

Foreward: Beyond Emmett Till

The Hope of a New Generation

Michael G. Long

If there's anything that shocks students in my civil rights course, it's the photograph of the mangled corpse of Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old Chicagoan lynched by two adult thugs under the cover of night in Money, Mississippi in August 1955. Till, an African American, had broken local customs by whistling at a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, at a small grocery store she and her husband Roy owned and operated. In turn, Roy and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, self-appointed guardians of Jim Crow in Money, exacted revenge on young Till by pistol-whipping him, shooting him in the head, and dumping his body, tied to a cotton gin fan, in the Tallahatchie River.

Mamie Till Bradley, Emmett's mother, insisted on an open casket and permitted photography so that the world could see what the cowardly racists had done to her son.

Photographs of Till's brutalized and bloated head subsequently appeared in *Jet*, a national black publication, and these are the disturbing shots that give my students a small but significant glimpse into the indescribable brutalities suffered by African American children and youth in Jim Crow America.

I'm not exactly sure how to interpret my students' reactions when they see the image of young Till lying in the open casket. Are they upset and unsettled? Are they angered and outraged? Does the image make them want to close their eyes, turn their heads, and forget? Or does it inspire them to ensure such brutality never happens again? Do they see it as part of an ancient past never to be relived, or as evidence directly connected to contemporary racism and violence?

The *Jet* photographs infuriated African Americans across the country in 1955, but they had no similar effect on the all-white jury in Sumner, Mississippi. The male jurors needed little more than an hour to acquit both Milam and Bryant, and it took that long only because they stopped for sodas before returning to the courtroom. My students are incredulous when they see images of Bryant and Milam kissing their wives and chewing on fat cigars following the verdict. How could this possibly have happened in the land of the free?

We explore the reasons underlying the verdict, but I also make sure to tell them that the gross miscarriage of justice had a far more significant effect than incredulousness in 1955—that the case of Emmett Till actually helped to ignite the modern civil rights movement. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) used the Till case to stage protests at the time, and just one hundred days after Till's death, Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, launching a boycott that led to a full-scale movement.

Because of the lynching of Emmett Till, as well as countless other gross injustices, African American adults throughout the nation were primed for protest as 1955 drew to a close. Those adults included Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., who shortly after the return of the Till verdict, described the heinous case by saying it “might be

considered one of the most brutal and inhuman crimes of the twentieth century.”

The Till case also had a demonstrable effect on African American children and youths throughout Mississippi and other states where Jim Crow ruled with an iron fist. The lynching terrorized and traumatized them, of course, but it also made some of them angry as hell. That was the experience of Joyce Ladner, now senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, who was twelve years old and lived in southern Mississippi at the time of the lynching. “I cannot remember having felt more vulnerable, more frightened . . . but at the same time, more angry,” she recalls, adding that she can remember her anger “very, very much.”

Remarkably, the terror and fury that young people felt in the land of Jim Crow transformed into hope-filled action in the post-Till years. The sickening photograph of Till’s mutilated face became a powerful image that inspired a generation of young African Americans to ensure that the same would not happen to them or anyone else. With Till’s face burned into their hearts and minds, this new generation boycotted a racist bus company in Montgomery, sat at segregated lunch counters in Greensboro and Nashville, took Freedom Rides into the Deep South, filled the jails of Birmingham, marched on Washington, organized black voters in Mississippi, and demanded the right to vote in Selma, among so many other things. In the case of Joyce Ladner, she became a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and, many years later, served as interim president of Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she inspired thousands of young African Americans.

This points to one of the main lessons of this powerful new book by Rufus Burrow: rather than despairing over Emmett Till, allowing his lynching to be the last and final word, a new generation of young African Americans organized themselves, grew powerful and, with

hope against hope, tried to create a civil and political society marked by liberty and justice for all. It's so easy for us to focus stereoscopically on the gut-wrenching case of Emmett Till—his horrifying face, his mother's tears, his smirking killers, and their racist buddies—but Burrow's study sees Till's death as the beginning of an enlivening era of hopeful activism in which children and youths, particularly African Americans, stood tall, often taller than their parents, teachers, and mentors, and demanded the justice that had eluded Till and the first-class citizenship denied to millions of African Americans in the land of the free.

We are greatly indebted to Professor Burrow for sharing the inspiring story of these brave young activists. It's not an easy story to tell. For one thing, the young activists were not a monolithic block; they differed from one another in terms of strategy and goals, region and education, class and gender—and race-consciousness. Student activists from the corridors of power at Stanford and Yale, for instance, were radically different from young black leaders reared along the dusty roads of rural Mississippi. For another, the young activists were not a self-contained unit; they existed in relation to adults who, at different points, were insightful and clueless, courageous and fearful, helpful and obstructive. We can fully understand the energetic and brash Diane Nash of the Freedom Riders, for example, only by recognizing that while she took some cues from Martin Luther King Jr., she also plowed past his occasional reticence. In typical fashion, however, Professor Burrow tells the story with such nuance and clarity that by the end of the book we can only stand in awe of the masterly and compelling way in which he presents this understudied, underreported, and underappreciated part of U.S. history.

Burrow's book adds depth not only to our knowledge of the many roles played by courageous young people in the civil rights

movement, some of whom died because of their daring work, but also to our understanding of Martin Luther King Jr. The interplay between King and young activists, so carefully depicted in the pages ahead, shows the great civil rights *leader* as a *follower* of young people—one inspired by their strategic ideas, their impatient attitudes, and their high-risk actions. It reveals America's prophet as an object of prophetic wrath unleashed by young people who found him too dependent on Washington. It depicts the Great Man of civil rights history as dependent upon imprisoned and beaten children and youth for the fulfillment of his dream—as part of a grassroots movement populated largely by young activists. And it shows the man who demanded so much of adults of all colors as generously supportive of young folks in need of their own inspiration and instruction.

I have been reading Professor Burrow's first-rate books for many years now, and I dare say this one stands above all others in the way it has captured my attention, fueled my imagination, and offered me a sense of hope for tomorrow. The generation of young African Americans who joined King in fiercely resurrecting the principles of equality, freedom, and justice to save the soul of our nation, as described so movingly here, leaves me with hope in the face of ongoing injustices related to race and ethnicity, including those which, like the Till case, end in murders crying out for attention—and for justice. The post-Till generation of young African Americans bore witness to the resilience of the human spirit like none other in U.S. history; the children and youths of this generation turned lynching into love—a tough love that pushed, even shoved, individual hearts and social systems far along the arc of the moral universe that King invoked so many times. We are better because of their unshakable witness, but we could be so much better if we tended to their hopeful stance anew, allowing their historic acts

of courage to inspire us, no matter our age, to carry the freedom struggle forward.