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Emmett Till, Justice, and the Task of Recognition

Courtney Baker

The murder of the African American teenager Emmett Till in 1955 and the acquittal of his confessed murderers constitute watershed events in the American Civil Rights movement whose legacy continues into the present. Many people can vividly recall their first viewing of Emmett Till's postmortem picture, which shows a bloated and disfigured body lying in an open casket or on the coroner's slab, and cite it as a consciousness-altering moment in their lives. The power of those images and the story leading up to them continues into the present. In a 2004 press release in which the Department of Justice announced the reopening of the nearly 20-year-old case, Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division, R. Alexander Acosta, is quoted as having stated, "The Emmett Till case stands at the heart of the American civil rights movement . . . This brutal murder and grotesque miscarriage of justice outraged a nation and helped galvanize support for the modern American civil rights movement. We owe it to Emmett Till, and we owe it to ourselves, to see whether after all these years, some additional measure of justice remains possible" (USDOJ).

The remarkable feature of the Emmett Till case—sadly not the only incident of a racially motivated murder in the Jim Crow South—is its visibility. Indeed, the visual accessibility of the multiple stages in this case—from the body's discovery to its burial to its deliberate and disturbing display at the funeral, and extending even to its virtual visibility in a Mississippi courtroom—set this episode in the history of civil rights agitation

apart from others. As this article will demonstrate, the exceptional invocation of the power of the visual in this event illustrates a key concept in play on both sides of the civil rights argument—namely, how the mechanics of visual recognition are central to a concept of humanity.

This article examines three major sites wherein Emmett Till's body was figured as a spectacle—the funeral home/morgue, the funeral, and the trial. Taking into account how each of these venues might position the spectator in a specific way, the article analyzes how issues of distortion and misrecognition are negotiated in relation to an overarching notion of humanity. As I will demonstrate, these visually oriented events derive their power in part by appealing to the same rhetorical and ideological features of traditional memorial photography, the *memento mori*. Nevertheless, in the representation of a disfigured body, the spectator's visual encounter is significantly different than that of the *memento mori*'s viewer. In this case the visible dead body not only instructs the spectator on issues of mortality but also illustrates the sometimes frustrating relationship between mortality and justice.

Without denying that the images in the Emmett Till case—especially the images of his dead body—are powerful because they are perceived as supplying documentary evidence of a brutal act, this article asserts that the spectacle of Till's body is rooted in a visual aesthetic and ideology other than realism. This nonrealist logic is an essential misrecognition required by the

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concept of humanity. The spectacles and images of Till's body accomplish their political work by situating an unrecognizable body that is, nevertheless, recognized by the spectator as human into a narrative of human suffering. After assessing the effect produced by visually beholding the human body, this article concludes with the site in which the acts of recognition and narration are made fundamentally political—the courtroom.

A series of image-centered events punctuated the Emmett Till lynching, funeral, and trial of 1955. Several elements of the story of Till's murder have been contested, including how many people were involved in the actual abduction and murder (the case has been recently reopened in hopes of resolving these questions); however, the crux of the story is that 14-year-old Emmett Louis Till of Chicago, IL, was visiting his great-uncle Moses Wright, a share cropper, and other relatives in Mississippi on a summer vacation. Although the details of the exchange are still debated and ultimately unknown, what is known is that Till had some interaction with a white female shopkeeper, 21-year-old Carolyn Bryant, at her family store in the small town of Money in Leflore County, Mississippi. Three days later, at 2:30 a.m. on Saturday, August 28, 1955, Bryant's husband, Roy Bryant, 24; brother-in-law, J. W. Milam, 36; and, according to many accounts, one or two others (including, perhaps, Carolyn Bryant herself) drove to the home of Moses Wright to abduct Till. Till was taken to Milam's tool shed where he was beaten. The beating was overheard by an 18-year-old black man named Willie Reed who eventually testified at the trial. At some point, Bryant and Milam decided to kill Till. They found a gin fan used for processing cotton, drove to the edge of the Tallahatchie River where they say they shot Till in the head, then secured the fan to his neck with barbed wire and threw his body into the river.

The portion of the story that I want to focus on begins with the discovery of Till's body three days later and continues with the increasing political significance that his distorted body accumulated in the weeks and months to follow. Till's body was discovered in the Tallahatchie

River on Tuesday, August 31, 1955 by a 17-year-old white boy, Robert Hodges, who spotted feet sticking out of the water at Pecan Point. By that time local law enforcement had been made well aware of Till's abduction and disappearance. (Moses Wright and his brother-in-law, Crosby Smith, had notified their local sheriff, George Smith, the morning after the abduction, and Chicago police, contacted by Till's mother, Mamie Till, 33, alerted Tallahatchie County Sheriff, Harold Clarence Strider. There are also accounts claiming that Till's cousin, Curtis Jones, also from Chicago, called Sheriff Strider directly to report the kidnapping.) When the body was retrieved from the river and taken to the undertaker it was so badly decomposed that it could only be identified by a signet ring bearing the initials "L. T."—Louis Till, Emmett's father. Ostensibly due to the body's state of decomposition, Strider ordered that Till be buried immediately, but Jones intervened by phoning Mamie Till in Chicago and notifying her of Strider's order. Mamie Till's own assessment of the situation was that, "the main thing [the police in Tallahatchie wanted] to do was to get that body in the ground *so nobody could see it*" (Hudson 300, emphasis added). She demanded that the Mississippi coroner return her son's body to Chicago. It was, but only on the condition determined by the sheriff's office that the casket never be opened. Emmett Till's body arrived at the Illinois Central rail terminal in Chicago on Friday, September 3, 1955.

Mamie Till's remarkable response to the tragedy was to display to the world the body of her son. She decided to make the violence enacted upon the body visible. In a speech delivered shortly after the acquittal of Emmett's murderers, Mamie Till explained what motivated her decision. Only moments after seeing Emmett's corpse for the first time,

I said, Roy [Mooty, Mamie's cousin], anybody that wants to look at this, can see it. I'm tired of stuff being covered up. If some of these lids had been pulled off of Mississippi a long time ago, then something like this wouldn't be happening today. So far as my personal feelings are concerned, they don't count . . . And if my son had sacrificed

his life like that, I didn't see why I should have to bear the burden of it alone. There was a lesson there for everybody. (Hudson 304)

The event precipitated by these sentiments was that Emmett's body lay in state for four days at the Roberts Temple Church of God. The church was thronged, mostly by black Chicagoans, who had followed the reported kidnapping, alleged murder, and subsequent trial through the black press as well as mainstream media outlets. In the foreword to Mamie [now Till-]Mobley's memoir Jesse Jackson remarked upon the strength of her political convictions, noting that they were so intense that she

put the struggle for emancipation and her outrage above personal privacy and pride. She allowed the distorted, water-marked body from the Tallahatchie River to be displayed in an open casket, at that time the largest single civil rights demonstration. More than 100,000 demonstrated their disgust at that casket. Each one of those people who saw how her son was defaced left telling their own story. They were never the same again. Mamie's courage unsettled people of conscience into action. (xii)

Implicitly, it seems, Mamie Till understood the political possibilities of making her son's body visually available to a public already aware of the ongoing threats against black, and especially black male, vitality in certain parts of the United States. Her belief was that, in confronting the disfigured body of Emmett Till, "people also had to face themselves. They would have to see their own responsibility in pushing for an end to this evil" (Till-Mobley 142). Seeing the brutality enacted upon the body of a young black boy would perhaps make the country recognize just how dire the situation was in the American South.

Yet as Mamie Till admits, the task of recognition—of recognizing her son in his degraded state—was not easy. At a speech given shortly after the court found Till's murderers not guilty, Mamie Till declared, "What I saw in that box was not like anything I've ever seen before in my life" (Hudson-Weems 302). The verbal description of

Emmett's body that she offers in her memoirs is itself wrenching:

When I got to his chin, I saw his tongue resting there. It was huge, I never imagined that a human tongue could be that big . . . From the chin I moved up to his right cheek. There was an eyeball hanging down, resting on that cheek . . . Right away, I looked to the other eye. But it wasn't there . . . Dear God, there were only two [teeth] now, but they were definitely his. I looked at the bridge of his nose . . . It had been chopped . . . From there, I went to one of his ears . . . And that's when I found out that the right ear had been cut almost in half . . . And I don't know what happened to that part of his ear, but it wasn't on the back part of his skull. I did check. And when I did, I saw that someone . . . had taken a hatchet and had cut through the top of his head, from ear to ear. The back of his head was loose from the front part of his face . . . I saw a bullet hole slightly back from the temple area . . . it was that one bullet hole that finally caused me to speak.

"Did they have to *shoot* him?" I mean, he had to be dead by then. (Till-Mobley 135–36).

Rather than mourn for her son in isolation and come to terms with the circumstances of his death in private, Mamie Till presented the body of her son to the world, and in so doing made the task of recognition a public project. The open-casket funeral that was held in Chicago was an orchestrated spectacle, one that relied in part on the juxtaposition of visual objects to make its political and affective points. At the viewing, the painful reality that a human body could be so horribly transformed was underscored by photographs taken during Emmett's last Christmas with his family that were taped to the coffin lid.

This juxtaposition of the photographs—which depicted Emmett Till alive, happy, and dressed to the nines—against the unrecognizable body actually on display made an emotional appeal to a sentimental aesthetic that can be associated with the memorial photography of nineteenth-century America. At that time, the photograph was a central feature in the mourning process, and in fact these memorial photographs constitute the largest

group of nineteenth-century American genre photographs. As Stanley B. Burns, whose archive houses the largest number of these images in the United States, explains, “Surviving families were proud of these images and hung them in their homes, sent copies to friends and relatives, wore them as lockets or carried them as pocket mirrors” (n. pag.). The most disturbing images of this genre are also the rarest; they are the premortem photographs. In the earliest days of photography, when most people did not have their portraits taken, photographers appealed to customers with the slogan *Secure the Shadow Ere the Substance Fade*, which united the unpredictability of death with photography’s technical ability to freeze time, as it were, in the image. After a person had fallen ill, however, death often came too quickly to capture the previously unphotographed subject while still alive. A few photographers and families compensated for this by posing their loved ones in gestures that suggested life. In one *carte de visite*, a young girl is seated with her eyes open, upright in a chair, holding a book; the mat on which the picture is mounted, however, explains that this girl has been dead—and unburied—nine days, presumably because “her mother could not part with her only daughter” (Burns n. pag.). Another common pose in these images is that of sleep which has no symbols of death in view or which may feature a prop from daily life, such as a newspaper, that suggests that its holder simply fell asleep while occupied with this activity.¹

The only pair of pre- and postmortem images known to exist—image Number 7, “Premortem Daguerreotype of Boy Lying in Bed With a Ball and Postmortem Daguerreotype of the Same Boy Lying in Bed” (c. 1848), of Burns’s catalog—illustrates the power of the juxtaposition of life and death (Figures 1 and 2). This daguerreotype is, in fact, a diptych, portraying a young white boy about seven or eight years old lying prostrate on a white sheet, his eyes open, his face relaxed, and with his left arm outstretched, making no effort to reach the small ball lying just a few inches above his hand. The second image shows the same boy, now lying on his back, in profile. His eyes are closed and his lips slightly parted. The description



Figure 1. “Premortem Daguerreotype of Boy Lying in Bed With a Ball; Anonymous; Daguerreotype; circa 1848” (Stanley B. Burns, MD and The Burns Archive).

provided in the catalog for these images suggests, by association, why the formal pairing of Emmett Till’s Christmas portraits and his dead body—a pairing that was repeated in the magazines and newspapers that reported on the funeral and trial—yields such affective power. The caption of the daguerreotypes reads:

The first, most unusual, image shows a sick boy in bed with a ball, which symbolized



Figure 2. “Postmortem Daguerreotype of the Same Boy Lying in Bed; Anonymous; Daguerreotype; circa 1848” (Stanley B. Burns, MD and The Burns Archive).

the joy of life in which he can no longer participate

The second image shows the boy after he has died The spots on the boy's forehead indicate the development of a childhood exanthema, perhaps chicken pox or measles. (Burns n. pag.)

In Emmett's Christmas portrait his whole body is shown, most likely to show off the new suit he is wearing. He is posed leaning on an object to his left; it is a Philco television, the American home's central vehicle of entertainment. Taking the historical disparity into consideration, one can consider that in the 1950s the television would constitute an update on the same "joy of life" signified by the nineteenth-century boy's ball. However, Till's proprietary pose against the television as well as his stylish new outfit, a Christmas gift from his mother, depict a boy who has no idea that his death is imminent—less than nine months away. As one scholar related to Mamie Till, "That photo would come to define him for everyone. It would become so important in telling his story, starting at his funeral, where it had been on display in his casket. How ironic, she [Clenora Hudson-Weems] noted, that the photo seemed to foreshadow something with such profound historical significance: the role that the media—especially television—would play in covering the civil rights struggle, a struggle that would intensify with the coverage of the murder trial" (Till-Mobley 159).

The spectacle of Till's body in the casket—the second image of this pre/postmortem visual pairing—like the daguerreotype, shows not only the body but the cause of its death (i.e., the mortal wounds that had been inflicted upon it). In place of the nineteenth-century boy's "spots" produced by exanthema, Till's body exhibits traces of physical abuse: bloating, a missing ear, a bullet hole. And as with the daguerreotype, it is the visibility of not only death itself but also the cause of that death that compounds the affective power of the visual display.

The emotional power of the *memento mori* pictorial genre is premised upon making mortality both visible and meaningful. The genre originates

in the seventeenth century European still life paintings known as *vanitas*. The genre was adapted to the photographic medium in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Because the images produced by photography are understood to offer documentary evidence of the physical existence of an actual body, the existential message of the *memento mori*—literally, "remember that you must die"—is explicitly linked to a real body—the subject of the memorial photograph. Barring witness from the actual circumstances of another's death—for instance, witnessing an act of murder—the spectacle of corporeal remains are understood by the viewer as proof of the cessation of life (death as an event). It is the dead body made visible that unites in the mind of the viewer the abstract concepts of life and death.

The memorial photograph, therefore, both is and is not allegorical. Its rhetorical strategy relies on a consensual investment in the idea of a universal humanity that is in part defined by mortality (i.e., the fact that all humans die). The photographic medium usually demands that there actually be a body present in order for it to be represented in the memorial photograph. The mourning for or acceptance of one's own mortality that is the ambition of the *memento mori* is a visually prompted event. That event is precipitated by the spectacle of another's death. The self-conscious act of mourning, figured by the genre as psychologically productive and cathartic, depends upon a fundamental misrecognition—one sees the dead body as (potentially) one's own. This misrecognition is the crux of a visualized humanity.

The ideological notion of a common humanity naturalizes the misrecognition required for recognizing one's self in another. The reappearance of that troublesome yet revealing preposition "in" in the latter phrase, the foundational concept of humanity—any person can see her/himself in any other—points again to an essential misrecognition. This is a misrecognition that permits an object that is clearly and visibly situated in another domain (in the photographic setting that represents some other space; in the dead body that is both physically and existentially in some other space—perhaps in a coffin and certainly in death)

to be confused with some recognizable attribute of humankind that is held in one's mind.

In the case of the postmortem photographs and of the body in the coffin, the object that is to be immediately recognized by the spectator who is automatically figured as mourner tests the boundaries of the recognition process. The threat of not recognizing Till's body as a body and the emotional stakes of that failure is made clear in his mother's explanation of why she insisted upon opening the box.

I was not bending. That box had to come open. I mean, I didn't even know what we would find inside. There could have been bricks, mud, someone else's body. I would spend the rest of my life not knowing. Besides, I had heard so many things over the past couple of days, I had to see for myself what they had done to my son. (Till-Mobley 131)

The confirmation came slowly, as Mamie Till walked her eyes up the body she would eventually recognize as her son.

Much had been done, even after the body had been discovered, to ensure that it would never be seen. In addition to locking the box with the seal of the State of Mississippi, the Mississippi coroner had packed the body in lime to further speed its decomposition. Ultimately, Mamie Till convinced the Chicago mortician, A. A. Raynor, to open the box so that she could see the body it contained. Her narration of this initial moment yields some very revealing information with respect to the terms that I have been discussing—specifically, the glance, humanity, and mis/recognition.

At a glance [Till-Mobley writes] the body didn't even appear human. I remember thinking it looked like something from outer space, something you might see at one of those Saturday matinees. Or maybe that's only what I wanted to think so that I wouldn't have to admit that this was my son. (134)

Mamie Till introduces immediately the effects of the glance: the body does not appear human. Instead, she forces a recognition through cinematic metaphors that are themselves revealing. Having

introduced the notion that the body before her might not even be human ("at a glance," appearing and being are one and the same), she manages to extend her powers of recognition by introducing the supernatural element that most resembles the human—the extraterrestrial alien. She is thereby able to capture the unrecognizable object before her in the net of humanity which she then draws toward a recognition of the body as that of her son.

But Mamie Till, as she views her son's body, is not a film spectator. The distinction is underscored by Richard Rushton's encapsulation of the essential criteria for viewing a mainstream film.

As a spectator of the cinema I am encouraged to forget the existence of my own self in its bodily form. At the cinema, the antagonism between the "real" existence of my body and the "imaginary" existence on my mirror image recedes. . . . If in "real life" the alienating split between my real body and its imaginary projection allows me to achieve an identity, then, at the cinema I have only an imaginary body, and this imaginary body can take on the shapes and values of the filmic world which it is encouraged to take in. (112–13)

Quite counter to this figuration of the spectator, Mamie Till is forced to think deliberately of her own body and her own body's limits when she takes visual stock of her son's evident torture and murder. Her identity as a mother further compounds the visceral response that is elicited by her thorough visual examination. But even before she has been allowed to see the body, she recognizes the box that he arrived in: "Finally, they unloaded the box that my son was in and placed it on a flatbed truck . . . [and] I just lost it. I looked up, saw that box, and I just screamed" (132).

Even when the box is eventually opened Mamie Till cannot, at first, recognize the body within as that of her son. But even though she misrecognizes her son's body, Mamie Till's misrecognition is based on her perception of herself and her knowledge of her own body's potential response to torture. Her position as the mother of the tortured body serves to minimize the possibility of disidentification and to maximize her affective

response. Unlike the torturer, who is “so without any *human recognition* of or identification with the pain that he is not only able to bear its presence but able to bring it continually into the present, inflict it, sustain it” (Scarry 36, emphasis added), Mamie Till can see herself in the body of the tortured and imagine herself in her son’s place. The facts of torture and pain are therefore too sublime, too incomprehensible for her to take full stock of through a procedure of identification with her son. She is, however, able to identify with his sense of fear as she discovers, suddenly, that she might be able to see with his eyes. Riding in a taxi on the night of the trial’s conclusion, passing through Mississippi back roads, Mamie Till recounts that she “was terrified and could only imagine the horrors that lay around every turn. And then an even more terrifying thought rushed over me: Was this what Emmett saw, was this what he thought on his last ride in Mississippi in the pitch black of night?” (Till-Mobley 190). It is by seeing what Emmett most likely saw that she is able to recognize the depths of his fear.

To the racist or to any other extremely prejudiced person, as Elaine Scarry points out, the experience of the other’s pain is unrecognizable. This is the essence of dehumanization. When the perceptual process of dehumanization is completed—that is, when the other’s humanity is rendered completely invisible, not only unrecognizable and therefore denied—it is possible that the other’s pain can be turned into a source of pleasure; it is this condition that facilitates torture. As Scarry notes, the perverse goal of torture is to make visible and to prove thereby (already, as I have demonstrated, a flawed ideological assumption) the power of one body over another.

In the very processes it [torture] uses to produce pain within the body of the prisoner, it bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer’s body. It then goes on to deny, to falsify, the reality of the very thing it has itself objectified by a perceptual shift which converts the vision of suffering into the wholly illusory but, to the torturers and

the regime they represent, wholly convincing spectacle of power It is, of course, because the reality of that power is so highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used. (27)

Elizabeth Alexander has noted that other perceptive bodies are involved in these moments of spectacular violence, and she adds another constituency to the visual equation—the family or community that claims affective ties to the tortured body. Observing that over the history of US race relations, “White men have been the primary stagers and consumers of [images of black bodies in pain],” Alexander reminds us that, “in one way or another, black people have been looking, too, forging a traumatized collective historical memory which is reinvoked . . . at contemporary sites of conflict” (92–93).

Alexander’s claim that spectacles of institutionalized violence can solidify and even constitute a community’s self-identification supports the idea that seeing another’s body disfigured and recognizing the violence enacted upon it as a violence enacted on the self as an essential and related misrecognition constitutes a productive and strategic misrecognition. In the institutionalized forms of violence that are now being classified as hate crimes (crimes that are motivated by the hatred of particular bodies, broadly conceived), there is misrecognition all around. The perpetrator of violence must act on a misguided assumption. S/he must consent to misrecognize the features of the loathed body that distinguish her/him from other members of her/his group—the group as a whole is loathed. In some cases this essential misrecognition may be the basis of terrorism. This is confirmed by cases in which any like body is considered an acceptable stand-in for the putative crimes of another. This intentional misrecognition does not constitute a case of mistaken identity since, as far as the perpetrators are concerned, all members of the group are guilty.

The prospective victim of the perpetrator’s or terrorist’s attack is conscripted into misrecognizing her/himself in the body of another of her/his group. S/he cannot escape the aggressive gaze of

the attacker, much as she would like to, for in linking vision to action—the attacker sees a body to act upon—the victim is pulled, bodily, into a domain of violence. To recognize a group, (comprised of what I am calling here “the victim”) before acts of violence affirm that group is necessarily an anachronism at best and pure apolitical structuralism at worst. I would invoke here Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism” which is, to my understanding, at least partially informed by the need to form politicized coalitions on the basis of perhaps ephemeral and superficial commonalities amongst individuals. These coalitions are formed in hopes of defeating and delegitimizing social, economic, and legal structures of oppression. To deny the political utility of strategic essentialism and the actual effects of terrorism (e.g., death and torture) would do politically engaged theoretical work a grave disservice. The actual experiences of community and of institutionalized violence are important to acknowledge and necessitate what I would call productive acts of misrecognition.

The power inequities that the coalitions seek to dismantle and that are forged in these sites of conflict have compelled the oppressed to develop social codes that aim to despectacularize gestures of power and dominance (even while occasionally re/spectacularizing others), thus attempting to compensate for the admission of weakness the body betrays during experiences of physical violence. The American segregationist South is one such venue in which the oppressed subject is compelled, whenever possible, to make her/his pain unrecognizable to the people in power. Rather than let multiply the white dominance made visible during the lynching and repeat the act of submission-under-duress in another location (the morgue), when called to identify Emmett’s body, Moses “Mose” Wright reveals no emotion and behaves in accordance with “the code.”

He and every other black person in the Delta knew it and lived by it. Never show emotions. You couldn’t show joy. That would be suppressed. You couldn’t show anger. That would mean defiance. You couldn’t show sorrow. That would mean weakness. I guess

as far as Southern whites were concerned, blacks had no feelings.

So Mose . . . dammed up his feelings, as he was so used to doing, holding back until later, until he couldn’t hold back any longer. (Till-Mobley 129)

It is the radical difference between black emotion in the morgue and black emotion during the funeral service that makes this case so remarkable in terms of the politics of affect and what Jacques Derrida has called “the work of mourning.” Both sites stage, each in its own way, the relative impoverishment of language in making one body somehow recognize and respect another body’s pain. “Whatever pain achieves,” Elaine Scarry writes, “it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (4).

Mamie Till implicitly understood the power of spectacle to do what words could not. Her decision to have a public, open-casket funeral and to guarantee that both the funeral and the body were photographed stem from this understanding. As she recounts in her memoir,

I knew that I could talk for the rest of my life about what had happened to my baby, I could explain it in great detail, I could describe what I saw laid out there on that slab at A. A. Rayner’s, one piece, one inch, one body part, at a time. I could do all of 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.

So I wanted to make it as real and as visible to people as I could possibly make it. I knew that if they walked by that casket, if people opened the pages of *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender*, if other people could see it with their *own* eyes, then together we might find a way to express what we had seen. (139)

It seems that even the ultimate translation of the visual spectacle into communicable language—the terms of which, as I will explain, are not based solely in the language of emotion but primarily in

the language of justice—demonstrate the failure of spoken language in the face of unrestrained brutality. Mamie Till’s reflections on the aftermath of the funeral bear this out.

Even after the viewing, so many people were left speechless. That’s not surprising. We’re taught to describe things by comparison. Something we’ve seen, something we’ve done. But what did we have to compare to Emmett? Nothing in our experience. Nothing in our expression. The English language is so rich with contributions from so many other languages around the world, yet it was inadequate for us when we needed it the most. We just did not have the vocabulary to describe the horror we saw, or the dread we felt in seeing it. Emmett’s murderers had devised a form of brutality that not only was beyond measure, it was beyond words. (142)

Nevertheless, even if the brutality cannot be articulated in spoken or written language, the endurance of the *memento mori* images demonstrate that the spectacularizing of death and/or violence, and the spectator’s misrecognition of her/himself in these images teach valuable lessons about living, including the most important—how (not) to die. In addition to the mourning that these images precipitate for the group, “corporeal images of terror suggest that ‘experience’ can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in muscle memory as knowledge” (Alexander 97). Such knowledge may include knowing which spaces one can inhabit and which one can transgress, and the limits of one’s behavior in those spaces.

Death, Derrida notes, is a teacher without peer in this respect. He writes, “To live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life. And yet nothing is more necessary than this wisdom. It is ethics itself to learn to live” (xviii). The human endeavor is not to learn to live, but to learn *how* to live—a query to which Derrida’s simple and provocative reply is “justly.” I would supplement Derrida’s theory with the claim that the lessons of death and of the dead inspire the very concept of justice,

and the dead’s palpable influence on the living is what Derrida captures in his notion of ghosts: “To live . . . not better, but more justly. But *with them* [ghosts] . . . And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (xviii–xix).

It would seem that the pedagogical imperative granted to the spectacle of mortality derives from a human desire for social justice, a desire to make death communicable (what Scarry calls “sharable”) and narratable. This project involves imbuing mourning with purpose, and granting the work of mourning a quantifiable goal. The goal—justice—is measured in terms of its responsibility to a notion of humanity. It has been claimed that humanity, itself, has a value; it is, Derrida points out, “that unconditional dignity . . . that Kant placed higher, precisely . . ., than any economy, any compared or comparable value, any market price” (xx). However, its evaluation in material terms is frustrated by its being both an item of (theoretical) exchange and the ideological criteria of the economy of exchange itself. In other words, the aim of justice is to quantify humanity, but the logic of humanity itself maintains that no single person’s humanity is unequal to another’s. The resolution of justice, then, can only ever be a superficial indicator of what is already known about the value of human life—that all lives are valued equally—or a brazen violation of the essential tenets of humanity—that all lives are *not* valued equally.

In the case of the Till trial, the prosecution was charged with the task of proving not only Emmett Till’s humanity and his attendant right to justice, but also that justice was being sought on behalf of the appropriate body. The desire to guarantee the identification of the body began in the Chicago morgue with Mamie Till’s demand that the box be opened so that she could actually see and recognize the body within as that of her son. In order for her to mourn “properly,” she must identify the body: “Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one *has to know* who is buried where” (Derrida 9). During the trial, her identification and powers of

recognition were called into question by the lawyers representing Till's alleged murderers. The extent of the body's disfigurement—its unrecognizability—was the basis for some people's testimony that no criminal act had been committed against Emmett Till. One move in the defense attorneys' strategy was to suggest that Till was still alive and well in Chicago and that the body found in the river had been strategically planted. One newspaper reported the sequence of events thusly:

J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant might . . . have abducted Emmett Till in the night.

But if they did, they turned him loose three miles down the road at the Bryant store in Money and told him to walk home. Moses Wright had left his cabin, and driven down the road to Money and met Emmett coming home, and taken him to meet a friend from the National Assn. For the Advancement of Colored People, and the friend had persuaded Moses Wright to plant his nephew's ring on a "rotten, stinking corpse," which, when fished out of the river, would be identified by simple people as that of Emmett Till. (Kempton 108 qtd. from defense team)

Defense attorney John W. Whitten exploited this scenario and declared during closing arguments that, "There are people . . . who will go as far as necessary to commit any crime known to man to widen the gap between the white and colored people of the United States. . . . They would not be above putting a rotting, stinking body in the river in the hope it would be identified as Emmett Till" (Johnson 100).

As the defendants, Milam and Bryant, never did confess their crime before the court, the state was required to make its case using witness testimony and circumstantial evidence. And although the two photographs of Till's corpse that were admitted in the trial offered perhaps the most emotionally compelling testimony, they did not serve as incontrovertible evidence of his murder. The image of the mutilated body that was at the center of civil rights agitation in the public realm was radically stripped of any significance to the pursuit of justice in the Mississippi

courtroom. The spectacle of disfigurement that conveyed such strong claims against racist brutality at the funeral in Chicago and which made it necessary for the spectator to give more than a glance in order to recognize the body as human, was, in the courtroom, the grounds for excluding the image as evidence, for denying it so much as a glance, and for making the body and the crime invisible.

The idea of photograph-as-documentary and the caché of the photograph as unmediated visible proof were delegitimized in the courtroom by the legal requirements to prove the *corpus delicti* (the fact that a crime has been committed). The body itself was not proof of murder. This missing equation—the crime as fact—prohibits the dead body from having the story of its arrival at death from being told. It is a body that cannot be accounted for in language; it is an unnarrated body. The pedagogical imperative of the spectacle of death is deflected, and an anxious uncertainty takes its place. The absence of a narrative explaining the cause of death means that there is also no hope of learning how that death might have been avoided. Deprived of a material reason for death, even a reason as vague as "he was murdered," death is meaningless. The *memento mori* is no longer a reminder; it is an image without effect.

Despite the defense team's strategy of objecting to the witnesses drawing "any conclusion about what caused the hole [behind Emmett's right ear]" (Hutto 77) and proposing the possibility that "a snag [in the river] might have caused the hole above the ear" (78), the court concluded that this was indeed the mortal wound, and the judge therefore overruled the defense's objection "that the state had not proved the *corpus delicti* [*sic*]: had not proved that Till died by illegal means" (77). The prosecution therefore proceeded to treat the case as though the crime that had been committed against Emmett was a given, and that their legal responsibility was to convince the court that the two defendants were in fact the perpetrators of the crime.

The prosecution also had to deflect the claims made by a series of witnesses that the body represented in the photograph was not the body found in the river. Although the body's extensive

disfigurement, which most concurred was likely the result of a severe beating, may have helped the prosecution's case by illustrating the extent of the brutality enacted upon it,² it nevertheless had a detrimental effect on the prosecution's case as it permitted the defense to challenge the prosecution's claims as to the body's identity. The defense made a point of this ambiguity when Sheriff Strider was called to the stand. According to one reporter's transcript of the trial, after Strider admitted that he could not identify the body by race, only that he "could tell it was a human being,"

[Defense attorney] Whitten then showed Strider a photograph of the body, which was taken after it arrived in Chicago. The body was on a slab when the picture was taken.

"I hand you here a photograph and I ask you if this picture represents a true likeness of the body that you saw."

"It doesn't," the Sheriff said . . .

Strider said that the body in the picture was darker than the body he saw at the river bank. "At the time I saw the body, he was as white as I am!" ("Sheriff Strider's Testimony" 98–99)

A deconstructive assessment of how the photograph is ideologically figured here reveals something which at first appears counterintuitive. In rejecting the photograph beyond all shadow of a doubt, Strider and other witnesses still articulate a wholehearted belief in the photograph's ability to represent "a true likeness" of a body. But their denial, their refusal to recognize the body represented in the photograph as the specific body of Emmett Till, demonstrates the documentary limitations of photography; namely, that it might not be able to represent sufficiently an object—such as a human being—that can constantly modify its appearance (through aging, gesturing, etc.)

This is what E. H. Gombrich points out in an essay on the portrait. There, he emphasizes the different techniques involved in producing an image that might depict a likeness so successfully that the identity of the subject depicted therein would be immediately recognizable to any of the image's spectators. And it is precisely the medium of photography that "has drawn attention to the

paradox of capturing life in a still, of freezing the play of features in an arrested moment of which we may never be aware in the flux of events" (16).

In ordinary circumstances it is the face that a spectator views in order to recognize the body in the photograph. And it is the face, "the living expression" (17) and not the mask, Gombrich specifies, that is the subject of portraiture. Gombrich attempts to account for the problem of representing likeness in a still image by referring to the research on the psychology of perception. That work acknowledges "the decisive role which the continuous flow of information plays in all our commerce with the visible world" (16–17). It appears to Gombrich, therefore, that a visual medium that represents movement over time is the medium that most successfully depicts likeness.

To put the matter crudely—if the film camera rather than the chisel, the brush, or even the photographic plate had been the first recorder of human physiognomies, the problem which language in its wisdom calls "catching a likeness" would never have obtruded itself to the same extent on our awareness. The film shot can never fail as signally as the snapshot can, for even if it catches a person blinking or sneezing the sequence explains the resulting grimace which the corresponding snapshot may leave uninterpretable." (17)

Gombrich's uniting of the face with movement is echoed in Gilles Deleuze's writing on cinema. For Deleuze, the cinematic device of the close-up (implicitly of the face) works because the movement of the face is a metonymy of those movements of the entire body that convey meaning and produce effects—emotional and physical. When we, as film spectators, are presented with the close-up of the face on-screen, we find that, "There are two sorts of questions which we can put to a face, depending on the circumstances: what are you thinking about? Or, what is bothering you, what is the matter, what do you sense or feel?" (88). In other words, our orientation toward the face—especially the face that does not and cannot *directly* answer the questions we pose it—is that of interrogator. This characterization of

the spectator as interrogator reaffirms the pedagogical imperative of the visual encounter, and extends the impulse to account for other spectacles, not only the spectacle of mortality.

Even if Strider could not recognize the face in the photograph as that of Emmett Till, he could still, with some effort, recognize the face as that of a human being. As has been mentioned, proving Emmett Till's humanity was a key element in the prosecution's case as it is in all civil rights cases. Yet throughout the investigation and the trial the sheriff exhibited an undeniable disregard for black people's participation in a common humanity—from his insistence on establishing a Jim Crow table for the black reporters to his solution to criticisms he received on his unpleasant demeanor (his revised cheerful salutation to Mamie Till and her entourage was, "Good morning, niggers"). It might therefore be reasonable and critically useful to claim that at least part of the reason why Strider could not recognize the body in the photograph as the body of Till is because he could not recognize the humanity represented in the photograph—the body of a human being in whose name justice was being sought—in the body of Emmett Till, an African American boy.

That Emmett Till's humanity was not recognized by a pro-segregationist racist is not in itself surprising. But as the recent critical work on the uses of lynching imagery have shown, the white supremacists' exhibition and circulation of visual documents of lynching (photographs and body parts) are underwritten by and serve to reinforce a notion of a powerful and just white community.³ It is not merely incidental, Shawn Michelle Smith suggests, that these images were often sent as postcards, a transmission so pervasive that legislation was passed to prohibit it.⁴ In the final chapter of her book Smith discusses how both actual lynching spectacles and the photographic *cartes-de-visites* that commemorated them worked to constitute whiteness in part by solidifying family bonds. Smith argues that these images operate as souvenirs of the event and are circulated as postcards which "presumed a return, the return of another card, of a shared sentiment"

(122). The photographic postcard becomes a means through which a son "perhaps demonstrates to his mother how he participates in upholding the mythology of pure white womanhood," as well as the fantasy of a great white American nation (122). The circulation of the images of lynching thereby made it possible to unite even those absent from the actual lynching event in the unified cause of defending the race, nation, and the honor of both.⁵

Emmett Till's claims to humanity that were exercised on his behalf in the courtroom represented a threat to this idealization of whiteness that claimed as a defining feature its special access to justice, which it both received and meted out. Oddly enough, Strider's own language betrays another oft-cited challenge to racial purity that racial supremacists usually champion. In his admission that the body at the river appeared to him as white, excepting, perhaps, for the "kinky hair" and that, "If one of [his] sons had been missing, [he] couldn't have told it was him" ("Sheriff Strider's Testimony" 98), Strider spoke one of the truths of American racial heritage: that a history of miscegenation and racial "passing" has totally undermined any assertions of racial purity. Strider's statement that he has "seen a lot of white men with kinky hair" ("Sheriff Strider's Testimony" 98) demonstrates not only his myopia in terms of racial critique, but also the parameters of a racially inflected notion of humanity. That the body in the river was human he is certain; but that the body of Emmett Till—which Strider and the defense have, through a series of rhetorical gyrations, practically reasoned out of existence let alone sight—is human in any sense that he understands (i.e., white, deserving of justice), he appears to have doubts.

Ultimately, the jury permitted these doubts to exempt them from finding the defendants guilty.⁶ It took them only sixty-seven minutes to acquit Milam and Bryant and, as one juror famously remarked, it would have taken them less time had the jury reportedly not stopped for a drink on the way back. It appears that the equation of whiteness and justice and the communal ties of race loyalty—both reducible to recognizing the white body exclusively as human and seeing humanity

exclusively in whiteness—is an equation that foreclosed the possibility of Till’s body ever being recognized either actually (in the post-mortem photograph or the decomposed body itself) or discursively (in the language of justice). Quite literally over Till’s dead body the tribal bonds of Southern whiteness in the United States were strengthened. The acquittal also represented the reinforcement of what Sheriff Strider hoped would be forever preserved when he declared that “we haven’t mixed so far down here and we don’t intend to” (Herbers 46). Nevertheless, from this very moment, the way of life that Strider cherished would find itself strenuously challenged and legally dismantled.

Notes

1. The former is image number 56 in the Burns catalog, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America* (Altadena, CA: Twelvetees Press, 1990). Good examples of the latter include images numbered 11 and 42 in the same catalog.

2. More than likely this was the case, for why else would the prosecution insist on entering the post-mortem photographs into evidence at all?

3. Notable texts on this subject include the exhibition catalog *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Ed. James Allen [Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2000]) and essays by Deborah Willis and Leigh Raiford in the catalog of the exhibition *Only Skin Deep*, curated by Coco Fusco (*Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, eds. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, [New York: Harry N. Abrams/ICP, 2003], pp. 275–81, and 267–73, respectively).

4. Smith notes, “Lynching postcards fell under section 3893 of the Revised Statutes which forbid “lewd, obscene, and lascivious” materials to be sent through the mail.” Smith, p. 197, n. 30.

5. The publication of Emmett Till’s images in journals both nationally and internationally is only superficially similar to the circulation of the lynching postcards. There are some fundamental differences between the two practices, including the ideological sympathies of the presumed recipient audiences, the scale of the transmission (the postcard indicates the intimacy of a single author being read by only a few readers) and, subsequently, the relative authority of the transmission gesture and of the practice it wishes to subvert (e.g., nonwhites’ resistance to white rule or an exposure of that rule’s illegitimacy).

6. Their guilt is certain. After the trial Bryant and Milam took advantage of the “double jeopardy” rule that prevented them from being tried again and sold the story of their murder to a reporter who published two articles for *Look* magazine. William Bradford Huie, “The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi,” *Look* 20.2 (1956): 46–48, 50, and “What’s Happened to the Emmett Till Killers?” *Look* 21.2 (1957): 63–66, 68.

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