemer” (Metress, “On That Third Day” 26-7). James H. Cone also emphasizes that this redemptive view was also clothed in mystery and woe, “a reflection of the spiritual struggles of Job.” But white Americans were in extreme denial of this legacy. Cone notes that in all his research, he failed to discover even a single comment by a white preacher of that time, either in the north and south, regarding the lynching of Emmett Till (68, 181, n1).

Thus, we should be mindful of the careful manner by which Emmett’s public memory came about; and here, I’d like to emphasize the extent to which this public memory should be attributed to Mamie and her faith in a God of moral justice. Her focus on “getting the whole world to see” what was done to her son indicates a shrewd tactic that could take advantage of the new ways of seeing that were at that moment accelerating in the media of America. This tactic relied on the rapid “emergence of visual media as a mode of cognition that contends equally with print literacy” (Goldsby, Spectacular Secret 295-7). The idea of the redemptive possibilities of her son’s death certainly began with Mamie, who later attributed this belief to direct communication with God (though this spiritual dimension is generally downplayed). Mamie established a “sacramental memory,” one that studies “the deep wounds and unsettling traumas of our fallen world and discovers in them the presence of things unseen, the presence of meaning, purpose, and—above all else—hope” (Metress, “On That Third Day” 16). To do this, Mamie confidently enlisted a sophisticated and nationally respectable black press. By 1955, the black press in America, especially in Chicago, was reaching full technological sophistication and maturity.
The fact that Mamie and Emmett both came from Chicago is certainly one of the most salient facts of the episode’s wide cultural memory. Most importantly, an “alliance” between Mamie and the editors of major black publications such as Crisis, Jet, Ebony, and the Chicago Defender assured that the death of her son would be well-publicized in sympathetic terms. Mamie’s cagy deployment of her story and the crucial role played by a modern and mature black press were crucial ingredients in the mythic power of Emmett’s story.1

But in the end, we must more forcefully credit the savvy black woman whose heroics navigated not just her own grief as a parent, but also the complicated experience of cultural trauma, enabling the resulting sacramental memory of Emmett’s lynching. It was all consciously set in motion by the singular decisions made by a grief-stricken and traumatized black mother—an inspiring fact that flies in the face of many popular accounts of the movement, which often depict the downfall of the “southern cracker” (evil characters not unlike the murderers of Emmett Till), but by the hands of his alter ego: the law-abiding, redeemed, southern white male. All too often, civil rights memory depicts whites as heroes, and blacks as helpless victims lacking moral agency—tropes that often recur in film treatments of the era (Romano, Graham).

Mamie’s true story provides an alternative. It is a narrative that should feature prominently the heroism, wisdom, and faith of a single African American woman (and mother), driven by a belief in moral justice. Moreover, we must credit her deeply religious motivations, including her faith in the power of generativity: the sense that the bonds with the dead are never to be broken, and that those bonds can motivate and heal our land.2 Mamie insisted that the bonds with her dead son must continue, along with the wounds; and that death would in fact be “swallowed up in victory” and that as a result, our work here on earth was “not in vain” (I Corinthians 15:54, 58). Mamie’s perception, as Metress puts it, of “things unseen, the presence of meaning, purpose, and—above all else—hope,” suggests the spiritual nature of her act of defiance. And we can argue that one mother’s continuing bonds with her lynched son were the cornerstone of the greatest social protest movement of the twentieth century.

In 2003, nearly a half-century later and just before her own death, Mamie published an account of those historic events entitled Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America.3 The
title of the book says a lot about Mamie’s understanding of her son’s legacy a half-century later: Emmett’s death, according to the title, ended up changing America. Mamie’s title seems to be agreeing with the many commentators who have suggested that exposure of that single crime marked the true beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. As Jesse Jackson puts it in the book’s foreword, “If the men who killed Emmett Till had known his body would free a people, they would have let him live” (Till-Mobley xiii). These are majestic words and they figure Emmett as a kind of martyr-savior: just as, if the legions of the devil had known the consequences of the martyrdom of Jesus, perhaps they might have let Him live as well. As Jackson puts it: “Mamie turned a crucifixion into a resurrection. Well done, Mamie, well done. You turned death into living. Well done. You awakened the world. Well done. You gave your son so a nation might be saved. Well done” (Till-Mobley xiii).

Jackson is echoing here a biblical phrase, “well done, good and faithful servant,” a phrase spoken by God that is said to greet the true believer into the heavenly kingdom. He is attributing massive historical changes to the death of this one boy, and consequently to the courage and longsuffering of the mother. In doing so, Jackson’s tribute is more the rule than the exception. It makes sense, for starters, because humans in general have a need for beginnings, for mythic moments of origin. In the American imagination, Till’s death deserves a place alongside such other mythic moments as Rosa Parks refusing to settle for standing on a Montgomery bus in December 1955. Today, it is very common for both professional historians and regular American citizens to acknowledge these two events of 1955 as the twin mechanisms that jump-started the movement for civil rights, and Mamie’s book echoes and augments that conception.

More needs to be said about how this came to be the case. In particular, Emmett’s rise to international fame and importance resulted largely from the insistence and the orchestrations of his brave mother, Mamie Bradley. It is fair to say that we would not be much interested in Emmett Till today if it had not been for his mother’s conscious decision-making, decisions that affected the transporting of the remains north and the conceiving of the details of the funeral, which took place in Chicago at the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ. Mamie’s dogged insistence that the funeral must include an open casket, so that the world could witness “what they did to my son,” even in the face of great pressure to do otherwise, is the remarkable detail of this narrative. And it was that single image, the swollen and disturbingly disfigured
head and body of her son, encased in glass in the coffin, which would become emblazoned on the nation’s consciousness. “From that point on,” after witnessing the body—and Mamie’s courage—“Mississippi began to move” (Raines 235).

At first, funeral director A. A. Rayner tried to keep Mamie from even opening the box that arrived from Mississippi. The body had been sent northward “locked up with the seal of the State of Mississippi, which couldn’t be broken. Promises had been made just to get the body out of Mississippi.” But the mother insisted that she must see for herself “what they had done to my son. . . . I told [Rayner] that if I had to take a hammer and open that box myself, it was going to be opened.” Even without opening the casket, the pungent odor could be detected two blocks away from the funeral parlor. “They were shooting off bombs so people wouldn’t become ill from the smell.” It was sealed by the state of Mississippi, they suspected, because that state’s authorities “wanted to make sure we didn’t see what was inside that box.” By having the box opened, she claims, “I had defied the people of Mississippi.” They had “something to hide” (Till-Mobley 131, 132, 133).
The horror of the moment of viewing the body is enough to make the skin crawl: “At a glance, the body didn’t even appear human. I remember thinking it looked like something from outer space. . . . Something came over me. It was like an electric shock. In fact, it was terror” (Till-Mobley 134). In addition to the terror, Mamie recalled the moment of viewing the body as somehow deeply spiritual: “When I got up to that casket, and looked over in there, something happened to me that is akin to getting religion” (Till-Bradley 136). As a result of this “religious” experience, Mamie claimed to know instantly what she must do in the coming days: “I couldn’t let them stop me from going through with it. If I was stopped one more time, I don’t know what I would have done. I’m not sure that I could have worked myself back up to it again. I had to steel myself like a forensic doctor. I had a job to do” (Till-Mobley 134).

That job, as it turned out, was to show the world the deformed and foul-smelling body of her brutally murdered son. It symbolized the crass injustices of the state of Mississippi and it did so in broad daylight for public inspection. Mississippi, which is commonly depicted as the setting for Jim Crow at its historical worst, represented the absolute zero of civil rights infringements against African Americans, mythically speaking. Many, including Rayner the funeral director, attempted to talk Mamie out of such horrendous public display. But she was “never more certain of anything. . . . Let the world see what I’ve seen.” Somehow she knew intuitively that her work must include the visceral reactions of the witnesses to the body, reactions that could never be manifested through second-hand accounts or description. “I could do all that and people still would not get the full impact. They would not be able to visualize what had happened, unless they were allowed to see the results of what had happened. They had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this. . . . It was important to do that, I thought, to help people recognize the horrible problems we were facing in the south” (Till-Mobley 139). The upshot of these and many other comments in the story is that Mamie had a particular goal in mind when she ordered that the casket remain open. Like many parents of deceased children, her hope was that somehow the death could become meaningful, and that some redemption might come out of it. Her hope in this case was that Emmett Till’s body might become a cultural shorthand for the horrendous treatment of black Americans in the south—which, in fact, it did.
Through his mother’s careful and unrelenting orchestrations of this moment, Emmett’s dead body did become a searing reminder of racial injustice (Harold and Deluca). At least 25,000 individuals filed past the body on each of the four days that he lay there in the church—and possibly, tens of thousands more—Mamie estimated in a speech two months later that “more than 600,000” viewed the body of her son (Till-Bradley 138). Those were humid, un-air-conditioned August days in Chicago, and many of those who came to view the body fell out weeping, or fainted. Nurses were on hand to help. Chairs were set up outside for those too weak to walk. It was a strong illustration of human wickedness, according to Mamie: “After all, we had averted our eyes far too long, turning away from the ugly reality facing us as a nation . . . . People had to face my son and realize just how twisted, how distorted, how terrifying, race hatred could be . . . . They would have to see their own responsibility in pushing for an end to this evil. People had to consider all that as they viewed Emmett’s body. The impact was like being hit with a sledgehammer” (Till-Mobley 139).

Mamie’s description is similar to Kai Erikson’s definition of both individual trauma as “a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively,” and of collective trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together” (153-4). It was a blow struck somehow against a people, and thus became powerfully mythologized. As Jennifer Goldsby argues, the image of the dead child’s body, especially his face, “demonstrated to us how uncivil we could be to on another . . . . This lynching commands such a prominent place in our collective memory because it performs the function of political myth” (“High and Low” 247).

The “sledgehammer” impact became a national phenomenon when pictures of the mutilated head and body of Emmett Till were published in magazines and newspapers. Particularly noteworthy was the photo printed in Jet magazine. Many Americans have commented on the power of those images, and the dramatic effect that viewing them had in their lives. In effect, one mother’s grief, followed by a fearless resolve, helped to usher in a long period of national debate over crucial issues of civil rights. Mamie’s response to the murder of her son was an insistence on forcing something positive to come forth from it. Her goal was that her son Emmett would positively affect her community and her nation—even after his seemingly pointless death. As she gazed at his broken body, she
promised, “Darling, you have not died in vain. . . . your life has been sacrificed for something” (Cone 67). Her refusal to allow her son “to die in vain” alluded to New Testament passages, as well as invoking the nineteenth-century’s most hallowed way of phrasing the redemptive view of suffering. Mamie may or may not have known it, but that exact phrase appears in America’s most celebrated speech: Abraham Lincoln’s Address at Gettysburg in 1863. Variations of the phrase have appeared in countless letters and diaries throughout American history. Long before the Civil War, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote in 1852 to a friend that her own son’s death need not be “suffered in vain” (qtd. in Boydston 75-6). And well into the twentieth century, Martin Luther King wrote that the children killed in the Birmingham church bombing “did not die in vain. God still has a way of wringing good out of evil” (Cone 86-7). All of these took their cue from the Bible, which reminds us that we do not suffer tragic circumstances in vain, as in I Cor. 15: 58: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.” And death need not be in vain if the memory of the dead continues to change the world through the efforts of survivors. As research has shown, “survivors hold the deceased in loving memory for long periods, often forever, [and] maintaining an inner representation of the deceased is normal rather than abnormal” (Klass et al 349). It was true for Mamie; and she made sure that the nation never forgot her son, either.

In these ways, if Goldsby is correct to notice how Emmett’s death “performs the function of political myth” (“High and Low” 247), it is just as crucial that we analyze Mamie’s memorial to her son in spiritual terms, and as spiritual myth. Her faith was founded in mystical experience; she envisioned the survival of her son in an after-life that allowed her to continue sensing his presence and believing in an ultimate reunion with him in heaven. Her spiritual sensibility and conviction about Emmett explain how her loss became such a catalyst. As McAdams and Logan put it, “The life stories of highly generative adults suggest a deep and abiding faith in the fundamental worthwhileness of the human enterprise. Despite human depravity and a precarious world, humans can redeem themselves, or be redeemed. Adults who shape their life narratives in terms of generativity build identities on the foundation of their faith in humankind, affirming their hope for the future and supporting their convictions that their own lives have ultimate meaning and significance by virtue of their connection to the generations that will follow” (26).
Mamie Till-Mobley’s case is certainly one of the most poignant examples of the generative responses of bereaved parents, and it illustrates three elements that are common in many similar instances: 1) a powerful desire to discover a way that the dead child might continue to have a positive legacy in the world; 2) a willingness to understand the tragedy within the context of the superintendence of God in the world; and 3) the achievement of some sort of constructive outcome that illustrates how calamity and trauma can be beneficial for future generations, and how suffering and tragedy can generate redemptive fruit. Mamie insisted on a redemptive effect to the loss of her son. In her own words, “I thanked God that He felt that I was worthy to have a son that was worthy to die for such a worthy cause” (Till-Bradley 140). And in retrospect, it seems evident that through her heroic efforts, Emmett’s death did in fact generate and inspire much good upon American society.

Mamie’s insistence on viewing the events within a supernatural frame of God’s will becomes clear in the powerful concluding sequence in the documentary, _The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till_ (2005). The film ends with Mamie on screen, providing in essence her final analysis of the events of half a century before. “I do know that without the shedding of blood, there is no redemption” (_The Untold Story_). This comment reveals a biblical understanding of suffering as expressed, for example, in Hebrews 9:22. The shedding of blood is required for forgiveness, and of course the reference in Hebrews is to the blood of Christ. James Cone points out the centrality of the “power in the blood” throughout African American literature and preaching, appealing especially to the mystery of that power. The grieving mother thus signifies her willingness to view the events in a supernatural context that transcends mere human understanding. There is a mysterious power in her son’s blood, like that of the Savior. And we know that her appeal to the power in blood did not come after many years of introspection: Mamie drew upon the biblical image of shed blood quite early in her grieving, claiming God as her source, as in her speech in Baltimore a year after the murder: “it was as if He [God] spoke to me and said: ‘Without the shedding of innocent blood, no cause is won’” (Till-Bradley 140).

Mamie’s final words in the film of 2004 make this reliance on transcendence even more explicit, and are both spiritually inspiring and haunting: “And I know that the Lord appeared to me in a vision, and he told me that Emmett was not mine, that he belonged to him, and that God had chosen him for this particular mission” (_The Untold Story_). Here
she reveals that there continued to be an aspect of “mission” in her mind regarding the work of her dead son, right up until the time of her own passing. He was like Christ, a martyr chosen by God. The comments also indicate her conviction that somehow the will of God was being carried out. I call this confession both inspiring and haunting because I recognize that viewers will have different reactions to it—as they do to suffering in general. But such confessions must surely be understood in the context of the famous verse in Paul’s Letter to the Romans, verses that assure believers that somehow, in some mysterious way that we can barely conceive, all suffering works out in the end for God’s purposes: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purposes” (Rom. 8:28).

Mamie’s mystical belief that she did in fact experience a vision of Jesus first came forth in a series of interviews with her that appeared in the Chicago Defender in the summer of 1956, although it is a detail that has strangely been ignored in most accounts of her ordeal. She describes in those interviews in great detail the nature of this visitation, although for some reason she was at that time less willing to identify what she refers to as “the presence” or “the voice” as being God or Jesus. She recalls how a few days after discovering the death of Emmett, she tried one afternoon to lie down and rest for a while in her mother’s house:

I was angry with God that He had let Bo [her nickname for Emmett] be kidnapped and slain so brutally and aloud I demanded, “Why did You do this [?]” . . . Then began one of the strangest experiences of my whole life. It was just as though someone had entered the room and we were carrying on a conversation. . . .

The presence said to me, “Mamie, it was ordained from the beginning of time that Emmett Louis Till would die a violent death. You should be grateful to be the mother of a boy who died blameless like Christ. Bo Till will never be forgotten. There is a job for you to do now. . . .”

“What shall I do?” I asked.

The voice replied, “Have courage and faith that in the end there will be redemption for the sufferings
of your people and you are the instrument of this purpose. Work unceasingly to tell the story so that the truth will arouse men’s consciences and right can at last prevail.”

The Voice died away and the Presence left the room. (Metress, “Literary” 232-3)

This description of an encounter with some sort of supernatural presence is for Mamie the crucial fact about her mission: God has ordained it and set the events in motion. From this vision Mamie takes away a covenantal sense that her work will bear the fruit of redemption. Emmett’s death, like that of Jesus, will never be forgotten, and the mother’s raising of the “immemorial hammer of God” marks her as an “instrument of this purpose.”

It’s interesting that Keith A. Beauchamp, the director of The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till, decided to end his film with Mamie’s claim that she had a vision of God. It is a much briefer account than the one outlined in the Chicago Defender interviews, but it corroborates that account almost fifty years later. Beauchamp’s decision to end the film with this cosmic gesture is curious, given the fact that ours is a time in which confessing visions of Jesus Christ is generally not well received in educated society. Perhaps Beauchamp wanted to document how her faith in God was an inspirational motivation in her decisions to carry out the funeral the way that she did. Or, perhaps he believed that she did in fact have the vision, and wanted others to believe that such visions are possible. Or, perhaps, he wanted to illustrate the touching remnants of supernatural belief for a highly secular audience, in order to highlight the innocence and simplicity of the speaker.

For whatever reasons, many viewers will find this conclusion heartrending, and will be moved by the possibility that even such a seemingly pointless act as the brutal murder of a fourteen-year-old can have startling and even metaphysical meanings that are not easily discerned. We might give the director the benefit of the doubt by suggesting that he wanted to recover a detail of Mamie’s story that has been given almost no attention over the years: her spiritual encounter days after the murder with some “presence” that became for her the anchor of every effort of hers for the rest of her life. And in most historiography, such supernatural claims are silenced or at least problematized: for instance, as Cone states, “We do not know what really happened in Mrs.
Bradley’s revelatory experience; its meaning remains locked in mystery” (69). This position of dismissal which, as Charles Taylor remarks, is consistent with the “default position” of secular culture (3), undermines the witness of the grieving mother. And furthermore, many readers of her memoir and viewers of the film will be sympathetic to her claims of mystical encounter, and perhaps have spiritual claims of their own to make. If we grant Cone’s conclusion of mystery, we should also grant the possibility of an authentic spiritual experience of God’s presence. At the very least we must admit that, whatever “the voice” was, it produced a life-changing impact in the mother’s life; Mamie went forward with her work, because she fervently believed it was ordained by God.

Moreover, I want to suggest how this powerful and impressive tale of one grieving mother relates to my larger project, tentatively titled Continuing Bonds with the Dead. The story of Emmett Till and his valiant mother Mamie illustrates one of the most powerful versions of the “continuing bonds” model of parental grieving in all of American culture. It is a story of how it is possible for the deaths of children to exert a remarkably generative influence upon the lives of the surviving parents. Mamie Till-Mobley’s moving quest for purpose in suffering represents an especially influential “redemption sequence” that ultimately has changed American cultural history.

This sentiment was memorably captured by the poet Richard Davidson just a month after the court trial: “His death becomes a part of our living flesh. His killing a waking cry of our conscience” (Boudreau 143). The exhibition of her dead son’s body was a kind of test for the nation, one that became “part of our living flesh.” The memory of Emmett Till’s body resonated strongly for years after the trial in works by major literary figures, including Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Harper Lee (Boudreau 129-61). Lee’s novel To Kill a Mockingbird (1960), for example, powerfully documented the collective erosion of faith in our legal system, an erosion accelerated by the Till case, whose trial resembles the one depicted in Lee’s novel (Chura). The Nobel laureate William Faulkner recognized the Till incident as such a test from the beginning: “Perhaps the purpose of this sorry and tragic error committed in my native Mississippi by two white adults on an afflicted Northern child is to prove to us whether or not we deserve to survive. Because if we in America have reached the point in our desperate culture when we must murder children, no matter for what reason or what color, we don’t deserve to survive, and probably won’t” (Crowe 109-11).
In this context of redemption and testing, some historians wonder if Americans have created “narratives of redemption” regarding the Civil Rights era that are faulty, and misrepresent the heroism of African Americans, especially women. The many trials in recent years attempting to bring racist murderers to justice are considered by some to be “fixing” history in damaging ways. Such fixes falsely suggest that white people “have fully confronted the legacies of America’s past racial practices” (Romano 126, 125). They might also dismiss the agency and effectiveness of black leaders.

One remedy for these defective histories is to recover the implicit power of Mamie’s sledgehammer, to confront fully the dead body of her son Emmett, and to reassert her heroic achievement as a black woman making a strong stand in deeply troubling times. As Mamie put it in August 1955, “I believe that the whole United States is mourning with me, and if the death of my son can mean something to the other unfortunate people all over the world, then for him to have died a hero would mean more to me than for him just to have died” (Untold Story). Emmett’s death did “mean something,” and it did profoundly affect the liberation of “unfortunate peoples” both in America, and even abroad. The image of the grieving mother struck as deep a chord in American culture then as it does today. As John Edgar Wideman has written, “it was hard to bury Emmett Till [and the four girls killed in the Birmingham church bomb blast of 1963]. . . . so hard an entire nation began to register the convulsions of Black mourning. The deaths of our children in the civil-rights campaigns changed us. Grief was collective; began to unify us, clarify our thinking, roll back the rock of our fear. . . . We read the terrorist message inscribed upon Emmett Till’s flesh and were shaken, but refused to comply with the terms it set forth” (281). But none of us would have seen that flesh, had the mother not demanded her “immemorial hammer” and insist that the coffin be opened. The grisly photographs did attain a wide public release, and the nation was indeed forced to gaze upon the “terrorist message” that they documented.

The death of Emmett Till, the continued exposure of his dead body, his horribly disfigured head, and the gallant tale of how his mother forced us all to gaze upon it, illustrate the potent urge within American culture, and perhaps within the human heart in general, to respond to the extremes of tragedy with a hope for redemption. Her dogged insistence is an embodiment of an idea of the theologian Johann Baptist Metz, who claimed that “the memory of suffering” is “anticipatory . . . [it] brings a new moral imagination into political life, a new vision of others’ suffering.”
Mamie’s courage and prophetic mission remind us that redemption is possible in even the most pressing and dire of circumstances.

Recently the Till family donated the remains of Emmett’s casket to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington (Callard). This old relic will thus be permanently protected by the federal government in commemoration of one of the century’s most notorious murders. The incident is now materially a part of our most important national historical institution.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech of 1950, William Faulkner complained about younger American authors: “the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing . . . . His grieves grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands.” When we recall the story of Emmett Till, and teach others about it, we are grieving on those “universal bones”: we must fix our eyes once more on the “scars” of that hideous head and lacerated body, and reread what Wideman called its “terrorist message.” But we can do so in hope: as Dyson reminds us, through the “sacrament of remembrance” by which we make “communal choices to remember . . . and renew our hearts and illumine our minds” (Metress, “On That Third Day” 26). The grieving mother still insists that we do so, because coming to terms with Emmett’s body, as Mamie once put it, “can [still] mean something to the other unfortunate people all over the world” (Untold Story). Nearly 70 years after her son’s death, our cultural bonds with Emmett continue.

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NOTES


3See Mamie Till-Mobley, Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America (New York: Random House, 2003), hereafter Till-Mobley. For several reasons, I will generally refer to Emmett’s mother as either Mamie or Mamie Till-Mobley. When her son died, Mamie went by the name Mamie Bradley. Later she called herself Mamie Till-Bradley; then later still Mamie Till-Mobley, so there is some confusion regarding what to call her regularly.


5The full, tentative title is Continuing Bonds with the Dead: Parental Grief and Nineteenth-Century American Authorship, now under contract and forthcoming in spring 2015. The title is directly acknowledging the important work of Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman, whose book of the same name and model of “continuing bonds” in grief therapy has been crucial. In my own project, I talk about how the deaths of children affected the creative works of a range of authors, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, Abraham Lincoln, W. D. Howells, Mark Twain, and W. E. D. Du Bois. On Mark Twain’s continuing bonds with his dead daughter, see my essay “‘Broken Idols’: Mark Twain’s Elegies for Susy and a Critique of Freudian Grief Theory,” Nineteenth-Century Literature 57.2 (Sept. 2002): 237-68.

6In his The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self (New York: William Morrow, 1993) and The Redemptive Self: Stories We Live By (New York: Oxford UP, 2006), psychologist Dan P. McAdams has shown that generativity and redemption are key themes in American autobiography, and that Americans are particularly prone to seeing redemptive aspects come out of tragic circumstances. Some major expressions of redemption sequences are the often repeated desires “to give something back” to family, friends, schools, organizations, or society in general; or to locate the “silver lining” of a dark cloud.

WORKS CITED


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