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60 Years Later, Echoes of Emmett Till's Killing

Charles M. Blow AUG. 31, 2015

Friday was the 60th anniversary of the savage killing of Emmett Till.

Till was a black 14-year-old Chicago boy who was visiting his great-uncle in Mississippi during the summer of 1955.

It is said that the boy said something to, and whistled at, a white woman.

This was a line not crossed in those parts in this country. As I wrote in June when Dylann Roof killed nine black people in a Charleston, S.C., church after complaining that black people are “raping our women”:

“There is the thread of couching his cowardice as chivalry, framing his selfish hatred as noble altruism in defense of white femininity from the black brute. So much black blood has been spilled and so many black necks noosed in the name of protecting white femininity, and by extension, white purity.”

That thread seems altered but unbroken from Emmett’s time to ours.

In the wee hours of the night, two white men kidnaped Emmett from his family’s home, mercilessly beat him, took him to the banks of the Tallahatchie River and shot him in the head, then tied the metal fan of a cotton gin around

his neck with barbed wire and pushed him in.

When Emmett’s body was fished from the river three days later, it had already begun to decompose. He was unrecognizable. His body was identified because he was wearing a ring that had belonged to his father.

His body was sent back to Chicago for burial. His mother, Mamie, collapsed at the sight of the coffin, just two weeks after she kissed her son goodbye.

His mother insisted that the coffin be opened so that she could see her son. As she recalled: “I saw that his tongue was choked out. I noticed that the right eye was lying on midway his cheek. I noticed that his nose had been broken like somebody took a meat chopper and chopped his nose in several places. As I kept looking, I saw a hole, which I presumed was a bullet hole, and I could look through that hole and see daylight on the other side. And I wondered: Was it necessary to shoot him?”

His mother insisted on an open coffin so that everyone could see what had been done to her baby.

According to Deryn S. Anderson’s book about Emmett published this month, the night of the wake alone, “between 10,000 and 50,000 people” filed past Emmett’s glass-covered coffin to gaze at what was left of his face.

A little over two weeks after Emmett was buried, the men who killed him were acquitted, after only 67 minutes of jury deliberations. One juror is said to have told a reporter that the deliberations wouldn’t have taken that long if the jurors hadn’t taken a break to drink a pop.

After the acquittal the killers kissed their wives, lit cigars and posed for pictures.

And unfortunately, Emmett’s case was far from the only one. As the law professors Margaret A. Burnham and Margaret M. Russell wrote in *The Times*

last week, there are hundreds of “disappeared” black people in this country “who were victims of racial violence from 1930 to 1960.”

But Emmett became the most pivotal. His death was immeasurable in its effect on young black people at the time. It activated and mobilized them. That is not so dissimilar from today.

Jesse Jackson is credited with calling Emmett’s murder the “Big Bang” of the civil rights movement.

But in an interview published earlier this month, a University of Illinois professor, Christopher Benson, co-author of the 2003 book “Death of Innocence” about the case, made a more direct comparison:

“Before Trayvon Martin, before Michael Brown, before Tamir Rice, there was Emmett Till. This was the first ‘Black Lives Matter’ story. It is no wonder, then, that each time we read about another young unarmed black male being shot down in the street — unjustly — by an authority figure, there is the mention of Emmett’s name. What we come to see with the loss of Emmett is just what racism has cost us in this country. What it costs us still, in the loss of so many bright, gifted kids. Partly through untimely deaths. But also in the limited opportunities many have to excel, because of mass incarceration or even unwarranted tracking in schools.”

Benson continued:

“When we begin to see the Emmett Till story in this context, we realize that we all lose something to racism. And we see that we all have something to gain by overcoming the obstacles to full participation that still exist. So, Emmett Till is a vital American story.”

Yes, Emmett’s story is a vital American story, and it feels like an all-too-present one as we see this cycle repeating itself: young lives are lost, the body itself is desecrated or neglected, killers are acquitted or not even brought to

trial, and the effects of the feelings of terror and injustice galvanize a generation of young people who have taken as much as they plan to take.

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