Mourning Emmett:
“One Long Expansive Moment”

by Rebecca Mark

However the image enters
its force remains within
my eyes
—Audre Lorde, “Afterimages”

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an
angel looking as though he is about to move away from
something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are
staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is
how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned
toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he
sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage
and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to
stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been
smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has
got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel
can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels
him into the future to which his back is turned, while the
pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is
what we call progress.
—Walter Benjamin, On the Concept of History

If you do not know—and you should know, as Americans we
should know—Emmett Louis Till, a fourteen-year-old African Ameri-

Southern Literary Journal, volume xi, number 2, spring 2008
© 2008 by the Southern Literary Journal and the University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill Department of English and Comparative Literature. All rights reserved.

121
ing of August 28, 1955, took him to a shed, pistol-whipped him and beat him with tire irons (he was screaming an awful piercing wailing cry that everyone nearby heard), shot him or drilled a hole in his head, (no one should ever have to write this sentence, read this sentence, or live this sentence), then took his body in the back of a pick-up truck and tied a heavy gin fan around his neck and dumped him off a cliff into the Tallahatchie River. After being tried and exonerated in the greatest travesty of justice, the worst farce of a trial in American history (Milam and Bryant and their wives sat in the courtroom drinking Cokes with their toddler sons and laughing no more than twenty feet from Emmett's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, later Mamie Till-Mobley), the two men confessed to William Bradford Huie, a southern journalist (who paid them for their confession) that they had killed Emmett Till—didn't want to, hadn't meant to, but had to, because Emmett had whistled at Carolyn Bryant, who was married to Roy, the owner of a small grocery store out in the middle of cotton fields in the Delta of Money, Mississippi.

Milam and Bryant and the others claimed they had to kill Emmett Till because he was too uppity and kept bragging that he had slept with a white woman in Chicago. They claimed he had a picture of his white girlfriend in his wallet. Emmett was only fourteen. What fourteen year old, what human, dragged out of bed at two in the morning in the loneliness of the Mississippi Delta by two white men with guns, pistol-whipped and beaten, would be talking about anything, let alone boasting. He was screaming in pain. He was dying. Bryant and Milam died years later. No one has ever paid for this crime. There is evidence that there were as many as seven, maybe more people involved, including Carolyn Bryant, and several African American men. As Toni Morrison writes in Beloved: this is not a story to pass on.

Because I cannot bear that this narrative takes up space on this page, and because my heart dies a little each time I think about it, I swore off writing about Emmett Till after two years of collecting fragments—quotes and impressions, teaching a yearly course on the rhetoric of violence in the South that included many of the most important literary texts on Emmett Till, and co-directing the civil rights conference Unsettling Memories, which included the panel on Emmett Till that contributed to the birth of the comprehensive new book by Harriet Pollack and Christopher Metress: Emmett Till in the Literary Imagination. The essays in this collection address the questions of history and memory and narrative with a rich diversity and directly explore issues related to the cultural representation of the black body.
Then August 29, 2005 struck and as a New Orleans resident, I was caught in the middle of the Katrina evacuation. The fact that Katrina hit fifty years after the day Emmett was killed and that I was witnessing the worst civil rights travesty of my adult life made the moment impossible for me to ignore. I had chosen not to write about Emmett because I could not distinguish between my own empathy, voyeurism, horror, guilt, grief, but-by-the-grace-of-God-go-I, and curiosity in my white liberal academic’s obsession with Emmett’s murder. Those creative artists who were writing, singing, painting the murder into and out of our cultural conscience were saying all that I had to say in the only form I could embrace. Now, after Katrina, I feel differently.

I always assumed that there was a story to tell, or perhaps several stories to tell, a picture to fill out, and that historians, literary critics, and documentary filmmakers were telling the story. Certainly when Mamie Till-Mobley’s own book about her experience came out posthumously in December 2004, the feminist in me felt: yes, now we can rest. We have walked this ground, dragged this river long enough. Enough. Enough, that is, if we believe in history as a linear, or at best an objective story, but if, like Virginia Woolf, we see mourning as a point with rays stroking out, a spatially connected creative act, the kind of Renaissance definition of melancholy that David Eng advocates in Loss: A Politics of Mourning, then mourning is potentially creative, necessary and endless. As Eng shows, “This special truth asserted an understanding of melancholia less as the wretchedness of despair and disease than as an imaginative form generated by subjective apprehensions of and attachments to loss” (17). He asks us to consider “the ways in which loss and its remains are insistently creative and deeply political” (23).

If mourning is a constantly nuanced, fractile, continuous unfolding that grows and expands with the lyrical calls and responses of each generation across time, then the one hundred and forty plus literary references to Emmett Till that Metress so meticulously documents are only the beginning. With the research and documentaries of the past ten years, with careful study and collaboration of the black presses of the time, we have told Emmett and his mother’s story with more historical accuracy and less blindness, but we have rarely stopped and asked: why, if storytelling is healing, do we keep telling the story, why has this boy’s death, like certain other moments in history, created such outpourings of imagination and artistic creation that seem to take on, quite literally, lives of their own? It is taken as a cliché that humans must write out their grief, as if with enough writing it will be spent up and we will be whole. Our
recognition of the value of the remains, the existence of the remains and the reality of the remains connect us inextricably to our humanity. We are not using grief to create art, but we are recognizing that art is a form of mourning, and the act of mourning, as Eng suggests, is at once an aesthetic and political act.

After Katrina I learned something about the cultural/communal storytelling that follows traumatic events. There are never enough stories and they are not linear or even geometric. They spring from multiple sources of origin and entry and they build and reproduce as they are spoken. They sing like the blues, they riff like jazz, and they morph into and out of form. From the moment of catastrophe on, the system seeks to resurrect itself, to awaken the dead, not by telling one healing story but by insisting on the non-repetitious multiplication of points of regeneration and creative alchemical transformation that invigorates and dismisses the tyrannical single deathblow of the victor, so that each person tells not anything as static as a “part of a much larger cultural story,” but instead produces notes towards a complicated orchestration of elegy, requiem, a mourner’s Kaddish, dirge, mantra, a symphony which that one individual might not even know he or she is part of.

I do distinguish between imaginative renderings that have the political and linguistic power to enliven and those that simply memorialize and thus add to the pile of debris at our feet. Walter Benjamin is even stricter on this point, believing that if we are not actively engaging the dangerous moments that flash up in the memory of our culture then we are actively enjoying the spoils of the victor: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Benjamin 278). In “Black Mo’nin” Fred Moten asks us to see through the eyes of a historical materialist, not willing to give up this moment of danger: “even if his [Emmett’s] death marked panic and even if that panic had already led to the deaths of so many, so that his death was already haunted—its force only the animating spirit of a train of horrors—something happened. Something real—in that it might have been otherwise—happened” (Moten 61–62). It is important that we understand what Moten means by “Something real happened.” No matter what long bloody trail led to Emmett’s death, the boy’s body annihilates the white racist panic of miscegenation, and in a moment of shattering silence the southern lie, the chivalrous storytelling ceases to exist. This time the
dead do awaken. The body returns. The movement begins. The angel for a moment stays. Because of this we are called upon, generation after generation, just as Moten has done, to slow down, look at the photograph, listen to Emmett’s whistle and scream, hear the song behind the photograph as Moten admonishes us to do, feel and then perform, an act of cultural and personal resurrection. Emmett’s death haunts us.

In responsive texts like Lewis Nordan’s *Wolf Whistle*, Gwendolyn Brooks’ “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” and most recently Fred Moten’s “Black Mo’nin” the moments of aesthetic transcendence are simultaneously the deepest cries of sorrow, the longest calls for justice. They are insistently connected to the real and demanding of an imaginative and simultaneously political belief in something more. They are at once the whole fertile classical theater cycle from tragedy to comedy. As Eng would have us believe, melancholic awareness is imagination.

So the melancholic world of my drowned Katrina land cried out to me to write out one more mothers’ kiss on the forehead of that beautiful boy. This is what this writing is to me. I am simply one more mourner, passing one more time in front of that Chicago coffin, crying out. In her book, *The Death of Innocence*, Mamie Till-Mobley tells the story of Emmett’s life and death in excruciating, personal detail. A young white boy fishing downstream sees a body in the river and he calls the sheriff. The body has been festering for three days in the Tallahatchie, a river delivering this boy from a night of hatred, fear, violence, and insanity. Emmett Till’s body is pulled from the river, feet floating, the cotton gin weighing down his neck.

What we do know at that moment, when that boy leaden down with a gin fan, a mammoth cotton soaked, blood soaked, gin soaked, cotton sack heavy down ten yards of cotton fields heavy, of slave-pulling dragging-the-river-of-their-lives-behind cotton sack, Eli Whitney’s big mistake, cotton fan tied around his neck to hold him down. The headline should have read: A young boy’s body rises. Still we rise.

The bloated body, thrown off the cliff, floated down the Tallahatchie and rose to the blind of Roger Hodges, 17, a teenager fishing. As Nordan writes: “Bobo sang, don't look, don't look at me, preserve your innocence another moment longer” (186). Rodger Hodges looked out on the water and watched his soul die. I wonder where is Rodger Hodges? How does he go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning?
Going to the river, peaceful. Thinking of fishing up a trout and finding instead a boy’s floating body, a body tortured rising. Moan deep mourn deep. So, as Moten lets us know, even if Emmett was just another black boy in the river of black boys floating down into oblivion, that day something happened.

Rodger Hodges should never have had to look on that face. The photograph should never have had to be taken; the onlookers should never have had to see what they saw, never looked on, and passed on what they saw. Mose Wright had to look hard, had to stand in front of that mean-spirited Sheriff Strider and identify the body in the boat. Had to stand there, as Mamie Till-Mobley says, hiding all his emotions, the black man’s impossible performance. He could not say, “No this is not Emmett. This is murder. This is hate. This is evil. This body I am looking at in this boat is not my nephew.” Then he saw the ring and he had to say, yes. This is Emmett.

After Emmett’s body was found and his uncle identified the body, an African American undertaker was called to handle things. A black undertaker, maid, servant, slave is always and forever called to handle things after the white man slaughters somebody. In this case the undertaker worked all night to send Emmett to Mamie in the condition she saw him in when she opened the casket. Can you even imagine what the black undertaker saw? I try to imagine the long hours of that undertaker’s night. Of course he knew that this body had become too monstrous to be contained by anyone or anything. If I had been there that night, I would have sat quietly in the corner, in reverence to the undertaker’s work. I would have held a candle, a lantern, a light where needed. Taken a tachrichim, and wrapped Emmett, the undertaker and myself in it, said Kaddish and before morning lifted the white shawl for Emmett’s journey back home.

The state of Mississippi tried to hide the body and forbid Emmett’s mother from seeing her own son. Instead she writes that she insisted the state return her son to her in Chicago where Mr. Rayner, a Chicago funeral director, would be there to take the body. Mr. Rayner had been told that, “the box would have to be buried intact, as it was being shipped.” But, writes Till-Mobley,

I was not bending. That box had to come open . . . “Oh yes,” I said, “I’m going to look at the body.”

“But the box cannot be opened,” [Mr. Rayner] kept insisting.
Well, I couldn’t take it anymore because I was really spent. Finally, I told him that if I had to take a hammer and open that box myself it was going to be opened.

“You see, I didn’t sign any papers,” I said, “and I dare them to sue me. Let them come to Chicago and sue me.” I just couldn’t imagine a judge anywhere finding me guilty of viewing the body of my baby.

Finally, they unloaded the box that my son was in and placed it on a flatbed truck, a simple train-yard wagon that seemed so much like a caisson. I just lost it.

I looked up, saw that box, and I just screamed, “Oh, God. Oh, God. My only boy.”

And I kept screaming, as the cameras kept flashing, in one long explosive moment that would be captured for the morning editions. It was as if everything was pouring out all at once. All the tension that had built up since Emmett left for Mississippi, all the fear that had grown in me since we had gotten word of his abduction, all the sorrow of a thousand people in that train yard, began bursting out of me. The box was huge. It seemed to me to be nearly half the size of the train car itself. Such a big box for such an itty-bitty boy. I couldn’t imagine how they ever thought they could have buried that huge box intact. It would have taken up nearly three grave sites. That’s the way it looked to me. At that moment, there was nothing in the world but that giant crate. Death to me was so much larger than life. It was overpowering. It was terrifying. It seemed that, if I could scream loudly enough, I could get that feeling out of me. (131–132)

When Mamie Till Bradley insisted, against the wishes of the funeral director, that her son’s casket remain open for viewing at Robert’s Temple Church of God on the South Side for four long days, she stopped the world. The Defender wrote that thousands of people stood in line to see Emmett. Sometime during that day, David Jackson, a photographer for Jet magazine, took the now famous photograph.

Before Emmett’s body became a horrible photograph for all to see, the photograph was imprinted on his mother’s eyes when she looked in that bag and saw what her child had been turned into. For one long devastating moment her child love, her only baby boy yes sir that’s my baby, was imprinted onto her eyes as this bloated and patched-together atrocity.
she had stopped there . . . none of this would have been. At that moment, she rejected an impossible narrative of ancient grief—slave mother giving up child grief, watching child beaten, snatched, humiliated, raped, smothered, torture grief—the kind of grief that kills. Instead of a public photograph that started one of the largest public outrages in the nation’s history, Emmett’s body could have become the photograph always and forever imprinted on the eyelids of African American women for centuries, babies still being brought as disfigured corpses to their mothers’ eyes. Mamie Till Bradley could have become a screen for this projection. This did not happen: she rejected the image she saw in that casket. And instead invited the world to see what they had done to her son.

He was no longer hers but her community’s. She gave birth to the dead boy. She bore him. In doing so she held onto his humanity. She held onto dear life, to that wolf-whistling fourteen, self-assured, full-of-self, Beau man.

Moten writes that Emmett’s mother knew exactly what she was doing. She wanted to instigate “the passion of a seeing that is involuntary and uncontrollable, a seeing that redoubles itself as sound, a passion that is the redoubling of Emmett Till’s passion, of whatever passion would redeem, crucifixion, lynching, middle passion, passage. So that looking implies that one desires something for this photograph. So that mourning turns. So that the looker is in danger of slipping, not away, but into something less comfortable than horror” (Moten 65).

Two months after Emmett Till was brutally murdered in Money, Mississippi on August 26, 1955, I was born on October 9, 1955 in Oslo, Norway, my father working for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to protect democracy in Europe. When I was about eight years old, I went with my mother to knock on doors in the Virginia suburb called Little Hunting Park. Paul E. Sullivan and his family owned a house and bought another house and leased the first one to T. R. Freeman, Jr., an employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Paul Sullivan gave his membership in the local swimming club to Freeman. The board refused to approve the assignment because Freeman was a Negro and therefore he could not swim in the pool. I walked those streets hand in hand with my mother and felt the doors slam in our faces, the sour looks meet our petition. This neighborhood bordered mine. I swam in their pool at swim meets. This was 1963, eight years after Emmett died. Cracks in the system were forming.
Mourning Emmett

In 2000 I started teaching a course on the literature of racial violence in the South that I would teach every year from then on. Emmett Till gradually took over the course. We studied the literature written in response to the murders of Medger Evers, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, the literature on lynching by Ida Wells Barnett, and the images in *Without Sanctuary*; but always the story of Emmett kept reappearing as a stubborn wound. When I taught the course with poet Kalamu Ya Salaam, Jim Randall, and a group of Douglass High School students from the upper and lower Ninth Ward, in the Bywater section of New Orleans on the other side of industrial canal from where the Katrina break occurred, I changed the way I could understand Emmett. Not only did my co-teachers shake up my white liberal notions of victims of hate crimes, they familiarized me with texts like *Carnival of Fury*, a history of Robert Charles, a New Orleans man who fought back and killed several policeman before turning himself in, and Lance Hill's *Deacons for the Defense*, a book that describes in detail the African Americans in Louisiana who armed themselves and fought back during the civil rights movement. Even with this balancing discourse, after reading about six books on Emmett Till, a heavy air of defeat started to creep into the classroom and a young man in the class asked: why do we have to read all these books on Emmett Till?

In response to this student I wrote: *Blood bath of my city 4,000 African American young people killed in the last ten years What would happen if 4,000 young people from Uptown had been killed in the last ten years? I am walking down to that river And fishing out Emmett's body from My bad mind and Picking it up and looking into his gorged and bloated head and that river in his eye and holding him, yes holding him, rocking him touching him, feeling his face where his eyes used to be groping with my blind eyes his mountainous face of caverns and streams You want me white woman Carolyn Bryant to be afraid of his black monstrosity of dead body or relieved afraid of his beautiful extraordinarily beautiful, sure, adorable baby-faced, man-like strutting teenage self. But he is my son and I will mother him as I would my son not let him lie in that formaldehyde water some specimen for all to gawk at and dissect I will pull the water from his lungs, breath air into his mouth, and tell him of his great contribution. And you sitting over there in that seat in this classroom you who I have come to love. Ten years from today I want to look you in your living eye, I want to hear you again ask why? Why must we read about this dead boy? Why? By then I might have an answer.*
After the storm, I drove from my evacuation home in Perdido Key, Florida to Tuscaloosa, Alabama for an Emmett Till conference. I was late for the opening day and ended up listening to a panel of historians who were arguing over exactly what happened during the days of and the days following the Till murder, and who has come out with the latest information that might pertain to reopening the case. The discussion had all the energy of academic competition, detective sleuthing, and journalistic scooping. At another time and place I might have been interested. But at this moment, I was in shock from Katrina. All I could hear was the silence. There was no moaning, no mourning or grieving for Emmett. I had bodies from the Lower Ninth, Upper Ninth, and Lakeview floating in my head. All I could feel at the moment was that this academic and legal pursuit was serving some intellectual purpose, some safety valve of white liberalism, but after the Convention Center and the Superdome, one for which I had no tolerance. There was no keening, or caring, or emotion of any kind. I could have stood up and started to scream and cry out for my dead city, for our dead sense of decency and righteousness. I can now see and name this emotional dislocation as a serious problem not only for those researching Emmett Till but for all southern literary scholars and historians. One cannot talk about slavery dispassionately. One cannot discuss the roaring twenties and forget that this was the height of lynching or the 1830s in Georgia and forget to mourn the Cherokee Removal. This kind of approach to horrific moments is not objective history; it is quite simply selective scholarship because it removes from discussion the truth that makes us care. The picture is never taken. The moan is never heard.

Emmett Till without “mo’nin” is not Emmett Till. Emmett Till without the real laughing, joking, on the verge of budding manhood Emmett imagined, a life imagined, a fighting back imagined is not Mamie Till Bradley’s son. Mourning takes seeing, imagination, art. I don’t know whether he whistled. I hope he whistled. His mother said he stuttered. For that moment I want him to be a boy who whistled out loud at a woman because he could, because he was a normal immortal teenager, doing exactly what his mother told him not to do, exactly what any fourteen-year-old boy might have done. I wish he had asked Carolyn out on a date like James Baldwin imagines in Blues for Mr. Charlie or shot back as Nordan imagines in Wolf Whistle. I want to think he flaunted the insane rules of southern conduct. I hope that his last act was to defy
Mourning Emmett

segregation, the deadly line of the purity of southern white womanhood that no black boy or man was allowed to cross.

At the Unsettling Memories conference in 2003 commemorating Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, there was a display of Without Sanctuary, the lynching photographs. Several of the young scholars were sobbing in the front yard of the building. The older scholars looked at the photographs or tried to. The question in everyone’s mind was: How do we position ourselves so that we are not simply voyeuristic spectators at a lynching that we should never have attended in the first place? Should we leave? Should we refuse to look? Alferdteen Harrison, my co-director, refused, wanted no part of this exhibit. An African American woman from the civil rights movement thought they were demeaning. Why should all those images of lynching not be burned up, why should we ever look at Emmett Till’s face again, why shouldn’t all these cultural memories be forgotten and buried away—the question: “Why do we have to read this?” The problem with looking into the face of horror, of racism—of a boy’s face so severely disfigured that he is unrecognizable as a boy—is that it can begin to define the victim as just that, a victim to be felt sorry for. Just as Moten had the impulse to animate the image, to make it sing and moan, I had the desire to get inside the photographs, to cut down the bodies, to become the undertaker, to give them privacy, to wash their bodies as thousands of women had done before me. In “Flesh that Needs to Be Loved,” Myisha Priest argues that Langston Hughes answers Mamie Till Bradley’s call with his The Sweet Flypaper of Life that reconfigures the ravished African American body in pain with “a bittersweet blues sensibility” (Pollack 57).

Oh Emmett. I was born a white woman three months after you died. Carolyn knew enough not to say anything at first, knew Roy would kill Emmett. She knew that. Carolyn had seen that rage in him. But then she got up and testified all those lies, Emmett trying to ask her on a date, she got a gun, he was in her face calling her baby doll. Carolyn, I want to ask you as one white woman to another. So what if all that happened (and I don’t believe that it did). He was a boy. A fourteen-year-old boy. Were you really scared of him?

Or of Roy?

Carolyn you did not even have the guts to get out of the car and step into Lizzie and Mose Wright’s house and point the finger at their nephew. You hid in the car.
A whole lot of white women told a whole lot of deadly lies. A whole lot of white women killed a whole lot of black men. Accused them of rape of fear of love. Forgot that it was their husband or father or brother who had raped and beaten them. Or that—as Ida B. Wells tells it—that they were lovers with the men they pointed the finger at: a perversion of “Thar he.” Forgot that they had invited you up onto their porch to water their plants, tend their roses.

Emmett my white women self owes you and your mother some kind of truth. I have a thousand black men’s souls on my conscience.

And Carolyn as one white woman to another even if he was going to beat you half to death and scream at the kids and drink his way into your sore body, I sure wish that history were an angel and could go back and could fix the things that had been broken and that she would have taken one wing and circled you with it and the other circled Mose Wright and that the two of you before there ever was a courtroom would have stood together along with the teacher Alice Conroy from Wolf Whistle and kept Roy and J.W. from ever leaving in that truck. I wish to god you had been stronger, had a gun, used your smarts, had some, because in my history fantasy I want Alice Conroy to be real and to tell you as her friend Carolyn to stand on that witness stand in front of all those white men and say:

Oh Emmett. Emmett he was playing with some of his Mississippi cousins and bet them he could ask me on a date. They were funny. Daring and double daring and then he came in and kind of shy asked me out and I went in the back and Juanita and I laughed so loud or he came in and bought a soda and he went back out and joked with his friends. Or he may have whistled at me, but it was nothing but a childish prank.

I wish she had said that, not just in the witness box, but back then in bed when she and Roy had the first fight and he said some kids said that Chicago boy came by here and was whistling at you or asked you out on date or something and she had said in a whisper so as to calm, Roy it was nothing, but he said what do you mean nothing and started getting riled up ready to hurt and she tried to calm him down. But she did not, she should have said it then but did not. I wish that she had been able in some superhuman way to get out of that house, to get in that pickup truck, if she had one even and to drive along lonely Delta roads to Mose Wright’s house and tell him to get that boy out of there but she did not she did not. I wish she had stood tall and said “Thar he” in the witness stand but she did not. I wish she had said, Bastard baby killer, you touch me again and I will ram that cigar, cola up your throat. I will not stand here and pose with you smiling—your bloody hands on my body. But she did not.
And then we stop: what does imagination have to do with memory or history? Eng cites Walter Benjamin’s call “to seize hold of elusive histories that have been obscured by the historicist’s genuine image, not in order to fix those histories and establish new genuine images or new eternal truths, but rather to allow lost pasts to step into the light of a present moment of danger” (279). Allowing lost pasts to step into the light of a present moment of danger is an act of the imagination.

The idea that there even is a past and future is progress’s narrative. It has nothing to do with living. The past two decades the government, in honor of this notion of progress, has been attempting to memorialize difficult moments in our nation’s history by erecting civil rights monuments, statues, and museums, apologizing to relatives of Tuskegee survivors, paying reparations to Japanese Americans interned during World War II, retrying Byron de la Beckwith and other racist murderers of the 1960s, building interactive Holocaust museums. This therapeutic model of healing and closure does not take into account the fact that the effects of these traumas are reverberating throughout our culture today, are blasting and killing and shattering dreams, are leaving dead on the street the bodies of thousands of children, gunned down on drugs. The very government that is creating the overtures of reconciliation with one hand is perpetuating the discrimination with the other. It is no wonder that the civil rights monuments look like mausoleums to a past that local and national governments wish would stay buried.

When Mamie Till Bradley refused to allow her son’s body be buried without a public viewing she set the stage for a fight against closure and for a demand for Emmett to rise out of those cold waters that swallowed him to live in the memory of every American, both as a horrifying corpse and a lively sweet smiling boy in a white shirt and tie. During the past forty-seven years James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Bob Dylan, Bernice Johnson Reagan, Gwendolyn Brooks, Eudora Welty, Anne Moody, Endesha Ida Mae Holland, and Lewis Nordan have joined voices with Mamie Till Bradley as they put their versions of “What they done to my son” before the public eye. What no artist in any society is able to do is to go back and make right what was done wrong in the past, fix what is broken. Artists cannot even take the shards of the broken and make them whole and certainly they cannot keep these atrocities from happening again. But artists can recover some of the power of the moment and bring it back to life. Often this is an unsettling, deeply disturbing, and politically radical act. Emmett’s mother and all of these...
artists have ensured that the terrible impossibility of the two images, the bloated corpse and the handsome self-sure, sweet-smiling Chicago boy with the tie and suit, will, as they should, forever haunt us.

Emmett’s mother’s courageous, outrageous performance of grief, the need to show her murdered son to the world, turned one woman’s unfathomable loss into a nation’s activism and change—brought living energy and power where there was only hatred and death. Mose Wright’s performance—his strength in standing before that all-white jury and judge and pointing his finger, and speaking the famous words, “that he” at Milam and Roy Bryant—unveiled the absolute lie of the Mississippi legal system. These are the acts, dramatic acts that bring us to the enormity of the historical moment when Emmett Till was taken from us. Because of these performative moments, Emmett does not die. He goes on and on living in the cultural imagination in breathtaking orchestration.

When Adorno wrote “Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (19), he did not mean that one should not try to write it. When in Treblinka the people tried to make a monument to the Holocaust they set a large stone in the field to represent, not each person, as one at first imagines, but each village—the thousands and thousands and thousands of stones are a moment of metaphoric brilliance, a memorial act in which the true enormity sits in silence, a communicative silence between what can be known and what cannot be spoken, a Stonehenge of vast proportions.

In Selma, rather than any kind of representative memorial to those killed on Pettus Bridge, the people have created a stunning walk, with African ancestral houses and offerings to the dead. The effect is a living spiritual world. Morrison’s Beloved, Nordan’s Wolf Whistle, Anselm Kiefer’s paintings, Treblinka’s stones, the Selma memorial, William Christenberry’s KKK series, Cynthia Oznick’s The Shaul, and Charlotte Solomon’s Life in Art represent the rare moments when art written or enacted or scripted about a catastrophe reaches out and allows for the full mystery, the full orchestration of the human response without mutating, distancing, or analyzing.

My course in American history got stuck on one slide and the slide was a picture of a little boy in a coffin and his mother falling falling always and forever falling, always and forever kneeling down, kneeling down to her knees in a train station. In 2005 I saw a woman dead in a wheelchair at the New Orleans convention center. I saw guns held to kill anyone coming over the Greater Mississippi River Bridge during Katrina. I see a river, a bridge and a thousand other possibilities.
Emmett Till
Died after two murderers tied a gin fan around his neck
Beat his face
Drilled or shot a hole in his head
Threw him in the Tallahatchie River on August 28, 1955

My city New Orleans
Died after murderers tied red tape around our neck
Beat her face with racism, segregation, poverty and neglect
Drilled holes in our levees
And threw our people into a swill pit of polluted waters
On August 29, 2005.

Emmett/ Tammuz if I didn’t know better I would
think you flung
Out your arm
Looking over your shoulder
Down that long Old River

With your oh so detached eye
Into our Gulf
And stirred up the turbulent waters of our Katrina Kali
Flooding tears
Throughout this still
too dry
and calloused land.

Why do we have to read all these books on Emmett Till? What really happened has become the academic cry over Emmett Till—documentaries and historians trying to get to the bottom of it, dig it up, exhume the case, exhume the body, to put something right, to put somebody away, to find justice. As so many artists have shown us, Mamie Till Bradley’s moment of tearing the fabric of American racism demands something larger than a scholarly book, something less contained, more ferocious, more jolting, more full of the life of Emmett and the sacrifice of his mother.

Some say that art is for healing, some say that art is to help us remember. Some say that art is false, that only those who experienced an atrocity have the right to talk about it, only an eyewitness to the Holocaust should be allowed to speak. Yet the metaphor, the well-placed silence, the symbol are gifts to the storyteller of horror. As proof of this fact, many
eyewitnesses, many human beings who lived through long nights of terror themselves, more than we can possibly imagine, turned to literature and art, to tell their stories.

And now in Post-Katrina New Orleans I second-line this drum heartbeat through the streets of my tattered city because:

We are  
Always will be  
Have been  
Mourning Emmett  
Can't get him out of our hearts because  
We  
Are  
Have been  
Will be  
Mourning Emmett  
Can't get  
Gin Fan  
Tape Wire  
Screams in the Barn  
Out of our minds  
Because we are  
Have been  
Will be  
Mourning Emmett  
Can't get black tie, cute smile gorgeous eyes  
Hands-in-pocket boy with sailor cap  
Out of our mind  
Can hear low moan high roar, feet marching  
Because we are, have been, always will be mourning Emmett.

We are reading these books because I love Emmett and I want everyone to know how furious and sad I am that he is dead.
WORKS CITED


Moten, Fred. ”Black Mo’nin.” Eng et al 59–76.

