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The Open Casket of Emmett Till: Annotated Bibliography (Second Place)

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FYS, Civil Rights and Pop Culture

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The Open Casket of Emmett Till

Wikipedia

“Emmett Till.” *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, August 28, 2015.

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Emmett_Till&oldid=678287849.

Online encyclopedias updated by the public, such as *Wikipedia*, convey the current societal consensus about a topic. The author of the article “Emmett Till” is unknown and cannot be assumed credible, but the source allows Till to be interpreted through a modern lens. The article explains in great detail the life and murder of Till, as well the trial, his funeral, the media’s reaction, his influence on civil rights, and the display of his casket in the Smithsonian. The many subcategories of the article convey that Emmett Till’s death should not be oversimplified—it caused many ripples in civil rights activism. “Emmett Till” attempts to present information in an unbiased manner by citing various authors, which leaves the reader with a sense of uncertainty as viewpoints often contradict. However, the article emphasizes the significance of Emmett Till’s death during the Civil Rights Movement and today, illustrating Till’s story is an ongoing conversation, that should not only be limited to the page of a textbook. Moreover, society is figuratively looking into Till’s casket through endless books, academic papers, films, works of fiction, and public displays such as Till’s casket display in the Smithsonian as described in “Smithsonian’s African American History Museum Acquires Emmett Till Casket.” Overall, the *Wikipedia* article “Emmett Till” enables people to face the uncensored racial brutality of the mid-twentieth century, and also follow that thread to racism today.

Newspaper/ Magazine Articles

“Nation Horrified by Murder of Kidnapped Chicago Youth.” *Jet*: Volume VIII, number 19. *Johnson Publishing Company*, 1955. Retrieved from *Google Books*.

During the Civil Rights Movement, Emmett Till’s beaten face was not only displayed in his open casket, but also throughout black media to illustrate the inhumane treatment of blacks and a need for change. *Jet* magazine published an article on Till in 1955 with enlarged pictures of his face. *Jet* magazine, founded in 1951, was commonly known as “The Weekly Negro News Magazine,” as it catered to a black audience. The magazine was pro-African American and consistently supported the black cause. “Nation Horrified by Murder of Kidnapped Chicago Youth,” is an article that explains the death of Emmett Till, focusing on the brutal details of his murder. It also includes large pictures of his face that dominate the page, and a picture of the heavy gin fan used to drown him. This article is significant because it forces readers to imagine

the gruesome murder of Emmett Till, which leads to emotions such as anger and sadness. Emotions like these served as a driving force of resistance during the Civil Rights Movement, as black people were reminded never to settle for their current situation and to keep fighting for change.

“Slain Youth’s Body Seen by Thousands.” *New York Times*. September 4, 1955. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/113248880/abstract>

“Slain Youth Seen by Thousands” is an article published by *The New York Times* that describes the open-casket funeral of Emmett Till attended by thousands of African Americans on September 3, 1955. It is a short article on the ninth page of the edition, showing no sense of urgency surrounding the event. No author is named but it most likely a white male as they made up the vast majority of national press at the time. *The New York Times*, a well-respected national newspaper, maintains a pro-white bias expressed through a passive, objective lens. Their “no comment attitude” distances the paper from Civil Rights issues. “Slain Youth Seen by Thousands” shortly summarizes Till’s death, but does not mention the deformed condition of Till’s face due to intense beating. This directly contrasts the article from the African American magazine *Jet*, which published multiple pictures of Till’s face. In omitting the gruesome details all together, *The New York Times* attempts to suppress the issue of white brutality towards blacks.

Trescott, Jacqueline. “Smithsonian’s African American History Museum Acquires Emmett Till Casket.” *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2009, sec. Arts & Living. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/26/AR2009082603524.html>.

Jacqueline Trescott explains the significance of the Smithsonian museum’s decision to display Emmett Till’s casket in 2015. Trescott, a journalist who was cited by the Investigative Reporters and Editors Association, writes with a pro-African American bias as she is an African American herself and stresses the importance of spreading Till’s story. The article published by the nationally acclaimed *The Washington Post* in 2009, interviews Mark Bunch the museum’s director. He articulates that the display of the casket is controversial, but it is important for people to feel the “complexity of emotions” that comes with facing Till’s story first hand. The mixed feelings cultivated by uncomfortable racial issues is highlighted in Harper Lee’s *Go Set a Watchman*, where the accepted heroism of Atticus Finch is compromised by his beliefs of white supremacy. The display of Till’s original casket forces museum visitor’s to glimpse into the open casket like so many did in 1955. Although Till’s unrecognizable face is not there, the exhibition of his casket ensures that the whole world will be faced with Till story and its significance in modern times.

Academic Sources

Kolin, Philip C. “Forgotten Manuscripts: ‘Blues for Emmett Till’: The Earliest Extant Song about the Murder of Emmett Till.” *African American Review* 42, no. 3/4 (2008): 455–60.

Philip Kolin analyzes the impact of one of the earliest, but forgotten song “Blues for Emmet Till,” which emphasizes passing on the story of Till’s murder and unjust trial through the

song itself. Kolin, a white professor at the University of Southern Mississippi and a poet himself, specifically studies history through poems and songs. “Forgotton Manuscripts: ‘Blues for Emmet Till’” not only surfaces the lyrics of the extinct civil rights song, but also illustrates its social and political impact by relating it to other works that followed. Kolin points out that “Blues for Emmet Till,” written by Aaron Kramer and preformed by Clyde Appleton, exemplifies the collaboration of a white writer and black composer, which is also evident in Abel Meeropol’s poem *Strange Fruit*, later sung by Billie Holiday. “Forgotton Manuscripts: ‘Blues for Emmet Till’” resurfaces the song that set a foundation for the circulation of Till’s story through music. Through the essay, Kolin emphasizes the importance in looking into the greater complexity behind the cultural portrayal of Till’s story.

Allen, James. *Without Sanctuary: lynching photography in America*. Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2000.

James Allen compiles early twentieth-century photographs of southern lynching in his book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. The unedited, graphic photographs mainly consist of black victims, but also include white victims who fought against racism. The book includes insightful commentary by Hilton Als, John Lewis and Leon Litwack and personal stories of each person who was lynched. Allen intended the gruesome pictures to speak for themselves and cause an awareness of the inexcusable brutality of lynching. The photos force the audience to see the reality and prevalence of lynching so they become more than the forgotten page of a history book. The powerful effects of viewing uncensored racial violence is reflected through the poem *Strange Fruit*, which was written by Abel Meeropol in response to a lynching photo. Similarly, it was evident to Mamie Bradley that the most effective way to get people to act against racial violence was to show them the horrendous effects of it first hand through the open casket funeral of her son.

Feldstein, Ruth. “I Wanted the Whole World to See.” In J. Meyerowitz (Ed.), *Not June Cleaver*. (pp. 263-303). Philadelphia, PA: Temple, 1994.

In “I Wanted the Whole World to See,” Ruth Feldstein argues that in bringing nationwide attention to the death of her son, Mamie Till utilized motherhood as a political platform. The academic article was published by Temple University Press in the book *Not June Cleaver*, which analyzes the complex societal role of women following World War II. Feldstein, a professor at Rutgers University has also published *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism* and other books with a bias toward female African Americans. “I Wanted the World to See” emphasizes that Mamie Bradley led the nation to acknowledge the terrible death of Emmet Till by sharing her private struggles with the public sphere, especially through her son’s open casket funeral and continuously publicizing Till’s story such as the movie *The Death of Emmett Till*. Mamie’s personal grief, explicitly expressed in photos like *Mamie Bradley Meeting Till’s Casket in Chicago*, was brought to the political realm and sparked conversation about racial brutality.

Works of Fiction

Lee, Harper. *Go Set a Watchman*. New York, NY: Harper, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2015.

The recent publishing of *Go Set a Watchman* by Harper Lee not only catalyzes a modern conversation about white supremacy, but also emphasizes the issue of oversimplifying of leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. Lee drafted it over fifty years before her Pulitzer Prize novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but it was only recently released by HarperCollinsPublishers. Lee, who grew up in Alabama in the mid-twentieth century, writes with bias supporting racial equality. This antagonistic characterization of Finch in *Go Set a Watchman* directly contrasts his identity as an unblemished hero in *To Kill a Mockingbird* who fights against the system of racism. In reestablishing the identity of an accepted literary hero, Lee's recent publishing challenges readers to reevaluate oversimplified views of heroes in the Civil Rights Movement. Specifically, it is important not to dismiss the case of Emmett Till in labeling Emmett as a Martyr and Bryant as a villain—one must consider after effects of Till's death as well. "I Wanted the Whole World to See" by Ruth Feldstien explores Mamie Bradley's efforts to politically publicize the death, and like *Go Set a Watchman*, challenges readers to look into the complexity behind "heroic" characters the Civil Rights Movement.

Meeropol, Abel. "Strange Fruit". *Genius*. Accessed October 26, 2015. <http://genius.com/Abel-meeropol-strange-fruit-annotated>.

The poem "Strange Fruit" by Abel Meeropol, written in 1937, transports the audience to a scene of a black lynching and invokes a gruesome image that is difficult for the reader to forget. Meeropol, who also wrote the Frank Sinatra song "The House I Live In," was a Northern white writer under the name "Lewis Allan." He was greatly disturbed by racial violence in the South and was inspired to write "Strange Fruit," after viewing a picture of a black lynching taken by Lawrence Beitler in 1930. The poem utilizes sensory imagery to create a metaphor between a lynched black man with "the bulging eyes and the twisted mouth" hanging from a tree and him to rotting fruit. The poem transcended the text when it became a nationally famous song by Billie Holiday in 1939. The power of an image to translate across multiple mediums is also reflected in the song "The Death of Emmett Till" by Bob Dylan, which describes the gruesome condition of Emmett Till. In hearing, seeing, and reading about violence toward black people, it forces society to face the issue in a dynamic manner.

Musical Composition

Dylan, Bob. Death Of Emmett Till. Accessed October 7, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVKTx9YIKls>.

Many songs were forms of resistance and brought attention to national issues during the Civil Rights Movement. Bob Dylan's soft ballad "Death of Emmett Till", describes the details of the beating and death of Emmett Till, as well as the unfair trial to follow. Bob Dylan, a famous white American singer, is best known for songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Like a Rolling Stone." His diverse music incorporates social and political messages and makes him a renowned activist for the racial equality. "Death of Emmett Till" was first performed on the radio show *Folksinger's Choice* in 1962, but was not officially released until 1972 on the album *Broadside*

Ballads. It not only narrates Till's murder, but also the unfair trial to follow. It challenges listeners to move past indifference and speak out against the racial discrimination. "Death of Emmet Till" directly relates to the movie *The Untold Story of Emmett Luis Till* with Mamie Till-Mobley, which like the song, investigates Till's murder and the trial through primary sources and calls for a reopening of the case for justice.

Visual Image

Lanier, William. "Mamie Bradley Meeting Till's Casket in Chicago." Still image, 1955.
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97503805/>.

Images of Mamie Bradley-Till grieving over her son were often published along side articles and memorials of Emmett Till's death in order to convey the painful grief caused by racial violence. "Mamie Bradley Meeting Till's Casket in Chicago" was photographed by William Lanier, who is known for his pro-African American photography during the Civil Rights Movement as he captured victories and struggles of the black race. The photo depicts Mamie Bradley-Till falling in the arms of two men during the funeral of her son caused by paralyzing emotional pain. In the devastating raw image, the viewer not only mourns the loss of Emmett Till, but also the insurmountable pain of his mother. Pictures of Mamie Bradley deny the notion that murder only affected Emmett Till himself and highlights racial lynching's ripple effect in which family and friends must grieve the loss of a loved one. The emotional response depicted in "Mamie Bradley Meeting Till's Casket in Chicago" directly contrasts the objective description of Till's funeral in the *New York Times* article "Slain Youth Seen by Thousands," where grief is not portrayed as a significant effect of Till's death.

Dramatic Composition

Coogler, Ryan. *Fruitvale Station*. (2013). The Weinstein Company [Motion picture].
 United States: 2008.

Fruitvale Station, which won the *Grand Jury Prize* and the *Audience Award* in 2013, tells the story of Oscar Grant, a young man who was shot and killed by police at a train station in California. Ryan Coogler, the writer and director of the film, is also well known for the movie *Creed* and *Locks*. Coogler writes with a pro-African American bias, as he is black himself and clearly fights against police brutality through his film. The accuracy of *Fruitvale Station* is questionable, since there is no concrete account of the details of Grant's death but are videos of the police assault. Nevertheless, the movie recreates the life and death of Oscar Grant in order to raise awareness about police brutality. Like *The Untold Story of Emmett Luis Till*, the film presents a personalized view of in order to draw emotions from the viewers who see Oscar's true humanity and fundamental innocence. It is a contemporary example that serves the same purpose as Till's open casket funeral: to show society an uncensored example of racism and present a call to change this inhumane violence.

Till-Mobley, M. (Writer), & Beauchamp, K. (Director). *The Untold Story of Emmett Luis Till*. (Documentary 2005). Accessed October 17, 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvijYSJtkQk>

The Untold Story of Emmett Luis Till, a documentary released in 2005, retells the story of Emmett Till's murder through the eyes of his mother Mamie Till-Mobley and other family members. Keith Beauchamp, who studied criminal justice and closely investigated Emmett Till's murder, directed the film. *The Untold Story of Emmett Luis Till* presents the case of Emmett Till through a very personal and emotional lens as it is told with primary accounts of his family and other witnesses to his kidnap and murder. Familial anecdotes allow the audience to relate to Emmett Till and expose his childhood innocence toward the system of racism. This personal lens contrasts the factual explanation of Till's actions that led to his murder described in the *Wikipedia* article "Emmett Till." The film also follows the unjust trial of the acquitted murderers Milam and Roy Bryant, and ends with a call for justice in the courtroom. *The Untold Story of Emmett Till* is a way for Mamie Till to metaphorically reopen her son's casket to society and ensure that the ongoing injustice of racism is not forgotten half a century later. The film presents such strong evidence against Milam and Roy Bryant that it catalyzed the reopening of the case of Emmett Till in 2005.