

Tracing Emmett Till's Legacy from Black Lives Matter back to the Civil Rights Movement

Martín FERNÁNDEZ FERNÁNDEZ

Author:

Martín Fernández Fernández
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Spain
m.fernandez.fernandez@usc.es
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5153-5190>

Date of reception: 30/05/2020

Date of acceptance: 16/10/2020

Citation:

Fernández, Martín. "Tracing Emmet Till's Legacy from Black Lives Matter back to the Civil Rights Movement." *Alicante Journal of English Studies*, no. 33 (2020): 43-62.
<https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.2020.33.03>

© 2020 Martín Fernández Fernández

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).



Abstract

This paper explores the legacy of the Emmett Till case as one of the core elements which binds together the Civil Rights Movement and the current Black Lives Matter in the US. Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2017 has magnified the escalating racial tension of recent years and has, at the same time, fueled several forms of social activism across the United States. Acting as the catalyst for Black Lives Matter, the assassination of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012 stirred the race question in the country as the Till lynching had similarly done fifty seven years before. At the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement, the complex relations between race, class, and gender within the South helped to set the atmosphere for one of the starkest assassinations in US history. Till's infamous murder soon gave rise to an empowering narrative among the African American community that not only contributed to putting an end to the voracious rule of Jim Crow in the US South but that, with the passage of time, has also become a banner of justice in the current fight against racism, as it seems that recent violent events resuscitate the latent white supremacist ghosts of one of the world's most powerful nations.

Keywords: Emmett Till; Civil Rights Movement; Black Lives Matter; racism; white supremacy

1 The research for this article was funded by the project USRACEBODY, PGC2018-095687-B-I00, AEI/ERDF, EU. This article also benefits from the collaboration of the research group 'Discourse and Identity' (ED431C 2019/01) and the Grants for Predoctoral Stages of the Xunta de Galicia, partly co-financed by the European Social Fund's operational program Galicia 2014-2020 (ED481A-2017/138).

1. Introduction

The figure of Emmett Till has never left the African American collective imaginary and, as the 2018 reopening of the case evinces, it remains a matter of great social relevance in the United States. Although the reason that led the Trump administration to reinvestigate the gruesome lynching was most likely a bid to redeem its public image after the disgraceful family separation crisis of the summer of 2018—something that, according to Timothy Tyson (2018), constitutes a “civil rights charade” given Trump’s attacks on voting rights—, the reopening confirms that the structures of power also acknowledge the case’s current weight within US society. Emmett Till was one of the major catalysts for the Civil Rights Movement and, since then, his figure has become a banner of justice for African American activism. His image is frequently spotted at rallies against police brutality in the country and his story has been, and is, invoked by the mothers of the recent victims as a means of establishing a network of mourning but, at the same time, empowerment. That is one of the virtues of Black Lives Matter for, as Claudia Rankine (2016, 151) notes, “[u]nlike earlier black-power movements that tried to fight or segregate for self-preservation, [Black Lives Matter] aligns with the death, continues the mourning, and refuses the forgetting in front of all of us.” The movement configures a space of resistance against white supremacy that also recognises its black victims and which fights against racism now, but also bears in mind the triumphs and failures of the past. Being acquainted with the past becomes crucial in the current fight since, in the end, as Jesmyn Ward (2016, 6) contends we can, “[r]eplace ropes with bullets. Hound dogs with German shepherds. A gray uniform with a bulletproof vest. Nothing is new.”

Back in the obscure times of the Jim Crow South, fourteen-year-old black Chicago youth Emmett Till decided to spend his summer vacations with his southern relatives in Money, Mississippi, and, four days after his arrival down south, an innocent fleeting encounter in a local store would trigger one of the cruelest assassinations in the history of the US. The whole truth about what happened on that fateful Wednesday, August 24, 1955 has never been clarified and will never be known for sure. Countless versions have been produced of the “less than a minute” (Wright and Boyd 2011, 50) that the fourteen-year-old African American boy allegedly spent alone with the white storekeeper Carolyn Bryant; but what is clear is that this encounter would lead, days later, to his infamous lynching in the Mississippi Delta. According to historian Devery S. Anderson (2015, 28), who has written one of the most updated and insightful revisitations of the case, the most likely version of the incident is the following: Emmett Till entered in the store to buy some bubble gum, allegedly said or did

something *inappropriate* according to southern etiquette to Carolyn Bryant, and then left the store escorted by his cousin Simeon Wright, who had stepped inside just in case there was trouble. Apart from that, Till apparently wolf-whistled at the woman when she walked out of the store afterward but, although many would later call it the wolf-whistle case, there is no historiographic agreement on this detail. Whether there was a wolf-whistle or not, that fleeting interaction between the young African American boy and the white southern storekeeper would be what, four days later, unleashed the cruelest facet of white supremacy and led Carolyn Bryant's relatives to perpetrate the gruesome lynching.

Just after midnight on Sunday, August 28, 1955, Emmett Till was abducted from his uncle's home to then be savagely beaten and shot dead by southern white supremacists Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, respectively Carolyn Bryant's husband and brother-in-law. His battered body remained three days at the bottom of the Tallahatchie River tied with barbed wire to a heavy metal gin fan until a local fisherman found it floating on the dark waters of the river. Thanks to the tenacity of his mother, the boy's open-casket funeral later helped to raise awareness of the insidious level of antiblack violence to which the black community was subjected in the country and, according to David Halberstam (1993, 437), this infamous case wound up constituting "the first great media event of the Civil Rights Movement." While millions of overwhelmed US citizens closely followed the legal outcome of the lynching, Till's killers were tried for their crimes in southern courts and eventually acquitted of the boy's murder by an all-white and all-male jury after a sixty-seven-minute deliberation, which would have been shorter had they not taken a break to drink soda. Weeks later, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam were also acquitted of the remaining kidnapping charge despite having previously admitted to Till's abduction and, in exchange for 4,000 dollars, they openly confessed their heinous crime in an article published in the January 24, 1956 issue of *Look* magazine since, given the Double Jeopardy Clause of the US Constitution, they could not be prosecuted again for the same legal causes after their acquittals. The outrage of the African American community raised by the infamous case acted as a catalyst for the incipient Civil Rights Movement and, for more than six decades, his tragic story has continued to fuel various forms of social activism across the US as it seems that, despite the passage of time, the latent white supremacist ghosts of the country are experiencing a steady revival over the course of recent years.

2. The Glorious White National Past and the Geographies of Criminalizing Black People

With Charlottesville's Unite the Right rally in August 2017, white supremacist symbols and chants were displayed and sung by those in attendance and the

presence of a proud US far-right was made visible before the incredulous eyes of that part of the country still unaffected by the endemic racial hatred that stalks black people's lives each day. Donald Trump's refusal to explicitly denounce the rally's white nationalists, together with his statement blaming both protesters and counter-protesters for the violent outcome have helped to normalize the xenophobic discourse of the far-right. His inauguration as 46th President of the United States in January 2017 had magnified an already existing climate of escalating racial tension after a presidential campaign that focused on isolationist trade policies, the reinforcement of law and order, and racially provocative anti-immigration policies—with a relentless and ruthless rhetorical attack on the US-Mexican border. The combination of these last two resulted in the infamous family separation policy which, between May and June 2018, originated a humanitarian crisis given the inhuman conditions of the affected children and parents. Trump's famous campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," was an invocation to a romanticized vision of the past which, if anything, was not so great for all Americans. Just take, for instance, the harsh state repression targeting the African American community during the civil rights era; the images of firefighters hosing peaceful protesters, German shepherds attacking them, and white people filled with racial hatred throwing stones at black students who were attending college or punching, kicking, and beating African Americans who were claiming basic rights to access public spaces like eateries, hotels, schools, and workplaces. Given this historical context, what does Make America Great Again actually mean?

Well into the years of slavery, racial ideology sprung up in the United States and then progressively infected and spread across the sociocultural pattern of the country. In her celebrated article, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," Barbara Jeanne Fields (1990, 106) analyzes the formation of "[r]ace as a coherent ideology" and details how it "did not spring into being simultaneously with slavery, but took even more time than slavery did to become systematic." The conflicts between the Euro-American elites of the colonies, who pushed as far as they could in the exploitation of their workers, and the white indentured servants, who could, as a large social group, potentially pose a serious threat to the colonial status quo, had eventually resulted in a tacit agreement on the racial divide of the working class in colonial America. While indentured servants were eventually freed from their quasi-slave working conditions, African Americans fell even deeper into the jaws of the slaveholding society. As Fields (108) remarks, if slavery was to survive—even after the United States declared their independence—it "required the white majority to develop its own characteristic form of racial ideology." At the bottom of the US social hierarchy, African Americans suffered the extreme conditions of a slaveholding system which relied on the deprivation of their liberty and the brutalization of their lives in order to exist. Fields (115) characterizes

the resulting racial ideology as “the ideology to be expected in a society in which enslavement stands as an exception to a radically defined liberty so commonplace that no great effort of imagination is required to take it for granted” or, as she succinctly clarifies, “the ideology proper to a ‘free’ society in which the enslaved descendants of Africans are an anomalous exception.”

This *anomalous exception* has evolved and adapted over the passage of time to become an integral part of the US racial ideology. The proliferation of this radical ideology contributed to underpinning the increasing systematization of racial discrimination against black people and spurred the racial hatred of the white supremacist mentality. After the abolition of slavery, the anti-black violence that erupted in the US South during the Reconstruction period evinced the successful role of racial discrimination in the configuration of racial ideology in the country. In *Stamped from the Beginning*, Ibram X. Kendi (2017) explores the history of racism in the United States and contends that, contrary to the popular belief, the alleged historical causality between racial hatred, racist ideas, and racism “has actually been the inverse relationship—racial discrimination led to racist ideas which led to ignorance and hate”(9). Resistance to US racial ideology during the slavery, segregation and mass incarceration eras has been systematically undermined by the production of racist ideas, for, as Kendi (2017, 10) argues, “[t]he principal function of racist ideas in American history has been the suppression of resistance to racial discrimination and its resulting racial disparities.” All these issues integrate the larger realms of the US racial ideology and contribute to reinventing and reshaping them in what Kendi describes as a constant “dueling duality” (xi) between the simultaneous history of racial progress and racist progress for, as the historian shows in his book, one can see both “the antiracist force of equality and the racist force of inequality marching forward, progressing in rhetoric, in tactics, in policies” (x).

The post-2016 resurgence of ever-present white supremacist rhetorics along with the ongoing governmental policies which continue to criminalize black people in the United States have awakened a new wave of social activism in the country. Standing now as a convergence of nationwide organizational efforts, Black Lives Matter has become a major social movement which thrives in the contemporary communicational mechanism of social media to share their tenacious message of: “working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise” (Black Lives Matter). The different chapters of the association—i.e. local groups—have been channeling the outrage and frustration of the African American community into an organized tide that fights against the myriad facets of racism. This modern social movement emerged as an urgent reaction to the indiscriminate destruction of black lives during the early 2010s, particularly at the hands of police authorities. Unlike in the past, the racist crimes of police officers are now rapidly

exposed on social media by anonymous bystanders, relatives or friends of the victims to denounce the still extant lack of basic rights that African Americans have to endure every day in the country. Black Lives Matter consciously follows a long tradition of black activism which can be traced from the latest victims of police brutality back to the heinous murder of Emmett Till since, as Christopher Benson (Chamberlain 2015), the University of Illinois professor who co-authored the biography of Emmett Till's mother, reflects in an interview on August 17, 2015, "[b]efore Trayvon Martin, before Michael Brown, before Tamir Rice, there was Emmett Till. This was the first 'Black Lives Matter' story." With an updated scope focused on the ongoing struggle for racial equality, Black Lives Matter activists have joined other voices in denouncing the stark inequalities currently faced by black people before US law, which, although there are others, mainly revolve around three interrelated legal geographies of systemic subjugation of the African American community: mass incarceration, racial profiling, and police brutality.

2.1. The Politics of Carcerality in the Racially Biased Mass Incarceration Era

The situation of African Americans within the US criminal justice system can be explained with data, but it may help to first put it into context by evaluating the political life of civil rights from the vantage point of the US presidency. While still in the White House, former President Barack Obama (2015) made a famous speech at the 106th national convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) where he addressed the issue:

So let's look at the statistics. The United States is home to 5 percent of the world's population, but 25 percent of the world's prisoners. Think about that. Our incarceration rate is four times higher than China's. We keep more people behind bars than the top 35 European countries combined. And it hasn't always been the case—this huge explosion in incarceration rates. In 1980, there were 500,000 people behind bars in America— half a million people in 1980 [...] Today there are 2.2 million. It has quadrupled since 1980. Our prison population has doubled in the last two decades alone.

These (rounded) numbers were admitted to by the, at the time, head of the US government himself and, to them, one could also add the 338,028 prisoners registered in 1970 (Schiraldi & Ziedenberg 2000), the year considered to be the birth of the current mass incarceration era, to give a broader perspective. These statistics account for a history of criminal justice system policies which dates back to Richard Nixon's politics of law and order in the 1970s and which Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton reinforced over their subsequent administrations.

The statistics respond to a US criminal justice system which has systematically criminalized the African American community since at least the end of the Jim Crow era. Back in the 1960s, while the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement were placing the vision of an end to segregation on the national agenda, white supremacy was breeding new forms of subjugation to overcome this egalitarian blow to its very foundations. As Michelle Alexander (2010, 41) contends in *The New Jim Crow*, by the time the African American community was making progress for equal rights and Martin Luther King Jr.'s inclusive discourse grew within US society, "[t]he racial imagery associated with the riots gave fuel to the argument that civil rights for blacks led to rampant crime." Crime was increasing, according to sociologist John Hagan (DuVernay 2016), "just through sheer demographic change," but blaming the Civil Rights Movement for it became central to some sectors of US politics. This atmosphere put race at the center of the 1968 presidential election and, after a campaign mainly focused on the law and order discourse, Nixon became the 37th President of the United States. His administration focused on the *restoration* of social order and implemented a strong in-depth reform of the criminal justice system which, essentially, set up the black political movements of the time as its main targets.

After its further reinforcement during the Reagan and Bush administrations, the law and order rhetoric, along with its covert effects on the African American community, pervaded the full spectrum of US national politics during the 1992 presidential election. Incumbent Republican President George H.W. Bush was up against Democratic candidate Bill Clinton in a campaign focused on social order where, for the first time, both politicians strongly endorsed the enforcement of the criminal justice system. When Clinton was inaugurated as the 42nd President of the United States, he soon passed his "Three Strikes and You're Out" law—which essentially mandated that a person convicted for a third crime would receive a life sentence—and, years later, followed it with the Federal Crime Bill of 1994. According to a report of the Justice Policy Institute (Feldman et al. 2001, 3), the bill resulted in "the largest increases in federal and state prison inmates of any president in American history" and, by 2000, the inmate population was roughly double the more than one million registered in 1990. This reform perfected the whole structure of the mass incarceration machine with a huge expansion of the criminal infrastructure and, as Craig DeRoche (DuVernay 2016) explains, it led to the "militarization all the way down to small, rural police departments that have SWAT teams."² With the passage of time, the bill has proven inefficient

2 A SWAT (special weapons and tactic) team is a specialized and militarized law enforcement unit which was originally conceived to handle riot control and was eventually used to combat the so-called War on Drugs in the country.

in reducing crime—even Clinton (2015) himself admitted in 2015 to having “signed a bill that made the problem worse”—but it has utterly succeeded as the culmination of a systemic retaliation to the advancements of the Civil Rights Movement. In this, the state has perfected a biased mass incarceration system which, as Alexander (2010, 11) metaphorically describes in her celebrated monograph, has resulted in nothing less than “the New Jim Crow.”

Save the obvious differences with Jim Crow, the ongoing mass incarceration era functions as a mechanism of social order which, despite this being a problem across all sections of society, has undeniably targeted black people in particular across the United States. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Davis (2003, 16) analyzes the racial bias in the US penal system and explains how, despite the passage of time, “[b]ecause of the persistent power of racism, ‘criminals’ and ‘evildoers’ are, in the collective imagination, fantasized as people of color.” The statistics reveal a clearly imbalanced situation for the 13.4 percent of the US population comprising the African American community (US Census Bureau 2017). According to 2014 data, “overall blacks are incarcerated at a rate of 1,408 per 100,000 while whites are incarcerated at a rate of 275 per 100,000” (Nellis 2016, 4) and, as reported in 2011 by the Executive Director of The Sentencing Project³ Marc Mauer (2011, 88) “[i]f current trends continue, 1 of every 3 African American males born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime, as can 1 of every 6 Latino males, compared to 1 in 17 White males.” In addition to this, the records for black female incarceration further confirm the racial disparities of the criminal justice system since, according to the October 2020 bulletin of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, “the imprisonment rate of black females (83 per 100,000 black female U.S. residents) was 1.7 times the rate of white females (48 per 100,000 white female U.S. residents)” (Carson 2020, 16). The racially biased carceral geography of the United States constitutes what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007, 2) describes in *Golden Gulag* as “a system in which punishment has become as industrialized as making cars, clothes, or missiles, or growing cotton” and which, as Davis (2003, 16) remarks, “functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers.”

This voracious machine is designed to grind down black lives and expel them back into society as pariahs. No matter how much or how little time a person may spend behind bars, s/he is released as a second-class citizen and, even when

3 The Sentencing Project is an organization which “works for a fair and effective U.S. criminal justice system by promoting reforms in sentencing policy, addressing unjust racial disparities and practices, and advocating for alternatives to incarceration” (The Sentencing Project).

someone does not spend time in prison but is branded a felon, s/he carries the burden of the criminal label for his/her entire life as well. This means that, in the eyes of the system, you are a criminal for the rest of your existence and you are thus deprived of a number of rights which hinder your normal reinsertion into mainstream society. According to Alexander (2010, 92), people convicted for drug addiction or possession of a small amount of drugs, for instance, share the same criminal category—i.e. felons—with all violent offenders and are consequently “barred from public housing by law, discriminated against by private landlords, ineligible for food stamps, forced to ‘check the box’ indicating a felony conviction on employment applications for nearly every job, and denied licenses for a wide range of professions.” Additionally, felons may be permanently denied the right to vote in some of the most restrictive states and are, to a greater or lesser extent, temporarily disenfranchised in all other states except for Maine and Vermont. This situation often pushes people into a cycle where they might likely be convicted again for minor offenses related to, or as a consequence of, their precarious economic conditions. In the end, as Eduardo Mendieta (2004, 54) contends in his insightful essay “Plantations, ghettos, prisons: US racial geographies,” prison—and the constricting taint that it leaves on people—“as extension of the ghetto, continues this form of natal alienation and social death through its policies of cultural, social, and political exclusion.” Once one acquires second-class status, there is no way out of it within the current system.

2.2. *The Fatal Outcome of Racial Profiling and Police Brutality in the US*

The War on Drugs has played a pivotal role in the creation of modern forms of the subjugation of the African American community, such as the enforcement of laws that have fostered racial profiling. Black people are constantly stopped and frisked by police officers on the streets across the United States for an infinite variety of random reasons under the covert pretext of the police officer being suspicious of, among others, drug possession. The white supremacist mentality has constantly associated African Americans with drugs and crime and, as Alexander (2010, 7) remarks, although “studies show that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates,” the research conducted by Jonathan Rothwell (2014) shows that “[b]lacks remain far more likely than whites to be arrested for selling drugs (3.6 times more likely) or possessing drugs (2.5 times more likely).” The enforcement of the “Stop and Frisk” laws—which oftentimes collide head-on with the 4th Amendment of the US Constitution that, in short, prohibits unreasonable searches and seizures—has, since the dawn of the War on Drugs, bestowed police authorities with an almost totalitarian power which is disproportionately exerted on African Americans. Backed by the

US Supreme Court, police officers have *carte blanche* to criminalize dark-skinned folks and, in the process, undermine their lives with total impunity.

In 2014, the Kalief Browder case was reported on by the national media and exposed the injustices of the criminal justice system. A sixteen-year-old African American high schooler, Browder was going home at night when he was arrested on May 15, 2010 for allegedly stealing a backpack in the Bronx. According to the laws of the State of New York, he could have pled guilty and gone home with the criminal label upon him, but he refused and was thus sent to jail pending trial with a bail of \$10,000 which his family could not even dream of paying. After almost three years waiting for a trial on Rikers Island jail complex, several refusals to plead guilty, experiencing all manner of prison violence, and attempts at suicide, he was released a week before the charges against him were dismissed in May 2013. In similar cases, tens of thousands of African Americans plead guilty to crimes that they have not committed due to the fear of irrational mandatory minimums,⁴ but Browder maintained his innocence to the last. When he was asked why he did so, in a 2014 interview for ABC News, he responded: “If I would’ve just pled guilty, then my story would’ve never been heard. Nobody would’ve took [sic] the time to listen to me. I’d have been just another criminal” (Browder 2015). His brave determination sought to combat the narrative of the criminalization of the African American community that, more than fifty years ago, had also imbued the social reception of the Emmett Till case. Only two years after his release from prison and periods of severe depression, Browder put an end to his life by hanging himself when he was just twenty-two years old.

Other forms of systemic and police violence towards the African American community are not so subtle, but are equally lethal to its victims, as the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement has been denouncing over the last few years. Founded in 2013, one of the association’s pillars revolves around the struggle against police brutality to which black people are exposed daily across the country. Notorious cases, like that of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in 2014 and the subsequent riots in Ferguson, Missouri, have not restrained the impunity of their assassins before the law; and the key of the problem might be that, as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015, 78) notes in his book *Between the World and Me*, “[t]he truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear.” The narrative of the dark-skinned criminal has taken over US idiosyncrasy and, if white racists do not justify the facts by twisting logic and truth to their utmost, a major part of the population remains impassive

4 For instance, as Alexander (2010, 86) points out, “[t]he typical mandatory sentence for a first-time drug offense in federal court is five or ten years. By contrast, in other developed countries around the world, a first-time drug offense would merit no more than six months in jail, if jail time is imposed at all.”

in front of the file footage of black bodies being denigrated, beaten, asphyxiated or shot by police authorities viciously drunk with white supremacist hatred. The sad reality is that, according to Rankine (2016, 147), Americans “live in a country where [they] assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings,” a country in which “[d]ead blacks are part of normal life.”

This fatal trend does not even spare minors and the numbers of black youths murdered at the hands of police authorities and racist vigilantes are painful to count. Amir Brooks (1997 - 2014), Christopher McKay (1996 - 2014), Tamir Rice (2002 - 2014), Darius Simmons (1998 - 2012), Aiyana Stanley-Jones (2002 - 2010) and Cameron Tillman (2000 - 2014) are some of those children and teenagers who were murdered by an actual bullet of the state.⁵ Amongst them, the assassination of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin by white vigilante George Zimmerman in 2012 was a turning point in recent US history for it can be considered the catalyst of the Black Lives Matter era. After the news of the murder spread across the country, masses of black voices caused social media to collapse with their outrage and laid the seeds for the birth of the movement with the hashtag which would eventually give it its name: #BlackLivesMatter. Radical black organizers Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi were the masterminds of the project, which channeled the outrage of the black community into this contemporary form of social activism. Black Lives Matter constitutes a modern association which challenges the long-established institutions of white supremacy as a (virtually) omnipresent phenomenon which relies on social media and, therefore, cannot be stopped with traditional forms of state repression. This model responds to what Isabel Wilkerson (2016, 61) describes as “a second [n]adir” of violence for “[i]t seems that the rate of police killings now surpasses the rate of lynchings during the worst decades of the Jim Crow era.” Past and present, indeed, seem to now coalesce since the Trayvon Martin case has raised the race question in the United States just as the Emmett Till lynching had done fifty seven years before.

3. Tearing Down the Pillars of the Jim Crow South

More than a century ago, the southern way of life had resisted the Civil War and an incomplete Reconstruction to then be perpetuated by a new caste system anchored in the racial, class, and gendered pillars of the Old South. The

5 In 2017, the case of fifteen-year-old John Edwards resulted in the sentencing to 15 years in prison of the Dallas police officer who murdered the African American teenager on the same day that, sixty-three years before, Emmett Till had been fatally lynched by southern white supremacists. As Kurtis Lee wrote in the *LA Times*, this sentence meant “a rare victory for civil rights activists seeking justice for the dozens of unarmed African American men and boys who have been killed by police officers in recent years” (2018).

segregation of public and private life created a social scenario which relegated African Americans to the bottom of US society. Their second-class citizenship was not accounted for by their economic possibilities but rather it was completely dependent on and molded by racial bias. White elites succeeded in frustrating the timid attempts of the southern working class to come together to protest against their common precarious economic conditions, and polluted the mind of the average white southerner with racial hatred in order to sustain the white supremacist status quo. By ostracizing African Americans into second-class citizenship, the poorest of whites always felt superior to the richest of blacks and, thus, the southern white elites prevented any possible interracial alliance against their supremacist rule. Among the countless segregated spaces of southern life, rail transportation offered a clear illustration of the contradictory tensions between race and class status with regard to, as Grace Elizabeth Hale (1998, 132) puts it, “how inferior facilities and service worked to ease white anxiety about better-off blacks.” When traveling in or across the Jim Crow South, African Americans were automatically relegated to the worst passenger cars and even mandated to wait until the last white passengers bought their tickets, which often denied black people access to the train if the seats were sold out by whites and there was no fully segregated car available to them. W.E.B. Dubois (1921, 230) described this schizophrenic reality in his 1921 study of African American life in the country, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*, wherein he concludes that “[t]here is not in the world a more disgraceful denial of human brotherhood than the ‘Jim-Crow’ car of the southern United States.”

The intersections of the racial and class pillars cemented the foundations of the southern way of life, but both revolved around the oldest of the three: the gendered pillar. The increasing anxieties of the white supremacist patriarchy put into motion the southern myth-making machine and produced a set of hegemonic mythical narratives which, to a certain extent, still permeate the US collective imaginary nowadays.⁶ Myths such as the purity of white womanhood, the black mammy, the black whore and the black beast rapist sprung up in the early days of the Jim Crow era, and culminated in sex being established, as sociologist Gunnar Myrdal notes, as “the principle around which the whole structure of segregation ... [was] organized” (quoted in McGuire 2010, vii). The sexual frustrations of the male white southerner pedestaled the conception of

6 In June 2015, the myth of the protection of white womanhood was invoked by white supremacist and mass murderer Dylann Roof before opening fire at the Charleston Church shooting after complaining that “[African Americans] are raping our women and taking over the country” (Blow 2015).

the white lady to the point where the so-called *southern belle* was perceived as a quasi-goddess-like creature. She became the emblem of the South—according to W.J. Cash's seminal work *The Mind of the South*, "her identification with the very notion of the South itself" (1991, 116)—and her purity was to be protected at all costs and by any means. As Senator Coleman Blease, a fervent advocate of lynching at the time, roared to a crowd of supporters in 1930: "[w]henver the Constitution [of the United States] comes between me and the virtue of the white women of the South, I say to hell with the Constitution!" (quoted in Cash 1991, 248). When the loophole of the Constitution was not enough to repress the liberties of the African American community, this warrior-like mentality took over the South and guaranteed the perpetuation of white supremacy under the rule of Jim Crow.

Among the various sections of the South, this set of hegemonic mythical narratives was harbored and championed with greater fervor within the boundaries of Mississippi. The Magnolia State epitomized the white supremacist patriarchy at its "best" and was proudly considered, as historian James C. Cobb (1992, vii) states, "the most southern place on earth." Its strong idealization of a glorious regional past together with its blatant economic and racial disparities created a stagnant social atmosphere in which the white supremacist hate discourse seemed to not have opposition. James Baldwin witnessed with his own eyes this hostile climate on his first trip to the Deep South in 1957 and, still shocked about what he had seen, he meditated on his southern experience fifteen years later as follows:

I doubt that I really knew much about terror before I went South. I do not mean, merely, though I very well might, that visceral reaction produced by the realization that one is facing one's own death. Then, as now, a Northern policeman, black or white, a white co-worker, or a black one, the colorless walls of precinct basements, the colorless handcuffs, the colorless future, are quite enough to introduce into one's life the stunning realization that life can be ended at any moment. (Baldwin 1998, 388)

Baldwin's account was an eloquent depiction of the fragility of black life under the southern white supremacist rule. During the Jim Crow era, the merest transgression of the constricted southern etiquette could mean the death of black people and this palpable hostility left a profound traumatic impression on the author who comments in his essay (386): "I felt as though I had wandered into hell." Within this *infernal* scenario, the southern way of life remained almost intact throughout the twentieth century until the resilient African American resistance started to bring some victories in the civil rights arena.

3.1. *The Empowering Role of the Emmett Till Narrative in Civil Rights Activism*

During the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, an African American tide of social activism was steadily bringing into being the foundations of what would soon become the Civil Rights Movement. Fearsome of the winds of change, the southern white supremacist engine was put into full motion for the preservation of its status quo at the same time as its authorities launched a repressive and violent campaign against black people. The traditional hegemony of the southern way of life was being severely threatened for the first time since the US Civil War and white supremacy was ready and willing to reveal its crudest face. In this unstable climate, the decision of the United States Supreme Court to declare the practice of separate public schools for black and white students unconstitutional on May 17, 1954 (i.e. *Brown v. Board of Education*) dealt an egalitarian blow to the racist apparatus. White southerners were witnessing how the traditional pillars of the region were in danger and, enraged by the prospect of them crumbling, their constant state of paranoia and alertness increased dramatically. On August 28, 1955, Emmett Till was brutally lynched in the Mississippi Delta and, from that moment onwards, the history of race relations in the country was never to be the same.

The gruesome lynching of this fourteen-year-old African American boy greatly spurred on the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement which, as the majority of historians agree, would crystalize with Rosa Parks' courageous defiance to the white supremacist status quo. A hundred days after Till's lynching, Parks refused to yield her seat to a white passenger on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and was subsequently arrested for breaking a segregation ordinance. Being an NAACP official, Parks had attended a community meeting four days before her historical act where Dr. T.R.M. Howard, a prominent civil rights leader from Mississippi who had assisted Till's relatives during the trial, commented at length on the intricacies of the infamous case. Although Parks was already well acquainted with it from the news, Dr. Howard's detailed description of the tragic story seemed to particularly resonate that day, as David L. Jordan (2014, 18) recounts in his memoir, "I remember engaging in a conversation with Rosa Parks and hearing from her own mouth that the death of Emmett Till is what triggered her refusal to give up her seat to a white man."⁷ The Montgomery Bus Boycott of December of 1955 started just four days after Parks' arrest and constituted the first large-scale demonstration against segregation in the country. Among the leaders of the boycott was a young African American pastor called Martin

7 In her 2003 memoir, Mamie Till-Mobley (2003, 257) also narrates how, after they became close friends, "Rosa Parks would tell me how she felt about Emmett, how she had thought about him on that fateful day when she took that historic stand by keeping her seat."

Luther King Jr., who would soon become a distinguished leader of the Civil Rights Movement. At the beginning of his extraordinary ascent into the annals of history, King already understood the intrinsic martyrdom that the movement would bestow upon some African Americans like Till or himself since, as he prophesied in his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, published in 1958: “Today it is Emmett Till, tomorrow it is Martin Luther King. Then in another tomorrow it will be somebody else” (1958, 156).

While the fight for civil rights intensified across the country, the overwhelming Till narrative was playing a deeply influential role for a whole generation of black activists. Constante González Groba (2018, 180) posits how a large number of them, “particularly those who came of age during the 1950s and 1960s, frequently refer to the murder of Till as a crucial point in their racial and political consciousness.” The case of famous Mississippi civil rights activist Anne Moody instantiates the profound impact that Till’s lynching had on a large number of eventual activists, who historian John Dittmer describe as “the Emmett Till generation” (1994, 58). In her autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Anne Moody explains the harsh revelation that she experienced after learning about the gruesome event when she was just fourteen years of age:

Before Emmett Till’s murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me—the fear of being killed just because I was black. This was the worst of my fears. I knew once I got food, the fear of starving to death would leave. I also was told that if I were a good girl, I wouldn’t have to fear the Devil or hell. I didn’t know what one had to do or not do as a Negro not to be killed. Probably just being a Negro period was enough, I thought. (2004, 132)

The Till case ended up constituting a collective trauma which has been haunting the African American sociocultural imaginary for decades and, as Moody’s experience attests, it also contributed to fueling civil rights activism nationwide. Reverend Jesse Jackson (2003, xii) even came to identify the infamous lynching as the foundational moment of the Civil Rights Movement: “One could make the case that Emmett Till was ‘the big bang,’ the Tallahatchie River was ‘the big bang’ of the civil rights movement;” but, although his statement may be excessive, it is undeniable that the Till case acted as a catalyst in the burgeoning tide of civil rights activism which sprang up during the 1950s and extended through the 1960s.

The traumatizing visual component of the Till case proved decisive in the underpinning of his empowering narrative among the African American community. After the gruesome murder of her only son in the South and the disgraceful acquittal of the boy’s murderers, Mamie Till set out on a quest

for justice which would span the rest of her life. She successfully fought the southern authorities, who wanted to rapidly bury the black teenager in southern soil, to bring Till's body back North and, as she stated herself, endured the pain of a massive open-casket funeral in Chicago to "[l]et the people see what they did to my boy" (Gorn 2018, 59); and the world did indeed see it. David Jackson captured the otherworldly state of Till's body in a historical photograph which spread like wildfire across the country, igniting the consciousness of thousands of young African Americans. As González Groba (2018, 179) remarks, "[t]he horrific picture of Till's disfigured body published in the September 15, 1955 issue of *Jet* magazine was emblazoned on the minds of many young blacks who, upon seeing it, thought that one day they would avenge his death." The blatant lack of justice seen in the Till case along with the inhuman nature of the crime constituted the last straw for many African Americans who soon decided to stand up and organize themselves to fight for their rights, while, as Clenora Hudson-Weems (2006, xliii) asserts, "[t]he Till case exemplified one of the most dynamic forces of its time." Till's tragic story thus raised a liberating storm across the country which converged with the African American activism of the 1940s and early 1950s to eventually galvanize the Civil Rights Movement. Despite the insidious attempts of southern white supremacy to obscure his story, Myisha Priest (2010, 1) reflects on how the figure of Emmett Till "rises before us again and again": it rose first from the silent depths of the Tallahatchie River, then again in his open-casket funeral before the horrified eyes of the vast majority of the country and, as Priest (2010, 1) remarks, "it rose once more still later when the civil rights movement raised Till's body like a banner."

4. Conclusion

In the year of the sixty-fifth anniversary of his death, Emmett Till still permeates a contemporary US society which, in spite of the COVID-19 crisis and the ensuing national lockdown, continues to struggle with the brutalization of black lives on an almost daily basis. Amid the restrictive times of the pandemic, George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old African American man, was murdered on May 25, 2020 by a Minneapolis police officer who asphyxiated him after applying an excessive chokehold to restrain him while, as viral cellphone video clips show, Floyd remained lying face down on the pavement with his hands cuffed behind his back during the arrest. This new act of police brutality exerted on an African American has raised heated protests in Minneapolis and other parts of the country as a collective reaction to the searing vulnerability of black lives in the US. Floyd's death is one act along an ill-fated thread which connects 2020

cases like the murder of Breonna Taylor, a twenty-six-year-old black woman fatally shot at her house by Louisville police officers during a no-warrant search in March, and Ahmaud Arbery, a twenty-five-year-old black man gunned down while jogging by armed white South Georgia residents in February, to the rest of the past black victims murdered at the hands of abusive police authorities or white supremacist vigilantes. As Cal State LA student Jaime Carter told the *LA Times* during the demonstration about Floyd's death on May 28, 2020 in Los Angeles, California, "he [had come] to protest not only the death of Floyd but of many black men and children who died an unjust death. 'It's Emmett Till, it's LaQuan McDonald,' he said. 'It's every one of them'" (Winton and Ormseth 2020).⁸ More than half a decade ago, Emmett Till's powerful narrative contributed to propelling the Civil Rights Movement into existence and tearing down the tyrannical rule of Jim Crow in the South and, despite the passage of time, his memory has continued to reverberate through various social movements to spread the empowering message that, as the chant of an increasing majority resonates, *Black Lives Matter*.

Works Cited

- ALEXANDER, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.
- ANDERSON, Devery S. 2015. *Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi.
- BALDWIN, James. 1998. "No Name in the Street." In Morrison, 349-476.
- BLOW, Charles M. 2015. "In Charleston, a Millennial Race Terrorist." *New York Times*. [Accessed online on May 29, 2020]
- BLACK LIVES MATTER. n.d. "About Black Lives Matter." Accessed online on May 29, 2020. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.
- BROWDER, Kalief. "Who Kalief Browder Might Have Been If He Hadn't Spent Over 1,000 Days in Jail Without a Conviction." ABC news. June 18, 2015. Video, 7:29. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kv6gSl4JcFA>.
- CARSON, E. Anne. 2020. *Prisoners in 2019*. Washington, D.C: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- CASH, Wilbur Joseph. 1991. *The Mind of the South*. New York: Vintage Books.
- CHAMBERLAIN, Craig. 2015. "60 Years Ago This Month, Emmett Till's Death Sparked a Movement: Interview with Christopher Benson." *Illinois News Bureau*. [Accessed online on May 29, 2020]

8 LaQuan McDonald was the seventeen-year-old African American shot dead by a white Chicago police officer on October 20, 2014.

- CLINTON, Bill. Speech given at the Pennsylvania Convention Center, Philadelphia, July 2015. Accessed online on October 15, 2018. <https://naacp.org/latest/president-bill-clinton-speech-at-naacp-106th-convention/>.
- COATES, Ta-Nehisi. 2015. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- COBB, James C. 1992. *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*. New York: Oxford UP.
- DAVIS, Angela Y. 2003. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press.
- DITTMER, John. 1994. *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. Urbana: U of Illinois P.
- DUBOIS, W.E.B. 1920. *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe.
- DURÁN, Isabel, Rebeca Gualberto, Eusebio De Lorenzo, Carmen Méndez and Eduardo Valls, eds. 2018. *A Critical Gaze from the Old World: Transatlantic Perspectives on American Studies*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- DUVERNAY, Ava, dir. *13th*. Kandoo Films, 2016. <https://www.netflix.com/es/title/80091741?source=35>.
- FELDMAN, Lisa, Vincent Schiraldi and Jason Ziedenberg. 2001. *Too Little Too Late: President Clinton's Prison Legacy*. Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute.
- FIELDS, Barbara Jeanne. 1990. "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America." *New Left Review* 181 (1): 95-118.
- GONZÁLEZ GROBA, Constante. 2018. "The Emmett Till Case and Its Reverberations in Southern Autobiography." In Durán et al., 177-195.
- GORN, Elliott J. 2018. *Let the People See: The Story of Emmett Till*. New York: Oxford UP.
- GILMORE, Ruth Wilson. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: U of California P. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520938038>
- HALBERSTAM, David. 1993. *The Fifties*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.
- HALE, Grace Elizabeth. 1998. *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- HUDSON-WEEMS, Clenora. 2006. *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse.
- JACKSON SR., Jesse L. 2003. "Foreword." In Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, xi-xiii.
- JORDAN, David L. 2014. *David L. Jordan: From the Mississippi Cotton Fields to the State Senate, a Memoir*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi.
- KENDI, Ibram X. 2017. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. New York: Bold Type Books.
- KING JR., Martin Luther. 1958. *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. New York: Harper.

- LEE, Kurtis. 2018. "Officer convicted in killing of 15-year-old Jordan Edwards — a rare outcome in police shootings." *Los Angeles Times*. [Accessed online on May 29, 2020]
- MAUER, Marc. 2011. "Addressing Racial Disparities in Incarceration" in "Criminal Justice Reform: Issues and Recommendations for Corrections," ed. Harry K. Wexler, Arthur J. Lurigio, and Pamela F. Rodriguez, special issue, *The Prison Journal* 91 (3): 875–1015. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885511415227>
- MCGUIRE, Danielle L. 2010. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement, from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- MENDIETA, Eduardo. 2004. "Plantations, ghettos, prisons: US racial geographies." *Philosophy & Geography* 7 (1): 43-59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1090377042000196010>
- MOODY, Anne. 2004. *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. New York: Delta Trade.
- MORRISON, Toni, ed. 1998. *Collected Essays*. New York: The Library of America.
- NELLIS, Ashley. 2016. *The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons*. Washington, D.C: The Sentencing Project.
- OBAMA, Barack. 2015. "Remarks by the President at the NAACP Conference." Accessed online on October 15, 2018. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov>.
- PRIEST, Myisha. 2010. "'The nightmare is not cured': Emmett Till and American Healing." *American Quarterly* 62 (1): 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.0.0120>
- RANKINE, Claudia. 2016. "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning." In *Ward* 2016, 145-156.
- ROTHWELL, Jonathan. 2014. *How the War on Drugs Damages Black Social Mobility*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. [Accessed online on November 6, 2020]
- SCHIRALDI, Vincent, and Jason Ziedenberg. 2000. *The Punishing Decade: Prison and Jail Estimates at the Millennium*. Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute.
- THE SENTENCING PROJECT. n.d. "About the Sentencing Project." Accessed online on October 15, 2018. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/about-us>.
- TILL-MOBLEY, Mamie, and Christopher Benson. 2003. *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America*. New York: Random House.
- TYSON, Timothy. 2018. "Emmett Till case reopens: What would it mean to get justice for Emmett Till?" *Detroit Free Press*. [Accessed online on October 15, 2018]
- US CENSUS BUREAU. 2017. "Quick Facts." Accessed online on October 15, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>.
- WARD, Jesmyn, ed. 2016. *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*. New York: Scribner.

- WILKERSON, Isabel. 2016. "Where Do We Go from Here?" In Ward 2016, 59-62.
- WINTON, Richard and Matthew Ormseth. 2020. "Vandalism during heated L.A. protest over George Floyd death sparks concern from police." *Los Angeles Times*. [Accessed online on May 29, 2020]
- WRIGHT, Simeon, and Herb Boyd. 2011. *Simeon's Story: An Eyewitness Account of the Kidnapping of Emmett Till*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.