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HAUNTED BY THE SPECTERS OF RACIAL TRAUMA: THE EMMETT TILL CASE IN US FICTION

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Haunted by the Specters of Racial Trauma:

The Emmett Till Case in US Fiction

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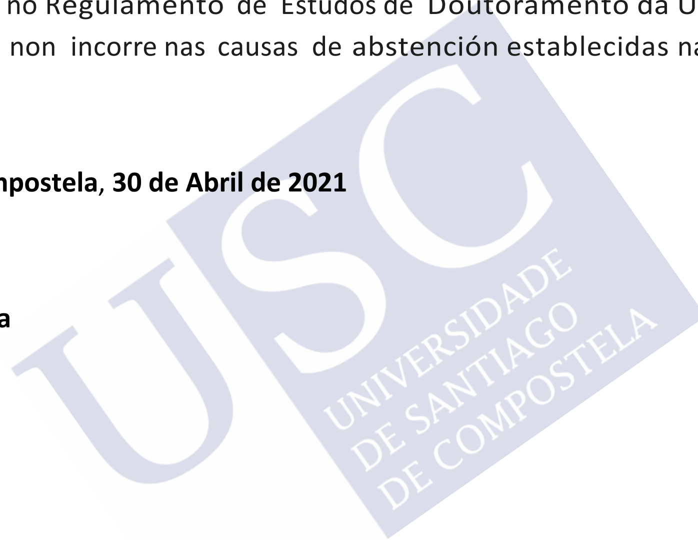

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes the different ways of coming to terms with the traumatic Emmett Till case in US fiction. The 1955 gruesome lynching of the fourteen-year-old black youth in the Mississippi Delta raised a cultural trauma in the US collective imaginary that particularly pierced the African American community. To explore the individual and collective responses to the infamous case, my study focuses on the three major novels inspired by the tragic incident: Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* (1992), Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* (1993), and Bernice L. McFadden's *Gathering of Waters* (2012). My critical analysis of these narratives is imbued with a theoretical framework mainly based on trauma theory but also influenced by spectrality studies and black studies. With the above premises in mind, my dissertation argues that fiction provides a better understanding of the real impact of the Emmett Till trauma on the US collective imaginary and, second, that fiction can have a decisive impact on writers and readers and how they can come to terms with trauma. Such an examination is initially underpinned by a broad contextualization of the long history of racist violence in the US that, starting in the present to evince the roots of the current racist ideology, pulls at its fatal thread back to the conditions that brought about Till's infamous killing. Ultimately, my study considers the existing interrelations and divergences between race, class, and gender with regard to trauma that intersect across the three main novels based on the Emmett Till case.

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RESUMO

Nos escuros tempos do Jim Crow no sur dos EEUU, un mozo afroamericano de catorce anos orixinario de Chicago chamado Emmett Till decidiu pasar as súas vacacións de verán cos seus familiares sureños en Money, unha pequena vila do estado de Mississippi. Catro días despois da súa chegada, un inocente e fugaz encontro nunha pequena tenda local desencadeou un dos asasinatos máis crueis da historia dos EEUU. Toda a verdade do que aconteceu naquel fatídico mércores 24 de agosto de 1955 nunca chegou a ser clarificada e nunca se coñecerá por completo. Innumerables versións téñense producido do escaso minuto que o rapaz afroamericano supostamente pasou só coa dependenta branca Carolyn Bryant, mais o que si está claro é que este encontro desencadearía o seu infame linchamento varios días máis tarde. Segundo o historiador Devery Anderson, quen escribiu recentemente unha das reconstrucións máis actualizadas e esclarecedoras do caso, a versión máis probable do incidente sería a seguinte: Emmett Till entrou na tenda para comprar goma de mascar, presuntamente díxolle ou fíxolle algo "desapropiado" a Carolyn Bryant con respecto a etiqueta racial sureña e despois saíu da tenda acompañado polo seu curmán Simeon Wright, quen aparecera dentro por se había algún problema (28). Ademais disto, Till aparentemente asubioulle a Carolyn Bryant cando ela saíu da tenda momentos máis tarde pero, aínda que moitos lle chamarían posteriormente *the wolf-whistle case* ("o caso do asubío"), non hai unanimidade historiográfica con respecto a este detalle. Tanto se houbo asubío coma se non, esta fugaz interacción entre o mozo afroamericano e a dependenta branca sureña sería o que, catro días máis tarde, desataría a faceta máis cruel do supremacismo branco e levaría aos familiares de Carolyn Bryant a perpetrar o horrible linchamento.

Xusto despois da medianoite do domingo 28 de agosto de 1955, Emmett Till foi raptado da casa do seu tío avó para despois ser salvaxemente golpeado e asasinado polos supremacistas brancos sureños Roy Bryant e J.W. Bryant, o marido e o cuñado de Carolyn Bryant respectivamente. O maltreito corpo do rapaz permaneceu tres días no fondo do río Tallahatchie atado con arame de espiño a un pesado ventilador industrial utilizado para debullar algodón, ata que un pescador local o atopou flotando nas escuras augas do río. Grazas á tenacidade da súa nai, o posterior funeral co seu ataúde aberto axudou a crear conciencia sobre o insidioso nivel de violencia racista ao que a comunidade negra estaba

suxeita no país. Mentres millóns de perplexos cidadáns estadounidenses seguían atentamente o desenlace legal do linchamento nos medios de comunicación, os asasinos de Till eran xulgados polos seus crimes nas cortes sureñas e finalmente absoltos do asasinato do rapaz por un xurado composto integramente por homes brancos despois dunha deliberación de sesenta e sete minutos, a cal tería durado menos se non pedisen un receso para tomar uns refrescos. Semanas despois, Roy Bryant e J.W. Milam foron tamén absoltos dos cargos pendentes por secuestro a pesar de ter confesado previamente o rapto de Till. A cambio de 4.000 dólares, os asasinos confesaron abertamente o seu espantoso crime nun artigo publicado no número do 24 de xaneiro de 1956 da revista *Look* xa que, tendo en conta a *Double Jeopardy Clause* da Constitución dos EEUU, non podían ser axuizados de novo polas mesmas causas legais despois da súa absolución. A indignación da comunicade afroamericana propiciada polo infame caso actuou como un catalizador para o incipiente Movemento polos dereitos civís e, durante máis de seis décadas, a súa tráxica historia continuou e aínda continua a avivar varias formas de activismo social ao longo dos EEUU, xa que semella que, a pesar do paso do tempo, os espectros latentes do supremacismo branco estadounidense están experimentado unha firme revitalización durante os últimos anos.

O primeiro capítulo desta tese proporciona un amplo contexto histórico do caso de Emmett Till a través de catro sección diferenciadas que abren portas de entrada distintas, mais complementarias, concibidas para facilitar unha mellor compresión do seu impacto social e cultural. O capítulo comeza establecendo un fío común entre o racismo sistémico e a violencia racista durante os anos de goberno de Donald Trump e despois segue tirando do fío cara o pasado ata chegar ao horrible linchamento de Till durante o período de segregación racial no sur dos EEUU. Esta primeira sección identifica tres formas principais de asoballamento da poboación afroamericana—nomeadamente o sistema de encarceramento masivo de minorías, o perfilado racial e a brutalidade policial—as cales están inequivocamente unidas mediante este mesmo fío aos hexemónicos relatos mitificados que imperaron durante o período da segregación racial no sur do país durante a época na que viviu Till. Mitos como *the purity of white womanhood* ("a pureza das mulleres brancas) e *the black beast rapist* ("a besta violadora negra"), xunto cos relatos

da serventa negra Aunt Jemima e a hipersexualizada figura da Jezebel—ambos os cales se empregaban para explotar os corpos negros femininos de diferentes maneiras—son analizados en profundidade na segunda parte desta primeira sección para contextualizar as complexidades que rodean a perpetración do infame asasinato. Xunto a isto, esta parte tamén investiga o inspirador relato que se formou arredor da figura de Emmett Till e a súa influencia tanto no Movemento polos dereitos civís como no actual *Black Lives Matter* nos EEUU. A segunda sección do primeiro capítulo continua este descenso na historia da violencia racista do pais norteamericano a través da evolución dos linchamentos desde as súas orixes nos albores do século dezaoito. Estes depravados ritos tentaban aterrar e maltratar as persoas negras para garantir e perpetuar o dominio do supremacismo branco no sur do país; e incluso transcenderon os limites temporais do período de escravitude, cando os linchamentos foron orixinalmente concibidos, para destruír milleiros de vidas afroamericanas ao longo do período de segregación racial dos EEUU.

A ampla reconstrución histórica das dúas primeiras seccións vén seguida por un detallado contexto do caso de Emmett Till na terceira sección do primeiro capítulo. Comezando cunha panorámica da breve vida do rapaz, esta sección explora a historia dos eventos máis relevantes relacionados cos antecedentes, perpetración e as consecuencias do horrible asasinato. O descubrimento do corpo no río Tallahatchie, o polémico xuízo e, entre outras cousas, a valente decisión tomada por Mamie Till de facerlle un funeral con ataúde aberto ao seu fillo son consecuentemente tratadas ao longo desta sección. A cuarta, e derradeira, sección do primeiro capítulo versa sobre o tratamento literario do infame caso, o que algúns críticos viñeron a denominar a tradición literaria de Emmett Till. Aquí explóranse as primeiras reaccións literarias do asasinato e conclúese cunha breve análise das obras poéticas e teatrais máis significativas da tradición literaria de Till, facendo simplemente mención a varios traballos narrativos inspirados polo caso, xa que as tres novelas máis relevantes son analizadas en detalle nos seus capítulos correspondentes da tese.

O segundo capítulo constrúe os cimentos teoréticos do meu estudo e inclúe unha extensa discusión sobre a teoría do trauma e as súas aplicacións á análise do caso de Till na ficción. Comézase cunha exploración epistemolóxica dos estudos de trauma e a súa etioloxía como concepto teórico incorporando unha perspectiva psicanalítica de corte

freudiana vencellada a unha interpretación sociolóxica. Unha vez estabelecida esta base, o capítulo aporta unha interpretación dos conceptos teóricos principais empregados na tese, sacados maioritariamente da teoría do trauma de Dominick LaCapra e Cathy Caruth, que son escollidos para analizar e explicar o trauma xurdido despois do tráxico asasinato do mozo afroamericano, que este estudo propón denominar o trauma de Emmett Till, nas tres novelas. Para completar a aproximación teórica, o segundo capítulo indaga nas interaccións entre os estudos de espectralidade e as súas interseccións coa teoría do trauma, pois o terreo en común que comparten estes dous campos académicos facilita a exploración de obxectos conflitivos de análise e, en certos casos, contribúe a un ulterior coñecemento deles que, separadamente, estas teorías non poderían proporcionar por si mesmas. Este capítulo continúa cunha interpretación do proceso de conversión de Emmett Till nun chibo expiatorio baseada nas asuncións teóricas tratadas previamente, e remata cos beneficios potenciais da exploración do trauma a través da literatura na asunción e asimilación de experiencias traumáticas.

O terceiro capítulo está conformado pola análise da novela *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* de Bebe Moore Campbell. Empregando a concepción teórica anteriormente mencionada, este capítulo comeza cunha discusión do rol traumático do linchamento de Till na conformación do libro de Campbell, cuxa obra ofrece unha ficcionalización realista do infame caso e as súas secuelas postraumáticas nos numerosos personaxes da novela. O capítulo continúa con sendas descricións do infortunado episodio que desencadea o espantoso asasinato na ficción e da conseguinte perpetración do linchamento, pois ámbalas dúas escenas constituirán o núcleo da narración. Este capítulo benefíciase dos múltiples cambios de focalización da novela para levar a cabo unha análise detallada das diferentes maneiras de asimilar o traumático evento evidenciadas polo variado elenco de personaxes negros, brancos, masculinos, femininos, ricos e pobres da historia. Deste xeito, o terceiro capítulo divide a análise literaria dos efectos postraumáticos do linchamento en tres partes principais que corresponden, cada unha delas, con cada unha das tres parellas de personaxes máis relevantes do libro, pois estas son inicialmente concibidas como habitantes arquetípicos do rural do sur dos EEUU durante a época da segregación racial dos anos 50; e o capítulo realiza un seguimento da súa evolución ao longo das case tres décadas de tempo narrativo.

O cuarto capítulo céntrase en *Wolf Whistle* de Lewis Nordan. A pesar de compartir unha orde estrutural semellante á análise da obra de Campbell, este capítulo presenta unha organización diferente como resultado das particularidades formais da novela de Nordan. Comézase polo tanto cunha ampla discusión sobre o impacto traumática do caso de Till no autor, tendo en conta a proximidade emocional e xeográfica do autor con respecto a traxedia. A diferenza de Campbell e McFadden, Nordan naceu e foi criado no Delta do Mississippi como un varón branco que, despois de que o horrible linchamento tivese lugar nun condado próximo, tivo que loitar durante décadas contra o seu involuntario sentimento de culpabilidade por pertencer a unha sociedade sureña branca que consentira a perpetración do asasinato do rapaz afroamericano. Tras explicar a traumática relación de Nordan co caso de Till, o capítulo leva a cabo a análise literaria da novela per se, examinando primeiramente a ficcionalización do fugaz encontro que desencadeará o horrible linchamento. A través dunha sucesión de episodios que están profundamente imbuídos pola atmosfera máxico realista da narración, o resto do capítulo analiza os antecedentes, perpetración e efectos postraumáticos do tráxico incidente baixo o filtro individual e colectivo dos habitantes da pequena cidade ficticia de Arrow Catcher.

O quinto capítulo completa a exploración do caso de Till na ficción dos EEUU coa análise de *Gathering of Waters* de Bernice L. McFadden. De igual forma que nos anteriores capítulos, este comeza coa relación persoal de McFadden coa historia do infame caso. Dado o prominente rol dos espectros no libro, o capítulo prosegue cunha sección teórica que profunda nas interseccións dos estudos de espectralidade coa teoría do trauma e nas súas conexións con *Gathering of Waters*. A discusión móvese despois a un detallado estudo da novela de McFadden que está dividido en tres partes principais, as cales corresponden coas tres liñas temporais da narración, para analizar o tráxico incidente. Desde a primeira á derradeira liña temporal, o quinto capítulo explora as orixes do linchamento na novela, que a narración data a comezos do século vinte, a través de tres xeracións de mulleres que, ao longo de case un século, desempeñan un papel central nos antecedentes, conformación, materialización e consecuencias do traumático asasinato. Neste amplo marco temporal, a conformación da realidade liminar resultante da fusión dos mundos espectral e material, xunto a unha marcada cosmoloxía animista, constitúe un elemento chave na comprensión da ficcionalización do caso de Emmett Till que McFadden leva a cabo.

Os capítulos dedicados á análise de cada unha das tres novelas iluminan unha serie de aspectos que merecen unha reflexión máis profunda. As diferentes ficcionalizacións da escena da pequena tenda onde ten lugar o infortunado encontro de *Your Blues*, *Wolf Whistle* e *Gathering of Waters* manteñen os elementos básicos da crónica histórica, mais interpretan a fatídica ruptura coa etiqueta racial sureña de diferentes maneiras, pois atribúen o suposto ataque á pureza da muller branca sureña a un mal entendemento dunha inocua frase en francés, un breve diálogo descoñecido para o lector e un asubío carente de ningún tipo de sentido implícito, respectivamente. Estes aspectos son os que máis adiante desencadean o horrible linchamento, que funciona como núcleo das tres novelas, tanto se está inserido no comezo da narración, como en *Your Blues* e *Wolf Whistle*, ou cara a metade, como en *Gathering of Waters*. A descrición da propia escena do infame asasinato tamén é altamente coherente co incidente histórico real e vai desde a lixeiramente baseada ficcionalización de *Your Blues*, á experimentación de *Wolf Whistle* ata, por último, ao extremadamente realista retrato de *Gathering of Waters*. Nas últimas dúas novelas, o asasinato sinala un punto de ruptura nas realidades máxico realista e espectral das narracións. Ademais, as ficcionalizacións do caso de Till incluídas en cada unha destas tres novelas pasan a través de marcados e diferentes filtros estéticos ao longo do tempo: desde o realismo psicolóxico de Campbell, ao realismo máxico de Nordan ata, finalmente, o relato espectral de McFadden, o cal podería interpretarse como unha mestura equilibrada do realismo de Campbell e a experimentación de Nordan.

Con respecto ao amplo elenco de personaxes analizados, as tres novelas comparten unha serie de semellanzas en común. Para ficcionalizar o traumático caso de Till, estas obras constrúen un conxunto de personaxes arquetípicos que facilitan a identificación dos efectos postraumáticos do horrible linchamento. En *Your Blues*, todos os personaxes principais sofren dun antigo trauma infantil, que explica o seu comportamento e marca o seu carácter na narración, que é ampliado e reactivado polo asasinato do Till da ficción, e que tamén se fusiona cos seus compartidos, mais diversos, sentimentos de culpabilidade para complicar tanto as súas respectivas existencias como a asimilación do traumático linchamento. En *Wolf Whistle*, o final da novela amosa como os habitantes de Arrow Catcher, a excepción dun renacido Cyrus que parece ter asimilado o incidente, continúan a estar atormentados pola traxedia. A súa vez, o final tamén deixa a porta aberta a unha posible asimilación do asasinato e a unha curación catártica colectiva

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de toda a comunidade. En *Gathering of Waters*, a experiencia persoal de Tass evidencia os efectos postraumáticos individuais do brutal linchamento do Till ficticio e como, despois dunha vida atormentada polo incidente, asimilar un trauma e, en certo modo, desapegarse psicoloxicamente del pode chegar a ser factible aínda que teñan pasado moitos anos por diante.

Outros paralelismos adicionais entre as tres novelas son o trauma de abandono compartido polos personaxes Ida e Runt de *Your Blues* e *Wolf Whistle*, respectivamente, e a pulsión ulterior de retornar á terra nativa manifestada por dous personaxes afroamericanos como Wydell e Tass de *Your Blues* e *Gathering of Waters*, respectivamente. Porén, o paralelismo máis significativo semella ser a frustración psicosexual que comparten os asasinos en cada unha das tres novelas. Mentres que Floyd, Solon e J.W. demostran claramente que o rol que desempeñan as súas respectivas masculinidades frustradas na perpetración do horrible linchamento, os casos particulares de Floyd e Solon amosan como os seus severos complexos de inferioridade tamén contribúen tanto a determinar as súas accións como a condicionar o seu comportamento violento ao longo da narración.

Como exemplifican as múltiples maneiras de asimilar o traumático caso de Emmett Till, o variado elenco de personaxes das tres novelas, construídos en base ás interseccións de raza, clase e xénero que determina o imaxinario colectivo do sur dos EEUU daquel tempo, conforma un palimpsesto de arquetipos que reflexiona sobre as súas diferentes experiencias, mais sinala unha tendencia común, ou, acaso, universal, con respecto aos procesos postraumáticos de *working through* ("reelaboración") e *acting out* ("paso ao acto"). Estes personaxes que permanecen, durante máis ou menos tempo, atascados nunha incontrolada e incesante fase de "paso ao acto" rematan por atoparse nunha situación de miseria e autodestrución temporal ou definitiva. Pola contra, aqueles personaxes que, por diversas razóns, si asimilan e "reelaboran" a traxedia, en maior ou menor medida, rematan por encamiñarse a un sendeiro proactivo que fomenta os cambios e as transformacións, feitos que finalmente suxiren unha potencial purificación das súas frustracións.

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Considerando os achados da tese no seu conxunto, as dúas hipóteses do meu estudo quedan probadas, xa que o meu traballo demostra amplamente, en primeiro lugar, que a ficción aporta un mellor coñecemento do impacto real do trauma cultural orixinado polo caso de Emmett Till no imaxinario colectivo estadounidense; e, en segundo lugar, que a ficción axuda decididamente a escritores e lectores no proceso de asimilación de experiencias traumáticas. A través deste proceso analítico, a miña tese tamén revela un achado central con respecto ao estudo académico da tradición literaria de Emmett Till, o cal ten que ver co feito de que, incluso considerando soamente as menos de tres décadas de marco temporal establecido polas publicacións da primeira e última novela baixo estudo, a tendencia xeral amosa que, co paso do tempo, a figura mítica de Emmett Till se apoia incuestionablemente nunha estética fantasmagórica ou espectral para a súa representación literaria na ficción dos EEUU.

Ao mesmo tempo que se deben considerar unha serie de limitacións, tamén semella conveniente suxerir varias direccións aparentemente inexploradas que poderían complementar esta tese na mellor compresión do trauma de Emmett Till na literatura estadounidense. O meu estudo céntrase nas tres novelas máis relevantes baseadas no infame caso polo que, se un futuro proxecto se aventura noutras obras narrativas significativas, podería adicionalmente validar as hipóteses e premisas probadas ao longo desta tese, ademais de botar aínda máis luz sobre as restantes complexidades ocultas deste complicado obxecto de estudo. Por outro lado, o marco teórico construído para a análise levada a cabo na miña tese, xunto coa organización estrutural de cada un dos diferentes capítulos que a conforman, tamén podería ser aplicado a unha exploración semellante do trauma de Emmett Till na literatura baseada en pezas teatrais e/ou poéticas inspiradas polo infame caso, dado que o meu estudo soamente as trata tanxencialmente. Finalmente, tamén sería interesante complementar os achados desta tese coa análise das novas obras literarias inspiradas pola figura mítica de Till que están sendo publicadas, e seguirán indubidablemente a publicarse, a curto e longo prazo, pois o traumático linchamento e as súas infortunadas connotacións racistas teñen probado ser unha inesgotable fonte de discusión ao longo do tempo.

No ano do sesenta e seis aniversario do tráxico incidente, o caso de Emmett Till continua a afectar a unha sociedade contemporánea estadounidense que segue a padecer practicamente a diario o asoballamento sistemático das persoas afroamericanas. No seo

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dos restritivos tempos da pandemia da Covid-19, George Floyd, un home de corenta e seis anos, foi asasinado o 25 de maio de 2020 por un oficial de policía de Minneapolis que o asfixiou despois de executar unha excesiva manobra de redución durante o arresto de Floyd ao agarralo polo pescozo mentres que, segundo amosan os vídeos virais que se gravaron no momento do incidente, Floyd permanecía tombado coa súa cara contra o pavimento da estrada e as súas mans esposadas por detrás das costas. Este novo acto de brutalidade policial exercido sobre un cidadán afroamericano orixinou intensas protestas en Minneapolis e outras partes do país en resposta á flagrante vulnerabilidade das persoas negras nos EEUU. A morte de Floyd constitúe un acto que se suma a un funesto fío que conecta casos do ano 2020 como o asasinato de Breonna Taylor, unha muller afroamericana de vinte e sete anos asasinada a tiros na súa casa por axentes da policía de Louisville durante un rexistro en marzo carente de permiso xudicial, e Ahmaud Arbery, un home afroamericano de vinte e cinco anos asasinado a tiros por residentes brancos do sur de Xeorxia mentres facía deporte na rúa, ao resto de vítimas afroamericanas de tempos pasados asasinadas a mans de axentes de policía abusivos ou *vigilantes* supremacistas brancos. Fai máis de medio século, o poderoso relato de Emmett Till contribuíu a propulsar o nacemento do Movemento polos dereitos civís nos EEUU e a derrubar o tiránico imperio da segregación racial no sur do país e, a pesar do paso do tempo, o seu recordo continúa a reverberar a través de numerosos movementos sociais que están a esparexer a empoderante mensaxe de que, como resoa o cántico dunha crecente maioría, *Black Lives Matter*.

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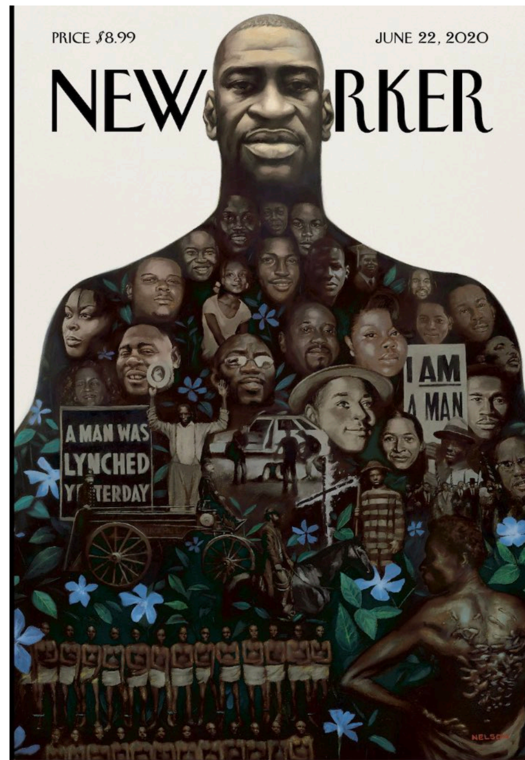

Figure 1. "Say Their Names," by Kadir Nelson.

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INTRODUCTION

On June 22, 2020, *The New Yorker* magazine featured a powerful cover in memory of George Floyd, created by acclaimed artist Kadir Nelson. Floyd's infamous murder at the hands of an abusive Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020, had sparked clamorous protests across the US, and Nelson's artistic response sought to encapsulate the social outrage that the case had generated. The top of the cover shows the solemn face of Floyd staring directly at the viewer, while the rest of his body is composed by images of men, women, and children who bear witness to the long history of violence inflicted on black people in the US. Entitled "Say Their Names," Nelson's artwork brings together the faces of recent victims such as Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Trayvon Martin alongside murdered civil rights icons such as Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X. This depiction of the history of racist violence on Floyd's body also includes visual references to the police beating of Rodney King, the march from Selma, Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Tulsa race massacre, and the horrors of slavery. As

Michael Cavna noted in his article for the *Washington Post*, Nelson himself described the cover as a “memorial to all of the African Americans who were and continue to be victimized by the long shadow cast by racism in America and around the globe.”

The anti-racist demonstrations against police brutality that followed Floyd’s death were already passionate and widespread when, on August 23, an unarmed black male, Jacob Blake, was shot seven times in the back by police authorities in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Two days after the incident, members and representatives of Blake’s family gave a press conference in which Letetra Wideman, his younger sister, evoked the collective experience of the African American community in verbalizing her pain and anger:

> So many people have reached out to me saying they’re sorry that this has been happening to my family. Well, don’t be sorry, because this has been happening to my family for a long time, longer than I can account for. It happened to Emmett Till, Emmett Till is my family. Philando [Castile], Mike Brown, Sandra [Bland]—this has been happening to my family. (Specter)[1]

Unlike the other victims named here, Blake did not lose his life, although he might never walk again. Yet thanks to his family and community, his story has created a strong will for change and justice, this in the name of the long list of victims of racial violence. In light of this ill-fated theme in US history, it is particularly revealing to focus on a single name, one which has become deeply ingrained in the African American collective imaginary, invoked repeatedly by victims of racial violence and civil rights activists alike in their struggle for racial justice and equality. This name is Emmett Till, and indeed his face can be also seen on Nelson’s celebrated *New Yorker* cover.

[1] Philando Castile was the thirty-two-year-old African American man shot dead during a traffic stop by a white Minnesota police officer on July 6, 2016. Michael Brown was the eighteen-year-old black youth gunned down by a white policeman in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014. Sandra Bland was the twenty-eight-year-old African American woman who was found hung in a jail cell in Waller County Jail in Hempstead, Texas, on July 13, 2015 three days after being arrested during a controversial traffic stop. Bland’s case was further investigated by the FBI, which uncovered a number of racist overtones and policy violations involved in her arrest and eventual death in jail.

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Emmett Till's gruesome murder has not ceased to haunt the African American collective imaginary since the fateful day of August 28, 1955, in the Mississippi Delta. Two southern white supremacists kidnapped the fourteen-year-old black youth in the middle of the night, and brutally lynched him in a barn for allegedly flirting with or whistling at a white female storekeeper a couple of days earlier. The horrific nature of Till's death, along with the infamous acquittal of his killers, followed assiduously by millions of US citizens through the media, gave rise to a mythical narrative that has left an indelible mark on the broader US collective imaginary. Since his lynching, the memory of the young Till has continued to be voiced at rallies, in social movements, memorials, the arts, and storytelling and, despite almost thirty years in which the academic world did not respond to the heinous incident, his story eventually became the focus of study for many scholars from different disciplines and cultural backgrounds.

The legacy of the Till case bears witness to the profound trauma that his lynching inflicted on the African American community, while the covert, and sometimes overt, opposition to any commemoration of it reveals the endemic racism that continues to plague the country. In the Mississippi Delta, numerous initiatives have been taken, such as the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, the Emmett Till Memorial Center, the Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center, the Mississippi Freedom Trail—with its numerous plaques erected in places that played a pivotal role in the tragic story;[2] among various others, we might also note the innovative Emmett Till Memory Project app, created by the Emmett Till Memorial Commission of Tallahatchie County in collaboration with a group of scholars. All of these attest to the close relation between the Mississippi Delta and the figure of Emmett Till. As Dave Tell argues in *Remembering Emmett Till*, "the physical, cultural, and symbolic landscape of the Delta has been permanently altered by the memory of Till's murder" (10). On the other hand, the increasing body of scholarly work on the case continues to trace the long shadows of Till's lynching and the decades-long cultural debate raised after the incident since, as studies such as Tell's illustrate, the

[2] The memorial plaque set near the spot of the Tallahatchie River where Till's decomposed body was found has been badly vandalized and shot at over the course of the years, to the point that it has had to be replaced four times, the damaged third one being substituted for a bulletproof plaque in October 2019.

fluidity between public memory and academic history have come together to give form to the predominant narrative about the infamous Till case.

Beyond the boundaries of the Mississippi Delta, the Till narrative has also been shaped by public memory and academic history. His legacy has expanded from the local initiatives of the Delta to various collective efforts that seek to honor his memory nationwide. Based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the Emmett Till Legacy Foundation was founded in 2005 as an organization that operates across the country with the intention of turning the memory of the young Till, and his mother's resilience, into outstanding examples to "educate, equip, inspire and empower youth, women and their families for a better future," as their website claims. That same year, the Till family's decades-long struggle for justice enjoyed a notable victory when, thanks to Keith Beauchamp's documentary film *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till* plus the work of prominent civil rights lawyer Alvin Sykes, the US Department of Justice reopened the investigation into the Till case. Through the Emmett Till Justice Campaign, launched in 2003, Beauchamp and Sykes had gathered enough evidence to trigger the reopening of the case, which was assigned to Dale Killinger, a Pennsylvania-born FBI investigator, and concluded with the 2005 autopsy of Till's remains. As a result of the exhumation, momentum gathered for Till's life and history to be commemorated, and his historical casket was substituted with a new one, the former finding a new destination several years later.

The 2009 decision to display Till's casket in the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., continued on the lines of instructive and eye-opening memorialization that, since the mid 1950s, has also been undertaken by numerous anti-racist social movements. In 2008, continuous activist pressure, along with Syke's unrelenting search for justice, resulted in another victory, and a landmark for Till's commemoration, with the eventual passing of the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act in the US Congress. As Thadious Davis notes, "[t]he legislation enables the pursuit of cases now decades old and supports an annual fund of $11.5 million to investigate civil rights crimes and also a fund for a Community Relations Service within the Department of Justice to help local communities solve civil rights crimes" (103). Since then, the Till case has remained active in the legal arena, as the FBI reopened the investigation again in 2017 in light of new evidence based on a late confession included in Timothy Tyson's *The Blood of Emmett Till*. While the Till family still awaits a final

resolution, the hidden intricacies of the Emmett Till case seem to have no end, more than six decades after the tragic incident.

If Till's story is undeniably present in the recent historical record, his prominence in the cultural memory of the US cannot be explained without a consideration of the role of the arts in the shaping of his extremely influential narrative. A long list of novels, poems, plays, essays, paintings, sculptures, songs, documentaries, and TV shows have been inspired by Till's mythical figure, to the point that, as Tell argues, "for thirty years following Till's murder, artists were virtually the only keepers of Till's story" (18). From A. C. Bilbrew's song "The Death of Emmett Till," recorded in 1955 by The Ramparts featuring Scatman Crothers on vocals, to Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan's song also entitled "The Death of Emmett Till," first played on July 02, 1962, to David Barr III's 1999 play *The Face of Emmett Till*, coauthored by Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, to the Academy Award-nominated 2017 short film *My Nephew Emmett*, directed by Kevin Wilson Jr., the memory of the young Till has been kept alive mainly thanks to African American popular culture. His name continues to reverberate in hip hop music and its different subgenres, and can be heard in songs by artists from different generations, such as Kanye West, Nas, The Game, Swizz Beatz, Rick Ross, Travis Scott, and the 2018 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Music Kendrick Lamar—and has even been mentioned by other influential rap and trap artists like Lil Wayne, who included Till in a very controversial verse for which he was forced to issue a public apology, after the song offended the Till family and the African American community generally.[3]

Apart from contemporary music, Till's narrative has also influenced a large number of professional athletes following the rise of his tragic story to national attention. In his autobiography, coauthored by Richard Durham and edited by Toni Morrison, legendary boxer Muhammad Ali recalls the profound shock that he experienced when he was thirteen years old and learned about Till's gruesome death: "I couldn't get Emmett

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[3] In an allegedly unauthorized, leaked version of the song, Lil Wayne included an offensive reference to Emmett Till in his guest appearance on Future's "Karate Chop" remix, which was officially released in February 2013. Epic Records Chairman Antonio "L.A." Reid soon issued an apology to the Till family and had the verse removed from the lyrics. Lil Wayne also apologized for the reference in a public letter in which he stated: "Moving forward, I will not use or reference Emmett Till or the Till family in my music, especially in an inappropriate manner. I fully support Epic Record's decision to take down the unauthorized version of the song and to not include the reference in the version that went to retail. I will not be performing the lyrics that contain that reference live and have removed them from my catalogue" (Kennedy).

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out of my mind" (34). Former NBA player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar also coauthored a book in which he says that the famous *Jet* magazine photograph that captured Till's decomposed body "left an indelible image I could never forget" and moved him to "beg[i]n thinking of myself as a black person for the first time" (205). In a June 2018 interview with *Democracy Now!*, former NFL player Michael Bennett referred to the 1998 lynching of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas, as his "Emmett Till moment. It was the moment that, as a young kid, I came to the realization that, you know, sometimes being black was going to be an issue." Additionally, NBA star LeBron James also invoked Till's name during a press conference on the eve of the 2017 NBA Finals after his Los Angeles home was spray-painted with racist graffiti: "I think back to Emmett Till's mom, actually. That's one of the first things I thought of. The reason she had an open casket was that she wanted to show the world what her son went through as far as a hate crime, and being black in America." James then linked Till's tragic story to the racial scenario of that time and stated that: "No matter how much money you have, no matter how famous you are, no matter how many people admire you, being black in America is tough. We've got a long way to go, for us as a society and for us as African Americans, until we feel equal in America" (Kilgore).

Given the above socio-historical and cultural background, this dissertation aims to analyze the different ways in which several social groups in the US came to terms with the Emmett Till lynching, looking specifically at three novels: *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* (1992) by Bebe Moore Campbell, *Wolf Whistle* (1993) by Lewis Nordan, and *Gathering of Waters* (2012) by Bernice L. McFadden. The rationale behind the selection of these three works is, first, their relevance within the extensive Emmett Till literary tradition, since critical opinion has placed them among the most representative literary works based on the infamous murder. Second, the formal characteristics of long fiction offer great advantages in the exploration of historical events, such as the Till case. Unlike in poetry and drama, long-form prose fiction provides writers with a broader canvas on which to develop their stories, setting up the right kinds of conditions for an in-depth analysis of the literary and cultural significance of Till over an extended text. This literary subgenre also creates a site to explore in detail the existing interrelations and divergences between race, class, and gender with regard to trauma that intersect across the narratives of the three main novels in this study.

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The aims of this dissertation are twofold. First, I intend to show how fiction can provide a better understanding of the real impact of the cultural trauma raised by the Till case on the US collective imaginary; and, second, the analysis of the three novels seeks to demonstrate that fiction can have a decisive impact on writers and readers and how they can come to terms with traumatic experiences. To do so, the dissertation will focus on how various members of different social groups deal with Till's traumatic murder, both as individuals and as part of a collective, in the three literary works under analysis. A theoretical approach based on trauma studies will be adopted, but this will also be influenced by spectrality studies and black studies. Such a theoretical framework is thus able to analyze the hidden intricacies of the Till case and its traumatic impact on US society as a whole and, especially, on the African American community as a well-defined sociological entity. The specific content of the five chapters of the dissertation is briefly summarized in what follows.

Chapter 1 provides a broad historical contextualization of the Emmett Till case, this through four distinct sections that open different but complementary gateways toward a better understanding of its social and cultural impact. The chapter begins by establishing a common thread of systemic racism and brutal racist violence during Donald Trump's administration and then follows it back to Till's gruesome lynching during the Jim Crow period. This first section identifies three major forms of subjugation of the African American community—namely the racially-biased mass incarceration system, racial profiling, and police brutality—which are unequivocally linked to the hegemonic mythical narratives that pervaded the Jim Crow South during Till's lifetime. In the second section of the chapter, racist myths, such as the purity of white womanhood and the black beast rapist, and narratives of the black mammy Aunt Jemima and the hyper-sexualized Jezebel, which in different ways both served to exploit the black female body, are explored as a means of contextualizing the intricacies surrounding the perpetration of the infamous killing. Additionally, this section also investigates the influence of Till's narrative on the shaping of both the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter. The second section continues this exploration of the history of racist violence in the US by looking at the evolution of lynching from its origins at the beginning of the eighteenth century. These depraved rituals sought to terrorize and brutalize black people in order to guarantee and perpetuate white supremacist rule in the South; and, having originally been

conceived of in the slavery period, they continued to destroy thousands of black lives during the segregation era.

The broad historical review of the first two sections is followed by a detailed contextualization of the Emmett Till case in the third section of Chapter 1. Beginning with an overview of Till's short lifetime, this section explores the history of the most relevant events related to the antecedents, perpetration, and aftereffects of the lynching itself. The discovery of the body in the Tallahatchie River, the infamous trial, and, among others, Mamie Till's courageous decision to have an open-casket funeral for her son, are thus covered in this section. The fourth and final section in Chapter 1 deals with the literary treatment of the Till case, which some critics have come to term the Emmett Till literary tradition. This explores the first literary reactions to the murder, then continues with a brief analysis of the most significant poetic and dramatic pieces of the Till tradition, mentioning several fictional works inspired by the case, but largely setting aside the three major novels to be analyzed in the dissertation, to which subsequent chapters will be devoted.

Chapter 2 sets out the theoretical foundations of the dissertation and includes an extensive discussion of trauma theory and its applications to the analysis of the Till case in fiction. It opens with an epistemological exploration of trauma studies and the etiology of trauma as a theoretical concept that incorporates a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective along with a sociological interpretation. Having established this, the chapter provides an interpretation of the major theoretical concepts, taken mainly from the trauma theory of Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth, which have been chosen to analyze and explain the trauma that arose after the tragic murder of Emmett Till, as narrated in the three novels. To complete this theoretical approach, Chapter 2 also considers the interactions of spectrality studies and their intersections with trauma theory, since the common ground shared by these two academic fields facilitates an exploration of conflictive objects of analysis and, in certain cases, contributes to the kind of understanding that these theories could not achieve separately. The chapter continues with an interpretation of the scapegoating of Emmett Till based on the previous theoretical assumptions, and closes with a discussion of the potential benefits of exploring trauma through literature in the working through and coming to terms with traumatic experiences.

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Chapter 3 is devoted to an analysis of Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*. Using the theoretical conceptualization described above, the chapter begins with a discussion of the traumatic role of the Till lynching in the configuration of Campbell's novel, which offers a realistic fictionalization of the case and its traumatic aftereffects on the numerous characters in the story. This is followed by a description of both the episode that triggers the murder in the fictional account and the ensuing perpetration of the lynching, since these early scenes will constitute the core of the narrative. This chapter takes advantage of the novel's manifold changes of focalization to undertake an in-depth analysis of the different ways of coming to terms with the traumatic event, as seen through its varied cast of black, white, male, female, rich, and poor characters. Thus, Chapter 3 divides the literary analysis of the traumatic aftereffects of the lynching into three main parts, each of which responds to one of the book's three main pairs of characters, these having initially been depicted as archetypical inhabitants of the Jim Crow South in the 1950s; the chapter follows their evolution over the course of the roughly three decades covered by the narrative.

Chapter 4 focuses on Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle*. Despite sharing a similar structural order as the analysis of Campbell's novel, this chapter presents a different organization as a result of *Wolf Whistle*'s particular formal characteristics. It begins with a long discussion of the traumatic impact of the Till case on the author, given Nordan's emotional and geographical proximity to the tragedy. Unlike Campbell and McFadden, Nordan was born and raised in the Mississippi Delta as a white male southerner who, after the gruesome lynching of Till took place in a nearby county, struggled for decades with his unwilling guilt by association as a member of the white southern society that condoned the perpetration of the murder. After explaining Nordan's decades-long traumatic relation to the Till case, this chapter undertakes a literary analysis of the novel per se, first dissecting the fleeting fictional encounter that later triggers the lynching. Through a succession of episodes that are deeply imbued with the constructed magic realist atmosphere of the narrative, the rest of the chapter analyzes the antecedents, perpetration, and post-traumatic effects of the tragic incident through the individual and collective filter of the inhabitants of the fictional small town of Arrow Catcher.

Chapter 5 completes the exploration of the Till case in US fiction with an analysis of Bernice L. McFadden's *Gathering of Waters*. As in the previous chapters, this opens

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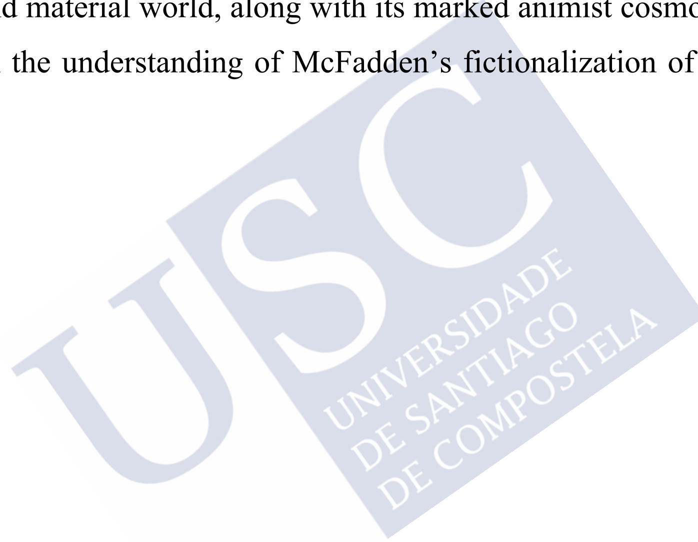
with McFadden's personal relation to the Till case. Given the prominent role of specters in the book, the chapter continues with a theoretical section that further discusses the intersections of spectrality studies with trauma theory and their connections to *Gathering of Waters*. The discussion then moves on to a detailed study of McFadden's novel, divided into three main parts, these corresponding to the three major time frames of the story used to analyze the tragic incident. Thus, the chapter explores the origins of the lynching in the novel, which the narration dates back to the early twentieth century, through three generations of women who, over the course of almost a century, play a central role in the antecedents, configuration, materialization, and aftereffects of the murder. Within this broad temporal framework, the constructed liminal reality resulting from the conflation of the spectral and material world, along with its marked animist cosmology, constitutes a key element in the understanding of McFadden's fictionalization of the Emmett Till case.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1. Emmett Till in Context

> We have yet to look upon Emmett Till's face. No apocalyptic encounter, no ritual unveiling, no epiphany has freed us. The nightmare is not cured.
> (Wideman, "The Killing" 288)

1.1 Tracing the Rising Tide of White Supremacy back to the Emmett Till Case[4]

The figure of Emmett Till has never left the African American collective imaginary and, as the 2018 reopening of the case evinces, it still remains a matter of great social relevance in the US. 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, constitutes a "civil rights charade" ("Emmett Till case reopens") 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 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." (151). The movement configures a space of resistance against white supremacy that also recognizes its black victims and that 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 contends, we can "[r]eplace ropes with bullets. Hound

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[4] Some parts of this section have been published in the special issue of *Alicante Journal of English Studies* titled *English Literary Studies: From Theory to Activism*, vol. 33, 2020, pp. 43-62.

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dogs with German shepherds. A gray uniform with a bulletproof vest. Nothing is new" ("Introduction" 6).

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 killings 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 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 Anderson, 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 (28). 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 granduncle's home to then be savagely beaten and shot dead by southern white supremacists Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, Carolyn Bryant's husband and brother-in-law respectively. 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, his infamous case wound up constituting "the first great media event

of the Civil Rights Movement" (437). 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 to 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 acquittal. 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 specters of the country are experiencing a steady revival over the course of recent years.

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During 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 contributed to normalizing the xenophobic discourse of the far-right. His inauguration as 46th President of the US 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 that, 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 that, 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 pacific 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 US 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 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" (106). 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 remarks, if slavery was to survive—even after the US declared their independence—it "required the white majority to develop its own characteristic form of racial ideology" (108). At the bottom of the US social hierarchy, African Americans suffered the extreme conditions of a slaveholding system that relied on the deprivation of their liberty and the brutalization of their lives in order to exist. Fields 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" (115).

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

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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 Kendi explores the history of racism in the US 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 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" (10). All these issues integrate the larger realms of the US racial ideology and help to reinvent and reshape 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 rhetoric along with the ongoing governmental policies that continue to criminalize black people in the US 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 that thrives in the contemporary communicational mechanism of social media to share its 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 movement (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. 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

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activism that can be traced from the latest victims of police brutality back to the heinous murder of Emmett Till since, as Christopher Benson, the University of Illinois professor who co-authored the biography of 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" (Chamberlain). 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.

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 gave 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. (Obama White House)

These rounded figures were admitted to by the, at the time, head of the US government himself and, to them, one could also add the figure of the 338,028 prisoners registered in 1970 (Schiraldi and Ziedenberg), the year considered to be the birth of the current mass incarceration era, to get a broader perspective. These statistics account for a history of criminal justice policies that dates back to Richard Nixon's politics of law and order in

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the 1970s and that Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton reinforced over their subsequent administrations.

The statistics give evidence of a US criminal justice system that has systematically criminalized the African American community. 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 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" (41). Crime was increasing, according to sociologist John Hagan, "just through sheer demographic change" (DuVernay), 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 US. His administration focused on the "restoration" of social order and implemented a strong in-depth reform of the criminal justice system that, essentially, set up the black political movements of the time as its main targets. The Nixon era also served to lay the foundations for the War on Drugs that President Ronald Reagan decidedly started in October 1982.

Roughly a decade after Nixon's resignation, the Reagan administration continued the politics of law and order and, with the help of some media to promote it, declared the War on Drugs when, as Michelle Alexander points out, "less than 2 percent of the American public viewed drugs as the most important issue facing the nation" (49). According to the post-Reagan political discourse, drug use and drug addiction became a criminal problem and not a health issue, as reflected by the federal budget: while the FBI antidrug funding, the Department of Defense antidrug allocations spending, the DEA antidrug spending, and the FBI antidrug allocations spending all skyrocketed, the budget of the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the antidrug funds allocated to the Department of Education plummeted (M. Alexander 49). Three years after Reagan declared the War on Drugs, crack cocaine hit the streets of the country with devastating effects on an African American urban community that was reeling from the economic

collapse of the early 1980s. Images of impoverished black neighborhoods plagued by the crack crisis were propagated by a media campaign aligned with the interests of the federal government, which wound up magnifying the narrative of the criminalization of the African American community. As executive director of The Sentencing Project Marc Mauer argues,[5] despite the fact that both drugs were pharmacologically almost identical, the US "congress, in virtually record time, established mandatory sentencing penalties for crack that were far harsher than those for powder cocaine" (DuVernay) at a time when, paradoxically, crack cocaine was associated with blacks and powder cocaine with whites.

Misbegotten narratives about a hyper-criminal African American community were magnified during the 1988 presidential campaign to the point that not only whites but even black people came to believe them. The Willie Horton case and the campaign ads surrounding it played an important part in this racist discourse, and resuscitated one of the most hated and endlessly generative mythical American narratives about black men: the black beast rapist. Willie Horton was an African American convict sentenced to life imprisonment who escaped from his weekend furlough and assaulted, robbed, and raped a white woman. The story was sensationalized by media along with the infamous Willie Horton ad, where conservatives blamed liberals for the crime, and created an atmosphere of racial tension that proved crucial in the outcome of the 1988 presidential election. Candidate George W.H. Bush continued the strong rhetoric of social order that had worked so well in the past for Nixon and Reagan and, eventually, as James Kilgore notes, "won the election by creating fear around black men as criminal" (DuVernay). Once in the White House, the Bush administration reinforced the War on Drugs and followed strict policies of law and order that kept dismissing civil rights enforcement but, however, Bush would not be the president who mastered the racially unequal system of the current mass incarceration era.

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 Bush was up against

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[5] The Sentencing Project is an organization that "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).

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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 US, 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, the bill resulted in "the largest increases in federal and state prison inmates of any president in American history" (Feldman et al. 3) and, by 2000, the inmate population was roughly double the more than one million inmate population 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 explains, it led to the "militarization all the way down to small, rural police departments that have SWAT teams" (DuVernay).[6] With the passage of time, the bill has proved inefficient in reducing crime—even Clinton 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 that, as Michelle Alexander metaphorically describes in her celebrated monograph, has resulted in nothing less than "the New Jim Crow" (11).

Save the obvious differences with Jim Crow, the ongoing mass incarceration system functions as a mechanism of social order that, despite this being a problem across all sections of society, has undeniably targeted black people in particular across the US. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Davis 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" (16). The statistics reveal a clearly imbalanced situation for the 13.4 percent of the US population comprising the African American community (US Census Bureau). 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 4) and, as reported in

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

2011 by Mauer, "[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" (88). 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 16). The racially-biased carceral geography of the US constitutes what Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes in *Golden Gulag* as "a system in which punishment has become as industrialized as making cars, clothes, or missiles, or growing cotton" (2); a system that, as Angela Davis 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" (16).

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, they are released as second-class citizens and, even when someone does not spend time in prison but is branded a felon, they carry the burden of the criminal label for their entire life as well. This means that, in the eyes of the system, they are criminals for the rest of their existence, and they are thus deprived of a number of rights that hinder their resumption of a normal social life. According to Michelle Alexander, 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" (92). 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 the 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 contends in his insightful essay "Plantations, ghettos, prisons: US racial geographies," prison—and the constricting taint that it leaves on people—"as extension

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of the ghetto, continues this form of natal alienation and social death through its policies of cultural, social, and political exclusion" (54). Once one acquires second-class status, there is no way out of it within the current system.

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 US 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 Michelle Alexander remarks, although "studies show that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates" (7), the 2014 research conducted by Jonathan Rothwell 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 that is disproportionally 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 that 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,[7] 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" ("Who Kalief"). 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 part of 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 toward the African American community are not so subtle, but they are equally lethal to its victims, as the ongoing Black Lives Matter has been denouncing over the last few years. Founded in 2013, one of the movement'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 killers before the law; and the key of the problem might be that, as Ta-Nehisi Coates 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" (78). The narrative of the dark-skinned criminal has taken over US idiosyncrasy and, if racists do not justify the facts by twisting logic and truth to their utmost, a major part of the population remains impassive 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, 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" (147).

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

[7] For instance, as Michelle Alexander 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" (86).

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Brooks (1997 - 2014), Christopher McKay (1996 - 2014), LaQuan McDonald (1997 - 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.[8] In addition to them, the killing of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman in 2012 was a turning point in recent US history, for it can be considered the catalyst for the Black Lives Matter movement. 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 that would eventually give it its name: #BlackLivesMatter. Radical black organizers Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi were the masterminds of the project that channeled the outrage of the black community into this contemporary form of social activism. Black Lives Matter, which challenges the long-established institutions of white supremacy as a virtually omnipresent phenomenon, relies on social media and, therefore, cannot be stopped with traditional forms of state repression. This model reacts against what Isabel Wilkerson describes as "a second Nadir" 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" (61). Past and present, indeed, seem to now coalesce, since the Trayvon Martin case has raised the race question in the US just as the Emmett Till lynching had done fifty seven years before.

The dark past years of the Jim Crow era epitomized the ideals of racist America in the US South and perpetuated a racial caste system for more than eight decades that still reverberates in the present. Many of the myths that fuel white supremacy in the US nowadays were conceived during Jim Crow in order to sustain new forms of the subjugation of the African American community. The end of slavery after the Civil War

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[8] 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."

brought a completely new scenario for the South, and was followed by a Reconstruction period of implementation of the liberties and rights of the black population promoted by the Federal government. By the late 1870s, the southern white supremacist machine had already dismantled such intentions and, after recovering the control of the region, promoted a new set of measures that gave way to segregation. As a substitute of slavery, this new racial caste system became the backbone of a New South that, as Thomas Nelson Page, one of its architects, defined, "was simply the Old South with its energies directed into new lines" (5). The Thirteenth Amendment had abolished slavery, but the South was light years away from recognizing the rights of the African American community. Instead, the southern elites propelled an aggressive retaliation against the emancipated black population, and the myth factory was set into motion to justify their violent backlash; one of the resulting myths maintained that, as Constante González Groba posits, "blacks, once free from the 'moral order of slavery,' fell back into the barbarism of their ancestors" ("The Emmett" 138).

Through the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth century, the romanticized vision of an idyllic Old South where happy slaves lived together with their benevolent masters took over the New South. The upsetting of the antebellum social order led white supremacists to spread the racist idea that, without the paternalist yoke of their masters, African Americans would wander wildly across the South. The twisted version of the Lost Cause became, despite all conceivable evidence against it, the major narrative among whites in the region and, as historian James Cobb observes, with the passage of time, its installation within southern idiosyncrasy "played a key role in achieving not just the New South objective of restoring white supremacy over blacks but of restoring white supremacy of white elites over the entire society" (*Away* 84). Supported by the majority, the southern institutions promoted a campaign of criminalization of the African American community to dodge the legal technicalities of the US Constitution and enslave black people again via convict leasing. According to the Thirteenth Amendment, "[n]either slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the US, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (US Constitution), which, to put it with other words, allowed—and still allows—the existence of state slaves in the country providing that a person was processed as a criminal. The criminalization of the African American community was not

a coincidence at that time, and the legal mechanisms of social control put thousands of prison labels upon black citizens for the slightest of reasons (e.g. loitering or vagrancy) so that they could work as slaves in the industrialization of the New South.

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 segregation of public and private life created a social scenario that 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 and 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 puts it, "how inferior facilities and service worked to ease white anxiety about better-off blacks" (132). 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 to whites and there was no fully segregated car available to them. W. E. B. Dubois 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" (230).

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 in motion the southern myth-making machine and produced a set of hegemonic mythical narratives that, to a

certain extent, still permeate the US collective imaginary nowadays.[9] 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, according to sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, “the principle around which the whole structure of segregation ... [was] organized” (in McGuire vii). The sexual frustrations of the male white southerner pedestaled the conception of the white lady to the point where she 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” (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]henever 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!” (in Cash 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.

This delirious patriarchal ideal shaped the construction of the southern female subject and resulted in the segregation of her actual physical body. The white supremacist cult of purity was inscribed in southern society through a combination of a strict puritanical religious education and a profound racial hatred that children came to learn from a very early age. These lessons forbade certain regions of the female body in order to desexualize white women and pedestal her figure in the eyes of southern males. In her extensive depiction of the segregated body, Lillian Smith explains one of the earliest lessons that the southern white patriarchy taught her when she was growing up as a white woman in the South: “Now, parts of your body are segregated areas which you must stay away from and keep others away from. These areas you touch only when necessary. In other words, you cannot associate freely with them any more than you can associate freely with colored children” (87). The female body was constructed as a temple of purity with,

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[9] In June 2015, the myth of the protection of white womanhood was invoked by white supremacist and mass murderer Dylann Roof when, before opening fire at the Charleston Church shooting, he complained that “[African Americans] are raping our women and taking over the country” (Blow A19).

as Lillian Smith describes, “[s]in hover[ing] over all doors” (88). White women were supposed to keep themselves preserved and pristine by being as sexually naïve as possible. Sex was a taboo for them, and the mere mention of the word was unthinkable for this alleged virginal creature. As González Groba states, “[t]he only passions allowed to these [desexualized] women were the love of their children and their dedication to the domestic” (*On Their* 165). Everything else beyond these two “passions” was evil and would eventually spoil the purity of the pedestaled southern lady; and, if they, willingly or unwillingly, failed to follow the norm, the white supremacist patriarchy stayed always alert to “amend” the deviation from the cult.

The perpetration of the Emmett Till lynching mainly responded to this paranoid urge to protect the alleged purity of the white southern woman from the predatory sexuality of the alleged “black beast rapist.” In their 1956 published confession to the crime, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, the killers of Till, provided journalist William Bradford Huie with a detailed version of the events that also included a surreal explanation of their murderous drives. As J.W. Milam himself asserts, these revolved around one central motif:

> As long as I live and I can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place. Niggers ain’t gonna vote where I live. If they did, they’d control the government. They ain’t gonna go to school with my kids. And when a nigger even gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he’s tired o’ livin.’ I’m likely to kill him. (in Metress, *The Lynching* 207)

According to their incongruent narration, the fourteen-year-old boy’s alleged flirtation with Carolyn Bryant at the store had constituted one of the most serious offenses that an African American could ever commit in the South and, as the perpetrators’ unfounded description claims, given that the young Till did never show any sign of regret while he was being tortured, the two white men resolved to send a message to sustain the viciously hegemonic idea of “keeping blacks in their place.” J.W. Milam came up with his devious resolution and, as the murderer describes, uttered his murderous threat to the young Till: “‘Chicago boy,’ I said, ‘I’m tired of ’em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddamn you, I’m going to make an example of you—just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand’” (in Metress, *The Lynching* 207). Through Till’s murder, J.W.

Milam and Roy Bryant continued a long thread of brutal racist violence that, despite their initial attempts to silence their heinous crime, was supposedly carried out in the name of southern white supremacy to preserve the delirious racial and sexual purity of white womanhood.

The idealization of the white southern woman, alongside her constrained subjection, affected and was affected by an extremely polarized construction of the black female subject under Jim Crow standards, which resulted in two hegemonic mythical figures: Aunt Jemima and Jezebel. As Diane Roberts notes in *The Myth of Aunt Jemima*, both myths "are but two of the 'markers' representing and limiting black women" (195) in the southern imaginary. The former marker, the myth of Aunt Jemima, accounted for the asexually archetypal black mammy who was in charge of raising the children of white families with a moderate income in the South. In the idyllic southern imaginary, mammies were generous, tender, loving, and caring figures who were almost considered members of the family—were it not for the color of their skin. Among other tasks, they took care of children who, in some cases, even loved them more than their biological mothers for a great period of their childhood and adolescence and who, eventually, suppressed their feelings toward their "colored nurses," to continue their exploitation. Black mammies were literally stripped from their actual families to serve white people who, as Hale describes, "pa[id] them pitifully for the deadening chores of domestic work" (32), which ushered them into a contradictory position within their nuclear family. As Lillian Smith notes, the domestic servant's "role in the family was involved and of tangled contradictions. She always knew her 'place,' but neither she nor her employers could have defined it" (128). Raising jealousies among white mothers, black mammies moved along the brink of the schizophrenic Jim Crow rules and directly participated in a private familial realm that, according to the southern way of life, should be forbidden for them but, nonetheless, required their exploitation for its preservation.

On the other side of the polarity, southern white supremacists situated the mythical fabrication of the extremely sexualized black Jezebel as a means of justifying their hideous mass sexual assaults on African American women. As white males removed the white southern lady from sexuality, the myth of the black whore was magnified in their twisted imagination. They constructed the figure of Jezebel as a sexually alluring character who triggered their sexual frustrations and "induced" them to do evil.

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According to Lillian Smith, within this repulsive logic, the “race-sex-sin spiral” was put in motion for, “[t]he more trails the white man made to back-yard cabins, the higher he raised his white wife on the pedestal” (121). From the times of slavery and over the course of the Jim Crow era, white-on-black rape plagued the South as a routine practice that brutalized and terrorized black women. Civil rights activist Fanny Lou Hamer, who suffered white supremacist sexual violence in her own flesh, was well acquainted with the painful reality that, as one of her biographers accounts, her grandmother’s and mother’s testimonies had confirmed her: “[a] black woman’s body was never hers alone” (C. K. Lee 9-10). Hale notes how for a long period of time these “women knew a doubled oppression of the doubled self” (33) under the white supremacist patriarchy for the mere fact of being simultaneously black and women in the South. As scholar and civil rights activist Ida Mae Hammond remarks, “[f]olks used to tell how, in the South, no white men wanted to die without having sex with a black woman” (85) and, influenced by their puritanical sexual frustrations and encouraged by the white supremacist patriarchy, white southern males considered themselves completely free to sexually assault African American women with impunity. The construction of the Jezebel myth was therefore just one of their ways to conceal their heinous abuses and justify, as Sarah Haley contends, “the necessity of violence against black women’s bodies in the maintenance of white supremacy” (7).

Through the Jim Crow era, the hegemonic mythical narratives of Aunt Jemima and Jezebel intersected with another crucial fabrication in the underpinning of southern white supremacy: the myth of the black beast rapist.[10] From the end of slavery onward, white supremacists perfected a narrative of criminalization and bestialization of the figure of the African American man from which not even children or teenagers were exempt, as the Emmett Till case would prove with the passage of time. Andrew Leiter notes how this twisted process of subjection spread “an enduring image of the segregation era characterizing black males as sexually aggressive, only slightly removed from savagery, and particularly lustful toward white women” in which, as Leiter’s succinct clarification follows, “if black men were not controlled—meaning segregated and constantly reminded

[10] This racist myth resurfaced under the narrative of the “super predators” during the Bush Sr. and Clinton administrations.

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of white supremacy—they would inevitably revert to their bestial nature and rape white women" (3). Southern racists thus fabricated themselves a hyper-sexualized black male subject that, in their delusional perception of reality, represented the main threat to the purity of white womanhood, as well as to the very South itself. Virginia Foster Durr described this fixation in Freudian terms: "I really think those fears came from the fact that the white men of the South had had so many sexual affairs with black women. And they just turned it around. It's the only thing I can figure out that made them so crazy about the subject" (175). In spite of the countless sexual assaults on black women during slavery and Jim Crow, it is indeed paradoxical how, as Leiter contends, "[w]hereas white southerners had been reluctant to discuss the rape of black women in the slave South, they turned eagerly to the image of the black rapist in the late nineteenth century and aggressively cultivated it as the most effective weapon in the battle for white supremacy" (13).

Southern racists reversed and deformed reality to redeem their innumerable white-on-black rapes and project their blame onto a mythical subject of their own creation. As Ida B. Wells, who adamantly fought against southern lynchings and the racist myth of the black beast rapist, stated in an 1895 publication titled *The Red Record*, white men resorted to the protection of white womanhood "[t]o justify their own barbarism"—despite the passage of time, her statement maintained its accuracy in the segregated South well until the second half of the twentieth century. With this pretext, white supremacists performed all sorts of unthinkable violence on black male bodies to dehumanize, emasculate, and both literally and figuratively destroy black lives. Lynchings attested to this ever-present state of paranoia and to what James Baldwin described as "a civilization so pathetic that the white man's masculinity depends on the denial of the masculinity of blacks" (*The Fire* 330). The myth of the black beast rapist formed a set of hegemonic narratives together with the fabrications of the purity of white womanhood, Aunt Jemima, and Jezebel that ruled the white supremacist collective imaginary during the Jim Crow era. As Cobb notes, "[i]n many cases, invented traditions are the key to securing the emotional and political allegiance of the majority of the population at large" (*Away* 81); and these myths were utterly successful in the underpinning of white supremacy for a long period of time in the US South.

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 Cobb states, "the most southern place on earth" (*The Most Southern* vii). 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 have no opposition whatsoever. 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:

> 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, *No Name* 388)

Baldwin's account is 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: "I felt as though I had wandered into hell" (*No Name* 386). Within this "infernal" scenario, the southern way of life remained almost intact over the course of the twentieth century until the resilient African American resistance started to bring some victories in the civil rights arena.

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

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traditional hegemony of the southern way of life was being severely threatened for the first time since the Civil War, and white supremacy was ready and willing to reveal its crudest face. In this unstable climate, the decision of the US 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 onward, 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 of 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 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" (18).[11] 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 Luther King Jr., who would soon become a distinguished leader of the Civil Rights Movement. At the beginning of his extraordinary ascent into

[11] In her 2003 memoir, Till's mother 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" (Till-Mobley and Benson 257).

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” (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. González Groba 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 Emmett” 180). The case of famous Mississippi civil rights activist Anne Moody instantiates the profound impact that the lynching of Till had on a large number of eventual activists, who historian John Dittmer describe as “the Emmett Till generation” (58). In her autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Anne Moody explains the harsh revelation that she experienced after learning about the gruesome incident 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. (132)

The Till case ended up constituting a collective trauma that 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 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” (xii); but, although his statement may be excessive, it is undeniable that the lynching of Till acted as a major catalyst for the burgeoning tide of civil rights activism that sprang up during the 1950s and extended through the 1960s.

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The traumatizing visual component of the Till case proved decisive in the underpinning of his influential narrative in 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 that would span over 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 herself stated, endured the pain of a massive open-casket funeral in Chicago to "[l]et the people see what they did to my boy" (Gorn 59); and the world did indeed see it. David Jackson captured the otherworldly state of Till's body in a historical photograph that spread like wildfire across the country, igniting the consciousness of thousands of young African Americans. As González Groba 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 Emmett" 179). 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 asserts, "[t]he Till case exemplified one of the most dynamic forces of its time" (xliii). Till's tragic story thus raised a liberating storm across the country that converged with the African American activism of the 1940s and early 1950s to eventually galvanize the Civil Rights Movement. Myisha Priest reflects on how, despite the insidious attempts of southern white supremacy to obscure his case, 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 "it rose once more still later when the civil rights movement raised Till's body like a banner" ("The nightmare" 1).

The Emmett Till case opened the eyes of thousands of people across the country and contributed to propelling the birth of the Civil Rights Movement. The passivity of white America and the southern mythical narratives were suddenly challenged by one of the most inhuman murders in the history of the country. Paul Gaston reflects on how myths "create mental sets which do not ordinarily yield to intellectual attacks … they may be penetrated by rational analysis only as the consequence of dramatic, or even traumatic, altercations in the society whose essence they exist to portray" (225) and, with

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Figure 2. Emmett Till's famous Jet magazine photograph, by David Jackson.

regard to southern myths, Till's tragic story decidedly constituted a powerful counternarrative. It is not only, as Philip Kolin remarks, "[t]he tremendous impact his death has had on the collective memory of civil rights activism" (6), but how, thanks to her mother's resilience and perseverance, Till's story combined with what Danielle McGuire identifies as "issues of sexual violence [that] were crucial both to the civil rights movement and to the white supremacist resistance" (xx), to wind up tearing down the barbaric rule of Jim Crow in the US South. Testimony resulted essential in the fall of a racial caste system that had come to substitute slavery and to which southern elites fiercely clung for the preservation of their romanticized way of life. Yet, despite the passage of time, the white supremacist discourse has not ceased to haunt US social life, and it has actually been experiencing a steady revival over the course of the last decade, two facts that pose a question that Hale cleverly formulates: "Why does the culture of segregation, despite the very real successes of the civil rights movement, still reduce and ensnare us all?" (ii). Perhaps a brief historical revisitation of the most vicious demonstration of racist violence may help better understand the virulent effect that, since

the nineteenth century, this blatantly unresolved past has been exerting on the whole spectrum of US society.

1.2 Lynching Rituals in the US South

The history of lynching in the US forms a surreal narrative in a white book written with the blood of the African American community. For a long period of time, black people were subjected to one of the most barbaric practices ever performed in the name of white supremacy; a practice that transcended the limits of human comprehension and left indescribable images as its outcome. Victims of a system that regarded them as nothing more than cattle, African Americans could do little to prevent the countless lynchings that blossomed across the country during the darkest days of this gruesome ritual. From the first existing registers of the 1880s, the Tuskegee Institute lynch reports recorded 3,446 known black victims between 1882 and 1968 (Work), but estimates of the unknown cases that happened from the origins of the lynch laws point to a dramatic increase. The Equal Justice Initiative,[12] following Tuskegee's prestigious research, documented 4,084 lynchings of African Americans between 1877 and 1950 just in twelve southern States: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching*). The lynching of African Americans was not evenly spread for, as historian Philip Dray notes, "[t]he Deep South accounts for most lynchings, with Georgia, Mississippi, and Texas the dominant lynching states" (ix).

The origins of lynching came almost hand-in-hand with the birth of the US itself. At the dawn of the eighteenth century, the former manifestations of lynching emerged as a means of meting out "justice" in a country that "was still very much wilderness and frontier" (Harris, *Exorcising* 5). Early Americans frequently took the law into their own hands to solve, according to their own judgment, the alleged crimes and offenses of the time with a usual lack of proportionality. Due to the initial ambiguity of the punishment

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[12] "The Equal Justice Initiative is committed to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, to challenging racial and economic injustice, and to protecting basic human rights for the most vulnerable people in American society" (Equal Justice Initiative, *About EJI*).

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itself, Harris argues that "[t]o be severely lynched could mean an individual received one hundred lashes. Or that he had been whipped, then tarred and feathered" (*Exorcising* 6). Although it could end and did end many times in a hanging, the deathly elements of the lynching process were added afterward since, as Harris points out, "[t]o be lynched, or to be a victim of Lynch's law, meant, at that time, that punishment for a crime had been meted out without a court hearing, or by a self-constituted court" (*Exorcising* 6).

Deprived of their human condition by the slave regime, black people were one of the most vulnerable social groups before the lynching penalties, but they were rarely lynched at that time, except for unusual events like the penalty for slave rebellions, due to their highly commodified value within the slaveholding society. In his 2004 essay, Mendieta reflects on how, as historiography confirms, "lynching seems to have been a common practice and was originally used against whites, but as the nineteenth century comes to a close, it came to be used predominantly against blacks" (52). After the antislavery movements of the 1830s, the vulnerability of the African American community did anything but decrease in the US South, and the rise of abolitionism established lynching as the primary method to terrorize black people and guarantee the perpetuation of the infamous southern way of life. Possessed by romanticized ideals of an idyllic glorious past, white mobs brutally lynched African Americans at the slightest transgression of racial etiquette to the point that, as James Cutler observes, soon after the Civil War, "the verb lynch came to carry the idea of putting to death" (116). The southern white supremacist machine had been blatantly hit by the advent of the Emancipation Proclamation, and the South resorted to violence—its most effective weapon—to frustrate a complete black liberation during the Reconstruction era. From this point onward, the preservation of southern white supremacy was at stake, and the means to perpetuate its barbaric rule did not matter whatsoever. Despite the end of slavery and the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment, southern racists kept brutalizing black people's lives, and the number of lynchings escalated during the last third of the nineteenth century in the South.[13]

[13] See Work for further description of the lynching data on this period.

With the irruption of the Jim Crow era, lynching seemed to acquire a ritualistic nature as its gruesome procedure was homogenized by white supremacists. In an atmosphere that, were it not for the heinous murder, could perfectly resemble a family picnic, Harris contends that "[w]hite men, women, and children would hang or burn (frequently both), shoot, and castrate the offender, then divide the body into trophies" (*Exorcising* 6). While all these gruesome steps kept repeating over the passage of time, this deathly routine was eventually established as the standardized procedure in a lynching. Racists perfected this sadistic spectacle with the primary intention of perpetuating white supremacy but, as Hale points out, it also became a form of "entertaining" (203). Whole white communities proudly partook in the lynchings and gathered some of the remaining pieces as souvenirs—for some, certain parts of the dismembered black body were a token of good luck—as if they were attending any other casual celebration. The brutalizing of black lives was surrounded by a festive atmosphere captured in antique photographs in which, as Dray remarks, "mobs tortured and burned victims to death as huge picnic-like gatherings of men, women, and children watched" (x). In her analysis of lynching photography, Bridget Cooks notes how this gruesome practice reached the point that even "schools cancel[ed] class so that children could attend lynching as a family event" or, as she continues, "[s]pecial train schedules were set so that people who did not live in the community … could take part in the celebration" (139). Lynchings were thus normalized among southern whites in communal feasts of destruction where young children played the predetermined role of ensuring, from generation to generation, the perpetuation of white supremacy's most depraved rite.

These barbaric sacrifices came to offer southern racists an almost cathartic experience for the expiation of their sins. Constrained in a rigid world that constantly bordered paranoia, white supremacists projected all the wrongs of the society and their own inner tensions onto the black scapegoat. In the eyes of the lynchers, the chosen victim became, as Lillian Smith reflects, "*not an object that must die* but a receptacle for every man's dammed-up hate, and a receptacle for every man's forbidden feelings" (162). By the destruction of this "receptacle," the balance was meant to be restored within the community, as if the killing, in Donald Matthews' words, "would *compensate* for the original breach of communal harmony" (34). Still, the restoration of order within the romanticized southern world did not and could not last much longer. Both white

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supremacist patriarchy's extreme racial hatred and psychosexual frustrations had submerged southern males in a constant state of psychotic alertness where, at the merest suspicion of transgression of racial etiquette, violence could be suddenly triggered. In this unstable atmosphere, the long-established myths of the pedestaled white lady and the black beast rapist acted as the perfect catalyst for lynchings. While the former myth urged white men to protect white women's proclaimed purity at any cost from any alleged threat, the latter rendered every single black male a potential rapist. This fatal combination was constantly haunting the twisted minds of southern white supremacists and resulted, as a means of releasing their tensions, in more rites of sacrifice.

The ritualistic nature of lynchings also accounted for the sentiment of white guilt that southern racists seemed to have gotten to feel after decades and decades of unrestrained barbarism. Over the history of the region, the perpetuation of the southern way of life took too many black lives away, and viciously tortured too many black people, for white racists to remain impassive before their ruthless acts. Their puritanical religious convictions permeated and nurtured the racial, class, and gendered pillars of the South, but their dogma also left a gap for guilt that could not be ignored after all. In one of his insightful essays, James Baldwin meditates on the contradictions of the private and public life of whites, and ponders on the relation between guilt and the racist construct of the black scapegoat:

> That the scapegoat pays for the sins of others is well known, but this is only legend, and a revealing one at that. In fact, however the scapegoat may be made to suffer, his suffering cannot purify the sinner; it merely incriminates him the more, and it seals his damnation. The scapegoat, eventually, is released, to death: his murderer continues to live. The suffering of the scapegoat has resulted in seas of blood, and yet not one sinner has been saved, or changed by this despairing ritual. Sin has merely been added to sin, and guilt upon guilt. (*No Name* 386)

This crescendo of guilt, instead of ushering lynchers into repentance, magnified the viciousness and violence with which they perpetrated the crime and, at the same time, fed their schizophrenic vision of the world. In their impossible quest for redemption, white supremacists resorted to ritualistic proceedings in order to obliterate their own inner fears and guilt. Castration usually constituted a part of these barbaric rituals as a means of

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destroying a hyper-sexualized bodily threat that only existed in their twisted imaginations. Paradoxically, as Harris states, this vicious act "simultaneously shows kinship to the black man and denies the connection. The white man does to the black man what, in his worst nightmares, he perhaps imagines other adversaries doing to him; before he becomes victim, he victimizes" (*Exorcising* 23). This identification between perpetrator(s) and victim—via a transference of guilt and fear from the white to the black subject—evinces the failing ritualistic nature of lynchings in the white supremacist imagination, and its connection with their unresolved psychosexual frustrations.

Among the most usual causes, the breaking of the sexual taboo, along with minor criminal offenses and, to a lesser extent, the killing of whites, resulted in the majority of the lynchings. The delirious southern imagination had immersed the region in a tense atmosphere where, mainly as a consequence of the clash between the myths of the black beast rapist and the purity of white womanhood, as Harvey Young remarks, "the slightest transgression could render the black body subject to some sort of violence" (32). The Emmett Till case proved in 1955 how the merest suspicion, or alleged violation of racial etiquette in a verbal exchange between a fourteen-year-old African American boy and a white female storekeeper, resulted in one of the most heinous lynchings in the history of the US. White supremacy's psychosexual frustrations submerged southern racists in a state of constant alertness where racial violence could be suddenly triggered for the most random of reasons, but they were not the only causing elements of these barbaric rituals. Any sort of minor offense could quickly prompt a lynching in the South to the point that, as Harris points out, "if whites believed Blacks were merely thinking of criminal activity, that was enough to warrant the death penalty" (*Exorcising* 23). The infrequent actual killing of whites by African Americans did also lead to the same violent ending, without the slightest consideration of the suspect's innocence or a judicial process. According to the white supremacist imagination, "[i]f a black man or woman actually kills a white man (in self-defense or otherwise), a taboo considered to be inviolable has been broken, and order can be restored and values reinstated only through the death of the offender" (Harris, *Exorcising* 78). The arbitrariness of the killings and the disposability of black lives kept terrorizing an African American community that, since the birth of the US itself, had seen how the brutalizing and destruction of their bodies constituted an intrinsic part of the southern way of life.

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As the first half of the twentieth century went by, lynching rituals experienced a number of formal changes in their gruesome procedure. Tiffany Willoughby-Herard notes how, with the industrialization of the segregated South, the tradition of this barbaric practice entered "an era in which major technological shifts in mass transit and communication were enunciated through [these] spectacular acts of antiblack torture and gratuitous violence" (16). This gradual modernization brought new elements to a violent ritual that, among other factors, D.H. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* helped shape after its premiere in 1915.[14] The commercial success of the blatantly racist movie fueled the warrior-like mentality of southern white supremacists, and contributed to the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. The imagery of *Birth of a Nation* provided lynchers with new elements for this macabre spectacle, such as certain clothing or, in particular, the visually striking burning cross, which, as Jelani Cobb points out, "was something that D.W. Griffith came out with because he thought that it was a great cinematic image" (DuVernay). These changes culminated the formal components of a mass southern ritual that sought to terrorize the African American community in order to maintain the white supremacist rule in the South but, with the passage of time, these updates were not the only substantial modifications to the long-established southern lynching ritual. Through the first half of the twentieth century, while the increasing social rejection of the crime and the early civil rights resistance to lynching were being gradually successful in the appeasing of mass group lynchings, small group lynchings were becoming the preferred option for southern white supremacists. This alternate version was nothing new in the South since, as Hale contends, "[t]hese lynchings in the night claimed many more victims than the open-air spectacles of torture that drew such large crowds" (201).

Emmett Till's tragic story went down in America's white book of lynching as one of these countless small groups variants where perpetrators used the anonymity of the night to commit their heinous crime. Over the history of this barbaric practice in the South, thousands of black lives were brutalized and terrorized in a number of inconceivable ways to perpetuate a southern way of life that white supremacists were willing to preserve at all costs. Southern racists would eventually lose the battle, but the

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[14] The film, which glorifies the Ku Klux Klan, is inspired by *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and based on *The Clansman* (1905), two novels written by the ardent white supremacist advocate Thomas Dixon Jr.

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psychological baggage of decade after decade of lynchings left an indelible mark on the African American collective imaginary.[15] As Amy Louise Wood and Susan Donaldson argue in their insightful analysis of the lynching legacy in US culture, "[t]he 'afterlife' of lynching … suggests that the cultural wounds left by those late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rites of violence have yet to be healed" (22-23). The Till lynching amplified the voices of the preceding victims and, with the passage of time, his case proved crucial for both civil rights activism and the arduous debate on the coming to terms with the lynching past in the US. As Kolin remarks, Emmett Till has become "one of the central figures on the stage of American racial trauma" (6), and his figure has been repeatedly raised as a banner of justice in the historical fight for racial equality in the country. To fully understand his magnitude, one should be first acquainted with his story and, to do so, it may be convenient to retrieve the narrative of a boy who, not so long ago, was born in the West Side of Chicago.

1.3 The Emmett Till Case

Emmett Louis Till was born on July 25, 1941, in Chicago's Cook County Hospital to Louis and Mamie Till after a complicated labor, and spent the major part of his brief life in Argo, a prominently black neighborhood situated on the outskirts of the Wind City. By the first year of his life, the short history of the three members of the Till family was going to split apart, as Mamie ended her relationship with her abusive husband. While the young mother and her son were enjoying happy years living with the child's grandmother, Louis kept having legal problems since the separation from his wife and, urged by a court to choose between prison or the army for violating Mamie's protective order, he wound up departing to the Italian campaign after receiving military training. The discipline of the US forces seemed to have changed him since, as Mamie explains in her biography, "he had made arrangements for me to receive a portion of his military pay" (Till-Mobley and Benson 17) and even tried to reconcile with her. In 1945, Louis was

[15] Efforts such as the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice of Montgomery, Alabama—which were both founded in 2018 by the Equal Justice Initiative—help to work through and bring closure to the dark history of lynching in the US.

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charged with “willful misconduct” in a court martial during his deployment in Italy, and was sentenced to death by hanging in a case that has remained full of shadows to this day. If the charges against Louis and one of his black countrymen were never clear, the official version of the case is everything but enlightening. The African American writer John Edgar Wideman explores these events in his *Writing to Save a Life: The Louis Till File* (2016), where he suggests that the fate of Louis Till might have actually been a prelude to his son’s tragic ending because, in both cases, white supremacist violence was winding underneath.

The passing of his father left Emmett Till with a vague childhood memory and a silver ring with Louis Till’s initials that would later play a crucial role in the infamous case. In early 1955, Emmett’s granduncle Moses Wright went up north from Mississippi to attend a familial funeral and, during his visit, his stories about the South instantly caught the young boy’s attention. When Emmett heard that his cousins Wheeler Parker Jr. and Curtis Jones were going down for a visit, he was determined to go as well and, although his mother did not want him to travel unless his grandmother accompanied him, as she had done twice before, the boy’s insistence along with Moses’ encouragement made Mamie yield to her son’s longing. The arrangements for the trip were soon made and, first and most important, Mamie carefully lectured his son about how to behave in the Jim Crow South. As she recounts in her biography, she put a great effort in ensuring that his son understood and assimilated her vital lecture on southern racial etiquette:

> … Now I wanted Emmett to listen to me. I was trying to make him see that he had to watch everything he did. And I went further, because I wanted to make it look as bad as I could possibly make it look.
>
> “If you have to humble yourself,” I said, “then just do it. Get on your knees, if you have to.”
>
> It all seemed so incredible to him. “Oh, Mama,” he said, “it can’t be that bad.”
>
> “Bo, it’s worse than that,” I said.
>
> In fact, if you were a black man in the South, not only should you never look a white woman in the eye, you should never be seen looking at a picture of a white woman. Now, I couldn’t bear the thought of seeing my son get down on his knees in front of some white man. But I figured that putting that image in his head would make him think about everything he did down there, every encounter. I wanted to make sure he was careful.

> Emmett just listened. And I kept stressing the points I was making. He finally spoke up again. "Mama," he said, "I know how to act. You taught me how to act." (Till-Mobley and Benson 101)

Once this lesson was understood, the material provisions were the only preparations left for the trip. In her narration, Mamie mentions a seemingly irrelevant episode in which she buys her son a photograph of Austrian-American Hollywood star Hedy Lamarr that would be relevant in some historiographic accounts of the Emmett Till case (Till-Mobley and Benson 102). After some further details, everything was ready for the trip down South.

On Saturday, August 20, 1955, Emmett and his mother rushed to Chicago's Englewood Station to meet Moses and Wheeler at the railway platform, making it at the last minute. As Emmett was climbing the stairs, Mamie suddenly stopped him with what, unbeknownst to her, would later prove sadly prophetic words: "You didn't kiss me good-bye. How do I know I'll ever see you again?" (Till-Mobley and Benson 104). With just a minute to catch the train, the boy handed his watch to her mother as a token of his return and bolted up the stairs wearing his father's silver ring in his middle finger. Moses and Wheeler were relieved to finally see him at the platform and, upon Emmett's last-minute arrival, they all jumped on the train to begin the southern adventure. During the first days in East Money, Mississippi, Emmett spent his time helping the Wrights with the house chores. He even participated in the seasonal cotton-picking, but the harsh weather conditions of the South sent him back to the Wright home to assist with other indoor tasks. Not all was work for him down in the Mississippi Delta, as Emmett also had time to enjoy the company of his family and friends, and witness the beauty of the southern countryside. They told each other stories, listened to the radio, went fishing, and rode Moses' 1946 Ford sedan to go on brief nearby excursions over the course of Emmett's first days in the Delta. This almost idyllic atmosphere became, however, the threshold of an evil that their worst nightmares could have never remotely foreseen: a twenty-minute visit to the hamlet of Money would tear apart the existences of all those who ever loved the fourteen-year-old Emmett Louis Till.

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The days after the infamous incident at Bryant's Grocery Store and Meat Market perfectly fit the atmosphere of the calm before the storm. The young crew had agreed not to tell anything to Moses and Elizabeth Wright, fearing that this could send Emmett back to Chicago before expected and, following the first moments of panic immediately after the incident, everything turned again back to normal. As Emmett's cousin Simeon Wright tells in his autobiography, "[a]t daybreak we were all up and ready for the cotton patch, having almost forgotten the events of the day before" (Wright and Boyd 53). While three more days passed without any unusual sign of danger, Emmett and his relatives were enjoying their southern vacations together as if nothing had happened. On Saturday 27, the Wrights and their visitors arrived home late at night from a daily excursion to Greenwood, Mississippi. As Wright recounts, "[w]e had not been in bed two hours when we were startled awake" (55), for two men were knocking on the front doorway past midnight demanding to talk with the preacher. As soon as Moses opened the door, their pistols were aiming at his face, and the preacher could do nothing to dissuade their wicked intentions. Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, Carolyn's husband and brother-in-law respectively, were looking for "that boy that done the talking down at Money" (Federal Bureau of Investigation 126) and were determined to teach him a lesson. In a few minutes, despite Moses and Elizabeth Wright's desperate efforts, the abductors left the house with the fourteen-year-old boy and disappeared into the darkness.

On Sunday, August 28, 1955, Emmett Till was reported missing by Moses at the Greenwood police department. Given the details provided to the officers, Deputy Sheriff John Cothran and County Sheriff George Smith started the investigation and rushed to question Roy Bryant at his store in Money. There, Roy Bryant openly confessed to the boy's kidnapping but, according to the official trial transcript, he sustained that his wife told him at the store that "he wasn't the right one so then he turned him loose" (Federal Bureau of Investigation 205). Roy Bryant was consequently arrested and sent to the Leflore County Jail as the prime suspect of the incipient Emmett Till case. Fearing that his half-brother might break down in jail, J.W. Milam, the headman of the Milam-Bryant clan, turned himself in to the authorities just a day later to secure their fabricated version of the events. Like Roy Bryant, J.W. Milam also admitted to having abducted the fourteen-year-old boy, and to having let him loose at the store after being informed that he was not the one of the alleged incident with Carolyn Bryant. While the two suspects

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were in jail, there were no news about the young Till, and the few hopes that his relatives held were fading away as days kept going by.

During their anxious wait, Emmett Till's family and friends were doing their best to find any clue about his whereabouts. Up North, Mamie mobilized the Chicago press and contacted the NAACP for help. The news about her son's abduction had completely shattered her, but she could not allow herself to grieve yet. As Mamie explains, "[a]t that moment, I had nothing left but my hope. To let that go would mean I would have nothing" (Till-Mobley and Benson 119). Meanwhile in the Delta, Moses and Crosby Smith, Mamie's uncle, were in charge of the situation. They first made sure that the rest of the children were safe and then helped authorities to find any possible clue about the missing boy. As to Elizabeth Wright, the recent kidnapping of her grandnephew had been such a terrifying experience for her that she collapsed and was not even able to remotely participate in the search. After her grandnephew's kidnapping at gunpoint, Anderson points out that "she was so traumatized that she never again returned to Money—not even to retrieve her belongings" (39). Both up North and down South, relatives and friends were appalled by the news, but some still hoped for a miracle.

In the early morning of Wednesday, August 31, 1955, seventeen-year-old Robert Hodges was fishing near the town of Philipp, Mississippi, when he discovered a body floating on the Tallahatchie River. The young fisherman was checking his trotline when he noticed "two knees and feet" (Federal Bureau of Investigation 215) protruding up the dark waters of the river. The neck had been tied with barbed wire to a heavy metal gin fan with the intention of keeping the body at the bottom of the river. When authorities retrieved Till's remains, the ghastly sight seemed not to belong to this world. As Anderson documents, "[t]he body was naked, had been badly beaten, and, due to the effects of the river, was heavily decomposed and bloated" (46). Due to the strong odor, not even after an undertaker was summoned and several deodorant bombs were thrown could authorities approach the body to closely examine it. John Cothran and Tallahatchie deputy sheriff Ed Weber immediately informed Moses of the gruesome discovery and brought him to the scene. As soon as he approached the badly decomposed body, Moses confirmed their suspicion: "That's him" (in Anderson 46). And even if, as some would later claim, the body was barely recognizable to assert its identity, the silver ring with the initials LT (i.e.,

Louis Till) found in its middle finger did not leave any doubt; "the body was indeed that of Emmett Till" (Anderson 46).[16]

Although everything was set for the burial in the East Money Church of God in Christ, the Mississippi Delta was not the place where Till's remains were going to rest. Headed by Tallahatchie County Sheriff H. C. Strider—who, according to Carolyn Bryant, ruled "like a godfather over the Delta" (in Tyson, *The Blood* 124)—southern officials were particularly eager to bury the body to avoid another scandal in the region. Mamie's tenacious determination frustrated such plans and stopped the burial arrangements that had already been started, urged by local authorities, in Money. The family then arranged to ship the remains to Chicago, where the deceased would receive a proper burial. The hearse arrived at A.A. Rayner's mortuary in Chicago by train with a seal of the state of Mississippi that unauthorized the funeral director to break it. Under Mamie's insistence, Rayner ended up tearing the seal and opening the coffin so that the mother could see the body of her son with her own eyes. In her biography, Mamie describes this traumatizing experience as follows:

> When I got to his chin, I saw his tongue resting there. … But as I gazed at the tongue, I couldn't help but think that it had been choked out of his mouth. I forced myself to move on, to keep going one small section at a time, as if taking this gruesome task in small doses could somehow make it less excruciating. …
>
> From the chin I moved up to his right cheek. There was an eyeball hanging down, resting on that cheek. It looked like it was still attached by the optic nerve, but it was just suspended there. … Right away, I looked to the other eye. But it wasn't there … I looked at the bridge of his nose, at the point right between his eyebrows. It had been chopped … as if someone had tenderized his nose.
>
> … I found out that the right ear had been cut almost in half. … As I moved around, I saw a bullet hole slightly back from the temple area. … That's when I had to stop. My momentum was broken. (Till-Mobley and Benson 135-36)

[16] For a detailed analysis of the impact of the Emmett Till case on African American consciousness and the history of racial violence through the motif of the ring, see Valerie Smith's essay.

On top of that, revisiting this devastating moment in Keith Beauchamp's 2005 documentary, Mamie would recall a further gruesome detail of her examination: "I also discovered that they had taken an ax and they had gone straight down across his head. The face and the back of the head were separate" (in Beauchamp). Till's body had been inhumanly brutalized, but the mother was not going to be the only one to witness it with her own eyes.

After that overwhelming experience, Mamie decided to have an open-casket funeral for his son to, as she herself stated, "let the world see what I have seen" (Till-Mobley and Benson 139). First at Rayner & Sons and then at the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ on State Street, the funeral service gathered so many attendants that, as Anderson describes, the whole event "resembled a state funeral" (59). Everyone wanted to lay eyes on Till's remains to witness firsthand that horrific reality, as if to finally confirm something that they did not really want to be true. And indeed it was real, but it was way worse than words could have ever described, and many broke down at its sight. For those who could not make it to the funeral, *Jet* magazine's famous photograph of the mangled body spread like wildfire across the country, igniting the consciousness of millions of African Americans. As Tyson recalls, "[p]erhaps no photograph in history can lay claim to a comparable impact in black America" (*The Blood* 75), since the image constituted, as Courtney Baker contends, "a consciousness-altering moment in their lives" (111); it was undoubtedly traumatizing.

Meanwhile in the Delta, the preparations for the murder trial were set at the small town of Sumner, Mississippi. Journalists from major national newspapers, magazines, the TV, and the radio gathered in Sumner to cover the event so that the whole country could witness the development of the trial. As Anderson observes, the designation of Circuit Judge Curtis Swango to guarantee a fair trial "received advance praise from both the prosecution and the defense" (88)—even the northern and southern media agreed on his fair-minded reputation[17]—and, on September 19, 1955, the trial opened with the jury selection by the prosecution and the defense. One day later, the twelve white men from

[17] See Metress, *The Lynching of Emmett Till*, and Houck et al. for an analysis of the substantial differences between the northern and southern media in the coverage of the case. In these books, the authors refute the popular idea of a monolithic southern media narrative and identify the divergences within it.

the Mississippi Delta who were going to decide on the fates of the two main suspects were finally selected. Never in the history of the South a crime committed against an African American had resulted in a white person's conviction but, given the gruesome nature of the case, a great part of the country was expecting that justice would be at last served for a black person in a Mississippi courtroom.

"There he is" (Metress, *The Lynching* 68), said Moses Wright firmly pointing at J.W. Milam when asked to recognize one of the suspects at the trial. That brave act constituted one of the most iconic scenes of the trial thanks to a photograph secretly taken by reporter Ernest Withers (Anderson 108), as the picture went down in history as one of the most courageous acts carried out by an African American in a southern court. Despite having to sleep in his car for his safety in different unknown locations—including a cemetery—during the three weeks following the boy's abduction, Moses did not shrink back and, when the decisive moment came at last, he testified against the white suspects. His testimony, along with those of the other witnesses, was not enough to avoid the not-guilty verdict of the jury and, after a sixty-seven-minute deliberation, which would have been less had they not stopped for a soda, the twelve white jurors wound up yielding to the defense's call for "every last Anglo-Saxon one of you [to] have the courage to free

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Figure 3. Moses Wright's historic gesture, by Ernest Withers.

these men" (Anderson 152; Metress, *The Lynching* 108). The trial had been turned into a challenge to the very South itself, and the southern jurors were the ones who eventually stopped those who, as defense attorney John Whitten stated, "would like to destroy the southern way of life" (Anderson 152). Forty-seven days after the not-guilty verdict, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam were acquitted of the kidnapping charge, a crime to which, ironically, they themselves had openly confessed in the murder trial, by the Leflore County grand jury. That meant that, in spite of all the circumstantial evidence and all the national turmoil arisen by the case, both suspects were not only free of bond, but free of all charges and, therefore, prevented from being prosecuted again for the same legal causes due to the double jeopardy clause.

The southern way of life had prevailed once again, but the disgraceful acquittal of the murderers was not going to be the end of the infamous case. On January 24, 1956, *Look* magazine published a piece written by William Bradford Huie based on the confession of the two murderers in exchange of, as Anderson points out, "$3,150, to be shared among Milam and Bryant" (232). Titled "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," the article narrated how the two Deltans beat and tortured the fourteen-year-old African American boy before killing him and tossing his body into the Tallahatchie River.[18] Enraged by the news, those who were seeking justice for Emmett Till were far from giving up. Different organizations including the NAACP worked together with members of the Till family during the years after the murder to spread the word across the country and gather momentum to reopen the investigation. Five decades passed until they could reap the fruits of their unwavering efforts. By the end of the millennium, the work of filmmaker Keith Beauchamp along with that of civil rights activist Alvin Sykes proved vital for the reopening of the investigation in 2004. That same year an autopsy confirmed the identity of the body and silenced the doubts of those few who had ever questioned the veracity of the tragic story. Nowadays, most of the people involved in the case are dead, but associations such as the Emmett Till Foundation keep fighting for justice to preserve the memory of the African American boy, while they also attempt to solve the remaining mysteries of the murder. Carolyn Bryant-Donham's

[18] For a long period of time, the *Look* story stood as the most popular narrative about the Emmett Till case in spite of the numerous incongruences that, with the passage of time, historians would find in the article.

published confession of her made-up testimony in the infamous 1955 trial confirmed a truth that she finally came to admit herself: "Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him" (in Tyson, *The Blood* 7). This new update of the historical record provided the FBI with new evidence to reopen, once again, the investigation of the Till case in 2017, which, up do this date, is still awaiting a final public resolution.

Immediately after the lynching of her son, Mamie Till initiated a tenacious quest for justice that spanned through the rest of her life and that has even gotten to transcend her lifelong activism over the course of the years. Mamie soon joined the NAACP after the tragic murder and rapidly became a prominent civil rights activist in the fight for racial equality. As she tells in a 1955 interview, although "I was never much active in working for racial equality, … Now I'm going to devote all the time I can. This has made me more aware of the problem" (in Anderson 71); and she indeed spent a lot of her time, especially during the years following her son's murder, rallying across the country in order to raise awareness about the vulnerability of black lives in the US. In his historical revisitation of the infamous case, Anderson reflects on how Mamie's "new role as a public figure who had endured an unspeakable loss no doubt positioned her as a comforter to many others who mourned, as well as an inspiration to people simply anxious to hear her story" (202). Thanks to her inspiring efforts and the increasing support of a large community of people who shared the common goal of racial equality and justice, Mamie utterly succeeded in honoring the memory of her son and spreading the consciousness-raising Till narrative nationwide, even transcending temporal and geographical limitations. As time passes by, the boy's story has not in the least ceased to reverberate among the black community, which proves, as Thadious Davis contends, "the continued significance of the Emmett Till murder case to creative writers and to African Americans who will not allow the Chicago youth's death to go unmemorialized" (86). A number of white artists have also contributed to broadening the large tradition of works inspired by the young Till, and have also joined their efforts in an ongoing quest for justice that Mamie started for her son and many other victims of brutal racist violence. Far from being completed, this still needs to be adamantly fought for since, as the unwavering mother invoked in 2002, "[w]e have to keep telling the story to raise people's consciousness and until justice prevails" (in Anderson 297).

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1.4 The Emmett Till Literary Tradition

From its impact on the origins of the Civil Rights Movement, to his recent reverberations in the ongoing Black Lives Matter era, Emmett Till has become a mythical figure in the US collective imaginary. His tragic story has transcended the passage of time and still shakes the consciousness of those who hear about it for the first time. Part of Till's immortal presence over the years is due to the extensive literary tradition arisen from the infamous case. Writers have explored its depths from countless perspectives, and in every available literary genre, in order to create narratives that help us grasp the meaning of one of the cruelest killings in the history of the US. And although it is true that, as Pollack's and Metress' edited collection of essays proves, "no single narrative could fully claim to capture the truth about the Till lynching" (7), the numerous poems, plays, and novels written about it shed some light upon the long shadows of the Emmett Till case.

Back in 1955, the news of the horrific crime soon triggered the first literary reactions in the country. Just a couple of weeks after the incident, on September 12, the *Daily Worker* published a short narrative poem written by the New York poet and playwright Richard Davidson. His "Requiem for a Fourteen-Year-Old" became the first creative work ever produced about the murder of the boy (Metress, *The Lynching* 291). "Requiem" opened the path for countless poetic expressions inspired by a case that, as Davidson rightly predicted in his verses, "[n]obody will forget how it happened" (292).

Among the initial current of literary responses to the Till case, Langston Hughes,[19] one of the major exponents of the Harlem Renaissance, produced what could be considered the most notorious piece of writing of the early literature inspired by Till's tragic story. On September 23, the very same day in which the infamous not-guilty verdict was issued in the Deep South, Hughes completed the first version of his short poem "Mississippi—1955" (Metress, *The Lynching* 293). Through its three stanzas, the author pays homage to the memory of the Chicago youth while he laments his death but, except for a prefatory reference in its early versions, as Priest points out, "Till never appears in the poem" ("Flesh" 63). Neither the boy's name nor any reference to the murder are

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[19] As Metress notes, Hughes became "the first major African-American literary figure to respond to the lynching" ("Langston Hughes's 'Mississippi—1955'" 141).

mentioned at all. Instead, as Priest states, "it is the specter of terror that actually appears" and lurks in a composition in which, as she continues in her analysis, the references to "Sorrow and Pity and Pain are the markers of trauma" ("Flesh" 64). This somber atmosphere recreated by the poetic voice becomes the heart of the poem and displaces any potential explicit mention of the boy. Perhaps the absence of the memorialized Till in "Mississippi—1955" is explained by his, at the time, recent traumatic impact on the African American community. The tragedy's recency had actually left no time for the writer, or for US society, to come to terms with the incident and overtly confront such a delicate matter. Hughes therefore chooses to rely on the reader's extratextual knowledge to evoke the memory of the boy and undertake his tribute without even having to mention him. After the poem's first publication in the *Chicago Defender*, Hughes kept revising it for several republications over the years, but he did not, or could not, find a place for Till's presence within its lines. In the end, as Priest concludes, the crime may have just been too "bloody" to be represented ("Flesh" 65).

Following Hughes's "Mississippi—1955," Gwendolyn Brooks—the first African American to ever win the Pulitzer Prize—became the next renowned author in dealing with the myth of Emmett Till in her poetic oeuvre. After five years of numerous literary responses to the murder, Brooks contributed to the incipient Till literary tradition with two interdependent poems about the case. First, in "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon," the author approached the crime's aftermath from the ground-breaking perspective of Carolyn Bryant. As Vivian May argues, through her exploration of the white mother's psyche, "it is as if Brooks tries to push this silent witness into speech by creating a verbose interior monologue in the first poem" (101). "A Bronzeville Mother" explores the broken spaces of the discourse of the fictional Caroline Bryant in a narrative that exposes the traumatic aftereffects of the murder through her psyche. The result of this poetic experiment allows the reader to ponder on the white mother's passive role in the crime and her vulnerable position within the southern social order. And it is, in fact, the seemingly depiction of Carolyn Bryant as a victim, alongside the notion of victimhood, what connects "A Bronzeville Mother" with the second short poem produced by Brooks. Although written somehow as an appendage to the first poetic piece, "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" completes the meaning of the previous long poem by shifting the perspective of the story to that of

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another victim of the southern way of life: Mamie Till. The poetic voice's depiction of the black northern mother is imbued with what May describes as the "character's grief, her sense of disembodiment and dispossession" (103) following the loss of her son, and she is represented through a much more solemn and cohesive discourse. "The Last Quatrain" seems to be the opposite mirror image of "A Bronzeville Mother," but it is actually through what May terms this "tactical juxtaposition" (109) of the two poems how Brooks links them and bestows them with a larger meaning, while she develops her artistic narrative of the Till case.

Twenty-one years after Brook's exploration of the murder, Audre Lorde went one step further and weaved Carolyn Bryant's fictional consciousness to a black maternal poetic voice—identified with the author herself—in her poem "Afterimages." Originally published in 1981, the composition revisits the Till case and its psychic cost on the white southern mother and the African American community through the tragedy's most symbolic imagery (Metress, *The Lynching* 324). Unlike Hughes and Brooks, Lorde does include "afterimages" of the actual murder in her poem to show how, despite the passage of time, the wound is yet to be closed. The crime's traumatic impact can still be perceived in the poem through a poetic voice that, as Laura Dawkins notes, is "permanently haunted by the battered face of the child victim" (121). Till's visual image becomes a "recurring nightmare" (Dawkins 120) for both the Carolyn Bryant character and the poetic voice that evinces their inability to cope with the tragedy. This troubled relation to the incident is precisely what links the two maternal figures together and, additionally, connects Lorde's revisitation of the case with Brooks' interdependent compositions. The aftereffects of the murder depicted in the three poems establish an intertextual dialogue over time that offers a new perspective on the case based on the notion of motherhood. As Dawkins points out, the poems "suggest that motherhood potentially creates a bond transcending racial and cultural differences" (113), which, in the end, constitutes the lens through which Lorde approaches her rendition of the tragic story.

Apart from the aforementioned authors, the poetic production of the Till case has expanded toward our days thanks to a varied and large list of authors.[20] Among them, two prominent Caribbean poets have helped Till both transcend the literary borders of the US and acquire an international dimension. The Cuban Nicolás Guillén and the Martinican Aimé Césaire, two of the major exponents of the *Negrismo* and *Négritude* movements respectively, reacted almost simultaneously to the news of the murder with two elegies in memory of the fourteen-year-old boy. Guillén's "Elegía a Emmett Till" and Césaire's "Message sur l'Etat de l'Union" were both written in Paris and first published in the French press to, as Sylvie Kandé remarks, "register—Guillén in Spanish and Césaire in French—their pain and bitter rage at this blatant demonstration of racial hatred and assign guilt in lieu of the judicial institution that staged a mock trial that eventually acquitted the murderers" (144).

The social outrage provoked by the crime has not only led black poets to write about Emmett Till, nor has it been confined to the realms of a specific genre.[21] Already after the earliest poetic responses, the white author Marijane Meaker produced the first novel inspired by the incident and published it as Vin Packer, one of her most recurrent pen names, with the title *Dark Don't Catch Me* in 1956. Although it has not been highly praised by the critics, Meaker's book opened the path for the fruitful narrative tradition inspired by the Till case. This has stretched into the early twenty-first century with, among others, Chris Crowe's 2002 young adult fiction *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, which won the International Reading Association Children's Book Award for Young Adult Fiction in 2003, Daniel Black's 2007 novel *The Sacred Place*, and Jewell Parker Rhodes' 2018 children's book *Ghost Boys*, which, among other distinctions, made it into the New York Times Best Seller List. These three books have contributed to expanding the Till literary

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[20] Wanda Coleman, Nagueyalti Warren, Aldon Nielsen, Anthony Walton, Sterling Plumpp, and Marylin Nelson are some of the writers who have contributed to the Till poetic tradition over the course of the last four decades. For a detailed list of authors and information about their works, see Metress, *Emmett Till in Literary Memory and Imagination*, pp. 223-49. Additionally, some of the compositions that are included in the 2016 publication of *Of Poetry and Protest: From Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin* edited by Philip Cushway and Michael Warr have enlarged this never-ending list of poems inspired by the mythical figure of Emmett Till.

[21] Rod Serling's efforts to release his teledrama about the Emmett Till case were frustrated by a TV industry that feared its public reception and censored any explicit reference to the murder. The final version of the draft was released in 1956 as *Noon of Doomsday* including vague connections to the actual case. For further discussion, see Metress, "Submitted for Their Approval."

tradition but, like Meaker's 1956 narrative, they seem to have not garnered the scholars' attention as other novels based on the infamous lynching. Little needs to be said about this at this point, for the three major narrative works inspired by the Till case will be analyzed in detail, respectively, in the third, fourth, and fifth chapter of this dissertation.

In 1964, James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* became the first play ever produced about the infamous murder, and it has remained the most representative drama of the Till tradition ever since. Nine years after the tragedy, Baldwin revisited the traumatic event in a dramatic work that, as he acknowledges in the opening note of the book, "is based, very distantly indeed, on the case of Emmett Till" (*Blues* xiv). The renowned African American author shaped the figure of Emmett Till into the adult character of Richard Henry, a black musician who returned to his southern home town from New York to recover from heroin addiction, in order to explore the complexities of the segregated society in which the actual lynching took place. As Brian Norman argues in his detailed analysis of the play, "Baldwin uses the polarizing figure of Till for an integration strategy: bring together segregated factions of society onto the same stage" (75), which is tellingly divided by an empty aisle in Blacktown, on the left, and Whitetown, on the right, as a metaphor for the segregated reality of the Jim Crow South. The scene of the murder opens a play that breaks with temporal linearity and, over the course of its three acts, conscientiously resorts to several flashbacks to provide the audience with insightful information at crucial points of the story. *Blues* thus begins in medias res, putting the audience on notice of every detail that, in the following, will somehow explicate its violent beginning. From this moment onward, the stage turns into a theatrical courtroom in which the different characters of the play ponder on the issues that lead to Richard's tragic death since, in contrast to the historical lack of justice in the actual case, Norman contends that "Baldwin is interested in elevating Till into the realm of justice" (94).

The dramatic production inspired by the Till case added a new title several decades later with a short-lived 1986 play written by the African American Nobel laureate Toni Morrison. Titled *Dreaming Emmett*, Morrison recreated an oneiric atmosphere to set an experimental revisitation of the tragic story where, as Margaret Croyden reports in her 1985 article for the *NYT*, "Emmett Till is intended to symbolize the plight of contemporary black urban youth—their disproportionately high rate of death by

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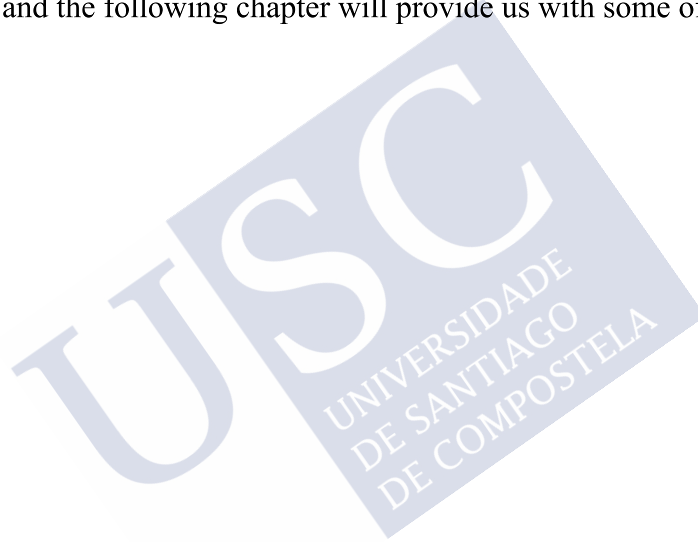
violence" (6). Asked by Croyden about the inspiration for her play, Morrison acknowledges her revisionist intentions regarding *Dreaming* since, as the writer notes, "I wanted to see a collision of three or four levels of time through the eyes of one person who could come back to life and seek vengeance. Emmett Till became that person" (6). Like Baldwin in *Blues*, Morrison reshapes the figure of the fourteen-year-old boy into an older character who, as Katie Cusack remarks, "resurrected as an adult, summoning and seeking vengeance on his murderers." After the first four-week run following the premiere at The Capital Repertory Theatre in Albany, New York, the experimental drama mysteriously disappeared from the charts for ever since, according to *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, "after the 1986 production, Morrison collected every record of the play and had it destroyed" (Beaulieu 106), apparently leaving no existing copy or printed record for posterity.

Given Morrison's intentional vanishment of *Dreaming* from the annals of literary history, Till's prose production would then have to wait almost thirty years to see other significant works after the publication of Baldwin's *Blues* in 1964. Bebe Moore Campbell's 1992 novel *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* was almost immediately followed by Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* (1993) and, in 2012, the triad of major contemporary narrative works that will be analyzed in chapters 3, 4, and 5 was completed with the publication of *Gathering of Waters* by Bernice L. McFadden. The Till literary tradition has not ceased to increase since this latter novel, as the Emmett Till Trilogy written by the African American playwright Ifa Bayeza has been demonstrating since the publication of *The Ballad of Emmett Till* in 2009. To this, Bayeza has added two more parts over the course of the 2010s, *Benevolence* and *That Summer in Sumner*, to complete an ambitious dramatic trilogy based on the infamous case that is currently in production and has been rescheduled for the 2021 season due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

With the passage of time, the figure of Emmett Till has become a literary motif that, as Janelle Collins remarks, "haunts the imagination of both writers and scholars" (653). The countless literary and academic explorations of the case have not ceased to blossom since the birth of the Till myth and, at least in the short term, they will most likely not stop coming. The particular horrific nature of the crime, together with its unresolved mysteries and its overwhelming impact on the African American community, have originated a trauma in the US collective imaginary that calls for our attention and

urges us not to ignore the most painful aspects of US history. Imagination has tried to fill the gaps in the case with narratives that try to provide answers to the many questions raised by the gruesome crime. Although it is true that, as Marcel Arbeit argues, "[d]ealing with history in fiction is a tricky business" ("Historical Trauma" 143), literature is thus playing a crucial role in this process of coming to terms with Till's tragic story, and ultimately preventing its burial in the national collective consciousness of denial. If the numerous narratives based on the tragedy confirm that the infamous lynching still lurks in US literature and society as a collective trauma, it is because the wound has never been completely healed. Now the task at hand is to dig deep into the intricacies of the Emmett Till case in fiction to find answers but, before doing so, one needs the appropriate theoretical tools, and the following chapter will provide us with some of them.



2. Trauma Theory, Spectralities, and Black Subjection

But it returns in nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks,
and other forms of intrusively repetitive behavior
characteristic of an all-compelling frame.
(LaCapra, *Writing History* 89)

From the origins of the concept as it is widely understood nowadays in the 1860s, to its recent irruption in the cultural studies scenario, the theoretical conceptualization of trauma has been characterized by its broad interdisciplinarity. Psychology, law, philosophy, historiography, sociology and, among others, literature have been brought together to unveil the myriad facets of the traumatic experience. This extensive collaborative endeavor met some resistance at the beginning but soon proved indispensable for the understanding of trauma. Although the term per se was first used in English in the seventeenth century to refer to a physical wound, its genealogy as a mental pathology was first identified as such during the so-called birth of the modern nations. By the late nineteenth century, the technological advents of the time together with the profound industrialization of the western city set the perfect conditions for the inception of "trauma." As one of the banners of modernity, the introduction of the railway came hand in hand with the first cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which, at the time, were regarded as mere nervous shocks. Soon, debates over the physical and psychical nature of trauma confronted the most prominent practitioners of the time and, as Roger Luckhurst notes in *The Trauma Question*, "[t]he structure of the dispute has not substantially changed for a hundred years" (3).[22] Within this ontological confrontation, the supporters of the psychological current saw a common thread between this newly formulated pathology and the underestimated tradition of female hysteria in Victorian times. The disproportionate registers of railway and industrial accidents condensed during the first decades of the short history of rail transportation triggered the number of nervous-shock cases among the population. The numerous victims claimed for monetary

[22] See Luckhurst, especially 1-15, for further discussion of the John Erichsen's and Herbert Page's debate on the physical and psychical nature of trauma.

compensations in legal litigations and, given the ambiguities in the legislation and the lack of consensus among practitioners, the incipient social demand wound up putting even more pressure upon the trauma debate.

The former nervous-shock approach elucidated from railway and industrial accidents opened the path for Hermann Oppenheim's groundbreaking theorization of "traumatic neurosis" in 1889. As Luckhurst pinpoints in his book, two of the German-Jewish psychiatrist's major contributions state that post-traumatic disorders "were transient rather than permanent disorders and thus treatable," and second, that "the emotional effect of shock was responsible for the majority of symptoms" (34). Oppenheim's conceptualization—in addition to Jean-Martin Charcot's interpretation of it—greatly influenced Sigmund Freud's early work on trauma. From the perspective of his recently founded psychoanalytic theory, Freud proposed a theory of trauma wherein repression constituted a key notion for its understanding. In short, his proposal gave an explanation for the behavior of post-traumatic latency and, overall, shed light on the arduous debate on traumatic neurosis, to the point that, as Luckhurst remarks, with the passage of time, Freud's psychoanalytic theory "massively extended the potential range of the term trauma" (48).[23]

The major war conflicts of the twentieth century and their decisive contribution to the trauma paradigm confirmed Freud's psychoanalytic approach to traumatic experiences. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 brought a new element to the ongoing debate on the term: shell-shock trauma. As part of the era's modernizing drive, the advances in technology developed a systematic war machine that produced almost as many deaths as shell-shocked victims. Thousands of cases of hysteria sprung among the soldiers and spread through the armies, manifesting the incapacity of the military commands to control them. As Peter Leese attests in his study, shell shock "define[d] for the first time, both qualitatively and quantitatively, … mass trauma" (4). But if shell-shocked victims presented new dilemmas to the trauma debate, both in the individual and collective spheres, World War II would magnify these challenges. More mechanization of death, more destruction, and the particular horrors of Nazism expanded the trauma

[23] The period of latency of a putative trauma is that time frame that spans from the actual traumatic experience to the manifestation of its first aftereffects.

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paradigm and its theorization—only within the spectrum of mass trauma, the Holocaust set the limits for the worst imaginable collective trauma and submerged theorists in an intense discussion about its aporetic nature. On a lesser scale, the Vietnam War followed WWII and provided the trauma debate with one of the most popular war trauma icons of recent times: the Vietnam veteran. The study of the traumatized Vietnam veteran, alongside the experiences of the major war conflicts of the past century, pushed the trauma concept further and resulted in the eventual postulation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association. As Luckhurst asserts, PTSD's success as a term lay in its inclusion of various "psychological reactions of those who survived the Hiroshima bombing, the victims of Nazi persecution, the consequences of slavery and segregation on African American identity, and women who had suffered incest or rape trauma" (62). For the first time, Freud's turn-of-the-century broadening of the potential range of trauma—which his work timidly had attempted to resolve—was articulated through the convergence of several interdisciplinary approaches in an agreed terminology for trauma.

By the time PTSD was being established as a concept, trauma studies irrupted in the cultural analysis' scenario as an academic discipline in which historiographic, literary, philosophical, psychoanalytic and, among others, sociocultural concepts intersected to provide an explanation for the different types of traumatic experience. This eminently interdisciplinary endeavor falls into the alternate category of what Michelle Balaev describes in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* as "the pluralistic model of trauma due to the plurality of theories and approaches employed" (3). In contrast to an aporetic understanding of trauma, Balaev posits that the pluralistic approach offers the possibility for criticism to "explore trauma as a subject that invites the study of the relationship between language, the psyche, and behavior without assuming the classic definition of trauma that asserts an unrepresentable and pathological universalism" (4). Thus, as she later proposes, this model "highlights the ranging values and representations of trauma in literature and society, emphasizing not only the harm caused by a traumatic experience but also the many sources that inform the definitions, representations, and consequences of traumatic experience" (6). In this line, the 1990s saw how the US scholars Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth laid the theoretical foundations for the cultural study of trauma with their respective reinterpretations of the psychoanalytic

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theory of trauma and its application to history and critical theory. Their extensive theoretical contributions have not only opened new possibilities for the lasting and controversial debate on the trauma paradigm, but they have also provided new perspectives to solve the interdisciplinary puzzle of the traumatic experience.

But, after this general overview of the etiology of the concept, there is a question that, without more detours, has to be necessarily tackled: what is actually trauma? Despite subtle divergencies depending on the disciplinary approach that is applied, there is general consensus on a concise definition of the term that has been established over the passage of time. Following the theory that Freud developed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth argues that "the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (*Unclaimed* 3). In her definition, Caruth is probably bearing in mind a very didactic metaphor envisioned by Freud himself to explain the term that, as Luckhurst notes, describes "the mind as a single cell with an outer membrane." A traumatic event is thus something that wounds and "blasts open the membrane … leaving the cell overwhelmed and trying to repair the damage" (9). This state of incomprehensibility, this incapacity to assimilate the accident, is precisely what, as Caruth theorizes, renders the mind's wound not "a simple and healable event" (*Unclaimed* 3), as the bodily wound might be, but a much more complex and repetitive process. For instance, the aftereffects of a traumatic event can be manifested days, weeks, months, or even years after the actual accident (i.e., the trauma's period of latency), and they are also characterized by immersing the traumatized individual in a sort of repetitive loop known as repetition compulsion, which will be carefully dealt with later in this chapter.

One of the major problems for the understanding of trauma lies in its intrinsic interaction with memory. Traumatic experiences have particular effects on the way in which we remember since, according to LaCapra, they "distort … memory in the 'ordinary' sense and may render it particularly vulnerable and fallible in reporting events" (*History* 61). The mind's chronological perception is altered by trauma and, in some severe cases, the boundaries between past and present may no longer be distinguishable: the traumatized individual is trapped in the past, for s/he is not able to come to terms with the traumatic experience and, instead of a continuous conscious thought, a traumatic memory is articulated through flashbacks, recurring nightmares, and hallucinations.

Traumatic memory or "traumatic recall" thus immerses the traumatized individual in the spiral of repetition compulsion and, as Caruth observes, it "remains insistent and unchanged to the precise extent that it has never, from the beginning, been fully integrated into understanding" (*Trauma* 153). In this cycle, traumatic memory works to maintain the yet-to-assimilate traumatic experience intact in the mind but, when the traumatized individual attempts to verbalize it, the very recollection of the forming trauma is abruptly blurred by an initial conflation of past and present. What happens here is that the individual tries to comprehend a past experience that s/he has never fully assimilated from his/her present frame of mind and, in the process, there is a departure from the "sensorial truth" of the traumatic memory, which repeats the event exactly as it was experienced, toward a constructed "verbalized truth," which may elide or distort how the event is remembered.[24] As Caruth argues, with the verbalization of trauma, the individual succeeds in creating a "narrative memory that allows the story … to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past" (*Trauma* 153) or, in other words, to be eventually incorporated into memory.

The relation between trauma and memory becomes essential for the understanding of the individual experience, but it can also account for the formulation of collective cultural traumas. General notions of the latter term have derived from Freud's uncompleted attempts to extend his individually-oriented trauma theory to the study of collectives (Luckhurst 10). Freud's suggested interrelation of the two concepts originated an arduous debate in sociology regarding the possibility of conceiving the collective traumatic experience as an extension of the individual one. In the 1970s, the Austrian sociologist Kai Erikson proposed a clear-cut differentiation between individual and collective traumas that went beyond Freud's speculations and provided a solid alternative to the controversial debate. His conceptualization of the term defined "collective trauma [as] a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (Erikson, *Everything* 153-54). In this definition, there is already a departure from Freud's psychoanalytic theory, centered on the individual psyche, toward a rather sociological interpretation of

[24] This duality has been an ardent topic of debate among historiographers. For a brief overview, see LaCapra's dicussion in his "Preface 2014" of *Writing History*, pp. xix-xx.

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communal consciousness. Erikson's innovative contribution lay in his theorization of "traumatized communities as something distinct from assemblies of traumatized persons" ("Notes" 185). Influenced by this conceptual shift, sociologist Jeffrey Alexander articulated a theory of collective trauma that, to some extent, furthered Erikson's former definition. According to him, and considering "cultural" as a synonym of "collective":

> Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (J. Alexander 1)

Despite the differences between individual and collective trauma, both concepts are interrelated through the indelible mark that traumatic experiences leave on memory. Trauma disrupts both the individual and the collective memory in a way that urges both the individual human psyche and the collective group consciousness to assimilate the traumatic experience and, hopefully, heal the wound.

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The Emmett Till case may serve as a factual example of how a traumatic experience disrupted the individual and the collective memory of the US and, in turn, originated a recurrent cultural motif that can be termed, as I propose, the Emmett Till trauma. In her article "The Trauma of the Routine," Angela Onwuachi-Willig dissects the social impact of the infamous murder over the passage of time in order to "reveal how the African American community experienced collective and cultural trauma in response to the not guilty verdict" (337). As she argues, even before the disgraceful trial and the ascent of the case into national attention, "the slaying of Till and the discovery of his mutilated body had already resulted in collective trauma for the residents of Leflore County, where Till was kidnapped, and Tallahatchie County, where Till's body was found" (341). The tragic story of the fourteen-year-old African American boy constituted a traumatic kernel that, from its inception in the Mississippi Delta, rapidly spread across the whole country thanks to the unwavering efforts of his mother and the unrelenting support of black social activism.

Over time, different generations of African Americans have been traumatized by the uncanny image of the boy's disfigured body. *Jet* magazine's famous photograph bore witness to the brutality and wickedness exerted upon the young black body, and catapulted Till's figure into the US collective imaginary. After more than sixty years, the US still struggles to come to terms with such a disturbing picture, but why has this particular incident had such a profound social impact on the country? Perhaps the visual component of the crime is to account for its massive traumatic capacity. The horrific photograph shattered black consciousnesses all over the whole country through a process of identification in which the observer identified with the victim of the murder. African Americans saw themselves, their relatives, and friends reflected in the flesh of the young boy and remained deeply overwhelmed by its sight. At this point, the young Till ceased to be a regular fourteen-year-old Chicago boy and became a totally different subject constructed by trauma.

Judith Butler's conceptual duality between "subject" and "individual human body-as-identity" can better explain what happens in this process of identification. Mainly following Foucault's theory of the body, Butler argues that "the subject, rather than being identified strictly with the individual [the body], ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, as structure in formation" (10). The subject transcends the physical boundaries of the individual body, which is conceived as a mere sleeve, and becomes a "site" that is filled with meaning. This occurs through a double process of subjection that, according to Anita Brady's and Tony Schirato, "both allows subjects to be (recognised); and provides them with an entry to, and a narrational trajectory within, the wider sociocultural field" (25). Once the subject enters this latter sociocultural realm, the members of society bestow it with their own narrative(s) and collectively shape a new subject. That is how Emmett Till became a symbol in the US collective imaginary. Given the incapacity to assimilate the uncanniness of his disfigured body, African Americans created a subject of trauma that has haunted the individual and collective memory of the US over decades; a subject that proves that, despite the passage of time, the Emmett Till trauma is yet to be healed.

However, the healing process of coming to terms with a traumatic experience becomes a complicated endeavor. One of the immediate obstacles in the assimilation of trauma is the fall of the traumatized individual into the spiral of repetition compulsion. In

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his reinterpretation of basic psychoanalytic concepts, LaCapra dissects the effects of the latter post-traumatic symptom and relates it to an acting-out force in which:

> one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes—scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop. In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene. (*Writing History* 21)

LaCapra's conceptualization of post-traumatic acting out is therefore equated with repetition compulsion and is, in turn, associated with traumatic memory: acting out becomes the mechanism that keeps the traumatic experience intact in memory by reproducing the trauma as it was experienced in the past. That is why, according to LaCapra, traumatized individuals "have a tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one were still fully in the past, with no distance from it" (*Writing History* 142-43). Trapped in a conflation of time, the mind keeps coming back to the traumatic experience in a struggle to assimilate it and integrate it into consciousness but, unable to do so by the very nature of the acting-out process, it endlessly enacts the repetitive loop.

To grasp the meaning of the traumatic experience, one should first break the cycle of repetition compulsion and restore a continuous conscious thought via the "working through" of the traumatic experience. Formulated as a counteractive process to acting out, LaCapra broadens the potential of this former psychoanalytic concept in his reformulation of it. According to him,

> Working through is an articulatory practice: to the extent one works through trauma …, one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future. (LaCapra, *Writing History* 21-22)

In this continuous process, the traumatized individual or community gains critical perspective on the putative trauma and begins to counteract the acting-out force "without entirely transcending it." Working through acts as a counterforce in its dual relation with

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acting out, but such duality should not be understood in terms of a binary opposition for, as LaCapra continues his theorization, working through does not necessarily imply "cure, consolidation, uplift, or closure and normalization" (xxiii). While working through aims to take the traumatized person out of the repetitive loop of acting out, both practices may in fact complement each other when coming to terms with a given trauma.

Focusing now on the collective sphere, US society has clearly manifested the aforementioned post-traumatic stages with regard to the Emmett Till trauma.[25] The boy's tragic fate has been repeatedly acted out in the collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent associations in defense of the rights of the black population. Its overwhelming traumatic capacity has led collectives to invoke the memory of the black youth in numerous rallies, protests, and artistic manifestations across the country, which has ultimately helped to consolidate his figure as a banner for social justice in the US. Till's continuous presence in the African American collective imaginary may be explained by the fall of this community into the spiral of repetition compulsion. Till has become a ghostly presence that haunts and troubles the black psyche for, despite the passage of time, his traumatic memory has never been fully assimilated and, therefore, his narrative keeps being acted out ad infinitum. As a specter seeking healing, Priest wittingly asserts that "'the boy who never died' rises before us again and again" ("The nightmare" 1) to remind an entire nation of what Onwuachi-Willig describes as "[t]he resulting, widespread knowledge about the routine harm from such unpunished murders [that] forced Americans of all races to ask themselves: 'How do we ensure that no more of these injustices occur?'" (351).

Although to a totally different degree, white America has also experienced the aftereffects of the Emmett Till trauma. The photograph of the disfigured black body undoubtedly traumatized African Americans in a severe manner, but it is not less true that a large part of the white community that was acquainted with the case remained horrified before the heinous crime. The brutality captured by the photograph, alongside the fact that it was only a fourteen-year-old boy, made the Till case a different lynching in the eyes of white America. Many of them clearly experimented the Emmett Till trauma's

[25] Individual reactions to the Emmett Till case will be carefully studied and further exemplified in the following chapters of the dissertation.

period of latency to reveal that, with the passage of time, they were utterly haunted by it. The case of the white novelist Lewis Nordan, who remained deeply troubled by the event for many years, is going to be carefully analyzed in the fourth chapter of this dissertation. While subtle signs and actions revealed to what extent white Americans were traumatized by the event, their post-traumatic acting out of the Emmett Till trauma was combined and somehow merged with a historic issue of the idiosyncrasy of this community: white guilt. Centuries of racial atrocities wound up stirring the minds of an increasing number of whites to the point that they could not deceive themselves any longer. As James Baldwin very accurately notes in his essay "The White Man's Guilt," when white Americans see the black body,

> what they see is an appallingly oppressive and bloody history, known all over the world. What they see is a disastrous, continuing, present condition which menaces them, and for which they bear an inescapable responsibility … The guilt remains, more deeply rooted, more securely lodged, than the oldest of old trees. (47)

The Till trauma magnified this dimension of guilt where the history of racist brutality was compartmentalized and, at the same time, totally immersed in the loop of repetition compulsion. If this sentiment of guilt is never fully faced by white America, the overwhelming capacity of traumas such as that of Emmett Till will never cease to be acted out in the whole US collective imaginary.

The Emmett Till trauma has been urging US society to come to terms with it for decades, and this is something that can only be achieved through processes of working through. The Civil Rights Movement was a clear example of this healing strategy, since it somehow functioned as a working-through of Till's and many other racial traumas. Although it is true that the movement repeatedly acted out the Till trauma, it also attempted to work through it by bringing up the tragic story to national attention and establishing a veracious narrative for decades to come. At some point during the escalation of the specter of Emmett Till into the US collective imaginary, a moral debate about which community was morally endowed to mourn the traumatic event emerged. Whose trauma is it and which collective is entitled to work through it? From a strict theoretical perspective, my dissertation follows LaCapra's conception of trauma as a limitless experience: "there is an important sense in which the aftereffects—the

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hauntingly possessive ghosts—of traumatic events are not fully owned by anyone and, in various ways, affect everyone" (*Writing History* xxxi). The specter of Emmett Till is a trauma that undoubtedly haunts black and white America in completely different degrees but that, in the end, troubles the collective memory of the whole country. As to the moral aspect of the question, my research cannot give a definite answer, but it provides a broad literary analysis of the aftereffects of the case in various sectors of US society to, hopefully, shed some light upon the controversial debate. The focus is therefore put on identifying who and which collectives actually work through the Till trauma in a number of literary manifestations, understanding working through, again, "as a mode of immanent critique, that engages both personal and collective problems, including posttraumatic symptoms" (LaCapra, *History* 84).

The interconnections between trauma theory and spectrality studies may help to further explicate Till's haunting presence in the US collective imaginary through all these years. Ghosts, phantoms, and apparitions have always shaped our westernized systems of belief despite being officially neglected as valid sources of knowledge. In their succinct theory of ghosts included in *Dialectic of Englightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno contested Freud's approach to or, rather, dismissal of ghosts and spirits as meaningful entities for being "too narrow," and reflected on how "[t]he way in which some bereaved people entirely reorganize their lives after the death of one close to them, the busy cult of the deceased or, inversely, the forgetting rationalized as tact, are the modern counterpart to the belief in ghosts" (178). The German philosophers hinted at an early theory of ghosts in the mid-twentieth century and provided crucial insight into what decades later would materialize as the school of spectrality studies. During the late 1980s, spectrality studies started to blossom in the field of cultural studies to investigate the undeniable social interest in specters and its many manifestations in Western culture. The publication of Jacques Derrida's pathbreaking *Spectres de Marx* in 1993, with its subsequent English translation in 1994, consolidated the late-twentieth-century fascination with ghostly phenomena and marked what critics have identified as a spectral turn in contemporary cultural theory.

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Over less than three decades, conceptualizing spectralities has proved to be an interdisciplinary endeavor for this area of investigation. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben posits that "[s]pectrality is a form of life, a posthumous or complementary life that begins only when everything is finished" (475) and, one may add, whose inherently liminal nature has opened up new approaches to understand haunting. In such conflation of states does haunting arise for, as Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler assert, "[j]ust because the dead no longer exist does not mean that we are done with specters. On the contrary. Mourning and haunting are unleashed at this moment" (49). Investigating such ghostly phenomena and their relation to haunting is the primary object of spectrality studies. Like in trauma theory, haunting looms over both the individual and collective spheres, and it also intertwines them since, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock notes, "the ghost suggests the complex relationship between the constitution of individual subjectivity and the larger social collective" (4). Haunting shares common ground with trauma, but it transcends some of its limitations. As Avery Gordon points out,

> Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them. What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes very obliquely. (xvi)

At this liminal state, specters are conjured up as a result of putative breaches with the past that urge healing or atonement. Gordon describes this unresolved nature as a "something-to-be-done" (xvii) that is characteristic of haunting and that may magnify the haunting experience, providing it is systematically neglected. Spectrality and trauma studies thus share a vast load of common ground in not only their approaches to loss and potential healing but also, as one may infer from this brief conceptual overview, in their whole theoretical structure.

Emmett Till's traumatic narrative has been haunting the US collective imaginary for decades, and his specter is found among the vast ghostly population of the country. In light of the spectral turn, Weinstock contends that "America has always been a land of ghosts, a nation obsessed with the spectral" (8). The specters of the Native American slaughters or the years of slavery, to cite some, are examples of insufficiently acknowledged historical events that have found their way into US culture through the

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spectral for, as Arthur Redding argues, "[d]enied any access to any sort of officially authorized voice, this vestibular culture of memory brutalized has no choice but to haunt" (47). The ghosts arisen by haunting, however, are not necessarily evil since, according to Weinstock, "[t]hey represent our desires for truth and justice … and validate religious faith and the ideas of heaven and hell" (6). Contemporary approaches to spectrality transcend the fixed boundaries of traditional gothic narratives to construct a fluid, multilayered and, rather, more positive conception of the ghost. In the introduction to their edited collection of essays on the spectral in contemporary cultural theory, María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren observe that "[s]tudies of ghosts and haunting can do more than obsessively recall a fixed past; in an active, dynamic engagement, they may reveal the insufficiency of the present moment, as well as the disconsolation and erasures of the past, and a tentative hopefulness for future resolutions" (16). While standing as a constant reminder of the country's complicated task of coming to terms with its obscure past, the ghostly presence of the figure of Emmett Till, alongside the rest of his spectral companions in US culture and literature, does also create, by its close examination, an avenue for a putatively potential redemption.

The ongoing preoccupation with ghosts in contemporary cultural studies is inevitably leading to a revisitation of the past that may result in a painful but necessary experience for the US. Revisiting the past entails a profound examination of the histories behind those spectral entities that, as a consequence of a blatant lack of honest and rigorous confrontation, have been continuously haunting the collective imaginary of the country. The narratives of both primary and secondary victims and perpetrators may come up along this quest for the roots of the haunting experience but, in such a shadowy endeavor, the gathering of all the pieces involved will certainly illuminate solutions. No matter how deeply ingrained a ghost is in the sociocultural pattern, analyzing it from as many perspectives as possible does help in its own exorcism for, as Gordon argues, "[t]he emergent quality of a haunting does not … just set limits; it simultaneously relates to a solution" (201). This something-to-be-done is intrinsically associated with the very nature of haunting itself and is, in turn, entirely related to a past that demands an open contestation. As Weinstock indicates, "[e]xamining our ghosts tells us quite a bit about America's hopes and desires, fears and regrets—and the extent to which the past governs our present and opens or forecloses possibilities for the future" (8). That is why a

conscientious examination of this haunted past is utterly necessary for the coming to terms with the specters that, such as those of thousands of lynched victims like Emmett Till, still lurk in the US collective imaginary.

A discussion of the notions of victim and perpetrator and their relation to trauma seems appropriate here, as this is an issue that may arise from the aforementioned revisionist endeavor, so let us dissect this duality through the scapegoat ritual of the young African American boy. As thousands of lynchings before, the killing of Emmett Till was meant to restore the balance of the southern community of Money, for its status quo, and extensively that of the whole South, had been destabilized by Till's alleged offense against the purity of the white storekeeper Carolyn Bryant. In such scenario, the dogma of white supremacy mandated racial atonement and so the scapegoat mechanism was quickly put in motion: while the body of Emmett Till was turned into a recipient of racial hatred—applying a similar process of subjection to that enacted later by African Americans to transform Till into a subject of trauma—white supremacists constructed their own subject of evil. This newly formulated subject represented a communal threat to the southern status quo and did not just have to be removed from the community but violently destroyed in a ritual of sacrifice. According to this same vicious logic, the relatives and friends of the allegedly offended woman had to be those in charge of undertaking the barbaric task in a rite in which they acted vicariously as representatives or champions of white supremacy. Indeed, the perpetrators believed to be no longer mere members of the community during the ritualistic process but to be divinely designated as advocates in the preservation of the southern way of life. No remorse was expected from their inhuman actions, as they were morally justified by a way of life that had ruled the US South for centuries. LaCapra describes such violent phenomena, which are reminiscent of ancient religious sacrifices, "as deranged sacrificialism and even a returning repressed insofar as both a quasi-sacrificial ritual anxiety involving a perceived threat of contamination and a regenerative or even redemptive quest for purification" (*Writing History* 131). This "deranged sacrificialism" is actually what may account for the viciousness and depravity with which the perpetrators lynched the young Till and, in

the process, attempted to obliterate the subject of evil that they themselves had created in their twisted imaginations.

White supremacists perpetrated these sorts of violent sacrifices in an effort to preserve their romanticized vision of the South. Their actions seemed to not even spoil their naïve ideal but, paradoxically, to reinforce the narrative of their allegedly Edenic region. Extreme violence was so utterly normalized down South that, especially after the Civil War, it became an entrenched part of southern idiosyncrasy. With lynching rituals, southern racists longed for a "violent catharsis" that would both remove evil from the community and purge their own personal sins but, instead, lynchings magnified their paranoid vision of the South. Their sacrificial violence was nothing less than what LaCapra theorizes as "a deceptive effort to break through what is experienced as a deadly compulsive cycle of repetition in the pursuit of hoped-for purification, regeneration, or redemption—but with effects that instead intensify that cycle's vicious force" (*History* 92). In this never-ending cycle of violence, African Americans usually became the victims in a region where the scapegoat and lynching rituals victimized the black body for the interests of white supremacy in vain. Instead of purification or atonement, the perpetrators encountered what LaCapra identifies as a "violent catharsis" putatively related to scapegoating that "might just as well undermine if not drastically disempower the self, making the 'new men' prone to prolonged depression, nightmares, and other posttraumatic symptoms, including much-feared sexual impotence" (*History* 120). It is not only that violence did not succeed in bringing the intended social balance but that, in turn, it fueled even further both the bonfire of racial tension and the white supremacist's constant state of paranoia. As violence escalated, southern racists became more and more hyper-vigilant, perhaps as a way to silence their conscience and justify their violent actions; if they kept playing the game, there might be some final redemption. The truth is, however, that violence led the perpetrators—although in a completely different dimension to that of the victims—to no other path than that of trauma and the repetition compulsion of violence to appease, in a vicious and impossible quest for purification, their central role in racial violence.

The previous conception of the scapegoat ritual hints at a sacralization of not just the violent rite itself but the traumatic experience altogether. Extreme violent and traumatic experiences such as slavery, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and 9/11 have had such

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a transcendental social impact on history that some scholars have been prone to relate them to the aesthetics of the sublime. In hindsight, these historic peak events have challenged the limits of human comprehension and have fallen to a group of communal experiences that, the furthest one tries to comprehend them, the most overwhelmed one becomes. Their utterly otherworldly nature associates these liminal experiences to a negative sublime that, in a way, would reverse the traditional "positive" conception of the term. In this scenario, the negative sublime has been historically associated to what critics have defined as founding traumas or traumas of origins. These particular manifestations of traumatic experiences have led to the formation of a religious, national, ethnic, communal, or political identity. Thus, sociologist Ron Eyerman identifies the roots of a unified African American identity in a collective reaction to the trauma of slavery, for "[i]t was the memory of slavery and its representation through speech and art works that grounded African American identity and permitted its institutionalization in organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909" (2). From this perspective, LaCapra posits that "trauma may be transfigured into the sublime of the sacred, and the traumatized may be seen as martyrs or saints, notably in the case of victims of extreme violence or genocide" (*Writing History* xiv). The Emmett Till case may easily fit this logic in terms of its crucial impact on the origins of the Civil Rights Movement. The story of the lynching of the boy soon acquired sacralized dimensions due to its uncanny nature and, with the passage of time, the young Till has become a martyr not only for the Civil Rights Movement but also for the ongoing fight for racial justice in the US.

The recurrent presence of the Emmett Till trauma in the US collective imaginary and the communal efforts to come to terms with its traumatic impact have at times stumbled with processes of mourning and melancholia. While these two psychoanalytic concepts are combined with some of the aftereffects of trauma, both are strategies that appear when coming to terms with traumatic experiences. On the one hand, mourning contributes to working through trauma both in the individual and the collective sphere for, according to LaCapra, it aligns with this practice in "restoring to victims the dignity denied by them by their victimizers" (*Writing History* 66). Through processes of mourning, one is already able to distinguish between past, present, and future and, when these are combined with burials or memorials, they constitute a remarkably useful

strategy to work through traumatic experiences. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice that opened in April 2018 in Montgomery, Alabama, is the perfect example of a proactive attempt to come to terms with the memory of the victims of white supremacy. The problem when facing historical trauma may arise, however, from what Caruth describes as the "deeply ethical dilemma … of *how not to betray the past*" (*Unclaimed* 27). A strong attachment to the past may lead the traumatized individual to fall prey to a melancholic drive that counteracts the working through of the traumatic event. Here, melancholia equates post-traumatic acting out in the sense that, as LaCapra indicates following Freud's perspective, melancholia constitutes "an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object" (*Writing History* 66). In extreme cases, this strong fidelity to trauma (i.e., a sense that one would be betraying the past by working through trauma), together with an incapability of having a critical distance from it, may be translated into an impossible mourning or aporia that would render trauma an unassimilable experience.

When trauma reaches these liminal dimensions, what can possibly be done to untie aporia? Following Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, Luckhurst asserts "the substantive power of narrative form to refigure our grasp of the real world" (84) and concludes that, despite the impossibility of total closure, "[n]arrative heals aporia" (85). If aporia is a point of impasse and disruption of all temporal distinctions, narrative form would then help to undo its knots. Using Derridean terminology, through narration, one can experience a change from "impossible mourning" toward actual "possible mourning" and the coming to terms with trauma. Yet the process is not as simple as it may seem since, when fictionalizing or narrating trauma, a transferential problem may arise between the identification or objectification of the author with the traumatic event. This has been a central issue in historiography for, as LaCapra observes:

> Again, the extremes in trying to come to terms with emotional response are full identification, whereby you try to relive the experience of the other, or find yourself unintentionally reliving it; and pure objectification, which is the denial of transference,

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> the blockage of affect as it influences research, and the attempt to be as objectifying and neutral an observer as possible. (*Writing History* 147)

Within this whole spectrum, all kinds of narrations wander in between its extremes. The focus is then put on the author's emotional attachment to the traumatic experience that is narrated and, ultimately, on the way an event is remembered in history.

But, if this constitutes a great dilemma in historiography, literature remains totally free of these constrains. The literary domain allows a large variety of possible approaches to trauma and, as Luckhurst notes, it becomes a site that can "incorporate the language of other discourses (such as history, law, philosophy and science), yet suspend their strict protocols of meaning and reference for a time" (80). This is what Derrida defines as literature's state of "*being-suspended*" (49), for it constitutes a medium for the exploration of "an array of knowledges" (Luckhurst 80) among which trauma is undoubtedly included. The overwhelming nature of the traumatic experience finds in literature an infinite space in which the boundaries between what Caruth refers to as "the knowing and not knowing" (*Unclaimed* 3) can be disrupted and filled with meaning. As Luckhurst contends, although it is true that "[i]n its shock impact trauma is anti-narrative, … it also generates the manic production of retrospective narratives that seek to explicate the trauma" (79). Therefore, literature does not only help to better understand trauma but also contributes to working through traumatic experiences. In the end, as LaCapra points out, when comparing the different relations between historiography and fiction with trauma, literature becomes itself an "expansive space" (*Writing History* 185) in which trauma can be further and more thoroughly explored.

Literature thus functions as a "space" that allows the specters of trauma to be fully materialized through words, and where healing strategies may eventually come up along its artistic process. The fact that the literary medium permits a convergence of many other disciplines and discourses in a site where temporality is suspended creates an infinite universe with endless possibilities in the study of traumatic experiences. If, as Lukchurst asserts, "the traumatic memory persists in a half-life, rather like a ghost, a haunting absent presence of another time in our time" (81), literature offers no actual boundaries for its representation in this out-of-time dimension. Here, the multifaceted manifestations of trauma can be registered, the repetitive cycles of acting out identified and, eventually, the

working-through process may be set into motion. The resourceful elements of the literary technique (e.g., flashbacks, ellipsis, interior monologue, etc.) are the chisels that help to shape the numerous and hideous angles of the traumatic experience. And although a satisfactory coming to terms with trauma might be a utopian endeavor, the mere verbalization or, rather, narrativization of trauma opens the way for working-through practices for both the individual and the community.

Indeed, reading about trauma also points toward this direction. Getting to know what haunts the mind with a critical perspective, or at least the attempt to do so, is, most of the times, a titanic effort but still something that literature can help to realize. There are ghosts that, as Luckhurst remarks, “mark both the traces of individual histories … as well as condensations of an entire community” (94) and that are, in turn, hidden underneath the individual and collective consciousness. Literature is a way of identifying these ghosts and freeing them in order to look them squarely in the eye. In the end, traumas should be confronted since, as Baldwin sagely contends, “to defend oneself against a fear is simply to insure that one will, one day, be conquered by it; fears must be faced” (*The Fire* 303); and the following revisitation and analysis of the Emmett Till case in fiction aims, to some degree, to shed some light on the traumatic incident and, hopefully, to be of help in the longed-for coming to terms with it.

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3. Exploring the Emmett Till Trauma through Psychological Realism in Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*

… and I try not to focus on that. Because it can
be scary, so I try not to focus on that, and just
go on and write what I have to write.
(Campbell, "An Interview" 967)

Elizabeth "Bebe" Moore Campbell produced in 1992 one of the most powerful literary revisitations of the Emmett Till case. Author of numerous fiction and non-fiction books, Campbell's life experience greatly contributed to shaping her style and narrative production. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1950, she grew up during a period of African American history characterized by the potent civil right advocacy of the time. As Osizwe Eyidiyiye notes, "[h]er writing and worldview were … influenced by the social unrest and change occurring nationally and locally during her childhood in the 1950s and 1960s" (24). In her college years, Campbell was involved in the Black Action Society of the University of Pittsburgh as a female leader within the male-dominated hierarchies of black nationalism. Her activism was reflected in her exploration of race, class, and gender through her prolific writing career. After graduating and working as a teacher, Campbell began her literary oeuvre hand in hand with a short but notorious journalistic stage that would later help her to, as she herself commented in a 1999 interview, "create real life characters and real life drama" ("An Interview" 957).

In her mid-forties, her personal experience as mother of a daughter with mental issues turned her activism toward black mental health. Well into her successful career, Campbell was able to, according to Eyidiyiye, "increase mental health awareness and advocate for individuals and families living with mental illness" (205) through her prominent role in the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Her last novel, *72 Hour Hold*, attested to her total commitment to black mental health before her untimely death at age 56. Campbell's career as a writer and lifelong activist established her as a well-known figure in the US but, as Eyidiyiye points out, "[d]espite her wide popularity and mainstream readership (or possibly because of it), her work is rarely considered in academic discourse" (25). Of all her work, the novel *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* based

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on the Emmett Till lynching has been recognized as her magnum opus and has remained her most notable work over time.

Your Blues first garnered the attention of the critics after its publication in 1992 and, thanks to Campbell's sudden literary success, this new fictionalization of the Emmett Till case started to reach an increasing mass audience. The traumatic event constituted the core of a novel that confirmed the everlasting presence in the US collective imaginary of a traumatic wound that is yet to be healed. A five-year-old child when the case took place, Campbell comments that she got so used to hearing Till's name during her childhood that "I just felt as though I knew this boy" ("An Interview" 958). The traumatic imprint that the Till murder left on the African American community together with her own personal memories played a crucial role in the origins of *Your Blues*. Campbell's creative process involved an initial stage of artistic absorption followed by another in which, as she explains in the aforementioned interview, she "need[ed] to sit down and let an idea come to me" (Campbell, "An Interview" 957). Plunged into this meditative stage before the birth of her new book, Campbell realized that, for more than three decades, she had always had Emmett Till in her mind: "It was just there" (Campbell, "An Interview" 957). Till's haunting presence emerged from her deep memories during the late 1980s, and Campbell's literary revisitation of the tragic case came into being. Her novel constituted an effort to come to terms with the collective trauma that emerged from the Emmett Till case, not just for the writer herself, through a sort of writing catharsis,[26] but for those readers among her vast audience still affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by the infamous lynching.

Campbell's novel undertakes a task of "psychological realism" (Jones 170) that ponders the individual and collective aftereffects of the Emmett Till trauma. Via numerous changes of focalizer, the book provides a somehow archetypical depiction of the different strata of the US southern society of the time: the black scapegoat, the abused black and white females, the lower-class white family, the southern white liberal, or the white supremacist rich landowner. This structure is very helpful to follow the individual evolution of the novel's varied cast of characters after the lynching of Armstrong Todd,

[26] Discussing healing processes and the coming into being of *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* in a 1999 interview, Campbell acknowledges that "writing does help me heal" ("An Interview" 967).

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Campbell's fictional version of Emmett Till. As Koritha Mitchell remarks, "[t]he bulk of the novel thus focuses on the murder's aftermath and the ways in which the lives of very different people overlap, intersect, and diverge as a consequence of their connection to the murdered child and his mother" (49). By approaching the social impact of the murder from such different perspectives, Campbell explored the putative aftereffects of the Emmett Till trauma on a fictional southern community and the life of his fictional parents in order to foster the coming to terms with it.

Among the varied perspectives from which the story is narrated, Campbell does include the perpetrators' point of view, as well as that of the catalyst for the lynching, in her literary revisitation of the Till case. The inclusion of Floyd Cox's and Lily Cox's voices, the fictionalized Roy Bryant and Carolyn Bryant of the real incident respectively, brings more angles to explore the traumatic event. Through them, *Your Blues* creates a fictionalized historical conversation between victims and perpetrators and, in the process, opens up new avenues for dialogue within and outside of the text. These ideas are inferred from Campbell's main intentions regarding the novel:

> I didn't want to stay true to the story. I was more interested in creating something similar and then really exploring my premise that racism is a crime for which we all pay—not just the victims, but the perpetrators as well. Carrying this out to the next generation, how this murder continues to vibrate in these lives—that's what I wanted to do. ("An Interview" 958)

The perpetrators' personal stories and their divergent participation in the lynching complete Campbell's literary exploration of the Till case. This horrific racist crime alters, to a greater or lesser extent, the existences of all those directly or remotely involved in it. As Gloria Ladson-Billings points out, the novel ultimately "lets the reader in on the multifaceted, ripple effect this one act of racist brutality had on everyone involved, directly and indirectly, close up and remote" (258).

Inspired by a particularly excessive gesture after the disgraceful trial, Campbell psychoanalyzes the drives of the actual perpetrators to reconstruct the obscured side of the infamous case and underpin this alternate dimension in her kaleidoscopic revisitation of the tragedy. The seemingly staged kiss between Roy and Carolyn Bryant captured by the media right after the non-guilty verdict profoundly influenced Campbell's fictional

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approach to the tragic story. In her 1999 interview for *Callaloo*, the author explains the impact that this eccentric moment had on her while she was watching the famous PBS documentary on the Till case:

> I saw them on "Eyes on the Prize," and they had footage of the trial. I was watching it one night—the jury decision was announced where these two men were found not guilty. … And they kissed, Carolyn Bryant and Roy Bryant, and the kiss struck me as very erotic, very inappropriate—kind of a flaunting kiss. And to me the kiss said—this woman was saying—"I got a man who killed for me." I thought to myself, what kind of woman needs to say that? What is she all about? (Campbell, "An Interview" 961)

These questions made Campbell look for answers in the couple's likely dysfunctional upbringing in the South. As she herself acknowledges, "that's what drew me into the story. It wasn't Emmett Till; it was Lily and Floyd Cox—but mostly Lily—who drew me into the story of Emmet Till. I was intrigued. Where did this come from? How did this happen?" (Campbell, "An Interview" 961). Lily's characterization constituted the starting point from which to initiate her fictional exploration of the traumatizing Till case, where she wound up being empathically portrayed as both victim and victimizer.

One of the most innovative aspects of *Your Blues* is precisely that one of the persons involved in the real crime is consciously depicted as a victim. Carol Henderson notices how Carolyn's conflictive personal history "leads writers like Campbell to argue that Carolyn Bryant's behavior is but a masquerade, for she herself wrestles with her own excruciating demons as she tries to reconcile (unsuccessfully) the ugly reality of child murder and the myths associated with Southern romance and marriage" (228). As discussed in the first chapter of the dissertation, Gwendolyn Brooks and Audre Lorde had already anticipated the exploration of their respective fictional Carolyn Bryants within the realms of victimhood in their poetic reactions to the Till case. Brooks, in the 1960s, and Lorde, in the 1980s, dealt with this controversial conception of the white southern storekeeper in order to shed light on the complexities of the Till case and, in addition, contribute to the coming to terms with its profound traumatic impact. Anne Sarah Rubin argues that, like her literary predecessors, Campbell "is exorcising the ghost of her own past as well" (62) through her fictionalization of the Till case while, as Eyidiyiye points out, her novel "theorize[s] the intricacies of white racism and the contemporary and

historical impact of racial violences and lynching" (25), more than three decades after the traumatic incident.

In *Your Blues*, the fictionalization of the fleeting interaction that triggers the gruesome lynching of the African American boy takes place at the very beginning of the book. Armstrong Todd is portrayed early in the narration as a tall and muscular boy who "appeared older than his fifteen years" (Campbell, *Your Blues* 9), and whose character stands up as that of a natural and witty prankster.[27] Dearly beloved among his southern neighbors, the youth is spending some time with his grandmother in the Mississippi Delta while, several years after his parent's separation, his mother earns a living for the two of them in Chicago. After his brief introduction in the novel, the sequence of events that leads to his tragic ending are triggered by an unfortunate misunderstanding. While playing pool with some friends, Armstrong is showing off the only French phrases that he knows without noticing that Lily Cox is by the main door of her husband's pool hall:

> "*Voules-vous danser ce soir? Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça …*"
>
> Armstrong was still spouting French phrases when he turned his head and there was the white woman, pretty like a doll … She was standing at the door, peeking inside the poolroom with the exhilarated, frightened look of a girl sneaking her first drink behind a barn. The woman stepped inside, smiling at him as he spoke his French phrases, and then raised her hand and smelled her wrist and started laughing. … Then, she paused in the middle of a giggle, looked over her shoulder, and stepped outside. (13)

The quick glance and innocent giggle are what, days later, lead to Armstrong's vicious killing in his own grandmother's front yard. After hearing that some northern black boy had "said something funny to Lily" (29), Floyd's father and brother, Lester and John Earl respectively, urge him to teach Armstrong a lesson to assert white supremacy in the southern community.

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[27] Hereafter, when quoting from *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, citations will only include the book's page numbers.

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Without much delay, the three Cox men head toward the segregated area where the black community lives to carry out their macabre task. By himself at night, Armstrong is sitting on the porch of his grandmother's house when the sudden barking of the dogs breaks his thoughts. The sound of a truck catches his attention, and the boy stands up just to see the figure of three men revealed by the headlights. Suddenly, "fear, as primal as the first scream, flooded his body" (39), as he realizes the danger of that vision and starts running for his life. Covered by the dark of the night, the three men catch him, and the boy's savage beating begins. From the first blow, Armstrong asks them what he has done to deserve such a violent punishment and, after repeating the same question several times, he sees how "the white men looked at one another, each waiting for someone to articulate Armstrong's crime" (40). Uncertain about their answer, they pause for a moment until Floyd responds: "You was talking crazy talk to my wife" (40). Deep down, the three white men know that they lack a cogent reason for their attack, but they cling to the white supremacist dogma to justify their barbaric reaction.

In his verbal attempts to stop the beating, Armstrong mentions two aspects that, instead of dissuading it, fuel the supremacist rampage. First, Armstrong deals with Floyd's accusation by strictly following his grandmother's lesson of playing dumb: "No, sir. I wasn't talking to your wife, sir. I was talking to my friend, and when I turned around, she was looking at me" (40). The boy tries to stick to the polite and naïve role that southern whites expect of southern blacks but, in his desperate effort, he unconsciously questions the purity of white womanhood for, at the end of his response, Armstrong allegedly implies that the white woman was somehow interested in him. Second, as the virulent beating continues, the boy is desperately struggling to come up with something to say that would stop the violence and, remembering bullies in his Chicago schoolyard, he offers them the money that he had earned over the past days. This worsens the situation since, according to southern racial etiquette, he was questioning his second-class citizenship in front of the three poor white men, as Floyd's reaction evinces: "You got money, nigger? You think you good as me?" (41). The increasing spiral of violence comes to an end when, before the approving glance of his father and brother, Floyd shoots Armstrong and leaves him to die in the dark front yard as a warning sign of the inhuman rule of southern white supremacy.

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Considering that Campbell consciously characterizes Lily as a victim in the novel, Lily's personal story constitutes one of the most innovative perspectives through which to analyze the aftereffects of the Emmett Till trauma in fiction. Her catalyzing role in the whole scheme of the lynching illuminates her victimized position within the racist and patriarchal southern status quo, and reflects on the traumatic burden that her character carries throughout the novel. Lily initially epitomizes the archetypal figure of the pedestaled southern lady, the southern flower whose purity is to be protected by white supremacists before the slightest hint of a real or imagined threat. As Eyidiyiye remarks, "Lily, even in her poverty, embodies 'the cult of true womanhood' in which white women are placed on pedestals of virtue, femininity, piety, and submissiveness" (110). From this constrained position, Lily finds no other way of owning some sense of agency in her dysfunctional marriage than resorting to her objectified body. Henderson points out how "Lily was taught at an early age by the men and women in her life that her body allows her access to certain forms of power—power that is painful and pleasurable, power that is as fleeting as the money in her household" (228) but that, one may add, constitutes the only weapon that, in her mind, can potentially render her subjugated existence more bearable. Her sexualized body becomes, however, if not completely damaging to her, a double-edged sword for Lily since, while it slightly provides her with a transient source of power, it also contributes to prominently underpinning her mythical objectification by the patriarchal and racist southern standards, which ultimately constitutes the primary source of her problems.

Lily's conflicting sexualization not only relates to the sexual connotations that operate in the configuration of the infamous lynching, but also serves to shed some light on some of the crudest aspects of her harsh personal history. Regularly beaten by her husband, Lily has to endure a life secluded at home suffering from extreme living conditions, which worsen dramatically after her husband commits the heinous murder and, as a result, her family is socially ostracized by both the black and white communities of Hopewell. While Armstrong's killing disrupts Lily's sporadic respites from her victimized role in the Deep South (i.e., the secret meetings with her black friend Ida Long at the train station), it also deeply traumatizes her whole existence to the point that, as Mitchel contends, she becomes a character that "is wounded and carr[ies] significant emotional baggage" (50) throughout the story. Lily is unable to grasp the meaning of her

accidental involvement in the traumatic event, and she is thus trapped in a limbo of what she actually feels and what her surroundings force her to believe.

As soon as the Cox men learn about the alleged incident at the pool hall, Lily's own version of the events ceases to matter at all, for the white supremacist machine is automatically put in motion to restore the "balance" in the community. Even though she considers trying to stop them, Lily is soon told that "[w]hatever they do is menfolks' business" and that "women ain't nary to do with it" (31). This conversation with her mother-in-law and her subsequent resignation explains why, as Eyidiyiye posits, "[s]he seems to have no sense of power within the patriarchal norms of the south" (108). Every time Lily begins to question her role within the southern status quo, she is reminded of the rules of female submission to which she is subjected as a southern woman. Unable to even try to dissuade whatever intentions the three Cox men might have, Lily fears that something bad is going to happen after they leave to teach Armstrong a lesson: "She had felt happy and exhilarated sneaking into the pool hall, like a child stealing cookies that were cooling on the porch, but now she felt guilty, and frightened for the boy and herself" (31-32). Her initial natural reaction anticipates an evil that she foresees but that, in the world of southern white supremacy, she cannot help to avoid. Deep down, Lily already knows the price that Armstrong is about to pay for allegedly breaking southern racial etiquette, and she remains in a paralysis of sorts.

Deeply overwhelmed by the prospect of the forthcoming violence, Lily is trying to comprehend why the young African American boy is about to be punished, when she stumbles across the white supremacist version of the story. According to the irrational dogma of the southern way of life, the Coxes have to follow the rules of white supremacy to restore the balance in the southern community through Armstrong's physical punishment. Lily is initially reticent to accept such a vile reality, but her vulnerable position in the whole scheme makes her yield to the racist narrative just moments after the three Cox men leave to punish Armstrong: "Well, she knew one thing: There was no telling what that freckled-faced boy might have done if Floyd hadn't come along and saved her" (54). Here, Lily departs from her first impression of the boy's innocence at the pool hall to one in which Armstrong is constructed as a threat; or, to put it in other words, Lily goes from being terrified for Armstrong's safety after she learns that the Cox men are going to beat him, to justify, in a remarkably short span of time, the same punishment

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for her own personal safety. This inner battle is completely disrupted after she receives the news that her husband has murdered the young black boy: "'Dead?' In all her fearful imaginings, she'd never pictured him dead" (63). From this moment onward, Lily attempts to repress what Donnie McMahand describes as "her honest feelings about Armstrong" (218) to survive in the racist and patriarchal world of southern white supremacy but, despite her persistent attempts, she is unable to let go of her accidental role in the crime.

Apart from being the unwilling catalyst for the lynching, Lily's rendition to the Coxes' fabricated narrative leads her to lie in court about her encounter with Armstrong. At a climactic moment in the trial, the attorney of the defendant insistently questions her about the pool hall incident and, after a suffocating silence,

> Lily looked at Waldo and spoke quickly. "He—he started saying nasty things to me. Horrible things." The beating of her heart was like gunshots exploding as she closed her eyes and imagined each one of the horrible, nasty things that the boy had said to her, until they became real. (149)

Her false statement complicates her actual degree of responsibility in the murder before the reader and magnifies the sense of guilt that she experiences throughout. These lies end up saving her husband from prison, but they do not save Lily from the traumatic aftereffects of the gruesome case. Lily's torments continue and, although, as Eyidiyiye argues, "Lily's character is written with empathy, … she is not exonerated for her hand in Armstrong's death" (107) later in the novel.

As her unfortunate life goes on, Lily suffers post-traumatic acting out as a result of her unwilling participation in the lynching. Following Dominick LaCapra's conceptualization of this symptom, Lily enters in a phase in which "one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes" (*Writing History* 21). While the traumatic memory of the murder keeps coming back to her mind, her inability to come to terms with it affects her everyday life. The memory of Armstrong haunts Lily's existence, and its intrusions become recurrent over her personal history in the novel. The imprint left by the traumatic burden of the boy's lynching winds up acting as a catalyst for Lily's repressed traumas, such as the horrific memories of her sexually abusive uncle. For instance, right after the passage of

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her false statement, Lily's distortion of the truth suddenly summons her former rape trauma: "she closed her eyes and imagined each one of the horrible, nasty things that the boy had said to her, until they became real. Somewhere in that vision was her uncle Charlie and his probing finger, as murderous as any weapon" (149). As Suzanne Jones remarks, "Campbell uses Lily's childhood to explain her convoluted thinking about sex and sin and race," since the novel flashes back to her troubled past "whenever Lily doubts herself in the present, such as when she wonders … whether the chance incident with Armstrong was her fault" (167). Lily's traumatic experiences converge and plunge her into a complex spiral of repetition compulsion wherein these haunting memories, as Cathy Caruth's theorization of traumatic experiences describes, "remain[…] insistent and unchanged to the precise extent that [they] ha[ve] never, from the beginning, been fully integrated into understanding" (*Trauma* 153).

Over the novel, Lily shows timid attempts to work through her traumatic role in the death of the fifteen-year-old boy. She clings to the white supremacist version of the story for decades but, after a life enduring Floyd's violent fits, Lily finally confronts her inner dilemma. On the same day her husband is about to be imprisoned for stealing, Lily experiences a somehow epiphanic revelation and momentarily breaks out of her lifelong acting-out of the murder: "Standing in the middle of the road, her son's words echoing around her, Lily was aware for the first time that the death of Armstrong Todd was not behind her. She felt his memory growing inside her like a new life" (257). The prospects of being freed from her abusive husband open the way for Lily's self-reconciliation. With Floyd in prison, Lily begins a new journey toward the coming to terms with her participation in the tragic event and, by the time Floyd is released, she seems to have successfully worked through it. Thanks to the support of her daughter, Lily finds the strength to leave Floyd and discovers that, after a whole life tied to an oppressive husband, she indeed has a voice. Her final encounter with Floyd shows a somehow empowered Lily confronting her drunk husband and acknowledging her actual role in the lynching: "You ain't done nothing for me. Everything was for you. To make you feel good. Even that boy" (427). Lily's courageous response dismantles one of the pillars of southern white supremacy, the myth of southern womanhood, for she finally internalizes that the heinous lynching was not her fault. Campbell's open-ended story leaves the reader with the uncertainty of Lily's complete recovery from a traumatic experience that, despite her

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refusal to acknowledge it during a large part of her lifetime, profoundly shattered her victimized existence in the cruel world of southern white supremacy.

Along with the victim of and the catalyst for the lynching, Armstrong and Lily respectively, Floyd Cox plays the remaining role of perpetrator in the triad of characters directly involved in the gruesome case. He becomes the corporeal representative of the white supremacist dogma as the actual killer of the alleged young offender. Campbell depicts him as the archetypal figure of the poor white male of the Deep South during the 1950s but, instead of a flat characterization, she provides the reader with a profound study of his unstable personality. The owner of a pool hall attended only by African American clientele, Floyd is introduced early in the novel as a character with deep inner tensions. He clearly suffers from a severe inferiority complex caused by the hyper-masculine hierarchy of the Cox clan. As Jones notes, this disorder springs from "a feeling of inferiority to his macho older brother and [the] fear that his father loves John Earl more because his brother is more masculine than he is" (167). Floyd is constantly trying to overcompensate this psychosexual frustration whenever he has a chance to prove his masculinity to his family. Eyidiyiye notes how, in the patriarchal and racist South, Floyd's "hopelessness and rage transforms to violent domestic abuse of his wife and periodic abandonment of his family" (106), along with, as Jones points out, "violent behavior … towards those his society has taught him to hate, like Armstrong" (167). The murder of the young black boy is thus perpetrated as Floyd's ultimate and desperate gesture to gain his father's approval, but it only leads him to a miserable life and a decades-long struggle with an unresolved sense of guilt.

Already at the very beginning of the story, Floyd's insecurities are explicitly portrayed during his first encounter with Armstrong at the pool hall. The fleeting encounter between the boy and his wife has just happened, and Floyd's black employee is informing him of the scene when,

> Just as suddenly, he started trembling. For a moment he stood motionless, trying to decide what to do, because if the boy had talked crazy to Lily, he had to do something. … Just how angry was he supposed to get? If John Earl was here, Floyd thought, pounding his fist into his palm, he'd just know what to do. (14)

Being an extremely insecure man, Floyd is overwhelmed by the situation and struggles to find an answer to his questions. He is desperately seeking to come up with a reaction that settles the alleged offense, but not because of the particular "honor" of his wife or his actual racist beliefs, but to primarily prove his masculinity to the Cox clan. His intended authoritative response is mixed with a strong inner fear of the African American customers: "They could all kill me, he thought. Just come at me and tear me apart, and that'd be the end of that" (15). Floyd finally resolves to expel Armstrong out of the pool hall and forbid his attendance thereafter, hoping that nothing of what had happened "*get*[*s*] *back to Daddy and them*" (15).

However, the news about the incident does get back to the Cox clan, and the lynching ritual is put in motion. That same night, the three Cox men drive to where Armstrong lives, chase him down in his grandmother's front yard, and beat him savagely. Before the frenzy of racist violence is unleashed, the young boy is looking around trying to distinguish figures in the dark, when he stumbles on Floyd's face and truly realizes the gravity of the situation: "What made terror slam into Armstrong like a lash across his back was the fear he saw in Floyd's eyes" (40). Overwhelmed again by the situation, Floyd seems to be in some sort of rite of passage toward his family's final acceptance. For a moment, the horrific scene paralyzes Floyd, until his father pinches his inferiority complex and awakes his violent rage: "You gon' fight your own battles, or is your brother gon' hafta do it all? She's your wife. Yourn" (41). Floyd then starts to kick Armstrong with viciousness and, after a pause, the moonlight illuminates "the fear and loathing and monstrous rage coagulating around the set of his mouth, the cruelty in his stare," which makes Armstrong wonder: "Where did all that hatred come from?" (42). After Floyd yells that he hates blacks while seeking the approving glance of his father and brother, he shoots the young boy on the ground and leaves him there to die.

Among the number of reasons that truly lead Floyd to commit the heinous murder, none of them have to do with protecting southern womanhood nor even his wife. Lily becomes the official pretext that veils the real motives of the lynching from the eyes of the community. Floyd's actual decision to kill Armstrong is related, as Jones remarks, "not only to southern society's sexist and racist ideology but also to a deep insecurity about his own manhood" (167). When the alleged breach of racial etiquette takes place at Floyd's pool hall, he is suddenly overwhelmed by the response that southern society

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demands of him in this kind of scenario since, as Paul Tewkesbury argues, "[a]ccording to the traditional tenets of white supremacy, Floyd should, as a white male, be able to dominate blacks" (49). Floyd fails to do so at first and, because of that, the three Cox men wind up putting their murderous plan into motion. Along with the racist motive, Floyd's inferiority complex also plays a crucial role in the completion of the lynching ritual for, as Jones notes, "[t]he southern racial code his father has instilled in him requires that he confront Armstrong in order to affirm his masculinity" (167). During the gruesome scene of the lynching, Floyd constantly seeks for his father's and older brother's approval after almost every move that he takes against the defenseless boy and, at the end, he is the one who shoots him dead to complete his macabre rite of passage toward his family's final acceptance.

The killing of the young African American boy momentarily makes Floyd an equal among his family, but the social and psychological aftereffects of his barbaric crime are soon manifested in the story. Floyd leaves the scene of the murder with his father and brother feeling finally accepted by them:

> Later, when Floyd would try to forget everything else about this night, he would still recall the ride back home, the smoky air of the congested cab, the three of them pressed in close together, singing and laughing as their shoulders touched. What warmed him more than anything was the sure, true knowing that his father, at last, was satisfied with him. (43)

Not only this idyllic family relation and Floyd's respectability within the Cox clan are short-lived but, as the narrator hints in the first line of the passage, the murderer is going to present post-traumatic effects later in the narration. When the three perpetrators are sent to jail before the trial, Floyd becomes the one to blame for the Cox clan's woes. Their lives are torn apart after the murder, and the memory of the boy begins to haunt Floyd's convoluted psyche.

While Floyd is in jail, the repression of his guilt for murdering the young boy triggers the memory of a traumatic event of his childhood. As she does with Lily's former rape trauma, Campbell also uses a key moment in Floyd's childhood to account for his behavior in the novel and, in particular, trace back the origins of his inferiority complex. In a hunting excursion when Floyd was only nine years old, "[t]ramping through the

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woods, he felt sick and nervous, terrified that his father and brother would discover what he'd never told anyone: He was afraid of blood and guns" (121). His concerns are soon found out when Floyd vomits at the sight of a dead dear and his father despises his natural reaction: "I didn't know I was taking a girl hunting" (121). This humiliating machoistic remark proves crucial in the novel since, as Jones contends, it "influences Floyd's choices for the rest of his life because he is forever trying to win his father's love by proving his own manhood" (167). Floyd recalls this traumatic episode as the founding moment of his inferiority complex at a time when he is being held accountable for the murder of Armstrong. That his heinous crime takes Floyd back to such a specific memory is not a coincidence, since his fear of "blood and guns" is somehow reenacted when he is forced to reflect on the murder in isolation while behind bars.

The memory of the African American boy thus triggers Floyd's inferiority complex and haunts his life to the point that he experiences several breakdowns over the novel. Although he never verbalizes his sense of guilt and even brags about killing Armstrong at some point, Floyd clearly acts out the traumatic memory of the lynching. A conversation with his former black employee at the pool hall implicitly hints at Floyd's inner remorse: "I always treated you right, didn't I?" (176). Floyd is struggling both to cling to the white supremacist narrative of the crime and, indirectly, to come to terms with his role as perpetrator. After his family is socially ostracized because of the murder, his life and violent behavior only worsen. Fueled by his unresolved traumas, Floyd's beatings of his wife increase, and the spiral of violence continues. In one of his various episodes of gender violence, Floyd arrives home completely drunk and, after he punches Lily while she holds their son, the memory of Armstrong suddenly bursts into his mind: "They were so quiet he thought that both of them might not be breathing, except they were watching him with eyes as wide and frightened as Armstrong's had been" (177). Floyd's abusive behavior goes on until his teenage daughter Doreen confronts him some decades later and expels him from their lives in a climactic scene of the novel. His final defeat leaves him wandering around town as a pariah who finds in alcohol the only solace from his deviant life, Floyd being the perpetrator of a heinous act of racist violence that, as McMahand points out, "continue[s] the already long chronicle of white male fear and sexual angst" (218), and that, ultimately, winds up ruining his own life.

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Apart from analyzing the white supremacist perspective of the case, Campbell deeply explores the traumatic aftereffects of the murder on the black community and, especially, on Armstrong's parents. The mother of the murdered boy, Delotha Todd, becomes one of the central characters in the novel, and her portrait is undoubtedly inspired by the figure of Mamie Till, Emmett Till's mother. Delotha is depicted early in the story as "a black woman making social progress, but also coping with other problems and disillusionment of life in the north and struggling to rear her son alone as a working mother" (Eyidiyiye 89). Separated from her husband, she resolves to send her son down South to spend some time with relatives so that she can earn a living for the two of them in Chicago. This understandable decision will later haunt her, as she will blame herself for the death of her son after the three Cox men perpetrate the infamous lynching. As Mitchell contends, "her guilt illustrates how successful white supremacy has been in convincing everyone that blacks bring hardships on themselves" (61) instead of, for example, solely putting the blame on the actual perpetrators. Delotha feels that, in the first place, it was her fault to let whites harm Armstrong, as if she could have avoided this vicious act of racist violence; and, for the rest of the novel, she struggles to come to terms with this maternal sense of guilt.

Through her multidimensional personality, Delotha's character transcends the stereotypical representation of black women as seemingly inexhaustible sources of strength. This traditional conception constrained the portrait of black women's identity in African American literature over decades since, as Henderson contends, "[t]his burden, which assumes that black women have a natural propensity to bear unbelievable pain and hardship (to a superhuman degree), denies black women a three-dimensional view of their true humanity" (236-37). Their superimposed strength blurred the fictional representation of black women and fostered the proliferation of one-dimensional characters that neglected intrinsically human traits, such as mourning or any other aspect that could potentially downplay their monolithic characterization as paragons of strength. Trudier Harris analyzes this conflicting question and ponders how "[s]eldom have we stopped to think, however, that this thing called strength, this thing we applaud so much in black women, could also be a disease" ("This Disease" 110). This representational fixation clearly backfired on its seemingly former intentions and, instead of underpinning black women's identity, this excessive vision wound up originating an empty stereotypical

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motif that became extremely recurrent in African American literature. In *Your Blues*, Delotha breaks with this constraint tradition, in that her character represents, according to Henderson, "all the textures of [Mamie Till-]Mobley's historical and perfected portrait of motherhood, treading into barely charted waters as she renders her fictional twin, Delotha Todd, as resilient yet susceptible to failure" (237), as her incapacity to work through the traumatic loss of her son explicitly instantiates throughout the novel.

In the South, Delotha has to fight against the white supremacist machine to deal with the arrangements for the burial in Chicago, while she attempts to process the recent tragedy. Eyidiyiye points out how, in spite of the challenges that Delotha's character has to face through the novel, "she is not a fragile victim nor is she frail in her womanhood" (91). Her undeniable resilience is soon instantiated when she succeeds in the difficult task of bringing the body of her boy North. The hostile atmosphere of the white South offers no mercy to Delotha's cruel drama and even complicates things to the utmost for her. At the train station, she receives a harsh treatment when she tries to buy tickets for her and the body of her son and, as the difficulties accumulate, she winds up breaking down back at her mother's home: "Why did my son have to die?" (100). Between tears and sobs, she answers her own question herself: "'God is punishing me, Mama,' Delotha said in a moan. 'He's punishing me for being a bad mother'" (100). Her sentiment of guilt is never resolved through the story and, according to Eyidiyiye, "because Delotha nurses unhealed wounds of her loss, she struggles with her unforgiveness year in and year out" (91), in spite of apparent improvements over time.

Delotha thus enters an acting-out phase that fuels her maternal guilt and hinders the coming to terms with her traumatic loss. During the first months, her grief takes the form of severe depression and leads her to a period of isolation from friends and family, bad habits such as drinking and smoking uncontrollably, and complete abandonment of her routine obligations. After a year, her condition does not improve at all and, as she plunges into what McMahand describes as "a pit of posttraumatic insensibility" (213), the aftereffects of the trauma intensify: she quits talking at work, her breakdowns in public become more frequent—she screams at people, forgets having done so, and regains cognizance without being able to stop shaking—and the loss of her son begins to haunt her sleep on an almost daily basis. Delotha loses the track of a continuous thought and, instead, a traumatic memory is articulated through flashbacks, hallucinations, and

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recurring nightmares, such as when, as the narrator describes, "[s]he began dreaming of baby boys, a yard full of sons who all looked like Armstrong, all calling her name. The same dream two or three times a week" (184). While her maternal guilt burns inside her, the fumes of this fire inspire her vengeance. Delotha plans on killing all the people responsible for the death of her son, even including her absent husband, to the point that, as Mitchell contends, "[d]uring these dark days of murderous fantasy and deep depression, Delotha's loss is the only basis for interaction with society" (1055).

The encounter with her husband at the mental hospital where he is recovering from a breakdown does not go as she has initially envisioned and, instead of vengeance, Delotha finds the help that she actually needs during these hard moments. Wydell Todd's empathy and support contributes to breaking Delotha's cycle of repetition compulsion, as they start to work through Armstrong's death together. Eyidiyiye argues that, during Delotha's darkest days, "[s]he grieves for her Armstrong, but also mourns the absence of her husband and wishes he was beside her as she processes the loss of their son" (90). Even though Delotha has also blamed her absent husband for the tragedy, she soon realizes that she needs him. When Wydell comes back to her life, Delotha is able to verbalize her pain for the first time; after months of isolation, "[s]he could talk with him for hours about Armstrong, and he would listen to her without fidgeting with impatience or changing the subject" (208). Her husband becomes the ideal partner to work through her trauma and, although "[t]he longing for her son didn't disappear" (209), Delotha has at least someone who is able to really empathize with her. Their relation soon rekindles, and the newly found love between the couple helps them both to start processing the loss of their son and continue with their lives.

Their economic and personal successes come along with the gift of two daughters, but Delotha's unhealed wounds soon trouble her family life. Still haunted by the loss of her son, she is determined "to have a brand-new Armstrong filling her womb" (209) in her second opportunity with her husband. McMahand notes that, driven by grief, "Delotha has suspended her acceptance of Armstrong's death in an irrational hope to reconstruct him bodily" (214). Before her daughters are born, Wydell perceives Delotha's dangerous longing in a conversation with her:

> "But I want a baby," she said. "Your baby."

He looked at her with a wild sadness in his eyes. "We can't bring Armstrong back."

"I didn't mean that."

"That *is* what you mean. You just don't know it." (210)

Despite Delotha's efforts to work through the loss of her son, her traumatic memory keeps her trapped in the spiral of repetition compulsion. As a result, she struggles with the fantasy of a "replacement child," which Leon Anisfeld and Arnold Richards postulate as "a child born to parents who have experienced the death of a child and then conceived a second child in order to fill the void left by the loss of the first" (303). Apart from her unfeasible desire, Delotha frequently "dream[s] of Armstrong when he was a baby, his tiny mouth on her breast, how she held and rocked him to sleep" (211), and the acting out of her son's remembrance does not cease. Delotha's determination to replace her first child turns into obsession with the passage of time and, as Eyidiyiye remarks, "we see that the lack of healing over Armstrong's murder is costly and jeopardizes her marriage, her career, and her family" (92), to a later point in the narration in which everything crumbles.

When the second of her daughters is born, Delotha's obsession for a replacement child increases and, because of her latent maternal guilt, she saddens before the prospects of not giving birth to a boy again. She tries to convince herself that it is not that she does not love her daughters, something that she indeed does, but that "her immerse hunger for a son was so overwhelming that her yearning for the unborn at times eclipsed what she felt for her living children" (279). Delotha's unhealed wounds detach her from her daughters, whose adoration is therefore turned to their father, and their constant acting out prevents her from coming to terms with the traumatic loss of her son. The pictures that Delotha keeps of Armstrong at home to remember him are nothing compared to the image of her daughters: "The girls were a constant reminder of her past trauma and what it had taught her: She couldn't save them." (280). More than a decade after the murder, she still carries an overwhelming sense of guilt for her inability to prevent the tragic incident. She has not been able to forgive herself and, as a consequence of her traumatic experience with racist violence, Mitchell argues that "[i]t is as if she wants to save all of her love for the boy that she is determined to have" (1057).

Pregnant one more time, Delotha prays to give birth to the son that she has been yearning for since she got back with Wydell. With the passage of years, her obsession

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does anything but decrease, and the traumatic memory of her son is established as a constant presence in her everyday life: "Armstrong had never stopped haunting her, and she still grieved for her dead son, crying for him when her husband didn't see her. … For fifteen years, she'd wanted to retrieve the child she lost. And now, at forty-four, she had one last chance" (279). The acting out of her maternal guilt is repeated in the endless spiral of repetition compulsion, and her impossibility to work through the traumatic loss of her son prevents her from moving on with her life. Delotha strongly believes that, by having another son, she is going to be able to redeem herself since, as McMahand points out, "[i]n her mind, Armstrong's death simply signifies an untimely (and temporary) absence, inverse to the absenting that predetermined his lynching in the South" (214). Over the years, her post-traumatic acting out leads her to a position in which, once she finally gives birth to a boy, her obsession can only worsen.

The birth of her second son radically alters Delotha's temperament, in that she becomes an overprotective mother as a means to compensate for her unresolved maternal guilt. From the very first moment, she treats the Armstrong-like newborn W.T. as if he were a reincarnation of her first son. Fifteen years after the murder, Delotha plunges again into her acting-out phase since, according to LaCapra's theorization of the concept, she begins "to exist in the present as if one were still fully in the past, with no distance from it" (*Writing History* 142-43). She usually calls W.T. by his deceased brother's name and cannot stop comparing them both as W.T. grows older. As Jones remarks, Delotha's plan to deal with her maternal guilt through another son "backfires when she begins to ignore her husband, to spoil her son W.T., and to blame his behavioral problems on the white teachers who try to intervene in order to stop his fighting" (174). Her fantasies of a replacement child thus prove to be what Gabriele Schwab describes as "an (always failing) attempt to erase and rewrite history under new premises by denying loss and foreclosing pain" (15), as Delotha's delirious intention to substitute Armstrong with W.T. inevitably fails and further deteriorates her mental stability.

Delotha's overindulgence, which is misguided love, and the problems at home, which confront her and Wydell, push W.T. to the streets of Chicago and, by the time Delotha realizes the gravity of the situation, her youngest son has already become a full-time gang member. Through this harsh realization, Delotha seems to step out of her prolonged post-traumatic regression in a moment in which Wydell saves W.T. from a

rival gang and drives South with him for salvation. The ending of the story invites the reader to think about Delotha's likely prospects of finally dissociating the haunting memory of the loss of her first son from her actual younger boy, not just for W.T.'s sake and putative redemption but, especially, for her own personal healing.

As previously anticipated through his wife, Wydell Todd constitutes another character deeply traumatized by Armstrong's death. Campbell uses this character to ponder the aftereffects of this devastating event on a fictional and complex paternal figure who, unlike Delotha, is not and could not have been based on Emmett Till's father for, by the time the infamous case took place, Louis Till was already dead. Several years out of the radar when the tragic event happens, Wydell is first introduced in the novel at a moment in which he has completely given in to alcoholism after the separation from Delotha. A migrant from the South who came to Chicago to seek for better opportunities, Eyidiyiye notes that "Wydell Todd is a man who is disillusioned with life in the North" (83) and who, one may add, struggles to fulfill his job duties due to his dysfunctional drinking habits. Wydell clings to the memory of a son who he has abandoned but hopes to contact when his condition improves: "I'm gonna call you … Hear? I'm gonna call you soon" (50). Living between hangovers, Wydell still manages to be the best worker at the factory, and his transient hopes to stop drinking and reunite with his son keep him moving forward: "He was going to do better, and that was a fact. Lay off the drinking. As soon as he got straight, he'd go see Armstrong" (135).

The idyllic reunion with his son is repeatedly postponed, and both his alcoholic binges and paternal guilt increase as time goes by, fueled by his latent childhood trauma. As a consequence of his father's violent treatment, Wydell carries unhealed wounds from his early life in the South that, by the time Armstrong is born, prevents him from properly raising his son. This traumatic burden drives Wydell to alcoholic abuse and leads him to lose two jobs soon after the birth of his son. Facing his incapability to restrain his drinking habits, Delotha takes the decision to put him out of their home after comparing Wydell, to his distressing surprise, with his own alcoholic father: "he could feel the searing pain in his chest, as if his heart was on fire, that always came when he thought about his father. … And drunk as he was, Wydell could see that he was putting that same pain in his son's crying eyes" (134). His sense of guilt ends up detaching him not only from his family but

from a responsible paternal role that, with the passage of time, continues to haunt him between periods of increasing alcoholic haze.

Wydell's childhood trauma is soon combined with the traumatic murder of his son to completely shatter his existence. Recovering from his latest alcoholic binge, Wydell is paying a visit to his cousin Lionel to ask him for a loan, when he learns about the overwhelming news of Armstrong's death. At first, he is incapable of understanding what his cousin is telling him, and his brain seems to block the horrific news but, after a moment, he processes the words and falls to pieces in front of Lionel and his wife. They both drive him to his son's funeral, where he lives an excruciating experience as an anonymous mourner among the crowd. From this day, Wydell experiences severe post-traumatic effects that his increasing alcoholic consumption cannot always suffuse: "Wydell began spending most of Friday and Saturday nights at Scott's, drinking until he felt settled and in control, until he chased the face of his child out of his head. But sometimes, even when he was so drunk he could barely stand, Armstrong wouldn't go away" (197). Apart from heavy drinking, Wydell devotes himself to his job in order to "keep his son's ghost at bay" (198), but the acting out of the memory of Armstrong worsens to the point that it triggers his early childhood trauma. During these days of haunting reminiscences, Wydell recalls his father's violent beatings: "It didn't take much, not much at all, for his father to grab him by his elbow, yank him behind the house, and make him strip down. He would stand in front of the big man, naked and shivering, and his father would walk toward him, holding the whip in his hands" (199). McMahand argues that these frequent violent episodes "mangle[d] Wydell's general perception of himself as a black man" (215), and they also wound up leaving a traumatic imprint on his psyche that combined later with the overwhelming loss of his son to utterly break him down.

Wydell's post-traumatic condition severely aggravates and plunges him into a depressive acting-out phase that leads him to a major breakdown. At the bar, he fantasizes about how he could have saved his son if he had been around on the fatal day of the lynching: "Armstrong would have called, 'Daddy! Daddy!' He knew where Odessa kept the shotgun. Those Coxes would have hightailed it if they saw a gun, even if they had three of their own" (193). With the passage of time, the haunting memory of his son takes the form of vivid hallucinations that wind up sneaking into his everyday routine: "He was

on his way to the liquor store one evening, and there was Armstrong, his little boy's face hovering over him. 'Daddy! Daddy!' Wydell started running" (200). Despite Wydell's desperate efforts, his hallucinations about Armstrong become increasingly frequent and uncontrollable: "he couldn't control Armstrong's visiting him, calling him, making him think" (200). Wydell's escalating post-traumatic stress reaches its climax when his son's specter begins calling his name at the factory:

> He started running, knocking over clothing bins, bumping into racks of ironed garments. Workers stepped back and watched. "Go 'way!" Wydell screamed. "Leave me alone." He could feel the baby breath on his shoulder. Armstrong smelled like milk and talcum powder. He pushed chairs out of his way and shoved tables aside, scattering clothing all over the floor. Everyone had stopped working now, and they were staring at him.
>
> "He won't leave me alone." (200-01)

Fully trapped in the spiral of repetition compulsion, Wydell loses track of a continuous chronological time and, to recreate his own reality, his traumatized mind resorts to past images and sensations from the little time that he had spent with his son. That the hallucination brings Armstrong back as a baby proves Wydell's unresolved sense of guilt, not only for abandoning his son but for being unable to protect him from the white southern racists. Deeply overwhelmed by his traumatic memories after the incident at the factory, Wydell is immediately sent to a mental hospital to receive a more than necessary professional help.

The time spent at the hospital brings Wydell the opportunity to reunite with Delotha and work through the traumatic loss of Armstrong with her. As the next of kin, Delotha is called to sign Wydell out and, when she arrives, she finds a shattered man. Their encounter rekindles their love relationship as it also helps to improve Wydell's mental health. He insists on staying another four months at the hospital "to purge from his body the memory of alcohol and banish the phantoms of his dead son from his mind" (208) and, by the time he is signed out, Delotha's daily visits have already made them fall back in love. The memory of their son becomes the binding element of their reunited marital life and the reminder of their newly found love but, as McMahand notes, Armstrong's "torture and murder, however, continue to cast a shadow over their lives, compelling Delotha's fixation to reproduce a dead child while aggravating Wydell's

uncertainty about his ability to raise boys" (215). Wydell's childhood trauma remains unresolved, and only through his wife's care and support is he able to recover the faith and self-confidence to become a "successful, sober man" (212) and dare to go for another child.

While Wydell proves a magnificent father to his two daughters, Delotha's last pregnancy terrifies him to the utmost, and the subsequent birth of his second son W.T. confirm his fears. At the hospital, "[t]he horror and fear he initially felt when the doctor announced that he had a son crept around his shoulders, the weight of it like ten iron bars" (286). The traumatic memories of his childhood and the loss of his first son are reenacted, and their acting out adds up to his wife's radical change and overprotection of their new son. Delotha's toxic raising of W.T. complicates the boy's relation with a father who, from W.T.'s birth, already has a traumatized approach to raising boys. Wydell's increasing detachment from his second son explodes when, in an argument about W.T.'s behavioral problems, his wife blames him for Armstrong's loss: "Yeah, he's your child until you feel like walking off and leaving him, like you done Armstrong. I'm the one he has to depend upon" (357). This accusation shatters his self-confidence and triggers the acting out of both his childhood trauma and his sense of guilt. As Eyidiyiye points out, their verbal confrontation proves that "[d]ecades later the couple continues to deal with the demons of Armstrong's death, culminating when Wydell resumes drinking alcohol" (84).

Overwhelmed by guilt, Wydell progressively comes back to his alcoholic routine and slowly detaches from his family, until Delotha puts him out again when, at this critical moment, urgency takes him out of the loop of repetition compulsion. His cousin's alarming words about W.T.'s imminent danger wake him up, as his second son's gang problems urge Wydell to step up and save W.T. from a certain death at an upcoming street shooting at night. As Jones explains, "[o]nly when Wydell works through his own childhood trauma does he begin to understand his role in shaping W.T.'s fate" (174). Wydell thus picks his youngest son up on the street when he is running from a rival gang, and he does not stop driving until they reach Hopewell, in an effort to finally undertake what McMahand describes as "the task of experiencing the experience, of confronting the center of his psychic terrors" (215). His final retreat to the Mississippi Delta accounts for a necessary quest to work through his unresolved traumas, and his native land becomes a

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redemptive space for both Wydell and W.T., while Campbell closes the novel in an optimistic note with an ending scene of reconciliation between father and son, as well as between the father and his place of origin.

The aftereffects of Armstrong's heinous lynching have a particular impact on the two marriages of primary characters directly involved in the case—with, needless to say, a special emphasis on the Todds—but the outcome of the tragedy shatters, to a greater or lesser extent, the whole southern community of Hopewell. Clayton Pinochet and Ida Long constitute an interesting pair of secondary characters through whom the author explores the traumatic aftereffects of the tragic incident within the racial, gendered, and class strata of the small town and its surrounding areas.

Depicted as the southern white liberal of the story, Clayton Pinochet carries conflicting inner tensions from the beginning of the novel that are greatly magnified by the lynching of his young black assistant. Clayton is early introduced as the chief editor of the town's newspaper and the only son of the most powerful landowner in Hopewell, Stonewall Pinochet. His father's white supremacist beliefs starkly collide with his own liberal worldview, but he struggles to dissociate himself from the predestined role that Stonewall wants him to play in the white power structure of the town. Clayton's sympathy for the black community is clouded by his dependency on Stonewall's financial support and, as Jones argues, although "Clayton does have a social conscience, … the racial guilt money that he doles out behind the scenes is his father's, the product of cheap labor by poor blacks and poor whites" (168). Conscious of this situation, he chooses to fantasize about grandiose gestures for individual members of the African American community, instead of exposing his liberal ideals to his father or his neighbors. Tewkesbury notes that, through this character, "Campbell scrutinizes the problematic situation of southern white liberals who claim to support the Beloved Community, yet reap the benefits of an exploitive economic system" (57), at the expense of the increasing magnification of their white guilt.

The lynching of the young African American boy triggers a sense of white guilt in Clayton that has his origins, as usual in the novel, in a traumatic episode of his childhood. Soon after his irruption in the narration, Clayton is sitting at his office

reflecting on his father's tyrannical rule in interior monologue, when he suddenly recalls a troubling childhood memory. The images of Stonewall's farm manager savagely beating a black employee burst into his mind as Clayton vividly revisits his innocent attempts to stop the brutal racist violence:

> Even now he could taste his eight-year-old passion. "Stop it! It's not right!" he screamed, flinging his small body between the two men. Suddenly he was lifted up, and then he was momentarily airborne, before he landed on the ground with a thud. When he looked up, his father's body loomed over him. Stonewall Pinochet's face was contorted with rage and venom as he shouted, "If you ever—ever—try to save a nigger again, I'll…" He stalked away. (23)

Stonewall's disproportionate reaction infuses an overwhelming fear in his eight-year-old son that ends up leaving a traumatic imprint on his young psyche. Eyidiyiye accordingly argues that "[t]his moment marked Clayton's deep compassion for black people as well as his entrenched fear of his father" (103), which would ultimately account for his ambiguous and passive behavior before the racist injustices of the South.

Clayton's segregated upbringing also contributes to illuminating his conflicting relation to African American women through the novel. In her seminal analysis of Jim Crow idiosyncrasy, Lillian Smith delves into the obscure intricacies of the collective imaginary of white southern males through three ghost relationships, "three traumatic relationships not common outside our region, that have left a lasting impression on all of us, though few, actually, have suffered them directly" (116). One of these relationships deals with the bond that white children established with their African American nurses during their childhood, which ponders the contradicting rules that shaped their interracial relation. As many wealthy white southerners, Clayton had grown strong affective ties to her black nurse Etta, "until the word 'mother' became synonymous with coffee-brown skin and rough, crinkly hair, and the white woman who bore him was relegated to being a bystander in her own son's life. Etta, his mammy" (23). His childhood love feelings could not exceed certain limitations and must be severed at a certain age, which had left Clayton, and thousands of white children, to deal with what Lillian Smith describes as "this special southern trauma in which segregation not only divided the races but divided the white child's heart" (134).

The way in which white southern males handled this early psychic wound ended up shaping their putatively future sexuality and, if unresolved, resulted in an uncontrolled sexual lust for black women. The intersection of two of the three ghost relationships (i.e., that of "white man and colored woman" together with that of "white child and his beloved colored nurse") profoundly shaped the sexual drives of the white southern man for, as Lillian Smith remarks, "[d]eep down in him, he often reserves his play, his 'real' pleasure, his relaxed enjoyment of sex activities, and his fantasy, for women as much like his nurse (they may or may not have colored skin) as his later life can discover" (134). In the novel, Clayton's relation to the main African American female figures of his life is deeply influenced by his unhealed wounds. The frustrations of his childhood love for his primary caregiver Etta and his current years-long relation with his black lover Marguerite—both representing, respectively, the myths of Aunt Jemima and Jezebel in the white supremacist imaginary—combine to add pressure to his closeted liberal ideas and his pathological sense of guilt. The more racial injustices he witnesses or the more guilty he feels, the more extravagant presents he gives to Marguerite as a way to momentarily soothe a white guilt that he is unable or unwilling to confront. Armstrong's heinous murder winds up challenging his passive position in the narration and magnifying his increasingly haunting guilt.

Clayton is initially unable to process the traumatic lynching of Armstrong, and the loss of his young friend begins to haunt his everyday life. He tries to block the memory of the murder and, sitting in his office only a day after the crime, he seems to have forgotten the recent tragedy: "Wonder where Armstrong is" (71). The gruesome events of the previous evening, however, soon burst into his mind: "What he recalled was as hard and punishing as a beating: the deep-red stain in the center of the boy's yard; the wailing that he heard from the small shotgun house; the sorrowful faces of the Negroes" (72). The traumatic memory of the boy's lynching triggers his unresolved sense of guilt as he realizes that, thanks to his privileged position within the southern community, he could have prevented the tragedy. Soon after learning about the pool hall incident, his fear of destabilizing the white supremacist status quo had paralyzed him and undermined his former intentions to stop the Coxes' likely imminent violent reaction. Clayton's vertiginous immersion into his remorse leads him to recall another traumatic past event wherein, a few years ago, the fear of his father's reprisal had frustrated his intended

marriage with the poor white Dolly Cox, who wound up dying due to the post-traumatic psychic wounds caused by the abortion of their child. Her death had been troubling Clayton ever since, and Armstrong's gruesome murder meant a painful reminder of his pathological sense of guilt, as he came to the sudden realization that, like in the boy's case, *"I didn't protect her either*" (73).

Clayton's incapability to stand up to his father's ideals and the southern status quo ultimately results in two tragedies that, especially in the case of Armstrong's death, increase his lifelong sense of guilt. Clayton repeatedly acts out the traumatic memory of the young boy through the narration because he is completely incapable of working through his guilt. Eyidiyiye argues that, in order to feel better with himself, "he seeks amiable relations with poor blacks out of self-interest and guilt" (104); relations that do not compromise his position in the social structure of Hopewell, as his controlling father demands. Armstrong's death proves too overwhelming to counterbalance by his usual kindness toward the African American community and, even as time goes by, Clayton does not manage to get rid of the haunting memory of his young friend:

> It was while the train sped by the cotton that visions of Armstrong Todd entered his mind. Placing his hands on either side of his head, Clayton pushed against his skull, as though he were cracking a walnut. He shut his eyes tight, but Armstrong was waiting for him in the dark and was there again when he opened his eyes. (165)

His acting out of the traumatic memory of the boy continues for a long time and, more than a decade after the tragedy, he cannot stop thinking about him: "How old would Armstrong be now? Clayton wondered" (314). The school that he winds up opening to help black students, after his teaching experience with Ida's son, becomes a way to start working through his sense of guilt that, finally, seems to help him cope with the traumatic memory of Armstrong.

In his path toward the coming to terms with the tragedy, the completion of his self-reconciliation is achieved through his interracial friendship with his mixed half-sister Ida. The discovery of their kinship after Stonewall's death initially triggers Clayton's inability to stand for his liberal ideals. When Ida claims to sue the Pinochet estate for her rightful share, he surprisingly adopts his father's ancient beliefs for a while, but the prospects of losing Ida's appreciated affection makes him reconsider his position. As

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Jones notes, “rather than continue to sympathize with black people and occasionally work behind the scenes” (173), Clayton finally gathers the strength to openly reject the role that the white elite was long expecting him to play in the power structure of the town. When a member of the Honorable Men of Hopewell, a sort of fictional Citizen’s Council that ruled the town from the shadows, calls him to replace his deceased father in an upcoming meeting, Clayton openly rejects the invitation: “He didn’t want to be his father’s son; he wanted to be his [black] mammy’s. ‘Waldo, I am not an honorable man,’ he said” (422). Clayton’s rejection marks the full acceptance and public manifestation of his liberal ideals after a lifetime veiling them. This revelatory moment comes hand in hand with the overcoming of the pathological fear of his father’s shadow and the southern status quo, as well as it signals an important step in the working through his white guilt and, extensively, the traumatic memory of Armstrong. The novel’s ending puts the emphasis on Clayton’s interracial friendship with Ida as the catalyst for his final self-reconciliation and redemption from a whole life clung to the white supremacist tenets of the southern way of life.

Ida Long is another secondary character deeply troubled by Armstrong’s gruesome death who, like Clayton, also has to deal with her conflicting inner tensions in order to come to terms with the traumatic incident. Campbell first introduces Ida in the narration through a short-lived interracial friendship with Lily Cox in which, as McMahand indicates, “[t]he women bond, if only for a moment, over their dream of escaping the stifling atmosphere of Hopewell, Mississippi” (218). Armstrong’s infamous murder puts an end to their secret meetings at the train station, but Ida’s hopes to leave the South and offer her son Sweetbabe a better future in Chicago increase after the tragedy. A strong and independent woman, as Eyidiyiye notes, “[s]he is … haunted by the unknown identity of her biological father, a white man that her mother refused to name before she died” (92) and who, by the end of the novel, proves to be no other than the white supremacist rich landowner Stonewall Pinochet. Until the secret is revealed, Ida’s friendship with Clayton progressively improves over the narration, especially after her son Sweetbabe is bitten by a rabid dog and, thanks to Clayton’s promptness, the child is eventually cured. Ida soon perceives Clayton’s taciturn behavior and deeply reflects on it, but she does not get to realize that, deep down, they both share a common sense of guilt for not being able to prevent Armstrong’s heinous murder.

The sight of the blood-stained spot where the young boy is shot leaves a traumatic imprint on Ida's conscience that initially fuels her haunting sense of guilt. She learns about the pool hall incident at her last meeting with Lily and, after running home to warn Armstrong's grandmother about the possible danger, at the last moment she resolves not to inform her in order to not worry her neighbor unnecessarily. Ida trusts her white friend's assurance "*that everything was alright*" (38), but that same night she winds up regretting her unfortunate decision after the murder is perpetrated by the three Cox men. Trying to process the gruesome events back at home, "[i]mages she couldn't chase swam into her mind. She kept seeing Armstrong, his head thrown back as he laughed loudly. Then he would appear to be quiet and sober, his freckles dancing, his friendly eyes following her" (56). The traumatic memory of the boy triggers the compulsive repetition of her sense of guilt together with the depraved nature of the crime and, immersed in this acting-out phase, Ida begins to present post-traumatic symptoms that reflect her inner restlessness and the numbing fear for her own son's safety instilled by the lynching:

> For the first few nights after the murder, she had difficulty sleeping … Her dreams were such wild, violent hallucinations that she found no peace in her rest. She would hear screaming and begin running toward the sound. … And then the real horror. She saw a little colored boy standing in the middle of a circle of white men. … and she could hear his cries of anguish as the men beat him. … And she knew it was Sweetbabe who was in the circle's center, her only child covered with blood and bruises. (106)

With the passage of time, although these severe post-traumatic symptoms lessen, Ida continues to be haunted by the traumatic memory of Armstrong since, even a year after the tragedy, "tears came to Ida's eyes whenever she even so much as glanced as the empty house" (162) where the boy used to live. This neighboring place becomes a constant reminder of the traumatic event, as well as a trigger for the sense of guilt that, from that fateful day, Ida fully interiorizes: "Armstrong was dead because she trusted a white woman with his life" (107).

While the haunting experience of the murder boosts her plans to move to Chicago with her son, her total devotion to providing her son with a better future helps her work through the tragedy. Ida simultaneously starts a successful local food business, organizes Saturday night parties for her neighbors, and works as a maid to earn the money needed

to accomplish her dreams and leave behind the racial terror of the South. She clings to the conviction that "[w]hat happened to Armstrong would never be her son's fate" (163) to endure the exhausting working days and the undermining obstacles of the southern racial caste system. Her buoyant local business attracts the attention of the white power structure of the town, and she is extorted by a corrupt sheriff who later harasses and tries to rape her without success. In spite of the adversities, Ida earns enough money to fulfill her hopes, but an unfortunate accident leaves her stepfather with a broken hip, and she is forced to remain in the South. From this moment onward, she focuses her energies on providing for her family as she progressively becomes a highly respected figure in the eyes of the African American community. Ida proves to be a character who, according to Eyidiyiye, "challenges stereotypes and offers an unmarried, uneducated woman who has a sound sense of personal agency and a commitment to her son, her family, and her community" (92).

In addition to the psychic wound left by the murder, Ida also struggles with an intermittent abandonment trauma through the story that, like in the rest of the characters, finds its roots in her childhood. Ida is the product of the remaining traumatic relationship (i.e., "white father and black children") that Lillian Smith identifies in her enlightening study. Although a slight number of southern white males secretly acknowledged and supported their interracial progeny, the southern critic argues that "[t]he stark ugly fact is that millions of children have been rejected by their white fathers and white kin and left to battle alone the giants that stalk our culture" (L. Smith 125). Ida belongs to this latter group of abandoned children, as she has been haunted by the unknown identity of her biological white father since her childhood. Troubled by this obscure secret, Ida repeatedly attempts to question her stepfather William Long, who has raised her as her biological daughter, at different and unexpected moments of the narration, "always trying to catch [him] off guard, to get him to tell her what she needed to know" (105), but he proves unable or unwilling to provide her with the desired answer.

The mystery of Ida's white father's identity and the damage caused by his abandonment accompany her until the end of the novel. In a casual conversation with Willow Scott, the cook of Hopewell's Busy Bee Café, Ida hints at the stigma that her mother had to carry for giving birth to an interracial child and the psychological damage that this injustice left on her, after Willow asks Ida about her frustrated plans to move to

Chicago with her son: “I can’t go now. When he gets better, me and Sweetbabe will go. Be good to be someplace where he can get an education and I don’t hafta hear people calling my mother names” (230). Part of Ida’s admission highlights the viciousness of a society that scorns the abandoned black mother and child but condones fleeing white fathers. Willow’s ensuing response despises this unjust behavior and praises the figure of Ida’s deceased mother: “Willow grabbed her arm. ‘Your mama was a good woman. You remember that’” (230). The Native American cook’s reassuring lesson is underpinned later in the narration by Ida’s temporary but influential boyfriend Dan, who consoles her after she opens up and verbalizes her abandonment trauma to him: “It ain’t your shame. And it ain’t your mama’s, either” (269). These same words are echoed when, decades later, Ida is cleaning her stepfather’s room after his funeral and discovers a metal box under his bed with pictures of her white father, who turns out to be no other than “Stonewall Pinochet. Clayton’s father. Her father. Not her shame” (326).

Over the narration, Ida’s resilience proves not only vital to provide her son with the opportunity to attend college in Chicago, but also essential in Hopewell’s activism and unionism as, according to Eyidiyiye, “her alliance with Clayton Pinochet also sets the stage for substantive changes at the institutional level” (92). Ida eventually becomes a strong leader among both the black and white communities and, roughly three decades after the murder, even considers helping the boy’s grandmother and mother “sue the Coxes for killing Armstrong” (391). Through resilience and dedication, she is able to work through Armstrong’s murder and transform her traumatic memories into positive energy to bring new opportunities both for her family and her neighbors. By the end of the novel, the news that her already adult son decides to move back to Hopewell and settle in there with his family surprise a middle-aged Ida who does not realize, as Sweetbabe tells her, how much the town has changed since the fateful day in which the death of an innocent fifteen-year-old boy stirred the consciences of a whole community in the Mississippi Delta.

Campbell’s precise psychological realism imbues a narrative that ponders the individual and collective aftereffects of the Emmett Till case through a varied cast of complex characters with a twofold healing intention. The author resorts to the literary medium to

create what Dominick LaCapra calls an "expansive space" (*Writing History* 185), not only to come to terms herself with the traumatic burden of a tragedy that had been lingering in her mind for decades but, at the same time, to also provide readers with an avenue to work through Till's infamous lynching. As Eyidiyiye points out, "Campbell deliberately uses this historical moment as an act of remembrance but also as a rite for examining the complexities of black life in the face of white racism" (79) through several decades. The fictionalized historical conversation included in the book explores the intricate relation between victims and perpetrators, and offers new scenarios for dialogue within and outside of the narrative text. With numerous changes of focalization, Campbell interweaves the different voices of her characters and their personal experiences through the common thread of Armstrong Todd's traumatic case. Perpetrators, victims, and neighbors converse through the pages of the novel and create a palimpsest of voices that offers readers an innovative narration of the horrific crime and its traumatic aftereffects. Campbell's fictionalization of the Emmett Till case in *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* continues the long literary tradition inspired by the infamous lynching while, through her evocative prose, the author makes us realize that, in the end, we are all, for better or worse, equal when feeling the blues.

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4. Through Bobo's Magic Realist Eye: The Emmett Till Trauma in Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle*

… but it was just my vision that had to come out
as reflected in my own pain and anguish
about the story.
(Nordan, *The Missouri Review* 85)

Lewis Alonzo "Buddy" Nordan came up with a magical geography to set his highly acclaimed fictionalization of the Emmett Till case. A native of Ita Bena, Mississippi, Nordan grew up and spent a considerable part of his life in a Mississippi Delta that would profoundly shape his aesthetics and literary production. The death of his biological father when he was just eighteen months old was followed by a childhood in the company of an alcoholic stepfather, who wound up leaving him a traumatic void that he carried for the rest of his life. This complicated (step)father-and-son relationship also played a crucial role in Nordan's fiction for, as the author mentions in an interview for *The Missouri Review*, "[i]t's normal, I think, to look back at my work and say, gosh, I've been writing about wanting a father all my life" (Nordan 76). After a two-year period in the Navy, Nordan went back to Mississippi to complete his bachelor's degree and receive a doctorate from Auburn University for his dissertation on Shakespeare's dramatic poetry. Dissatisfied with academic studies, he decided to devote himself to writing, and his literary career took off during the mid-1970s.

During his tenure as a creative writing professor at the University of Pittsburgh, Nordan received the shattering news of one of his son's suicide, and the author found himself immersed in a dark period of his life in which, as he acknowledges in the aforementioned interview, "[m]y world crashed down around me" (Nordan, *The Missouri Review* 82). This familial tragedy would also greatly affect his writing production, especially his recurrent father-and-son literary motif. Through his oeuvre, Nordan created a unique southern geography around the fictional small town of Arrow Catcher, where he set the majority of his literary works. As Brannon Costello notes, his aesthetics and unique style have "drawn comparison not only to southern chroniclers of the gothic and grotesque such as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor but also to Latin American

magic realists such as Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges and comic writers such as James Thurber" ("Lewis Nordan"). All these life experiences and artistic influences later combined to provide Nordan with the inspiration and the tools to produce one of the most celebrated fictional revisitations of the Emmett Till case to date.

The publication of *Wolf Whistle* in 1993 engrossed an already large Till literary tradition with an experimental fictionalization of the case that the critics praised as Nordan's magnum opus. The author was well acquainted with the story of the infamous lynching from the very beginning since, besides living at close distance from where the crime took place, he personally knew who the murderers were. As the writer explains in the interview for *The Missouri Review*, "[m]y father was a friend of one of the guys who killed Emmett Till. We knew their family, and yet when it happened, we withdrew into a cocoon of silence, even at the dinner table" (Nordan 84). Just a year older than Till, a fifteen-year-old Nordan stored those memories in the back of his mind and, for decades, never confronted his unresolved feelings toward this neighboring act of brutal racist violence. The description of the discovery of the body in the Tallahatchie River from a newspaper article of the time lingered in Nordan's mind over the years to the point that, as he himself acknowledges in a promotional essay for *Wolf Whistle*, "[t]hose helpless feet and legs, upside down, almost comic, have haunted me all my life" (Nordan, "Growing Up" 272).

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Nordan's initial response or, rather, lack of response to the first news of the gruesome lynching also troubled him for a great part of his life, as his insensitive initial reaction later ignited a profound sense of white guilt. In his 2000 memoir *Boy with Loaded Gun*, the writer dedicates a whole chapter to revisit the unforgettable afternoon in which he got acquainted with the death of the fourteen-year-old African American boy. An assistant to his high school football team, Nordan joined his teammates in the locker room before practice and noticed that some of his teammates were discussing the details of the recent discovery of Till's body in the Tallahatchie River. As he heard more about the morbid case, Nordan recalls in his memoir that he felt that "[t]his was such shocking information that it scarcely seemed real" (*Boy* 79), but the general hilarity of the locker room and the jokes about the deceased were preventing the young Nordan from truly reflecting on the

horrific facts until, after a while, one of his teammates brought some sense into their minds. As Nordan recalls, "[t]he thing that happened next remains one of my most vivid memories. The picture of the scene stands frozen in my mind's eye as clearly as a photograph on a table before me" (*Boy* 79). A courageous boy that was not participating in the depraved laughter of the all-white locker room stood up for Till:

> "I'm for the nigger." He was serious. I could see it in his face. He had not been smiling at the jokes, had not approved of anything that had been done or said. In my memory everyone else stopped talking and looked at him, frozen smiles on his face. He said, "It ain't right. Kill a boy for that. I don't care what color he is." (Nordan, *Boy* 79-80)

Amid the reprehensible discussion of the Deltan football players, a usually quiet teammate had the sagacity to raise his voice and—despite his racist wording—put an end to the cruel chatter. His memorable reaction profoundly struck a fifteen-year-old Nordan who, as he acknowledges in his memoir, "[f]or forty years I have wished I had been the boy who spoke those courageous words" (Nordan, *Boy* 80).

The Emmett Till case proved an inflection point to Nordan's worldview and sense of white guilt, as he became deeply haunted by the tragic events. Nordan recounts in his memoir how "[a]s a high school boy, in the days after the hilarity in the locker room, and then later, after I was a grown-up young man, I became obsessed with the case" (*Boy* 81-82). Torn apart by the factual crime and his southern loyalties, Nordan struggled to come to terms with the horrific news and, trapped in the battle between the northern and the southern press, he set out to compulsively read everything that fell into his hands about the case. Nordan never verbalized his anxieties to anyone, nor even to his parents, and, with the passage of time, his obsession with the Till lynching continued to haunt him during his college years. As the writer explains, "[o]nce in about 1968—for obscure reasons even to me—I copied from microfilm, by hand, onto a legal pad, every word about the trial that the *New York Times* had reported during that summer and fall" (Nordan, *Boy* 83). He appeared to be trying to find some final piece of the puzzle to fully understand something that, deep down, he already knew for, as Nordan acknowledges in his memoir, "[t]he thing I could never admit, and that all my obsessive thinking seems now to have been covering up, was that I indeed feel culpable" (*Boy* 83). He deeply regretted his, no matter how passive, participation in the unfortunate hilarity of the high

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school locker room, and he could not get rid of his guilt about his belonging to a dark South that had somehow condoned and brewed the conditions for the perpetration of the infamous lynching.

The traumatic memory of the gruesome events remained repressed in his mind until the day, roughly thirty-seven years later, when Nordan was interviewed in a talk show for a local television station in Atlanta. Among the all-black audience, a female voice asked him about his next book and, without having any remote plan about it, he confidently came up with an answer, unexpected even to himself, that he captured in his promotional essay: "It will deal with the death of Emmett Till" (Nordan, "Growing Up" 274). The author follows his description of his sudden revelation with the memory of how the haunting memory of the boy had emerged at a chaotic moment of his life. As he ponders in the text,

> … When that anonymous woman at the microphone asked me about my next book, I reached down to the core of myself for something substantial to answer her with.
>
> What I found there was Emmett Till. As soon as I spoke his name, I knew that I had found a buried chunk of my self's permanent foundation, the granite cornerstone of something formative and durable and true. (Nordan, "Growing Up" 274)

Nordan's momentary anxiety and his total exposition to the African American public combined to bring forth the traumatic memory of Emmett Till more than three decades after the tragic incident. This revelatory experience helped the author face a sentiment of guilt that he had been carrying for a great part of his life, and that later led him to produce a fictionalization of the case that he himself described as "the poor white version" (Nordan, *The Missouri Review* 84) of the Till lynching.

The fragility of the Emmett Till historical motif brought challenging steps for Nordan during the writing of *Wolf Whistle*. Asked about the creative process in an interview published in *Novel Ideas*, the author acknowledges the cathartic dimension of producing a novel for, as he points out, "there are psychological benefits, such as renewed confidence that I can do this big thing, solve this problem of language and structure, or work through issues with my father or whatever" (Shoup and Denman 263). In his fictional revisitation of the infamous lynching, Nordan was not only dealing with a sensitive topic for US society and, in particular, for the African American community,

but somehow seeking to work through one of his own personal traumatic memories. As he noted in a 1993 interview for *NPR*,

> I knew the murderers … But I didn't know that a little white boy growing up in the South who was in some ways even implicated in the guilt just by my whiteness had the right to write such a story, and so I repressed it, I kept it in my heart and in my memory for all these 38 years since the event, but I was obsessed with it. (in Fox A17)

Nordan's personal struggle with "the right" to write about this tragic lynching, along with his repressed haunting memories, initially hindered his literary approach to the Till case. He had unconsciously anticipated the Till story at the beginning of his book *Music of the Swamp* (1991), when the young protagonist and his best friend find a dead body floating upside down on the waters of the lake. Although the narrator soon identifies the body as that of "an old man, it turned out, who may have had a seizure of some kind before he went into the water" (Nordan, *Music* 12), Nordan later reveals in his promotional essay for *Wolf Whistle* that "I knew when I wrote the chapter that this dead person was none other than Emmett Till" ("Growing Up" 271-72). He eventually overcame his doubts after Bebe Moore Campbell published her novel *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* since, freed from the responsibility to create a realistic portrait of the events, Nordan realized that he could undertake his narration from his own perspective.

However, Till's haunting memory still complicated Nordan's portrait of the young African American boy. In his first draft of *Wolf Whistle*, the writer built a realistic characterization of Emmett Till, unlike what he had done, and would eventually do, with the rest of the characters and plot of the book. His previous literary works were completely imbued with a magic realist or fantastic atmosphere but, in the early drafts of *Wolf Whistle*, Nordan was unable to pass the Till case through his characteristic aesthetic filter, perhaps due to his haunting memories and the particular horror of the incident. His editor noticed this apparently latent impulse to preserve Till's character as real, in contrast to the rest of the elements of the novel, and he transmitted his realization to a Nordan who, as he explains in his essay, did not know quite well what to respond: "Having been asked, though, I wondered. Was it merely reverence for the dead? Was it a streak of sentimentality? Was it some Faulknerian something-or-another, blood-guilt, that made everyone in my story, except Emmett, fair game for irony and satire and caricature?"

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(Nordan, "Growing Up" 273). Deep down, he seemed to be writing the book not for any specific reason but, mainly, to work through both a traumatic memory and a sense of guilt that, for personal matters, had been haunting him all his life. Nordan noted in a 2007 interview for *The Mississippi Quarterly* that, "[a]lthough I would never minimize its importance, the racial topic was not what caused me to write the book" ("An Arm's" 629) in that, as he acknowledges to *The Missouri Review*, "it was just my vision that had to come out as reflected in my own pain and anguish about the story" (Nordan 85).

To resolve his conflicting portrait of Emmett Till, his fictionalization of the murder ended up omitting the boy's direct point of view because, as the author points out, "it was unbearable" (Nordan, "An Arm's" 632). Nordan kept several realistic features in the final configuration of his Till character, such as the boy's actual nickname (Bobo), but the boy's voice was almost completely removed from the novel. By the time the lynching begins, Bobo's scarce pieces of dialogue disappear from the narration and, after his death, his character is filtered through a magic and spectral presence that represents his spiritual consciousness. Bobo's murder is indirectly narrated through a dream-like, fantastic, and even comic atmosphere that, in a way, releases the dramatic tension of the scene. The use of this technique responds to one of Nordan's aesthetic maxims for his stories, which he explains in a 2003 interview for *The Southern Quarterly*: "at the very least, they should avoid adding wretchedness to the world's considerable store of wretchedness. I don't want to avoid any part of the truth of our lives, but I don't want it to exploit it for prurient reasons or merely shocking effects" (Nordan, *The Southern Quarterly* 105). Nordan asserts in his essay that, despite the boy's diffuse presence in the narration, "Emmett Till, though, is *terra firma*. He is the reality, he is the rock. Everyone else in the book flies with the whirlwind" ("Growing Up" 274). As such, Till's experimental representation helped Nordan harmonize his personal doubts and haunting memories with his characteristic literary style in order to give birth to his highly celebrated novel *Wolf Whistle*.

Nordan's unique writing style emanates from a magic realist tradition that permeates his whole oeuvre and, with particular emphasis, his fictional revisitation of the Till case. The birth of magic realism sprang from the Latin American aesthetic revolution of the first

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half of the twentieth century, and involved a large number of artists from the South American continent that wound up spreading the seeds of the movement over the rest of the world. With regard to literature, Elizabeth Hayes posits that this new current broadly translated as "[a] literary mode in which the supernatural and the material are the equally weighed contraries simultaneously inscribed in the text as experienced reality" (169). In an essay for *Oxford American*, Nordan wrote about the profound influence of Latin American magic realism on the conception of *Wolf Whistle*, as well as on his individual evolution as a writer:

> It was not the Emmett Till story but a phantasmagoria based upon history's broadest outlines … Animals spoke, nature wept, dead eyes saw, monsters and angels roamed the Delta flatscape on some other planet … I had become a magical realist, and was grateful to Latin America for making me possible. ("The Making" 76)

A self-proclaimed magic realist author, Nordan ended up succeeding in his intimate revisitation of the traumatic events of the murder thanks to the aesthetic tools provided by this literary mode. As Art Taylor points out, "[t]hrough magical realism, Nordan found himself finally able to untangle that reality and to forge some peace with the past" (446) as he recreated the brutality, incongruences, and wonders of his native Delta region within the fantastic atmosphere of his fictional small town of Arrow Catcher.

Among the different varieties of the literary mode that originated in Latin America, Nordan's works belong to a tradition of "U.S. magic realist narratives" that, according to Hayes, "are postmodernist texts that destabilize, that question, that challenge ideological assumptions, that refuse closure, unity, totality; and they do so through their juxtaposition of seeming contraries" (169). The fantastic or magical is counterbalanced by the real, and so the reality of the story is articulated for a reader who assumes such constructed reality as perfectly plausible. Nordan uses these elements to create a literary world that, as the writer Margalit Fox notes, "is characterized by a tall-tale outrageousness that shades seamlessly into magic realism …, along with recurring characters and places, in particular the fictional Delta town of Arrow Catcher, Miss." (A17). This small town also serves as the setting for his fictionalization of the Till case, and constitutes a magical geography wherein fantastic happenings and historical events intersect. In an interview

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given to *Contemporary Authors*, the writer acknowledges his former concerns regarding his particular literary style:

> I was a storyteller a long time before I became a writer. Everyone in my family is a storyteller, though none of the others are writers. For a long time I thought I was somehow defective for not being able to tell the truth—the "truth," I should say—without changing it, amplifying it, or romanticizing it. This seemed to be a flaw in my character. Now I think that it may be a flaw, but it is also a gift for which I am grateful. (Nordan, "Lewis Nordan")

Through such artistic mechanism, Nordan deeply explored the Till case in his experimental novel and, in the process, provided both himself and his readers with what Dominick LaCapra conceptualizes as an "expansive space" (*Writing History* 185) to potentially work through and come to terms with the traumatic event. This therapeutic endeavor indirectly fed on the literary tradition that the southern author was resorting to in his literary journey since, in the end, as Lois Parkinson Zamora argues, "most contemporary U.S. magical realists find a way to bring their ghosts above ground, that is, to integrate them into contemporary U.S. culture in order to enrich or remedy it" (542). Nordan's particular writing style also allowed him to fulfill what he describes as "my intention and my point: to render the natural world as itself and, at the same time, as unearthly" (Nordan, "Growing Up" 272), through a magic realist literary mode that, ultimately, could and did render such an aesthetic conception real.

Wolf Whistle intertwines a third person omniscient narrator with Nordan's characteristic grotesque humor in order to recreate the Till case in the magic realist atmosphere of Arrow Catcher. The prelude to the tragedy is narrated early in the book when the fictional Emmett Till, Bobo, is introduced at the beginning of Chapter 2: "he was the center of attention, always was, fourteen years old, fote-teen he pronounced it, always into something, always had a joke going, a dare, something another, some kind of mess, all

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time messing" (Nordan, *Wolf Whistle* 22-23).[28] A natural prankster, Bobo is initially depicted wearing a white shirt with a tie and a felt hat—the same outfit of the famous photographs of Till that the media spread after his lynching in 1955 and that Nordan seemed to have retained in his mind all along[29]—who brags about his "big-ass gold ring" (23) and a picture of his alleged white girlfriend, Hollywood actress Hedy Lamarr, that he carries in his wallet and his southern friends cannot identify. After the boy's initial jokes, his voice completely disappears from the narration. When the bold Bobo presumably asks a white female customer for a date at Red's Goodlooking Bar and Gro on a dare, the reader has to infer from the reaction, or non-reaction, of the other characters what the boy actually says:

> … when all of a sudden Bobo turned around and looked right square in Lady Montberclair's face.
>
> Well, Sir.
>
> He said what he said, Bobo did.
>
> …
>
> Lady Montberclair didn't even hear him say it, what he said, or the other neither, didn't seem like. …
>
> Seem like Red didn't hear the spotey little boy neither. …
>
> Everybody else heard it, though, what that spotey little shine did, dared to have did. Runt Conroy sure heard it. …
>
> … Gilbert didn't have time to pay it no mind, but he heard it. Heard him whistle, too. Wolf whistle, real low. (34-35)

The silences reported by the narrator and the insistence on what Bobo has uttered substitute an ambiguous version, in which, according to Harriet Pollack, "[a]s in history's record of Till, Bobo's voice is absent, overwritten with cacophony, with reported interpretations" (180-81), for an overt explanation of the scene. Except for one customer, all those present at the store ignore or decide to ignore what has just happened, including the woman involved in the unknown verbal exchange.

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[28] Hereafter, when quoting from *Wolf Whistle*, citations will only include the book's page numbers.

[29] See figure 4, p. 177.

Far from being the vulnerable southern lady of the white supremacist imaginary, Lady Sally Anne Montberclair is a strong independent woman who poses a threat to the southern status quo. Her mere irruption in Red's to buy tampons, alongside the storekeeper's nervous reaction early in the novel, are proof of Sally Anne's power to quickly undermine the southern patriarchal tenets, in a time and a region where women's menstruation was a taboo that required protocol. When she politely orders the tampons, indicating that "it's an emergency" (29), Red suddenly panics at the rupture of southern etiquette, for "[h]e just never had sold a package of feminine items to a woman before" (30). Males always took care of such purchases in the South and, before this unusual scene, as Pollack remarks, "[t]he men, represented by Red, are flustered, dazed, and unmanned by Sally Anne's dumbfounded refusal of their euphemisms and their protection; above all they feel unmanned by their own alarmed fear of and discomfort with the competent other-class female" (180). Sally Anne is married to the wealthiest white supremacist in town, but she strongly refuses to play the predetermined role that her socioeconomic position would demand in the Jim Crow South. Pedestaled in the eyes of the store's clientele, she is the first to notice the upcoming danger raised by Bobo's alleged disruption of southern etiquette and, as the strong female character that she represents, she resolves to take matters into her own hands and drives Bobo home for his safety.

Amid the tense atmosphere of the climactic scene at Red's, Solon Gregg is the only person at the store who remains deeply offended by the boy's immature behavior. Solon is introduced in the novel as a poor-white violent man whose eldest son is dying for accidentally burning himself in a desperate attempt to set his father on fire that sought to end his domestic tyranny. After escaping to New Orleans for six months, Solon comes back to Arrow Catcher and, as soon as he sets foot in the small town, he witnesses the fleeting encounter between Bobo and Sally Anne. At Red's, Solon decides to step up as the champion of white supremacy to protect the white woman whose purity had allegedly been spoiled by the alleged young black offender. As Marcel Arbeit notes, "when Bobo whistles at Sally, the sudden abyss between the expected and the observed threatens to crush them" ("Desperate" 651) for, despite the unknown verbal exchange, Solon seems to be more than willing to restore the breach of racial etiquette.

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Blocking the way out of the store, Solon tries to handle the situation and demands explanations from a fourteen-year-old Bobo whose succinct answers fail again to follow the southern code and, as Pollack points out, result in a "perceived but unwitting further challenge of Solon" (180). Until the very moment Bobo entered the scene, Solon was dreaming of transgressing the rigid southern class lines himself and asking Sally Anne for a lift "in that fine white Cadillac car of hers" to seem friends with the wealthiest woman of Arrow Catcher: "It'd be okay with Solon if the niggers out on the porch got the idea that him and Miss Sally Anne were together, friends, you know" (33). Conversely, once the racial breach is perceived, Costello notes how "Solon leaps at the chance to assert his adherence to the codes of conduct that preserve the stability of whiteness" ("Poor White Trash" 212). His efforts to stage his farce to befriend Sally Anne wind up backfiring since, in the end, she is able to make her way out of the store in order to escort Bobo to the front seat of her car, the very same place in which Solon could have realized his fantasized ride home.

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Outwitted by Sally Anne at Red's and driven by his latent inferiority complex and his profound racial hatred, Solon attempts to find a different way to reinstate and restate white dominance in the community. Standing as one of the poorest whites in Arrow Catcher, Solon aims to forge amiable relations with wealthy whites to uplift his status within the racial caste system of the small town. His socioeconomic position at the bottom of the social pyramid bestows him with an inferiority complex that he tries to overcome by asserting white superiority. As Costello points out, when he insistently tries to befriend Sally Anne at the store, "he wants the apparent friendship witnessed and validated by the African Americans, which perhaps foreshadows how Solon will use Bobo as a way of whitening himself" (211). But, although Solon's intentions fail at first, he comes up with an alternative plan to profit from the incident in his later trip to Sally Anne's home.

By the fence of the Montberclair property, Solon nervously ponders his scheme before confronting Sally Anne's husband, Lord Poindexter Montberclair. The narration of the encounter between the poor white visitor and the wealthy white planter provides a number of references to a suggested relation between guns and a problematic masculinity, which seems to point to the psychosexual frustrations originated from the rigid codes of

the southern way of life. Just before their encounter takes place, the narrator describes how Solon "felt the weight of the pistol in his pants pocket, and he put his hand on the heavy mass of it, for comfort" (50); and, after that, these sorts of references to Solon's weapon and Poindexter's Luger pistol become extremely frequent, especially throughout the rest of Chapter 3. As Ted Atkinson contends,

> The clumsy, homosocial bonding between Solon and Dexter, made all the more apparent by their fetishizing of guns as potentially explosive phallic cures for feelings of diminished masculinity, in Nordan's skilled hands becomes an insightful exploration of class resentment and exploitation as causes of racial scapegoating. (25)

Such fixation with guns accounts for Solon's and Poindexter's attempts to overcompensate their frustrated masculinities, since each of them, for different reasons, exhibits a virulent sense of emasculation that, ultimately, leads them to make common cause in their racial hatred.

While Poindexter plays the archetypal role of the wealthy white supremacist landowner, his first encounter with Solon discloses his problems with his wife Sally Anne, who has been sleeping in a separate room for two months. This situation deeply affects a Poindexter who feels emasculated, as his patriarchal ideals of manhood are severely damaged: "It was an insult to Dexter. A woman was supposed to sleep in the bedroom with his husband. Wasn't she? Wasn't the deal when they got married?" (60). His drinking habits notoriously increase during this period and, inebriated in the company of Solon, he even plans on pistol-whipping his wife: "it's what she deserved, humiliating him like this. It might give him some satisfaction" (61). Poisoned by Solon's fabrications, this outbreak of rage would soon feed Poindexter's profound racial hatred and fuel his renewed intentions to reassert white dominance in the community by scheming Bobo's lynching later in the story.

Moments before such realization, Poindexter invites the up until that moment ignored stranger (Solon) to his house after the latter claims to bring information of interest for him about Sally Anne. As the sound of his wife's name suddenly turns the wary planter more receptive, Solon introduces himself as Sally Anne's close friend with the intention of manipulating Poindexter and trying to extort him for some money: "Me and Sally Anne are close, I won't deny it. We're friends. That's my deep feeling. I want to

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protect her like a brother" (53). By invoking an alleged friendship with Sally Anne and staging a seemingly honest preoccupation for her, Solon dismantles Poindexter's former attitude of distrust and soon sees himself sharing a cup of coffee with brandy at the porch of the Montberclair property with the wealthy landowner. There, "Solon told Lord Montberclair what he knew" about the incident at Red's, including a detailed description of her wife's dress and "the part about the child Bobo riding in the front seat of the car with Sally Anne" (55). Bethany Perkins notes how, at critical moments like this through the narration, "[a]mbiguous narrative spaces provoke the reader to create the missing pieces, implicating the audience in critical response to the incident" (709). Like in the scene of the store, the narrator also maintains the ambiguity of what happens during Bobo's and Sally Anne's fleeting encounter in this conversation between Solon and Poindexter, avoiding any further description of the events from what the reader gets to know in Chapter 2.

The conversation with Poindexter, however, does reveal one of Solon's deepest unresolved traumas. After his description of the store incident, the flaws of Solon's version of the events put the planter again on alert and, pushed to the limit by the imminent failure of his plot, the memory of his sister suddenly bursts into the tense dialogue, even to his own surprise:

> I got me a sister in St. Louis, Mr. Dexter, baby sister name of Juanita, call her Neat, run off and married a nigger pimp and set up for a ho and broke our mama's heart … Onliest woman in the world I'd die for, Mr. Dexter. I miss her so much I want to die sometimes … (57)

Solon's unexpected story proves key to manipulate Poindexter as it finally settles his acquaintance with Sally Anne: "Lord Montberclair stopped clicking the safety of the pistol. He seemed satisfied" (58). Solon's brotherly and paternalistic relation to Juanita underpins his fake concern for Sally Anne's well-being, eventually bonding the poor white visitor and the wealthy white planter on the basis of their profound racial hatred and their shared sense of emasculation.

When Solon first informs Poindexter about Sally Anne's alleged incident and mentions that he "want[s] to protect her like a brother" (53) a while before telling the story of Juanita, his words seem to hint at a deeper traumatic memory related to his

younger sister. During one of his interior monologues, Solon remembers how his father used to abuse Juanita until she left home: "Solon's daddy would have been too busy trying to get his hands up underneath Juanita's shirt to feel her breasts in the kitchen while she was crying her guts out and trying to fix something for the old pervert's dinner" (64). Unlike his younger brother, he did nothing to stop his father but run off and leave them alone with the old sexual abuser. The memory of his sister and his inability to "protect her" trigger a sense of emasculation and shame that is channeled into violent behavior toward the weakest ones, according to the hierarchy of the southern caste system, that ultimately instigates his racial hatred. As Costello points out, "[t]he material conditions of Solon's existence would seem to align him with the similarly deprived African Americans of the Mississippi Delta, but he takes great pains to separate himself from them, even to the extent of disavowing his own sister" (210-11) and, one may add, blindly sticking to a white supremacist dogma that only helps to fuel the bonfire of his inner frustrations.

After a whole day of deliberation on behalf of the planter, Solon's and Poindexter's interclass alliance is officially sealed over a scheme to scapegoat the fourteen-year-old Bobo. That same night, an inebriated Poindexter approaches Solon in his rented room of the decrepit town boarding house with a murderous proposition: "Lord Montberclair was asking Solon to murder the little nigger, the sassy-mouth boy in Red's Goodlooking Bar and Gro. this morning, Bobo. Now wasn't that something?" (116). In his hazy state of mind, a half-drunk and half-asleep Solon struggles to assimilate Poindexter's words. The planter's unexpected visit catches him by surprise as much as his confusing pretexts to murder Bobo. From what the dream-like scene describes, Poindexter claims that his wife is being unfaithful to him with an Episcopal organist of Arrow Catcher and, from a story without any factual connection to Bobo, he ends up concluding that he wants the boy dead. Solon's initial confusion is soon cleared by Poindexter's overt proposal:

> Poindexter said, "You said he bragged about fucking a white woman, didn't you, isn't that what you said?"
>
> Solon said, "That's right."
>
> Poindexter said, "You said he had a white woman's picture in his wallet, didn't you, isn't that right?"

> Solon said, "That's right."
>
> Poindexter said, "He made lewd remarks to Sally Anne, and they drove off together in my car. … Wolf-whistled at her"
>
> Solon said, "That's right."
>
> Pointdexter said, "I need a man like you, Solon." (117)

This summary of the incident at Red's constitutes the deformed version of the events that Solon has previously told Poindexter to manipulate him and that was essentially omitted during their first encounter in Chapter 3. But, as Costello notes, "although he succeeds in convincing Dexter of Bobo's lechery and Sally Anne's treachery, he does not attain the sort of white validation he seeks; quite the opposite" (213). Even when Solon accepts the proposal, Poindexter never accepts his accidental partner as an equal, and he reminds Solon of the rigid southern class lines: "It gives you lower classes, you white-trash boys, some *raison d'être*, wouldn't you say so?" (118).

After negotiating some few loose ends of the vicious scheme, the sadistic scapegoating ritual is put in motion with a delusory intention in mind. The two perpetrators seek to cleanse their frustrations by murdering the African American boy and, in the process, restore the alleged breach in southern racial etiquette. As Scott Romine points out, "Lord Montberclair and Solon Gregg … use Bobo as a surrogate victim on which they attempt, ineffectively, to displace traumatic scenarios originating elsewhere" (725). Through violence, Poindexter pretends to get rid of the distress caused by his wife's alleged infidelity, and Solon aims to solve his various inner conflicts recently magnified by the sight of his burnt son. Hours before the murderous deal is made at his rented room, Solon visits his family for the first time in months to discover that his son has been almost fatally burned after his attempt at parricide, which provides Solon with a paternal sense of guilt that is added to the traumatic memory of his sister. Driven by their personal frustrations, the two violent white men drive at night to kidnap Bobo from Uncle's and Auntee's cabin. When they put the boy in the car and check the picture of his wallet, Poindexter realizes that Solon has been lying to him all this time and finally confronts him: "You goddamn idiot, this is Hedy Lamarr … You fucking white-trash fool. You led me to believe that this was a picture of my wife" (145).

At this point, the scapegoating ritual cannot be stopped, for Solon is determined to continue with the gruesome task by himself. He lets Poindexter out of the car at

gunpoint and drives off with Bobo as he plans his next move. Solon's confrontation with the planter had notoriously altered his unstable inferiority complex moments after the sudden realization of his poor white status had already angered him by Uncle's and Auntee's cabin:

> If Solon his ownself had to bow and scrape and call a blond-headed slut in a raincoat "Lady this" and her drunken husband "Lord that," well, why should a little nigger in a felt fedora be allowed to wolf-whistle her and call her "baby." It wont fair. Solon wondered what kind of pistol-whipping he his ownself would have took in a similar situation. (139-40)

Driven by his profound racial hatred, Solon proceeds with a crime that, after Poindexter is out of the scheme, lacks its original motivation. The lynching of the African American boy has now become a personal affront since, as Costello points out, "Bobo reminds him of his inevitable, inferior white trash status. His casual transgression against the values in whose shadow Solon has always lived serves as a constant reminder of Solon's second-class citizenship" (214).

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In *Wolf Whistle*, the chapter about Bobo's lynching is particularly imbued with Nordan's characteristic grotesque humor and magic realism. These literary devices permit the author to filter his fictionalization of the crime in a way that renders the gruesome scene bearable for the average reader. Such portrait clearly instantiates how, as Pollack indicates, "Nordan's grotesque humor shifts between the absurdity of and the prevailing horror of cultural circumstance and national trauma" (176) with dexterity and how, as Fox remarks, "[t]hroughout his writing … dark humor veils, though only just, a layer of pervasive pain" (A17), which the close analysis of the fictional events that follows may help bring to light.

The prelude of the murder situates an indecisive Solon and a silent Bobo driving through the muddy roads of the Mississippi Delta under a heavy rainfall at night. While Solon drives without any destination in mind, he pretends to recreate a friendly atmosphere in the car, which Romine describes as "a clever decoding of the farce of interracial 'civility'" (725-26). The kidnapper chatters about his life with Bobo and even

proposes to go on a fishing expedition with him: "What do you reckon your Uncle would charge me for a good fishing pole? You and me, maybe we'll get together, go fishing some time, what'da you think? Wet us a couple of hooks, you know?" (164). Throughout his amiable monologue, Solon also hints at an identification with Bobo's relatives that, for a brief moment, may suggest a covert longing for Uncle's and Auntee's commodities, such as "all them fishing poles back at the house" (164) or the kitchen's "fresh peanuts" (166). Other personal aspects that come up during their brief car trip are Solon's creepy adventures in New Orleans or, more interestingly, his recently frustrated idea of going fishing with his burnt son. In a very subtle way, the latter wish evinces Solon's aforementioned traumatic sense of guilt, for he significantly refers to his son using the past tense: "See, I always kind of thought I would take my boy fishing, someday, the one what got burnt up" (167). His frustrated plans with his son are somehow equated here with his illusory proposal to go fishing with Bobo, which, paradoxically, makes Solon establish an interracial relation of identification between his own white boy and the fourteen-year-old African American hostage that, at some point during their grotesque excursion, he is determined to murder.

Solon's forced conversation with Bobo, which in reality is a monologue, accentuates the magic realist atmosphere of a car trip marked by the boy's continuous silence. The absurdity of the monologic conversation is emphasized by the constant lack of response on behalf of one of the interlocutors to the numerous questions of a speaker who systematically provides the answers himself. As Perkins contends, "Bobo's absent voice allows for a use of humor otherwise irreverent and profane in conjunction with earnest consideration of the murdered boy's perspective" (705) during the long one-way conversation described in Chapter 8. The amiable farce ends when Solon notices that Bobo has just left the car in a desperate attempt to escape:

> Well, I swanee. Ain't that the limit? We's just sitting here having us a friendly conversation, and first thing I find out, straight out of the clear blue, that boy ain't even been listening. I knowed he was awful quiet, I ought to been done remarked on the rudeness of him letting me do all the talking, and goddurn it all if I ain't feeling the least bit foolish right about now, finding out he wont even-down listening. (167-68)

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In his interior monologue, Solon refers to his insistent attempts to establish a friendly atmosphere in the car to release the dramatic tension of the situation, in a scene that exceeds Nordan's unique grotesque humor. Far from succeeding, Solon is relieved when the farce abruptly comes to an end, and he realizes that his gruesome task will be soon completed: "In a way it was like going to sleep for Solon, when he caught on that Bobo had made his move, left the car. … What a relief. That's what Solon was thinking. It's over. Thank-you-jesus. It's all over" (168).

In *Wolf Whistle*, Bobo does have the opportunity to fight and wound his captor after escaping from the car. While he is out in the dark road of the Delta, the boy manages to get hold of Solon's small gun, which had been previously tossed out of the car window by the white abductor, and shoot a disoriented Solon several times: "Okay, so when the first bullet hit Solon in the face, it took him a minute to figure out just what the hail had done happened" (170). Like the rest of Chapter 8, the events are filtered through Solon's consciousness, and the reader thus has access only to the perpetrator's grotesque version of the story. The scarce descriptions of the confrontation are inserted amid Solon's absurd interior monologue in such a way that the explicit violence of the scene is somehow blurred in the narration: "When the bullet split his jaw open and knocked out some teeth and cut off the end of his tongue, he wondered if he didn't look to Bobo a little bit silly, maybe a little self-satisfied, thinking he was so well in control of the situation" (170-71). This repetitive overuse of the absurd and the grotesque ultimately provokes an effect that, as Romine describes, "induce[s] a kind of comic nausea" (716). Given the gruesome nature of the crime, humor does succeed in making these scenes more palatable but, as Romine remarks, "at second glance, the humor often turns out to be not so funny at all" (716). In a way, the comic nausea winds up putting more emphasis on the events narrated or, rather, non-narrated during the description of the murder for, as Perkins notes, the gaps and the omissions in the sequence of events "prompt[…] earnest consideration of the subject, possibly to a greater degree than exhaustive description could have done" (704-05).

The fictionalization of the murder signifies a breaking point from which the liminal reality of the narration is clearly accentuated thereafter. Bobo's bodily death transforms him into a spiritual presence that witnesses "[f]rom the eye that Solon's bullet had knocked from its socket" the scene of his own murder: "He saw Solon wake up in the

front seat of the truck spitting blood. … Bobo watched him check the body in the grass, Bobo's own dead body, the body seeing its own murderer from a demon and immortal eye" (175). Such supernatural eye somehow becomes the link between the world of the living and the world of the dead within the magic realist geography of the novel. This conflation of worlds does not in the least destabilize the fictional ontology of the narration since, as Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris point out, "[m]agical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction" (5-6). The liminal nature of the mode does not only reside in the worldly dimensions or spaces of the story but also, and more significantly, in Bobo's abject body itself.

The theory of abjection better explicates the complex relation between the twofold reality of the novel exemplified by and represented in Bobo's liminal body. According to Julia Kristeva's groundbreaking analysis of abjection, "[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (4). The abject is simultaneously positioned somewhere in-between both subject and object, in that it does not permit any clear-cut separation between the two categories. Following this conceptualization, Bobo's remains would embody the aforementioned conflation of worlds, not only through its abjection but also through a magic realist demon eye that overtly connects the world of the living and the world of the dead within a fictional universe where, as Manuel Broncano argues, "life and death are often interchangeable conditions of being" (671).

After the climactic moment of the murder, the disposal and discovery of the body are narrated through what Taylor describes as Bobo's "magical omniscience" (450). The dead boy witnesses how his murderer steals a gin fan and some barbed wire to then sink him in the spillway waters of Roebuck Lake:

> Bobo, dead, back at the spillway in the rain, where he waited for Solon, could see all this through the demon eye upon his cheek, without fear or anger, or even a sense of injustice, but only with an appreciation of the dark and magical and evil world in which he had been killed. (177-78)

In this supernatural state, Bobo calmly waits underwater two weeks for the discovery of his body, and he even foresees who are the ones who will find his decayed remains floating on the lake. When his body is found by two white boys on a fishing expedition, Bobo's magical narration comes to an end: "There was much that Bobo still could have seen through the magical eye, but now Bobo had stopped seeing. This part was finished. Now Bobo was dead and gone" (187).

Coincidentally, the description of his death is also metaphorically related to a recurrent motif that subtly permeates the novel from beginning to end. The music of the blues accompanies the characters at several moments through the narration, but it also contributes to modulating the prose over the course of the story.[30] In his essay, Donnie McMahand relates the blues motif of the novel to the violent racist history of the Mississippi Delta through the figure of the young African American boy since, as he concludes from the depiction of the murder, "Bobo literally and magically fleshes out the implied blues subject of the traumatized black body" (209). As Bobo merges with southern nature after his death, the narration seems to sing a blues song for him: "Oh, there was music in the swamp, the irrigation pumps in the rice paddies, the long whine and complaint, the wheezy, breathy asthma of the compress, the suck and bump and clatter like great lungs as the air was squashed out" (176). The landscape's impervious chant welcomes Bobo's remains in his spiritual transcendence, before his dead body is tied to a heavy gin fan and dragged by the currents of the spillway to the deep waters of Roebuck Lake. Through an increasingly magic realist narration, the weeks following the infamous murder are fast-forwarded until the discovery of the body in a succession of fantastic events. As McMahand contends, "Bobo's song, therefore, transcends the rigors of temporal space, an indication of the extent to which the child's death embodies, much like the blues artists, the psychic and physical trauma that informs black life in the 1950s" (210).

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[30] In an interview published in *Novel Ideas*, Nordan acknowledges his lifelong passion for blues music and its particular influence on his novel based on the Till case: "As I wrote *Wolf Whistle*, I listened constantly to the music of the blues—Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters—a diverse group of singers and pickers. I suspected, and it turned out to be true, that the music would wind its way into the prose" (Shoup and Denman 258). For further information about this point, see also his interviews to *The Missouri Review* (pp. 87-88) and *The Southern Quarterly* (p. 99).

In spite of his death, Bobo’s presence continues to imbue the narration as a traumatic core that is, to a greater or lesser extent, acted out by the denizens of Arrow Catcher. The gruesome way in which the crime is perpetrated and the horrific state in which the body is found shatter the reality of the different members of the community. As Romine states, “[i]n Bobo's corpse, then, rather than his ‘character,’ we can locate something like the novel's ‘core’—not as a ‘firm ground’ but as a trauma driving the vertiginous collapse of social reality” (724-25). The collective and individual trauma originated in the heinous death of the boy becomes the central element that binds together the different characters of the novel. In turn, it also constitutes the most powerful disruptive force of the narration since, while his lynching changes the way that things had been in the community up to that fatal moment, the traumatic memory of the crime begins to enact both communal and personal changes in Arrow Catcher.

The traumatic aftereffects of the collective and individual trauma raised by Bobo’s lynching illuminate and, in some cases, accentuate the personal frustrations of the different members of the community. The murder of the boy not only marks a breaking point with regard to the liminal reality of the novel, but it also signals a critical code shift in the narration that propels the characters’ inner conflicts and individual traumas to the surface. Romine notes that, after the crime shatters Arrow Catcher, “the real is not the ‘actual’ Bobo any more than the ‘actual’ Arrow Catcher but instead the trauma (hitherto repressed through social coding) that Bobo’s corpse renders hyperlegible” (725). Through this new light, the previously coded conflicts originated in the racial, class, and gendered tensions of the southern way of life begin to be explicitly addressed by the people of the town; the traumatic memory of Bobo does haunt the community, but it also acts as an emancipatory force that brings the possibility of redemption to this rural small town in the Jim Crow South.

Right after the discovery of the body, while the members of the community struggle to assimilate the recent traumatic events, the narration turns to a fourteen-year-old poor white boy to filter its immediate aftereffects. Roy Dale Conroy, who belongs to one of the central families of the novel, is dreaming of his high school’s arrow-catching game when his father breaks the news of the murder to him: “Honey, they was a body

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found down in Roebuck, out from the spillway. … You're going to be hearing about it, it's a murder, a terrible murder, I just thought I ought to tell you" (196). The boy panics at his father's revelation as the excitement for his beloved game disintegrates: "All of a sudden Roy Dale felt the arrows float up out of the quiver across his shoulder and float out into the air, away from him. He felt the re-curved bow disintegrate into a powder and scatter itself lightly across the floor" (196). His initial distress is followed by an automatic reaction, "I got to go to school" (196), which suggests that these kinds of discoveries are usual in Arrow Catcher, in that he does not want to, or cannot, acknowledge or discuss the disturbing news, something that would seem natural if it were the first time. At school, while he enjoys jokes about a black corpse, Roy Dale appears to have forgotten the horror that he experienced in the morning and, as the narrator describes, even what his father had told him about the body: "He didn't even think about the body in Roebuck being the same as the one Runt had told him about, which seemed like it must be a white person, for some reason" (200).

In this initial stage of latency, Roy Dale blocks the traumatic memory of the murder and unconsciously sticks to racist humor in a futile attempt to escape from trauma. Through the jokes, he seeks a way to underpin his sense of belonging to a white southern society in which a dead black body would allegedly mean nothing. This collective white denial raises a further problem since, as Pollack argues, "laughter … can signify willingness to callously turn horror into cartoon, to obscure behavior that should cause outrage. And Nordan shows us that laughter can be a testimony of membership in the clan of whiteness that effectively reinforces apartheid boundaries" (177). By spreading the jokes and laughing about them, Roy Dale is involuntarily strengthening a racial caste system that he himself admits loathing several times through the narration. He carries a covert anxiety from the moment his father lets him know about the discovery of the body, which leads him to overuse humor in order to conceal the traumatic memory of the dead boy and push it out of his head. The collective repetition *ad nauseam* of the same jokes at Arrow Catcher's high school may subconsciously pretend to protect from trauma but, instead, winds up hinting at it.

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This delirium of jokes peaks at a climactic moment in the narration, in the white boy's locker room, that winds up revealing Roy Dale's repressed feelings.[31] While everyone is getting ready for practice, the same jokes about the dead black body escalate and make the teenagers roar with laughter until, unexpectedly, "somebody said something that shut the mouth of everybody standing in the locker room. The words froze the smile on Roy Dale's face and caused it to crack and fall right off" (204). Smoky Viner, known as the brute of the group and the least expected person in the locker room to have acted in such a way, brings some sense into the eccentric situation with his sensible words:

> "I'm for the nigger … It ain't right … Y'all ought to be shamed of yourself, laughing about a boy got killed."
>
> …
>
> The room was very quiet, no one was moving, or scarcely breathing.
>
> Some time passed like this. (204-06)

Despite the racist epithet, Smoky's ardent defense of the dead black boy constitutes a courageous act of disruption to the southern status quo for, as Atkinson indicates, the white teenager is "appealing to a higher moral order rather than bowing to the pressure of a social order structured on the ideological foundation of white supremacy—he sees Bobo not as a 'black boy' but as a fellow human being" (33). This meaningful scene confirms the code shift that Bobo's murder triggers in the narration, as Smoky's brave words not only stir his teammate's, and especially Roy Dale's, consciences but help to illuminate the traumatic aftereffects of the murder in the community.

Startled by the unexpected scene, Roy Dale is suddenly forced to face a troubling truth that he had been trying to avoid since his father had warned him at home that same morning. Smoky's words suddenly awake his dormant conscience from the period of latency induced by the traumatic memory of the discovery of the body:

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[31] In a 1997 interview, Nordan confirms the autobiographical nature of this crucial scene, noting that it was almost completely based on the locker room story of his youth: "This is one of those real life experiences that imitates art, in which scales seemed to fall from my eyes" (*The Missouri Review* 83).

> Roy Dale wondered why he hadn't known enough to say what crazy Smoky Viner said. Roy Dale even had a daddy that warned him, and he still didn't know enough. Roy Dale was laughing like a durn hyena, that's all Roy Dale was doing. Roy Dale realized he hated Smoky Viner worse than ever. (206)

When he ponders on his insensitive behavior, Roy Dale initially channels his sense of guilt into hatred toward Smoky for having unveiled such a painful reality to him and, later at arrow-catching practice, he shoots an arrow to Smoky that his unskillful teammate could never have caught. Hit in the middle of the forehead and completely knocked out, Smoky is here allegorically punished not only for, according to Taylor, "asserting a truth that sets into motion events with the power to topple the very foundations of Southern society and chang[ing] the seemingly inalterable realities of everyday life" (448) but, literally, for awakening Roy Dale from a fantasy in which his frustrations did not exist at all. For Roy Dale, the arrow symbolizes what the narrator describes as "all his rage, his emptiness and loss, outward, outward, forever away from his heart" (208). After crashing on Smoky's forehead, the blunt object collapses somehow releasing an epiphanic revelation for Roy Dale in which, ultimately, he sees hope for his troubled self: "Maybe he could believe that his vile laughter at the death of a child, like himself, did not eliminate him from human hope, by its villainy" (209).

In the novel, laughter and humor constitute covert mechanisms of perpetuation of the southern status quo also used by the adult members of the community that Bobo's case helps to destabilize over the narration. Right after the incident at Red's, Rufus McKay, a singer of the group of bluesmen that acts as some sort of Greek chorus, had already anticipated the potential dangers of certain jokes, when everyone in Rage Cage's barber shop was jestingly discussing the alleged rupture of southern etiquette and the racial caste system of the Jim Crow South: "You make a joke like that and you jess part of the problem … You part of the reason that child done put his life in danger … All y'all just guilty as sin, guilty as the gravedigger, guilty as me" (102). Here, Rufus alerts his colleagues about the sharp side of humor for, although jokes help the members of the community dodge their frustrations for a while, Romine argues that "they enact communal strategies to regulate reality by repressing … the horrific and traumatic nature of things" (720). Bobo's gruesome death winds up bursting the repressive function of jokes by their factual overuse after the murder, but the humorous vein of the narration

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does not decrease at all after the boy's traumatic lynching. Instead, humor is triggered to the utmost through the rest of the novel as Nordan, in Pollack's words, "is making us laugh uneasily and provokingly and guiltily at unreasonable and absurd class, gender, and race violence and vulnerability" (178) to, in the end, expose the frustrations and the traumas hidden underneath such excessive laughter.

Following this humorous vein, Runt Conroy, Roy Dale's father, is portrayed as a comical and pitiable character whose frustrations are openly exposed to the reader and whose hopes seem to be already doomed from the beginning of the story. He is early introduced as "the gravedigger and town drunk" (40) through a comic filter that would appear to lessen his serious consideration in the novel: "Runt Conroy, he was standing in Red's place, too, like usual. Runt looked like a weasel, with real beady eyes, and wore a felt hat with a grease stain on the crown" (26). Recently abandoned by his wife due to his heavy drinking habits, Runt lives a monotonous life in the seemingly static rural South that appears to have plunged him into a constant state of paralysis. His timid attempts to quit drinking in order to win back the love of his wife constitute a sort of personal leitmotiv that suggests that his hopes are far from being fulfilled but that, however, keeps him going during his daily routine among his drinking friends. Runt is trapped in the repetition compulsion of his abandonment trauma, and his possibilities to work through it are scarce until the very moment in which, accidentally, he witnesses the fateful incident at Red's, and his personal evolution appears, for once, to be remotely possible.

When the confrontation between Solon and Bobo takes place, Runt is incapable of intervening to calm down the situation and remains, as usual, paralyzed by the bar of the store with his beverage in hand. His incapacity to act before the tense argument hints at how subdued he lives within the rigid and static world of the southern way of life since, despite supposedly wanting to, he does not even utter a word during the incident. Absorbed in a trance during the whole scene, Runt experiences an epiphanic revelation after the argument is over: "But today, suddenly, … something ended for Runt, some innocence, or blindness, fell away from him, and Runt Conroy suddenly knew what he had not known before, that he was all alone in the world, that we all are" (42). Suddenly aware of the potential danger, Runt decides to stop drinking, much to his friends' surprise, and walk down to the black slum to make sure Bobo is safe at home with his relatives. His attempt to check on the boy fails when he does not find him and he is told that Bobo's

relatives live in another section of the town. Runt’s failure in locating the likely endangered African American youth is immediately followed by the acting out of the memory of his wife, together with his urgent need to go back to the bar; and, believing, or, rather, wanting to believe, that the danger was surely over, he recedes into his habitual state of paralysis.

When the news of Bobo’s death arrives in town, Runt experiences a profound sense of guilt, which triggers a personal evolution that had already been anticipated by his revelatory moment at Red’s. Clearly affected by the murder, Runt struggles to come to terms with his passive role in the incident and starts seeing things through a different perspective. A conversation with his son during the early morning of the day in which the dead body is found shows that something has changed in Runt since, as a token of his rebirth, he asks Roy Dale to start calling him by his real name: “How much trouble would it be for you to call me something besides Runt? … I done got tired of being called Runt … My real name is, you know, Cyrus.” (194). His wife is coming back home the next day but, as he himself mentions later, that is not the only reason for his transformation: “Honey, they was a body found down in Roebuck, out from the spillway. … Maybe that’s why I want to change my name I don’t know” (196). By verbalizing and acknowledging the profound impact that Bobo’s murder has had on him, the born-again Cyrus is working through the traumatic event and, in the process, stepping out of the repetition compulsion of his monotonous routine. The death of the young boy wakes him from his lethargy and, although Romine remarks that “[i]t is clear that Bobo’s body makes things fall apart” (726), the tragedy also brings winds of change, not only for this character but for the whole community of Arrow Catcher.

The twelfth chapter of the novel deals with the fictionalization of the infamous trial at a moment in the narration in which the members of the community are struggling to assimilate the tragic events. The small town is occupied by a large group of northern reporters who have arrived in the Mississippi Delta to cover the historical moment. Astonished by southern idiosyncrasy, they make fun of the inhabitants of Arrow Catcher and wind up raising animosity among their southern countrymen. While the northern journalists publish several racist jokes and racial overtones as serious information, the

members of the community, supported by the southern press, retaliate by blaming northern interference and the *Brown v. Board* ruling for all the trouble: "The Supreme Court became the villain" (219). The bizarre argument between these two factions peaks at a surreal trial in which a big African green parrot is quietly attending the event without generating any kind of surprise in the courthouse. As Taylor notes, "[t]hroughout *Wolf Whistle*, magical realism appears at moments of extreme tension or outright horror" (446), and the exotic bird here constitutes another example of how this mode is used to release the dramatic tension at another climactic moment in the novel.

Before the parrot makes its surreal move, Alice Conroy, Roy Dale's cousin, plays one of the most significant roles during the trial, as she comments the session for her students and, in a sense, for the reader. Alice had moved with her uncle and cousins to lend her relatives a hand after Roy Dale's mother had left the household and, back in the Delta after college, she had also taken care of a class of fourth graders at school. Her extravagant teaching methods, such as the excursion to the trial or the field trip to visit Solon's awfully burnt son, seek to make the children aware of the injustices of the world since, according to Romine, "Alice Conroy excessively embodies the figure of the idealistic white liberal" (716). Alice openly acknowledges the flaws of the southern status quo and even gets to foresee the racist murder early in the novel thanks to the magic realist atmosphere of the story. Passing by the Montberclair property before the lynching is even schemed, she sees something:

> In one of the little crystal balls of rainwater on her sleeve …
>
> Alice hadn't even meant to be looking at the drop of rain, let alone looking *into* it. It only lay there before her, on her sleeve, perched like a million other drops of rain. In it, Alice saw the image of a child in the river, some river, running water, anyway. She thought the child must have drowned. (80)

Such vision anticipates the fatal events to come, but it does not constitute the only vision that Alice experiences through the narration. As Taylor points out, "Alice's several visions provide her not only a glimpse of Bobo's impending murder … but also with a cascade of images from the coming Civil Rights movement" (452). Alice stands as, in Romine's words, "the novel's true visionary" (730), and she plays her role in the story profoundly influenced by Nordan's characteristic grotesque humor.

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At the courthouse, Alice's sense of white guilt is triggered among the audience as the tense trial advances in an increasingly surreal atmosphere. While Alice begins to ponder her racial identity, she despises her whiteness and worries about the intrinsic racist heritage of her students: "Alice hated the whiteness of her own skin, she ached in her heart for the white children sitting along the balcony rail with her, … the whiteness whose history they had never asked to participate in, to be infected by" (228). Her interior monologue on her white guilt by association continues up to a point in which she establishes a bizarre racial identification with Bobo's relatives, who sat next to the hostile white audience. In a grotesque effort to empower Bobo's uncle before his declaration, Alice shouts at him from the balcony as he happens to lay eyes on that area of the courthouse: "Yes! … We are here! We colored people are behind you!" (231). Amid the incredulous audience, the schoolteacher shows her support to the astonished witness, and she even manages to involve her students in an odd but laudable gesture that does actually help Uncle calm down. As Pollack contends, her extravagant reaction "brings her fourth grade class to some germ of a disconnect from racial identity" (193), at a crucial moment in the narration in which Uncle is about to testify against the white man who had lynched his fourteen-year-old nephew. This climactic scene finds Alice trying to raise consciousness among her innocent fourth graders at a trial that, undoubtedly, was not at all fit for them for, as the narrator remarks, "there was no telling how much emotional damage Alice was actually doing to these innocent children" (230). She persists in these bizarre educational practices because she is well aware of the injustices of her community and, thus, as Arbeit argues, "Alice tries to harness the disharmony of the world in order to handle the disharmony of her mind" (641).

The dramatic tension accumulated by the historic declaration and the uneasiness of the traumatized group of children peaks at a moment that is eventually disrupted by the African green parrot. Runt successfully smuggles his exotic pet into the courthouse, and the bird quietly witnesses the whole session without anyone's surprise until the very moment in which it takes off from its owner's shoulder. In its ascent, while the African parrot catches everybody's attention, it also takes Alice out of a white guilt trance in which she was "think[ing] of the little boy who'd got murdered, and this broke poor Alice's heart and made her believe that forevermore she would love the weak and draw them into her heart" (241). If neither Alice nor anyone from the audience can bring justice

to the southern courthouse, the big African parrot does perform an act of poetic justice after a brief flight, in one of the novel's most grotesquely comical scenes. Right after the judge asks Uncle to point to the white supremacist murderer, the parrot lands on Solon's head and, with its claws dug into his scalp, "[i]t shit down Solon's back, great farting blobs of liquid white bird dooky. *White!* It seemed to say, *White, white, white!*" (255). In this scene, Pollack points out that the parrot "speaks for Bobo in the courtroom when Uncle's heroic accusing voice bounces off whiteness" (194) and, in a way, it serves the justice that the verdict blatantly fails to bring to the case.

The disgraceful outcome of the murder trial winds up magnifying the traumatic impact of the case on the southern community, as the different reactions of the major characters instantiate over the final chapters of the novel. Alice continues to act out the haunting memory of Bobo "after all the witnesses had all testified down at the courthouse, and the trial was over, and Bobo's murderers had been set free, as most folks spected they would be, without apology or logic or shame" (257) in spite of the fact that she never actually met the young African American boy. While she initially attempts to work through the gruesome case with her fourth-grade class, Alice's guilt by association does not cease to haunt her, in that "[s]he felt responsible, somehow, for failures that were vague to her. In her mind she carried the image in the raindrop and wondered whether there was not more she could have done" (259). Pollack notes how, through Alice's recurring memory, "we know the genuine reality of damage, waste, loneliness, loss, grief, racism, and evil" (193) that pervades the shattered southern city. Like his niece, Runt also carries a similar sentiment of guilt for having failed to potentially prevent the murder. As he ponders several days after the trial at Red's, "Runt wished he'd followed up on his hunch and found a way out to Runnymede that day, to Uncle's house, it might have changed things. He regretted he hadn't tried harder to find the boy's people" (260). His regular visits to his friend's store allow Runt to eventually notice the traumatic aftereffects that the rural community is experiencing as a consequence of the infamous case. His companion Gilbert Mecklin begins to avoid Red's, the blues singers also vanish, and a swarm of bizarre younger men displace the usual clientele of the store, which ends up also chasing

Runt away for, as he concludes, "[i]t was unsettling to be around people who lived where this thing had happened and for them to seem not to have noticed" (260-61).

On his way home after one of his last visits to Red's, Runt has a meaningful conversation with his son's coach that not only illuminates the traumatic damage done to Roy Dale by the gruesome case, but also evinces their own incapability to come to terms with the tragedy. Coach Heard introduces the harsh topic of Bobo's murder into their odd chat through his honest worries about Roy Dale's mental wellbeing: "Some people, boy like Roy Dale, for example, even a sweet boy like that, a murder like this can put a mean streak in them. … Murder ain't good for nobody" (272-73). Without paying much attention to Runt's responses, Coach Heard begins to act out the horrific case and winds up verbalizing his deepest concerns:

> "What I'm trying to say to you is, I never knowed about this emptiness inside me, until that little colored boy got killed and Solon and Dexter got let loose. That's when it come to me. I want them uniforms back, and them brass belt buckles, them cartridge belts and Eisenhower caps and field jackets. I want my daddy, who died twenty years ago. I want every durn thing I ever lost." (273)

Coach Heard's words contribute to illustrating the existential void that both Bobo's lynching and his murderers' disgraceful acquittal have recently left in the southern community. The gruesome case reminds Coach Heard of, and momentarily magnifies, his past personal traumas, such as the painful loss of his leg during his days in the army or the passing of his father. His agitated monologue leads him to formulate a question that seems to have been looming over the conversation: "Would you have let them go, Runt?—if you had been on the jury?" (274). Runt's African green parrot abruptly interrupts the climactic moment with an array of its most bizarre phrases in a scene that, in spite of the intentional narrative distraction, is undoubtedly permeated by the two men's latent sentiment of white guilt.

Over the narration, the collective and individual traumas of the denizens of Arrow Catcher are filtered through and treated with excessive doses of magic realism. Nordan purposefully resorts to this literary strategy through the novel, especially at moments of

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extreme dramatic tension, in order to create a fictional geography wherein he feels completely free to explore the Till case from his own artistic perspective. Questioned by the role of magic realism in his literary production, the southern writer explains:

> *Wolf Whistle* is, of course, my most magic-filled story. The real-life events (or pretend-like-real-life events) are more terrible than this author can quite believe, so mustn't this whole world in the story (I ask myself) be subject to similar distortions? And if so, might not some of them be benign and others sweet and still others funny, as well as horrible? (Shoup and Denman 261)

In his fictionalization of a gruesome historical event like the Till lynching, which is in itself full of excess, Nordan constructs a magic realist narration in which the actual references to the horrific nature of the case, and even the character's own personal traumas, are blurred within and counterbalanced by the excessive, grotesque, and magical atmosphere of the story. Weighing the historical and cultural component of the uncanny as a putatively conceptual container of magic realism, David Mikics posits that "[m]agical realism realizes the conjunction of ordinary and fantastic by focusing on a particular historical moment afflicted or graced by this doubleness" (373), to which, one may add, the Till case is undoubtedly subjected in *Wolf Whistle*.

If Nordan's characteristic use of magic realism imbues the narration at critical points to deal with the intricacies of trauma, the aforementioned scenes of the exotic bird are not the last instances in the novel. After the infamous trial, the community experiences the aftereffects of the traumatic murder as life in Arrow Catcher seems to be progressively changing. The communal alterations overlap with people coming together and coming to terms with the case in a way in which everyone tries as best as they can to work through the brutal events. Atkinson notes how, by verbalizing the personal impact of Bobo's traumatic murder, as several characters do, "the social dimension of trauma can offer a sort of blessing in disguise, making possible shared responses that potentially lessen the impact of blows on individual consciences" (34). The narration thus becomes a space to share and explore trauma for the characters of the story—as well as for both Nordan and the reader—which culminates in a final encounter between Alice and Sally Anne at Swami Don's Elegant Junk store that offers an ultimate ray of hope. Their honest conversation evinces that healing is still possible since, in the last scene of the novel,

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"[t]hey spoke, finally, from their hearts. Maybe, finally, they did weep together, and maybe held each other tight" (290), while they were seen by a mystical crystal ball on a shelf with which, just as the narration ends, Bobo was watching them through his magic realist eye.

5. The Ghost of Emmett Till in Bernice L. McFadden's *Gathering of Waters*

> I never thought that I would write a story that
> he would be included in, never in a million years,
> but it was something that was nagging at me
> for quite some time.
> (McFadden, "Bernice L. McFadden (1/2)")

Bernice L. McFadden has contributed to the Emmett Till literary tradition with a contemporary fictionalization of the case in which the boy's tragic story is filtered through a spectral perspective. Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1965, McFadden belongs to a generation of African American writers who grew up right after the conquests of the Civil Rights Movement and could only learn about its conflictive history secondhand. A great part of McFadden's intellectual formation on black history may likely come from the family gatherings that she attended from a very early age wherein, as she acknowledges in a film project for Emerson College, "you sat around the dinner table and you told stories; and a lot of those end up in the books that I write" ("Reading Series"). A self-admitted amateur writer since she was eight years old, McFadden boarded at an all-girls high school in Pennsylvania and then enrolled fashion merchandising studies in New York City during just two semesters. The birth of her first daughter in February 1988 followed her enrollment in New York's Fordham University, where she took classes in literature, creative writing, and African American studies.

McFadden's actual literary career took off after the two years spent at Fordham University, as she began writing poetry, short stories, and her first long fiction during the 1990s. Her tenacious efforts to publish her long fiction came to fruition in 2001 and her debut novel was well received by the critics. The turn of the century established McFadden as a renowned author in the US while, as Ann Arbor notes, her literary production was "sparking comparisons to writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison," two of her major influences. During the 2000s, McFadden produced five erotica books under the pseudonym Geneva Holiday, but she then recovered her birth name to focus on historical fiction during the 2010s. Through this literary genre,

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McFadden found the avenue to write not only an innovative fictionalization of the infamous lynching but the latest novel based on the Emmett Till case to date.

Gathering of Waters conjures up the spirit of the little town of Money, Mississippi, to untangle history and narrate the events that led to Till's gruesome lynching. When writing the first chapters of the novel, McFadden initially struggled to identify the voice that was narrating the story for, as she explained in the presentation of her book at The Center for Fiction in Brooklyn, New York, "I wasn't clear on the voice at that time. I didn't know who was really telling the story … I couldn't tell if it was a male, I couldn't tell if it was a female." To solve this narrative dilemma, McFadden continues, "I asked the question, I went to bed, and I woke up. And the next day I was told: 'It's the town. The town of Money, Mississippi, is telling the story'" ("Bernice L. McFadden (1/2)"). The personification of Money allowed McFadden to approach the fictionalization of the case from an innovative perspective and, once the book was finally published, her bold narrative choice positively caught the attention of the critics. In his review for NPR's *All Things Considered*, the late US writer Alan Cheuse praised the novel pointing out that "[t]he town literally has a voice and narrates this novel, inviting us to plunge into a deep and powerful story of love, hate, race, demons and desire with the lynching of Emmett Till at its center" ("Book Review"). Adding to Cheuse's positive reaction, Jesmyn Ward wrote a review for the *New York Times* in which she also applauded McFadden's "unconventional choices" for the narrator figure and, moreover, lauded the writer's sensitive work in the shaping of her characters with the following words: "It would be easy for her characters to recede in the glare of these events, but McFadden works a kind of miracle—not only do they retain their appealing humanity; their story eclipses the bonds of history to offer continuous surprises" ("Washing").

The fictionalization of the Till case acts as the very core of a novel whose origins are deeply rooted in the traumatic nature of the lynching. Despite being born more than a decade after the infamous murder, McFadden was well acquainted with the Till narrative from an early age and, unlike her school friends, she had already formed a solid consciousness about the matter by her high school years. As she recalled during the presentation of *Gathering of Waters*:

> I was very surprised when I started speaking with friends that I went to school with … and then went to an all-white all-girls Catholic high school. When I bring up Emmett Till, they didn't know anything about him and so I figured … you should know about Emmett Till the way you know about George Washington. It is somebody you should know about. (McFadden, "Bernice L. McFadden (1/2)").

What McFadden did not know was that, several decades later, Till's haunting presence would find its way to her fiction. *Gathering of Waters* wound up constituting McFadden's attempt to restore the memory of the fourteen-year-old boy and create an avenue to work through this unresolved cultural trauma. As she acknowledged in the book presentation, "I never thought that I would write a story that he would be included in, never in a million years, but it was something that was nagging at me for quite some time" (McFadden, "Bernice L. McFadden (1/2)") and that, despite the passage of time, continues to haunt the US collective imaginary.

Several weeks after the publication of *Gathering of Waters*, the murder of African American youth Trayvon Martin reverberated the long history of racist violence in the country and rapidly drew comparisons to the heinous Till lynching. McFadden needed sixteen months to openly verbalize her frustration following Trayvon's cruel death and, less than a day after the non-guilty verdict, she exploded with an open letter to the teenager's murderer, George Zimmerman. In her blog, the writer joined thousands of voices who saw the specters of the Emmett Till case rise again in this new act of racist violence, and she overtly pointed this unfortunate historical connection to Zimmerman: "I'm sure you have read and heard the comparisons between Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin. I'm curious if you've even taken the time too [*sic*] find out who Emmett Till was. If not, let me brief you." She then follows with a short overview of Till's tragic story and a meaningful rhetorical question that immediately finds its answer:

> Milam and Bryant murdered Emmett Till because he allegedly whistled at a white woman. Can you imagine taking a life for something so harmless?
>
> Oh, yes I guess that would not be so far fetched for you, because you murdered Trayvon Martin for wearing a hoodie and walking in the rain while carrying a bag of skittles and a soft drink. ("An Open Letter")

McFadden's open letter not only hints at a long historical thread of brutal racist violence already extant during Till's lifetime, but also evinces, once again, Till's haunting presence in the US collective imaginary, as well as in the writer's personal experience.

In her fierce reproach to Zimmerman's abhorrent crime, McFadden exposes a tenacious reliance on spiritual karmic forces that permeates her entire literary production and helps to further understand her intentions regarding *Gathering of Waters*. The writer's spectral aesthetics is profoundly influenced by her own conception of justice in that, as Melissa Elizabeth Schindler observes in her study, "[t]he notion that divine retribution will act where human justice has failed is prominent in her writing" (170). This karmic perspective somehow accounts for the large presence of ghosts and spirits in her books, and greatly contributes to shaping the spectral reality of her fiction. In *Gathering of Waters*, for instance, the inclusion of Till's ghost in the story ultimately serves McFadden to provide her fictional revisitation of the case with karmic justice; and it also responds to the writer's commitment to what Schindler describes as "using Till's status as an iconic representative of civil rights to draw attention to the fact that the geography hasn't changed" (165), as Trayvon's killing or many other contemporary cases continue to demonstrate. Through Till's spectral portrayal, McFadden provides the boy's character with an ambitious role, both in social and aesthetic terms, that is completed and enhanced by a preceding realistic depiction of his summer vacations in the South and the different stages of the infamous case.

In the novel, the central figure of Emmett Till is intertwined with a varied array of characters through a balanced combination of facts and fiction. During the book presentation, McFadden mentioned how the boy's arrival in Money "was the first thing that I wrote" ("Bernice L. McFadden (2/2)") and from which the rest of the chapters emanated thereafter. Till's presence in the narrative wound up constituting the binding element of the three main time frames of the two distinct parts of the novel that correspond, respectively, to three generations of women of the same family. This female genealogy thus permeates McFadden's narrative structure and helps to bring a contemporary feminist perspective to the events that preceded and followed the infamous lynching. In an attempt to deconstruct the whole case, the crime's seeds are traced as far back as more than thirty years before the murder at a time of racial turmoil in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and its traumatic aftereffects are monitored through the passage of time until

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the very first winds of 2005 hurricane Katrina in the Mississippi Delta. Such historical landmarks help to underpin the centrality of the Till case within the novel's broad time frame and its other fictional events. This conscious uplifting of the figure of Emmett Till lies behind McFadden's intentions regarding her novel, as the writer herself revealed to the audience during the book presentation: "Not everybody is going to pick up a history book … but I think that if you get a little history in your fiction, then it excites you and it will inspire you to go and research your history or someone else's history" (McFadden, "Bernice L. McFadden (2/2)").

Gathering of Waters benefits from the US gothic tradition to articulate a succession of fictional and historical events that, altogether, constitute what critics have come to describe as a haunted narrative. The particular characteristics of the US gothic mode, which, to some extent, originated in opposition to those of the British gothic, feature a marked regional character that has been traditionally associated with a monolithic conception of the US South. As Teresa Goddu explains in her monograph on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century US gothic, "the American South serves as the nation's 'other,' becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself" (3-4). While this abject South is inhabited by that which has historically haunted the US collective imaginary, its spectral geography is based on what Goddu identifies as the usual gothic elements: "haunted houses, evil villains, ghosts, gloomy landscapes, madness, terror, suspense, horror" (5). Taking on Goddu's fundamental study, Arthur Redding's analysis of contemporary US gothic reflects on how "gothic permits investigation into realms and themes that are largely muted in conventional channels of discourse or consensual understanding" (3). Through this mode, fiction creates a space of contestation that usually opens the way to a necessary historical revisitation with a deliberate proactive scope. Contemporary gothic forms maintain the traditional essence of the mode but, as Kathleen Brogan notes, "these conventional elements play a vastly different literary role than they do in traditional Gothic novels" (2). The new approaches to haunting in recent cultural criticism have expanded the gothic mode as broader theorizations on the spectral blossomed along with spectrality studies.

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McFadden's novel includes many of the defining traits of traditional gothic narratives but transcends the mode's conventional boundaries to explore, through the spectral, the gruesome Till case in her constructed abject South. The book's spectral conceptualization fits what Brogan, influenced by an anthropological perspective, describes as a literary secondary burial in that, as the critic theorizes, "the dead are provisionally buried and, after a period of extended mourning, are then exhumed to be reburied properly and finally" (22). These funereal rituals entail an intermediary period, before an ideally final burial, wherein specters arise to haunt those affected by the loss of someone or a putative violent past event. Haunting imbues the narration during this phase, and its intrinsic nature exposes a something-to-be-done that, if completed, would finally put the deceased to rest. In such terms, Brogan ponders "the implications of conceiving of literature as a form of burial, particularly when that literature responds to traumatic stories" (27), such as, one may add, that of Emmett Till in *Gathering of Waters*. If the intermediary spectral period remains unresolved, the aporia resulting from the traumatic experience may be permanent as the haunting would be prolonged *ad infinitum*, unless the ghost is, at some point, successfully exorcised.

When historical trauma coalesces with racist violence, haunting becomes an experience in which the resulting specters may fulfill a transcendental role in the revisioning of the past. As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues, "[t]he usefulness of the ghost in the revisioning of history from alternate, competing perspectives is one reason why tales of the spectral have assumed such prominence in contemporary ethnic literature" (5) and, by extension, in contemporary African American literature. McFadden seems to conjure Till's ghost in her novel to contest the ongoing history of racial inequality in the US and, through several fictional reburials, provide a spectral perspective on the historical debate about the traumatic case. Analyzing the role of haunting within historiography and its relation to black writers, Redding posits that "[t]he site of memory—the haunted place—inhabited or occupied by the creative writer affiliated to traditionally marginalized communities stands in contrast to those sites, however fabricated, that might once have been authorized by a common tradition" (48). These separate traditions would be destabilized by the haunting experience, in that haunted narratives such as *Gathering of Waters* question the actual peripherality of certain discarded perspectives. Writing from the margins thus allows McFadden to use the

supernatural in order to challenge the hegemonic historical account and potentially infuse the minoritized perspective on racial violence into the dominant collective memory.

If the ontological conception of ghosts proves essential in the latent message of the novel, the varied terminology used to refer to these spectral entities should be clarified at this point. Established at the end of the twentieth century as a response to the spectral turn, spectrality studies has contributed to unifying concepts and providing a rather scientific approach to the study of ghostly phenomena within the scenario of cultural analysis. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren discuss this theoretical shift in the introduction to their edited collection of essays:

> In their new spectral guise, certain features of ghosts and haunting—such as their liminal position between visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality and immateriality, and their association with powerful affects like fear and obsession—quickly came to be employed across humanities and social sciences to theorize a variety of social, ethical, and political questions. (2)

The scientification of the haunting experience revolved, to a greater or lesser extent, around the conceptualization of one central entity. Terms like "ghost," "phantasm," "phantom," "apparition," or "specter," and, extensively, their derivatives "ghostly," "ghostliness," "spectral," "spectrality," etc., have been used in this dissertation and will continue to be used as instantiations of the same aesthetic and semantic experience.

Despite the academic preference for the spectral etymological family (i.e., "specter," "spectrality", etc.), these terminological variations serve to describe a synonymous concept. According to Avery Gordon, "[t]he ghost or apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course." Such spectral entity arises, again, only when haunting takes place since, as Gordon continues, "[t]he way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening" (8). This alternate historiographic facet of haunting accounts for a disruptive role that the ghost exerts on linear temporality. In this line, Weinstock argues, "[a]s an entity out of place in time, as something from the past that emerges into the present, the phantom calls into question the linearity of history" (4). Ghosts evince unresolved wounds from the past that demand healing or redemption; an

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intrinsic something-to-be-done that not only troubles the self but also, and more revealingly, relates to a solution. Specters, however, as the present characterization may suggest, do not only function as conceptual metaphors, for they do unequivocally constitute, as traditional ghostly conceptualizations contend, possible actual entities. As Redding posits, “[g]hosts exist not simply in the imaginations of characters, but in their own right; they are possessed, so to speak, of a potent character and autonomy of their own” (6). Literature thus stands as the appropriate medium to better instantiate the ontological nature of ghosts and the many spectral guises of an almost identical concept that contemporary spectrality studies has contributed to illuminating.

In *Gathering of Waters*, McFadden constructs a spectral reality that is profoundly shaped by traditional African spirituality. The writer subverts the hegemonic system of belief of Western culture and imbues her novel with a subtle West African worldview wherein ghosts and spirits coexist with the rest of the characters. Her constructed geography fosters a normalized interaction between all these entities that reproduces an ontological relation based on African cosmology in that, as Donna Aza Weir-Soley posits, “[w]hile Western epistemology locates the sacred and the secular in separate and even opposing realms, the African worldview recognizes no such separation” (1). This resulting conflation of worlds creates a liminal reality in which animism comes to play a primary role from the very beginning of the story. Following Native American and West African beliefs in the spiritual nature of all natural things, McFadden provides Money, Mississippi, with a conscious soul and chooses this little town as the narrator of the story. The first words of the novel, and therefore the whole first chapter, serve as an introduction to this unusual narrative voice and immediately set the tone for the animist atmosphere of the narration: “I am Money. Money Mississippi. I have had many selves and have been many things” (McFadden, *Gathering of Waters* 15).[32] After a brief overview of its own history, Money hints at the Choctaw Indian heritage and the West African influences brought by slavery as the origins of its own spiritual nature, and establishes an initial premise for the reader that proves crucial throughout the novel: “Listen, if you choose to

[32] Hereafter, when quoting from *Gathering of Waters*, citations will only include the book’s page numbers.

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believe nothing else than transpires here, believe this: your body does not have a soul; your soul has a body, and souls never, ever die" (16).

The spiritual continuum that emerges from this assumption generates a fictional universe that is filtered through and deciphered by Money's timeless omniscience. Its lengthy revisitation of the Emmett Till case traces the seeds of the crime back to the early twentieth-century through three generations of African American women (grandmother, mother, and daughter) at different periods of a roughly century-long timespan. Money itself provides the reasons for its profound interest in humankind, especially in the Hilson family, at the beginning of the novel:

> To my memory, I have never been human, which probably explains my fascination with your kind. Admittedly, I am guilty of a very long and desperate infatuation with a family that I followed for decades. …
>
> Their story begins not with the tragedy of '55 but long before that … (17)

Through a succession of historical events, Money relates the antecedents, configuration, materialization, and aftereffects of the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till to the personal history of the Hilsons in a narrative that, in line with the spectral tone of the novel, could not start with a triggering event other than a haunting.

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This genealogic reconstruction begins with Doll Hilson's childhood and her early possession by the mean spirit of Esther Gold, which, decades later, will be responsible for the killing of the young Till. The consequences of extreme gender-based violence had pushed the once kind and beautiful Esther into a mythically racist Jezebel role under forced prostitution, and the unceasing abuses that she suffered in Tulsa, Oklahoma, had eventually "beat the goodness and the sweetness out of her" (24). After her murder, Esther comes back from the dead as an evil ghost that possesses Doll on the very day of her birth. The baby's haunted condition soon shows its first signs, as her mother, Coraline, recalls six years later at Doll's own request: "You come into this world screaming holy murder, and didn't stop until you were a month old. Like to drive me outta my mind. It was your daddy—God rest his soul—who stopped me from throwing you down the well"

(22-23). The mother's teasing response unconsciously unveils a truth that Doll's following reaction confirms:

> Doll raised her hand and stroked the taut skin beneath her chin. "Maybe *you* the one shoulda gone down the well," she said.
>
> The statement was horrible—yes—but the voice behind the statement was terrifying. Esther Gold, Esther the whore—dead and buried for half a decade, and now come back in her daughter, in her Doll? (23)

Coraline here discovers something that she might have been suspecting for a long time and resolves to drag her possessed daughter out to a local healer for an immediate exorcism, which constitutes another instantiation in the novel of the West African vestiges of African American culture. Despite a five-year-long success after burying deep a sealed jar containing Esther's soul in murky water, as the exorcism mandated, the attempt to expel the dead prostitute out of Doll eventually fails, and the evil spirit reappears "stronger and more spiteful than ever" (27) to haunt the narration.

A momentary incestual episode with her five-year-old brother corroborates the return of Esther's spirit to Doll's body and drives her horrified mother to send her possessed daughter to the reverend's household. Rev. August Hilson and his wife Ann pity the seemingly innocent child and not only adopt her but raise her with their six-year-old daughter as if she were their own kin. As time goes by, the evil spirit that Doll carries inside starts to threaten the stability of the family. The celebration of the couple's tenth wedding anniversary is marked by the wicked behavior of a now fifteen-year-old Doll. Ann had prepared a speech to surprise her husband at church but, when she joins him at the podium and starts nervously reading her paper, Doll's or, rather, Esther's malice spoils Ann's honest expression of love: "The husband and wife turned their heads in the girl's direction and Ann saw the thing she was not supposed to see" (34). Doll's strident cough had deliberately caught Ann's attention with the purpose of driving her mad, since the teenager, who was seated in the front pew, was not wearing underwear. Ann quickly realizes that, from the pulpit, her husband was the only one who could have noticed such an improper sight and, disgusted by her thought, she decides to leave the church amid the congregation's confusion. Back at home after a bizarre confrontation with a parishioner called Gloria, who may have been momentarily poisoned by Esther's supernatural evil

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powers, Ann confronts her husband and discovers that, despite his lies, he was perfectly aware of Doll's nakedness at church and, what is worse, that he was secretly allured by it.

Doll's haunted nature impels her to attempt to seduce an August who struggles to resist the teenager's incestuous flirtations and increasing sexualization. The church scene was not the first time August had run into her nakedness. It was an Easter day in the park with the family when August suspected that her teenage surrogate daughter was not wearing underwear in order to seduce him: "Why in the world wasn't she wearing any undergarments? Should he tell Ann? Was the girl possessed? Could his own daughter be next?" (40). Through Esther's powers, the reverend's dreams begin to be haunted by Doll's sexual approaches and, although nothing happens outside this oneiric state, the evil spirit's intentions to drive the reverend and his wife crazy start to succeed. With the passage of time, Ann winds up exploding at her induced conviction that August is having sexual intercourse with Doll and, after a tense argument with her husband, she walks around Tulsa in search of Doll while informing all her neighbors of the alleged infidelity: "Your man of God! Your reverend is fucking that devil he brought into our home!" (42). The next morning, Ann and her biological daughter leave the house for ever as August passively watches the scene hidden in the carriage where he has spent the night. By himself with Doll, August finally gives in to the girl's sexual advances and his lustful dreams come to fruition.

As the narrative goes on, the spirit of the dead prostitute renders Doll an extremely sexualized character who is profoundly influenced by the racist Jezebel myth. White supremacists constructed the stereotype of the hyper-sexualized black whore in order to veil their rampant sexual abuses of African American women. From the days of slavery onward, this narrative remained in the white American imaginary and, alongside other racist stereotypes like Aunt Jemima, severely constrained black women's identity in the country. In her study of the racial representations of female bodies, Diane Roberts posits that the "Jezebel can act wicked as a razorblade or sweet as sugar cane, but she is always the willing receptacle, the hip-grinding blues woman, the almond-eyed mulatta, the over-blown 'wench' who always says yes to men" (2). These defining traits are somehow mirrored first in Esther's former physical appearance, previous to her spiritual transcendence, which the narrating town succinctly describes at the beginning of the

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novel: “She had been a beauty once, bright-skinned and thick-legged, with a curtain of hair that stretched all the way down to her waist” (23). When Esther’s ghost takes root in Doll’s body, the characteristic alternation between the wicked and the sweet behavioral patterns becomes apparent, thus confirming the stereotypical features of the Jezebel. The relation between this myth and the ghostly character of the prostitute is not a coincidence in that, through Esther’s possession, Doll reproduces and completes this racist narrative to ultimately relate the same sexist violence that engenders the evil spirit itself, to the sexist connotations that operate in the later representation of the Emmett Till lynching.

Esther’s extremely sexual and mean influences operate at those moments where Doll’s own consciousness cannot restrain her control over her ghostly guest. These bipolar lapses intensify in the narration following Doll’s and August’s marriage and the birth of their two children. Their eldest daughter, Hemmingway, soon witnesses one of her mother’s spectral trances. Awoken in the middle of the night by her baby brother’s wailing, Hemmingway seeks the help of her mother and finds an utterly gothic scene at her parent’s bedroom:

> The room was cast in shadows. She could see the gray silhouette of her mother’s body stretched out on the bed.
>
> “Dolly, Paris is wet and I think he’s hungry too.”
>
> The silhouette shifted and the bedsheets rustled. A voice the girl had never heard before said, “Hemmingway, is that you? Come in here, sweetness.”
>
> Can a voice have fingers? That one did. Icy fingers that closed around Hemmingway’s young heart. (52)

Terrified by the haunting encounter, the young child hurries along the hallway back to her bedroom and secures the door with a rocking horse, looking forward to her father’s arrival after his night absence. Hemmingway remains awake for a while keeping watch on the door, but she later gives in to a frightening dream in which she and her brother run for their lives as a wolf with the face of her mother seeks to hunt them down. The next morning, Hemmingway wakes up to the scent of a sumptuous breakfast and the merry voice of her father in an idyllic bright morning that starkly contrasts with the disturbing events of the night. Doll is now glowing and pleased to see her daughter: “When she looked up and saw Hemmingway standing in the doorway, her face turned bright with

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pleasure" (53). While the confused child tries to process the situation, Doll repeatedly offers her some cereal that she has kindly prepared for her daughter, but the smell of turpentine suddenly prevents Hemmingway from eating it. As Doll is leaving the kitchen, the child finds out that, in another malicious shift, her mother was attempting to poison her.

The Tulsa race massacre of 1921 leads the dysfunctional family to the little town where Doll's bipolar nature fully flourishes and where, decades later, Esther's vile supernatural powers trigger the infamous Till lynching.[33] In Money, Doll uses her gift to make johnnycakes and starts selling them around the little town with great success. Along her house delivery route, she finds Melinda Payne lying in bed with high fever and kindly tends to her. Her good intentions are soon overshadowed by Esther's kleptomaniac will, and her inner battle becomes momentarily visible to her patient: "Doll's gaze traveled across the room and to the window. Her hand floated to her neck. … Melinda thought the woman had fallen into a trance. 'Doll?'" (91). The sound of her name brings Doll back from her bipolar struggle and makes her excuse her bizarre behavior before sneaking out of the house with a crimson vase that had caught Esther's attention: "I'm sorry, I drift off sometimes" (91). At the Paynes', Doll timidly hints for the first time at a potential self-awareness of her dual personality, but she later attributes it to amnesiac memory: "You see, Doll thought she was suffering from lapses in memory. And I guess that would be the best way to explain away the periods in her life when Esther's will overpowered her own" (98). Since her childhood, Doll has been jumping from one fresh memory to another in a broad grey ocean of lacunas that have swallowed up the majority of her life. Esther's spirit has controlled her body over her numerous sexual affairs and mean acts to the point that Doll's own consciousness cannot recall none of them. From the six years that she has been living in Money at this point in the narrative, she cannot even remember the photograph that, upon the family's arrival at the little town, had captured her changing spectral nature.

[33] The Tulsa race massacre of 1921 erupted after nineteen-year-old African American shoeshiner Dick Rowland was falsely accused of assaulting seventeen-year-old white elevator operator Sarah Page. The ensuing racist riots that devastated the black neighborhood of Greenwood, which included a prosperous business district known as "Black Wall Street," went down in history as one of the worst incidents of racist violence in the US.

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In a flashforward from Chapter Two, the haunted photograph that immortalizes the arrival of the Hilsons in Money finds an aqueous destiny that, along with the title of the novel itself, anticipates the relevance of water imagery in the narration. The construct of water has historically constituted a major motif in African American culture that has been greatly influenced by the collective traumatic experience of the Middle Passage. As Schindler notes, "water has accumulated a number of meanings for people of African descent, ranging from an association with death, to diasporic nostalgia and loss, to cultural change and mixture, to the formation of new kinship ties, to a link to African and American deities" (175). Given the prevalence of this element in African American culture and the novel's profound spiritual background, it is no coincidence that McFadden decided to entitle her book after the translation of the Choctaw Indian word *mississippi*, which, according to the narrating town itself, "means *many gathering of waters*" (1). The large number of references to the watery element converge in the latent primary role of the Tallahatchie River in *Gathering of Waters*, as this spatial character is always present at crucial episodes in the narration. The hydrological history of the river ultimately determines the fate of the characters of a novel in which, as Schindler notes, "[t]he author uses water to reveal a world in which we are all profoundly, if also sometimes invisibly, complicit in one another's fates" (176).

The waters of the river form a hydric spiritual continuum that links the African and Native American souls that had once labored along its shores, to a varied range of spectral episodes inaugurated by August's futile attempt to expel the evil spirit out of his home. After receiving a framed copy of the newspaper article with the picture of their arrival in Money, the reverend notices a paranormal detail on his wife's image as weeks go by:

> Sometimes when August peered at it, Doll seemed to be sneering; other times, she bared her teeth like a badger. August blamed the changes in the picture on figments of his imagination, poor light, and aging eyes; he had a bagful of explanations to explain it away. The final straw, however, came when he looked at the picture one day and saw that Doll's middle and index fingers on both hands were crossed; … (21)

In this initial flashforward, the changing picture openly exposes Doll's haunted nature and, before the story of the family is even narrated, it also foretells August's doomed fate:

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"He tossed the memento in the river, but it was too late—his fate was already sealed" (21). The river does not rid the reverend of the evil spirit that coexists with her wife at this point in the story, but its currents will eventually rise to cleanse sin all around the little town.

In what looks like a reenactment of the story of Noah's Ark, the waters of the river devastate Money during the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 but, unlike in the Christian tradition, the deluge does not save the community from all their evils. On suspicion of her mother's adultery, a now fifteen-year-old Hemmingway follows her mother to the Payne home and, frightened by the increasingly destructive power of the storm, breaks into the house to soon catch Cole Payne with her half-naked mother. After hearing a clatter of glass in the house, the lovers walk out of the bedroom and run into the unexpected visitor. Doll is completely immersed in one of those trances in which she will later forget that Esther's spirit fully controls her own will, as the reaction to the sight of Hemmingway suggests: "Oh, that's the reverend's daughter" (121). The subsequent fight between them is suddenly interrupted by the first signs of the flood. As water inundates the ground floor of the house, Hemmingway's animosity toward her mother turns into a terror-induced kind gesture when she aims to reach for her mother's hand, but her possessed mother does not respond accordingly: "Doll Hilson looked down at her daughter's hand and began to laugh. If Hemmingway had any bit of hope that she could ever love her mother, Doll's refusal to take her hand dashed it all away" (122). This mean response winds up condemning Doll's fate in one of McFadden's recurrent climactic moments of karmic justice for, after falling into the swirling water, she desperately tries to reach for her impassive daughter without success:

> Hemmingway didn't move. Cole couldn't move.
>
> Doll's head disappeared beneath the water, resurfaced, and then disappeared again. Soon after, Esther's spirit floated up toward the ceiling and perched on the chandelier. (123)

In spite of her bodily host's death, Esther survives the catastrophe and soon finds another body to continue to haunt the southern community of Money.

Among the desolate landscape left by the flood, the evil spirit finds a new corporeal host that allows it to keep its tormenting quest. The overwhelming waters of

the river resulted in a large number of casualties including Doll, August, and their youngest son. Hemmingway and Cole had, in turn, found better fortune and were safe in the attic of the Payne house. Rescued by the boat of the Manning brothers, they all navigate across hundreds of floating bodies with an unexpected spectral companion onboard since, "[a]s they floated out of the house, Esther swooped down from the chandelier and settled on Hemmingway's shoulder" (125). Along their macabre journey, they come across the dead body of J.W. Milam, who will later resurrect to perpetrate the heinous Till lynching, and the evil spirit wastes no time in "execut[ing] a perfect swan dive off of Hemmingway's shoulder and plung[ing] right into that boy's open mouth" (127). Schindler notes how, "[b]y following Esther as she travels from person to person, McFadden plots the trajectory of violences that explain Emmett's death" (174), which will soon take place in the second part of the novel. Unlike her possession of the newborn Doll, Esther now chooses an older host and, in the body of a white southern man, her vileness does anything but cease.

Significantly, McFadden bases J.W.'s death and his ensuing bodily identification on images of the real victim of the lynching. As in the fateful morning when Till was found, J.W.'s floating body "is dressed in slacks and a white shirt knotted at the neck with a bow tie" (127). The similarities do not end here since, to load the corpse into the boat, the Manning brothers use "a large hook normally used to move bales of cotton" (127), which somehow hints at the cotton gin that Till's killers used to weigh his body down in the Tallahatchie River. The scene of J.W.'s bodily identification of Chapter Eighteen also imitates reality, as Eula Milam's encounter with the body of her deceased son at the funeral parlor may remind readers of the actual moment in which Mamie Till herself had to endure such a traumatizing experience. In her analysis of the novel, Schindler relates these similarities and J.W.'s subsequent resurrection to a narratological purpose: "To underscore the perversity of Esther's survival, McFadden sets up the rebirth of Milam as the mirror-like foreshadowing of the death of Emmett Till" (179). These mimetic portraits would additionally confirm the recurrent water motif of the story for, in the end, the main characters of the novel find, sooner or later, some kind of spiritual transcendence in the "many gathering of waters" of the river.

The river flood signals a major transition in the structure of the novel and, after a brief description of its outcome through Hemmingway's personal story, it winds up propelling the narration to the 1950s, nearing Till's arrival in Money. Schindler reads the natural catastrophe as a turning point in the narration since, according to her, "[t]he flood acts as a break. For the characters, it means the temporary removal of Esther. Meanwhile, structurally, it divides Part One and Part Two, which begins many years later" (180). The second part of the novel opens with the narration of J.W.'s vile transformation following Esther's possession: "He had been such a sweet child, but after he died and came back again, he was different. J.W. was suddenly fond of torturing living things" (153). Thanks to Esther's supernatural powers, he had resurrected at the funeral parlor before the incredulous eyes of his mother, but his return from his brief stay among the dead takes a terrific toll on the southern community of Money. The evil spirit transforms J.W. into an extremely violent man who enlists in World War II at the age of twenty-three to "actively and openly pursue his burgeoning passion—murder" (154). After the war, he tries to feed his insatiable bloodlust by hunting, but his maniacal drive cannot be satisfied for, as the narrator explains, "killing animals didn't offer the same thrill as slaying a living, breathing human being" (155). To complement his depraved personality, J.W. keeps a metal tin filled with "[t]eeth from the dead Germans he'd shot and killed in the war" (154) and, after failing to enlist in the Korean War, he beats his wife savagely, driven by his frustration, which proves him, on top of the aforementioned vices, a violent domestic abuser. This overview of J.W.'s life at the opening chapter of Part Two already portrays him as a monster before even committing the heinous Till lynching in 1955, thus setting the tone for the imminent irruption of Emmett Till into the narration in the following chapter.

The novel's fictional revisitation of Till's vacations in the South paints a realistic portrait of the fourteen-year-old African American boy that is deeply influenced by the actual historiographic accounts on the case. The narrating town announces the boy's arrival in Money at the beginning of Chapter Twenty-Two:

> In 1955, that boy came from Chicago down here to spend the summer with his mama's people. They called him Bobo, but his given name was Emmett.
>
> He arrived with a few casual clothes, *one suit, one tie, and a white shirt* that was one size too small and frayed around the collar. … (156; emphasis added)

Figure 4. Till broadly smiling to the camera and leaning on a TV set, by Mamie Till-Mobley.

The three pieces of clothing mentioned here reproduce Till's actual outfit in one of his most recurrent photographs in his historical archive, which Mamie Till personally ceded to the media for the coverage of the case. The narration relies on precise historiographical details like this to recreate Till's image for the reader, resorting to traumatic memories deeply rooted in the US collective imaginary. However, as Ward points out in her review, "McFadden's conception of Emmett is very human" (BR14) in that, instead of being constrained by the myth, the author is able to fantasize about Till's southern sojourn from a sensitive perspective.

The Chicago boy's days in the South are profoundly marked by his innocent romance with Tass Hilson, who follows her mother's (i.e., Hemmingway's) steps in the continuation of the female genealogy of the narrative. Till's first physical description already relates him to Tass and helps to introduce him: "He was brown and stout with full cheeks and a generous belly that jiggled when he laughed. His ears were long and the lobes were curved upward. He wasn't anything Padagonia would look at, but Tass was

head over heels" (156). Their fates are intertwined from their very introduction in the novel and, although Till takes some time to return Tass' interest, the river soon bears witness to the true origins of their romance. On the hottest days of August, the young pair and some friends spend their time bathing in the Tallahatchie River and, as the narrator describes, "[i]t was there at the river's edge that Emmett finally took serious notice of Tass" (165). While the waters of the river cause destruction at some crucial points of the narration, it is no less true that, as Schindler notes, "the river sees more than just death. Much that is good in this story happens in or near the water" (180). At the river's edge, Till finally falls in love with Tass since, on that day, "the sight of her moved something deep within in him that he didn't know he owned" (165). Using a twig, Till proves his artistic skills on the sand to amuse Tass and, later, presents her with several personalized drawings.

One of the scenes that the young boy recreates on paper for her beloved winds up illuminating the traumatic wound that the devastating flood of 1927 had left on a central character of the story. A survivor of the catastrophe herself, Hemmingway is studying the drawings that Tass had enthusiastically hung on her bedroom walls when she runs into a scene that overwhelms her: "It depicted a river, and a man and woman—or a boy and girl—holding hands, their feet hovering just above the water" (167). The traumatic memory of the flood suddenly bursts into her mind and drives her to tear the drawing down from the wall. The pair of the image above the water seems to remind her of the post-apocalyptic landscape left by the flood and, in particular, as Schindler points out, "[m]ore likely it recalls the miracle of her own escape from death, with Cole" (181). Till's drawing may also be interpreted as an anticipation of the watery ending of the novel—which will be closely analyzed in the last section of this chapter—or, prior to that, even his own tragic fate. While the apparently innocent image may contain a reading of the catastrophic past events, as it certainly does for Hemmingway, it also points to a future in which Till's death and spiritual transcendence converge in the waters of the river as a result of a seemingly innocuous scene in a local store.

Along with the riverbank, Bryant's grocery store stands as one of the main settings in which Till and Tass enjoy the sheer bliss of their innocent romance, but it also constitutes the site in which a fleeting encounter later triggers the infamous case. In her novel, McFadden imbues beauty into this historically haunted space through the influence

of Till's and Tass' teenage love story. The two scenes that the author sets in the store recreate a friendly atmosphere between Carolyn Bryant and the group of young African American friends. While Tass is in the store with Padagonia, Till walks in with his cousin and a friend to buy some cool beverages: "They went to the cooler and retrieved three bottles of Coca-Cola, and then each of them placed a nickel on the counter and started toward the door" (162). On their way out, Till notices a jar full of pickles and remains fascinated about their size: "After a moment of close examination, he swiped his hands across his forehead and let off a long, shrill whistle. 'Those are some gargantuan pickles'" (162). He then proceeds to purchase one of them and holds a brief friendly conversation with the storekeeper:

> "I ain't never in my life heard someone whistle like that," Carolyn snickered as she unscrewed the top from the jar and stuck her hand inside.
>
> …
>
> Emmett rocked back on his heels and whistled again. "That sure nuff is a big sucka though!"
>
> Carolyn giggled and nodded her head in agreement. "Where you learn to whistle like that?" she asked as she wrapped the pickle in wax paper and handed it to him. (163)

After informing her of his northern origins and politely responding her questions about his silver ring, Till soon joins his friends outside to head back home. This first scene at the store portrays an everyday friendly sale at a local grocery that may not differ too much from the actual encounter at Bryant's Grocery & Meat Market in August 1955. McFadden is here musing on what may have happened on that fateful verbal exchange, as well as demythologizing the wolf-whistling component that has surrounded the Emmett Till case from its very beginning in that, as in the next meeting of the group of friends at the store, the sound does not bear any kind of sexual or provocative connotation.

The second, and last, scene at Bryant's grocery store in the novel includes scarce verbal interaction between Carolyn and Till, but the apparently harmless fleeting encounter winds up triggering the boy's infamous lynching. After Till purchases ice pops for his friends, Carolyn observes how the young group wanders off in the distance as nostalgia seizes her on the porch. Her sudden musings offer an introspective look into her consciousness that hints at her constrained situation within the southern status quo and

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her oppressive marriage to Roy Bryant: “She was still young herself, just twenty-one—but married to a man who was rarely home, and when he was home, all he wanted to do was drink beer and fuck. They never went anywhere, not even to the movies or on a picnic” (170). Carolyn’s inner frustrations make her long to be momentarily captivated by the teenager’s innocence and, without even needing to mention Till’s name, she hollers to the distant group:

> … “Hey! Do that whistle for me again, would you?”
>
> And he did and the sound made Carolyn happy, it made her feel included in something free and forbidden. (170)

Even this naïve behavior was prohibited by southern racial etiquette and, although Carolyn was well aware of that when she asked Till for the wolf whistle, she could not remotely anticipate that the depraved eyes of her brother-in-law J.W. had witnessed the scene from his green Buick.

The wolf-whistling episode unleashes J.W.’s vicious racial hatred and puts the white supremacist lynching machine in motion, in a succession of narrative events that fill the missing historiographic details of the actual case with McFadden’s realistic historical fiction. J.W. uses the pretexts of the alleged breach of southern racial etiquette in order to instigate his half-brother Roy to supposedly restore Carolyn’s honor. Fed by Roy’s initial indifference and considerable alcoholic consumption, J.W.’s violent behavior escalates:

> “Don’t you care about what the boy done to your wife?”
>
> Roy swirled the whiskey around the glass. “Yeah, I guess so.”
>
> J.W. exploded: “You guess so? This is your wife’s honor we talking about, boy!” (173)

J.W.’s reaction reveals how he resorts to the myth of the purity of white womanhood, not to save anyone’s honor, as he falsely claims, but, in truth, to satiate the extremely violent instincts that Esther’s evil spirit had conferred on him after his supernatural resurrection and, in the process, assert white supremacy in the community. Carolyn stands here as another victim of the racist and patriarchal southern way of life and, in spite of her insistence on forgetting the matter, her opinion is not even remotely considered by her

brother-in-law's blind hatred: "J.W., let's just forget about this. That boy ain't meant no harm" (174). On his nocturnal rampage, J.W. winds up forcing his reluctant half-brother at gunpoint to set out on the kidnapping of the young African American boy.

In contrast to the spectral atmosphere of the rest of the narration, the representation of the events that immediately lead to the gruesome lynching are completely imbued with a succinctly realistic tone. McFadden ponders in Chapter Twenty-Four the influence that alcoholic consumption may have played in the real case since, as some versions of the fateful events suggest, alcohol may have been one of the main reasons why the kidnappers' intentions got out of hand that night, allegedly transforming a night scare into a depraved murder.[34] The references to J.W.'s heavy drinking habits are continuously linked in the novel to his increasingly violent nature during the different stages of the lynching, as the night drive to Till's whereabouts instantiates: "J.W. drained the bottle of whiskey and tossed it out the open window and then stepped down harder on the accelerator" (174). When the half-brothers arrive, in the middle of the night, at the house where Till is spending his summer vacations with his southern relatives, they quickly make their initial intentions known to an astonished Moe Wright: "'Your nephew whistled at my brother's wife,' J.W. spat. 'And we come to school him on how white women are to be treated in Mississippi'" (175). Moe and Mary Wright try everything they can to deter their vile intentions, but the kidnappers ignore their desperate pleadings and burst into the house to fetch Till. The narrator immediately exonerates Moe's reaction for, as in the real case, "[w]hat was Moe to do? He was an old man, an old black man who only had his words, and he had used them and they had failed him" (176). After the two white men find Till on his bed and drag him out, Mary attempts to persuade them to set the boy free by offering the kidnappers all their savings in an ultimate gesture that sparks doubt between them: "J.W. and Roy stared at the roll of money, and for a moment a flicker of hope whipped in that room. But just as quickly as it came, it was gone" (176-77).

While McFadden's fictional revisitation of the Till lynching puts the blame on J.W. and his mean spectral host, the narration emphasizes Roy's latent reluctance to

[34] For more information about this particular point, see Anderson's *Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement*, pp. 371-73.

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perpetrate the crime during the course of events. The late-night car ride following the visit to the Wright home offers an initial scene wherein J.W.'s and Roy's differing attitudes concerning the kidnapping become clear. As the narrator describes, "J.W. ranted and raged and pounded angrily on the dashboard, while Roy sat perfectly still with his hands folded neatly in his lap as though he might be praying" (177). J.W. leads the action at all times and, upon their arrival at the barn where the vicious lynching takes place, he forces Till to take his clothes off to then ridicule his penis, which evinces the psychosexual frustrations that the patriarchal and racist southern way of life had induced on J.W. The mythical racist narrative of the black beast rapist somehow backfired and plunged white supremacists into a state of psychotic anxiety, paradoxically, as a result of their own fabrications; but it was originally conceived to allow southern males like J.W. to, as Vicent Cucarella-Ramon notes in his analysis of the previous scene, "stigmatize black men and … to propose [his] masculinity over Emmett Till's" (285). At this dehumanizing moment, Roy shows again his discomfort since, as the narrator describes, "Roy gave his head a pitiful shake and wished that someone would come along and stop this thing" (178). In spite of J.W.'s attempts to partake his wicked joy with his half-brother, Roy is disgusted by the events and even plans to escape before the beating takes place: "Roy was thinking about running. … He peered down at his feet and wondered if he still had the speed to outrun a bullet" (179). On J.W.'s demands, Roy punches Till twice and walks back to the entrance, hoping that the lynching is over, but J.W. then takes the lead in the savage beating as the chapter closes with his increasingly violent trance.

Till's gruesome death is explicitly omitted in the novel to exempt readers from unnecessary details of a traumatic event that, for a long time, has been haunting the US collective imaginary. Roy's putative participation in the murder of the African American boy is blurred in the story to the point that readers do not get to know his degree of involvement in it. After the temporal omission, the narration continues with Roy's return home with clear post-traumatic stress symptoms: "He had left his voice near the river, and when it finally found him again, it spewed out of his mouth in great, sorrowful wails of regret" (181). His reluctant participation in the gruesome lynching leaves him with a traumatic imprint that somehow fits the so-often discussed notion of perpetrator trauma. According to Dominick LaCapra,

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> There is the possibility of perpetrator trauma which must itself be acknowledged and in some sense worked through if perpetrators are to distance themselves from an earlier implication in deadly ideologies and practices. Such trauma does not, however, entail the equation or identification of the perpetrator and the victim. (*Writing History* 79)

This theoretical category helps to illuminate McFadden's innovative characterization of one of Till's murderers as the narrative simultaneously underpins the demonization of J.W.'s character. In the novel, Roy's traumatic aftereffects are exposed during the days following the lynching, but he does not work through them, for he is unable, or maybe unwilling, to distance himself from the same white supremacist tenets that ultimately lie beneath the perpetration of the crime.

The fictional representations of the discovery of the body, the open-casket funeral, and the non-guilty verdict conform to the actual historiographical accounts of the case, but McFadden soon recuperates her characteristic spiritual filter to continue the narration. On the morning after the kidnapping, Moe tries to find clues about his nephew's whereabouts, stumbling across both Roy's lies and, moments after that, the sheriff's indifference. Three days later, the body is found by a local fisherman floating on the Tallahatchie River among "a thick swarm of blue bottle flies" (184), which mirrors J.W.'s mouth "filled with swarming bottle flies" (127) on his first passing during the flood and completes the aforementioned mimetic references between these two deaths. Mamie Till then proceeds with the unbearable identification of her son's remains and, back in Chicago, convinces *Jet Magazine*'s owner to send photographers to the open-casket funeral, resorting to a fictional paraphrase of Mamie's actual historical response that, before the CEO's doubts, makes her intentions clear: "So the world can see what those men down in Mississippi did to my boy" (188). The succeeding narrative events capture the outrage raised by the controversial non-guilty verdict and summarize the remaining living days of the perpetrators, whose eventual excruciating deaths are anticipated by Money's timeless omniscience and, for lack of the usual legal ways, attributed to the novel's characteristic karmic justice.

The traumatic aftereffects of the lynching have a shattering impact on Tass, who greatly struggles to come to terms with the tragedy. From the breaking of the horrific news, she

falls in a state of continuous melancholia in which she cannot avoid acting out the memory of her beloved Till. Despite their efforts, "Hemmingway and Padagonia didn't know how to make Tass feel happy again, and so they just waited for the melancholy to drift away. But it never did—not really" (189). Two years after the murder, Tass is still unable to work through its traumatic memory and come to terms with it, as her mother's sober comment demonstrates:

> "He ain't coming back, Tass."
>
> How many times had her mother said that to her? Too many to count. And each time Hemmingway uttered those words, Tass was reminded of how silly the statement was. Of course he wasn't coming back. He had been dead and buried for two years by then. (194)

Hemmingway is here aiming to wake her daughter up from her melancholic lethargy, but the mother's statement means nothing new to Tass, for she is well aware of that haunting reality. The bond that Till and Tass had formed, however, does not end with the boy's death since, in line with the spiritual reality of the novel, Money hints at Till's spectral return even before Tass' previous mourning is mentioned in the narration: "But how does one wait for death to come to an end? Death is final, right? Wrong! Death is the end and the beginning. But I am getting ahead of myself" (188).

In contrast to the realistic depiction of both Till's character and his summer vacations in Money, the murder of the fourteen-year-old African American boy signals a further transition into the spectral dimension of the novel. His killing violently interrupts his innocent romance with Tass, but their separation is only temporal in that, as Schindler observes, "[i]n many ways, Emmett's death marks the beginning of Tass' journey back to him" (181). Several decades pass after the murder, and while Tass gets married and builds a large family in Detroit, she continues to be haunted by the loss of her first love. At her mother's funeral, Tass is envisioning images of her childhood when the ghost of Emmett Till makes its first appearance in the narration:

> As she continued reminiscing, she was suddenly overcome with the feeling that she was being watched. She turned and saw a crew of gravediggers milling about, obviously waiting for her to leave. So she started across the lawn and walked right into a spiderweb, or at least what felt like a spiderweb. She was swiping at her face when she felt the

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> unmistakable tickle of a feather in her ear, followed by a gentle breath of air against her cheek. Little did she know that the lines of communication between the here-and-now and the beyond were now open. (207)

In such challenging times for Tass, Till's ghost uses its supernatural powers to comfort her after the burial of her mother. Significantly, McFadden sets the graveyard as the linking point between the world of the living and that of the dead—hinting at a Judeo-Christian influence in the author's conception of spiritualism—and the passing of Hemmingway, who suffered the vileness of Esther's evil spirit firsthand, as the nexus in the continuation of the spectral saga of the novel.

After the perpetration of the lynching, Esther's evil spirit disappears from the narration to be replaced, several chapters later, by Till's kind and benevolent spirit, which somehow counterbalances Esther's vileness in the story. Till's ghostly return from the dead occurs some years after his murder as a consequence of the divergent rules that operate within the liminal cosmology of the novel. As Money describes, "[w]hen Emmett had finally opened his eyes in the here-and-now, he found that his body was no more, that the boys he'd known were now men and the girls had blossomed into women" (208). The perception of time in the spiritual dimension differs from the temporal constrictions of the material world and, upon its spectral irruption in Money, Till soon realizes that time has passed in the community during his earthly absence: "Tass was gone and Hemmingway was graying around her hairline" (208). For a long time, the spirit remains in Hemmingway's porch, until her passing brings Tass back to the South and Till finds out "that she hadn't forgotten about him" (209). The traumatic imprint that the loss of her first love had left in her psyche burned every August with the republication of Till's famous *Jet Magazine* photograph or, over the years, with the assassinations of different civil rights activists, like that of Medgar Evers in 1963 or those of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner in 1964, among others, all of them in the Mississippi Delta. As Money describes, "[t]hose murders always brought Emmett Till back to the forefront of not just Tass's mind, but the minds of many people all around the world" (209), which illuminates the overwhelming traumatizing capacity, both in the individual and collective spheres, of the horrific lynching of the young African American boy.

Tass' unexpected visit to the South winds up bringing Till's ghost to Detroit with her on her trip back home and, in the northern city, the ghost comes to play the role of

her guardian angel. Till uses his supernatural powers to "send a butterfly or bloom a flower to make her happy" (211) during his early days in Detroit and, with the passage of time, to even conjure cardinals in the cold winter after one of Tass' melancholic breakdowns. As Cucarella-Ramon notes, "Tass Hilson and Emmett Till embody the traumatic self *per excellence* as their ultimate destruction, physically and mentally, is brought about by the aftermaths that result from the extremely violent experiences that black Americans have for so long been subjected to" (285). Till's spiritual interventions seek to counteract the post-traumatic effects of his loss by taking care of Tass through the powers granted by his spectral nature. While Tass cannot explain such otherworldly assistance, Till's ghostly presence and role of guardian angel can actually be perceived by some of the other characters. According to the animist beliefs that shape the cosmology of the novel, Money explains that:

> When you are young, you are open to all things; that's why the babies were able to see Emmett following Tass from room to room, and hunched in the corners watching her. Emmett would make funny faces at the babies and perform cartwheels and handstands until they fell over with laughter. (212)

Young children are not the only earthly creatures that sense Till's spirit, since animals do notice its presence as well but, however, find it extremely disturbing, to the point that Tass' cocker spaniel and hamster soon disappear, for different reasons, from her house. This spectral capacity lasted in humans just a number of years given that, following the animistic logic of the narration, "as the babies grew into toddlers and beyond, that window known as spiritual consciousness slipped closed and Emmett became as invisible to them as air" (212).

Apart from these two groups, McFadden confers the ability to see spectral entities on a particular character of the novel who enters the scene twenty-three years after the infamous lynching. Despite her three-page-long participation in the story, Aida, the former Ghanaian girlfriend of Tass' eldest son, Sonny, is able to perceive Till's ghostly presence on her first visit to her boyfriend's family. The young couple leaves Tass' house to catch a movie at the cinema but, on their way out, Aida walks back to pick up her pocketbook. She finds it hanging on a chair in the dining room, but it seems that the purse is not the main reason for her brief return since, "[b]efore turning to leave, she looked

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right at Emmett and offered a soft, knowing smile" (213). Even to Till's surprise, Aida's West African roots grant her spiritual consciousness, which relates to the aforementioned profound influence of West African spirituality on the animistic cosmology of the novel. At the cinema, Aida timidly attempts to share her spectral discovery with Sonny, but her boyfriend takes her for a lunatic and, by the time Sonny drops her home after a cold farewell, "Aida knew then that he didn't believe one word she'd said and that she would never see him again" (215). Sonny's Westernized worldview does not leave room for spirituality and, light years away from his own African heritage, he is unable to comprehend his girlfriend's transcending lesson, which ends up provoking not only his breakup with Aida but her own departure from the narration.

Except for the previous incidental situations, Till's ghostly presence in the house remains unnoticed as decades go by, until a remarkable confrontation between Tass and her husband Fish triggers an unprecedented spectral intervention. As Fish's health deteriorates with the passage of time, he starts to regain spiritual consciousness and to hear noises in the house that he cannot identify. This late recovery of the spectral capacities happens because, as the narrator explains, "when a soul begins to slip from the binds of the physical world, the consciousness reverts to its natural state and once again it becomes open and receptive to the spirits that live amongst the host body" (219). If the stroke that paralyzes the left side of his body and slurs his speech had turned him mean, the haunting sounds that Fish hears almost drive him crazy, as well as making him unfoundedly suspicious of Tass' faithfulness. When a violent fight between the couple erupts, Till's ghost reemerges in the narration with increasing supernatural powers to protect Tass:

> On the floor they battled like hellions, until Tass was finally able to free herself and jump to her feet. Backing away from him, she reached for the knife lying in the sink.
>
> "Nigger, don't you ever put your hands on her again. Don't you know I will kill you?"
>
> Not her words, but his. Not her voice, his voice.
>
> In that moment, Emmett discovered that his love for Tass far exceeded the power to manipulate butterflies, flowers, and birds. (220)

Till's ghostly intervention succeeds in deterring the couple's confrontation through Tass' momentary possession. This haunted experience terrifies a Fish who soon seeks to

distance himself from his wife, but Tass, in turn, just drops the knife and gives no second thoughts to what has just happened. As in the supernatural events that she had previously experienced, "Tass thought it was an oddity" (220) and continued with her life as if nothing had happened.

Despite her recurrent neglect of spirituality through the novel, an ulterior pulsion seems to lead Tass to drive the long ride to Money all by herself in August 2005. The passing of her husband Fish is followed by a melancholic period in Tass' life that, after several months, is interrupted by her resolution to visit her native land and, somehow, confront her traumatic past. From the first hints at Hurricane Katrina in the narration, Tass' fate is intertwined with the incipient tropical cyclone in that, before the peak conditions and lack of rain announced in the forecast, "Tass took that uninterrupted perfection as confirmation that it was time to go" (229). After a four-day-long trip, a sixty-six-year-old Tass arrives in the southern town on the afternoon of August 26, and finds that her best friend Padagonia is not only waiting for her but has prepared her childhood home for her stay. The next day, they drive together to get some food and go past the place that, half a century ago, had witnessed that fateful encounter between a white female storekeeper and a young African American boy. The sight of the still standing Bryant's grocery enrages Tass for a moment, as it was something that she was not expecting or, despite the passage of time, that she was not ready to confront again. The store stood as a vestige from the past, a traumatic reminder, that, as Money describes, "[v]acant and ghostly, it had survived high winds and treacherous storms, holding onto a life that no longer wanted it." As Money continues, "[v]irulently racist whites wanted it to remain as a reminder to black folks that what had happened here could happen again. And black people wanted it to remain for the very same reason" (237); and, as an ambivalent memorial, the store remained within the landscape of the little town.[35]

By the end of the day, Tass seems to have forgotten this painful sight and, sitting on her porch, experiences a spectral encounter with a seemingly unknown visitor that,

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[35] The real Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market has been left to crumble by its current owners, who refuse to sell it to the local leaders who want to turn it into a monument to Emmett Till's memory. According to Dave Tell, Hurricane Katrina inflicted the latest structural damages to the infamous store, since it "claimed the roof and a story-sized portion of the grocery's north wall" (162). Significantly, as in McFadden's novel, the hurricane ended up intersecting with the history of the Till case.

later, turns out to be no other than Emmett Till's ghost itself. Its unexpected appearance is related to "the bouquet of wild flowers someone had placed in the doorway" (236) that same morning for Tass, which, in truth, had served as an anticipation of the stranger's nocturnal visit. While Tass is enjoying the serenity of the night from her porch, she perceives something that turns her attention to the grass next to Padagonia's house:

> … Soon, a dark figure emerged.
>
> The two stared at one another for some time, before the stranger raised a hand and waved. Tass waved back and waited for something more, but the man or woman—she couldn't tell—stepped back into the grass.
>
> *Odd*, she thought. The sweater forgotten, she went into the house and prepared for bed. (238)

Again, as she had been doing all her life, Tass regards this ghostly encounter as an "oddity" and soon forgets about this strange scene. Here, this unidentified figure clearly evinces the function of the visor effect that Derrida proposed to better understand spectral entities. According to the French critic, "[t]he specter is not simply someone we see coming back, it is someone by whom we feel ourselves watched, observed, surveyed, as if by the law" (Derrida and Stiegler 40). The fact that, although Till's ghost has been looking after his beloved for decades as her guardian angel, Tass continuously repeats this behavioral pattern suggests her total disregard for the spiritual world, a disbelief also shared, as previously noted, by her eldest son, but the increasing frequency of these spectral visits winds up changing her mind later in the narration.

Among haunting visitations, Tass' southern sojourn continues to illuminate the profound traumatic wound that the Till lynching had left on her half a century before. Over the course of her third day back in Money, Tass deliberately attempts to avoid any reference to the traumatic event, and even manages to dodge the still standing infamous store when she runs for some errands in town since, deep down, she is perfectly aware that, exactly fifty years ago on this day, the tragedy had taken place. Although her plan almost succeeds, a casual conversation with Padagonia brings the memory of Till to her mind when the day is almost over. The old friends are relaxing at Padagonia's house after dinner when Padagonia unexpectedly pushes the forbidden topic into their calm chat: "You would never think something so horrible happened in such a peaceful place" (242).

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Her best friend's comment suddenly triggers traumatic reruns of a past with which Tass has never been able to come to terms, and opens questions that both had incessantly discussed in their youth:

> They had been through it all before. Fifty years earlier, their young minds had twisted and turned with the effort of trying to understand why J.W. and Roy had done such a thing. That incident had opened up a world of horror for them. Fear and distrust surfaced where before there had been none.
>
> J.W. and Roy didn't just snatch the childhood away from Emmett; they stole it from every single black child in Mississippi. (242)

The heinous crime had traumatized numerous generations of young African Americans in the South, and its haunting memory had indelibly remained in their minds as a painful event that was yet to be healed. While Padagonia had apparently referred to the tragedy in a proactive way for her friend to work through it, Tass proves unable to even utter Till's name out loud in spite of the considerable passage of time and, in an instinctive effort to protect herself, abruptly leaves for her house to avoid any further discussion of the matter.

With the increasing traumatic recalling of the lynching, the spectral visitations of the dark stranger intensify for a Tass who initially fails to acknowledge this haunting reality. On the same night after her abrupt departure from her best friend's house, Tass experiences a meaningful dream in which she gets to know more about the visitor. In this oneiric state, she identifies the figure as that of a young man and even has a peculiar conversation with him. Tass aims to question the dark stranger as he calmly approaches her, but the figure is initially unable to utter a comprehensible response: "He opened his mouth, and Tass was sure she heard a swishing sound. No, not swishing, Tass thought, lapping, like water against a shore" (243). Instead, he produces an array of watery sounds that, once again, relate to the crucial water motif in the novel.[36] For a moment, he responds to Tass' insistent inquiries with "a gurgle of words wrapped in fathoms of water" (243),

[36] Additionally, the dark stranger's speech defects may be another hint at the real Emmett Till since, when he was six years old, polio left him a stutter that he carried with him during the rest of his short life.

until she loses her patience and, after shouting at him, he is finally able to produce an intelligible sentence: “The boy balled his fists and Tass sensed that he was summoning strength from a deep, dark waterlogged place. Straining forward, he parted his lips and bubbled, ‘How you, ma’am?’” (244).

This succession of aqueous references relates to the particular conditions of the lynching of Emmett Till, whose dead body had remained for days at the bottom of the deep waters of the Tallahatchie River, and, extensively, to the ancient collective trauma of the Middle Passage. As Brogan reveals in her study of the works of Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, “the mediate nature of ghosts (always associated with water imagery) cannot be separated from the disaster of the Middle Passage” (16) and, in McFadden’s book, this historical motif is somehow echoed through Till’s particular spectral representation. The deadly associations to the permeating water imagery of the novel are, however, counterbalanced by an alternative interpretation of this construct in that, as Schindler posits, “[h]is water-voice is so much more than just a reminder of the conditions of his murder” (182). Good and bad are indistinctly mixed in the hydric spiritual continuum of the narrative, as the spatial character of the river instantiates over centuries in Money, among other examples. The dark figure’s aqueous traits would ultimately hint at how Till manages to summon strength from the Tallahatchie River, which both held his body under water and witnessed the initial sparks of his teenage romance, in order to continue with his role of Tass’ guardian angel before the imminent danger of Hurricane Katrina.

When Tass awakes from her meaningful dream, she explicitly ponders, at long last, her haunting encounter for a while as the references to the devastating hurricane intensify in the narration. With the light of day, she realizes that her feet are covered in brown dust and that her intense oneiric experience might have been real. Unbeknownst to Tass, the imminence of the hurricane is inducing a conflation of dimensions in the liminal reality of the novel. As Schindler remarks, “Emmett’s spirit has accompanied Tass for years, but she only begins to see him when she approaches the day of her own death” (182) and, immersed in a sort of trance, she attempts to inform her best friend of her spectral discovery. Padagonia believes her friend to be delirious, but the traces of Tass’ dreamy visit are, to a greater or lesser extent, undeniable for, as she herself points out to Padagonia, “[t]he grass is pressed in where he was standing” (247). Tass’ haunting

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experience would account for her decades-long attachment to the traumatic memory of her first love since, despite its not being a nightmare per se, her nocturnal episode perfectly fits LaCapra's conceptualization of severe traumatropism: "Perhaps the most poignant and disarming kind of traumatropism is that performed by victims who experience post-traumatic phenomena, such as recurrent nightmares, not as symptoms to be worked through but as bonds or memorial practices linking them to the haunting presence of dead intimates" (*Writing History* xv). Her life-long incapacity to openly work through the loss of her teenage love has for so long underpinned Tass' transcending bond with him, which, within the liminal reality, translated into their increasing spectral relation over the decades.

The imminence of the hurricane acts as the catalyst for their spectral reencounter in a succession of scenes in which Tass winds up fully perceiving the presence of her beloved guardian angel and in which, along with the completion of Till's literary secondary burial, the circular temporal structure of the novel is closed on August 29. The symbology of this month imbues the whole novel from beginning to end to the point that, as Schindler notes, "it can be said that the novel constructs a century-long geography of the month of August" (172). The story begins by focusing on the importance of Rev. "August" Hilson in Doll's personal history, Part Two follows its initial chapter overview of J.W.'s vile transformation with Till's arrival in Money in August 1955, and the last scenes of the book are set on the last days of August 2005. As Schindler reveals, "[f]ocusing on the Tallahatchie River in August gives McFadden a stage from which to explore how the actions of previous generations quite literally animate spaces and people for decades to come" (173). This explains why, in the guise of the devastating hurricane, Esther's evil spirit reappears one more time in the story to conjure the haunted winds of the cyclone and cause a degree of destruction in the southern community that only Till's supernatural powers can truly counteract.

Despite many subtle references during his different visitations, Tass only discovers the identity of the dark stranger during their final encounter as the ferocious hurricane progressively approaches Money. Given Tass' odd awakening after her intense oneiric experience, Padagonia resolves to put her friend in bed and tend to her believing that Tass may be sick. While Padagonia leaves to cook dinner, Tass remains alone in her

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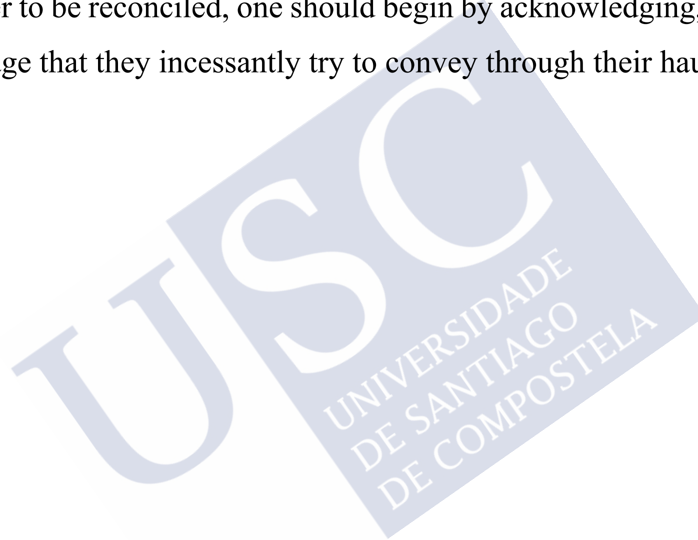
bedroom and gives in to a state of reverie through which the figure of the night boy suddenly reemerges in the narration:

> This time, when he appeared, the sun was up and she could see him quite clearly. Young, dark, full-bellied, and smiling. From the porch, she raised her hand in greeting and did not suppress the urge to run to him. It took forever—the space between them seemed to stretch for miles—and when she finally reached him, she was fifteen-and-a-quarter years old and the gown she wore was too long and too big for her. (249)

In their teenage forms, Tass and Till go back hand in hand to a time and a place where they were exceedingly happy in order to revisit their first kiss in front of the infamous Bryant's grocery store. Immersed in a sort of semiconsciousness, Tass does not seem to be fully aware of why she does not want to enter the store or, even, who her teenage companion actually is, but she yields anyway to her sensorial memory to relive her everlasting first kiss with the young Till. Given that the hurricane also brings Padagonia's death, she appears to gain spiritual consciousness and, from the window, witnesses a young couple, who she cannot identify, walking up the road as "Tass and Emmett skip[…] off into forever" (252), while the old body of her best friend still lies in bed. In the book's final scene, the winds of Hurricane Katrina blur the boundaries of the spiritual and the living world as a sixty-six-year-old Tass transitions to death, before the imminent *gathering of waters* raised by the cyclone, accompanied by the ghost of her dearly beloved Emmett Till.

With this final transition, McFadden completes her fictional revisitation of the Till case through her constructed abject South over the course of the three major time frames of the novel. The roughly century-long female genealogy formed by Doll, Hemmingway, and Tass ties together the succession of fictional and historical events that McFadden employs to explicate the antecedents, configuration, materialization, and aftereffects of the Till lynching. The collective trauma raised by his gruesome murder becomes the core of a narrative that, from beginning to end, uses the spectral to provide its characters with supernatural mechanisms for the coming to terms with trauma. This spectral reality allows McFadden not only to approach Till's tragic story from an innovative perspective, but

also to illuminate some of the different kinds of violence to which African Americans have been historically subjected since, as the real and fictional case prove, the Till lynching undeniably constitutes a convergence or, even, a clash of sexist and racist violence. From the origins of Esther’s evil spirit as a result of extreme gender-based violence in the first time frame of the novel, the story moves on to Esther’s subsequent possessions in a spiral of depravity and violence that culminates in the brutal killing of the young Till in the second one. In the third, and last, time frame, Till’s ghost evinces the something-to-be-done, the unhealed wounds, that his tragic story continues to reverberate not only through those who dearly loved him but also through each new victim of racist violence. As Tass winds up showing at the end of the novel, if the specters of trauma are ever to be reconciled, one should begin by acknowledging, and listening to, the hidden message that they incessantly try to convey through their haunting.



CONCLUSION

In his seminal monograph *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra considers the potentialities of exploring trauma through fiction, in contrast to the far more limited, perhaps even nonexistent, relation between historiography and trauma theory. Historians zealously stick to facts in order to construct their narratives, while they tend to disregard what a majority of them appear to see as unfathomable excesses of theory. The epistemological basis of historiography is conceived of as a rejection of what it cannot verify or validate since, as LaCapra argues, theory "seems hyperbolic or speculative in a manner that many historians would reject or find profoundly suspect" (*Writing History* 185). Despite the feasible alternative of considering what the theoretician describes as the other "complementary extreme," in which the excesses of theory would provide materials to test the constructed historical narrative, historiography proves adamant in its implicit rejection of theoretical approaches. LaCapra posits that this conflict arises from the fact that:

> … historiography is subject to constraints different from those of literature, or at least fiction, despite the important features these modes of discourse share (notably with respect to narrative procedures). The counterpart is that at least certain forms of literature or art, as well as the type of discourse or theory which emulates its object, may provide a more expansive space (in psychoanalytic terms, a *relatively* safe haven) for exploring modalities of responding to trauma, including the role of affect and the tendency to repeat traumatic events. (*Writing History* 185)

Here, LaCapra sees fiction, alongside a few other artistic forms, as "the expansive space" or, to put it in other words, the appropriate medium to explore the multifaceted responses to traumatic experiences, plus the extensive nature of its individual and collective repercussions. This is why he distinguishes between the two distinct narrative discourses of historiography and fiction in their approaches to trauma: "writing about trauma," which concerns the historiographical reconstruction of past events "as objectively as possible," as opposed to "writing trauma," which "involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and 'giving voice' to the past" (*Writing History* 186).

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This dissertation has clearly set out to “write about trauma,” initially reconstructing the gruesome lynching of Emmett Till, but has focused primarily on exploring the Till case in US fiction by means of how Bebe Moore Campbell, Lewis Nordan, and Bernice L. McFadden “write trauma,” which wound up constituting a leitmotif of sorts throughout my study. The broad historical contextualization of Chapter 1 has provided key elements toward a better understanding of the social, cultural, historic, and biographical aspects surrounding both Till’s tragic story and the ensuing formation of his extremely influential narrative. Pulling at the common thread of systemic racism and brutal racist violence, the current US racial ideology and some of its unfortunate by-products, such as the mass incarceration of minorities, racial profiling, and police brutality, have been traced back to the not-so-distant times when the Jim Crow laws plagued a great part of the country, and even to slavery before that. Race, class, and gender intertwined during the end of slavery and the Jim Crow era to shape the old pillars of the southern way of life and to evolve ruthless forms of the subjugation of the African American community, which, despite the passing of time, continue to reverberate through the continued racist ideology of certain sectors of society across the country. The history of lynching left its evidence of the insidious level of depravity that white supremacists were willing to reach, without showing apparent regret, into their schizophrenic insistence on the preservation of their romanticized way of life. The systemic brutalization and terrorizing of black people would continue to grind their lives down for decades, and even caught in its grip a fourteen-year-old African American boy who was visiting his southern relatives in the summer of 1955. Till’s traumatic ascent into the US collective imaginary was registered early on by the first poetic reactions to the case, which inaugurated an extensive literary tradition that has continued to expand ever since.

The theoretical foundations laid in Chapter 2 have provided the necessary tools to critically assess the Till case in the major novels that it inspired. Understanding certain notions taken from the most influential trauma theorists, and approaching these conceptualizations through other complementary academic disciplines, has proved enlightening, leading to further explanations of the traumatic experiences analyzed in my study. Concepts such as “working through,” “acting out,” and “coming to terms with” have given rise to considerable theoretical discussion that helps to shed light on the ways in which different members of various social groups deal with and try to cope with the

Till trauma in fiction. In this respect, the three novels covered in this dissertation have certainly proved to be an "expansive space" in which to thoroughly explore traumatic experiences.

The chapters dedicated to the analysis of each of the three novels have illuminated a series of aspects that deserve further reflection. The different fictionalizations of the scene at the store in *Your Blues*, *Wolf Whistle*, and *Gathering of Waters* maintain the basic elements of Till's historical record, but they interpret the fateful breach of racial etiquette differently, in that they attribute the alleged attack on the purity of southern white womanhood to a misinterpretation of an innocuous French phrase, a brief dialogue unknown to the reader, and a meaningless wolf whistle, respectively. These issues are what later trigger the gruesome lynching, which constitutes the core of the three narratives, whether it is introduced early in the narration, as in *Your Blues* and *Wolf Whistle*, or roughly half through it, as in *Gathering of Waters*. The depiction of the killing itself is also quite faithful to the real historical incident and goes from the loosely based fictionalization of *Your Blues*, to the experimental one of *Wolf Whistle*, to the extremely realistic one of *Gathering of Waters*. In the latter two novels, the murder actually signals a breaking point in the magic realist and spectral realities of their narratives. Additionally, the fictionalization of the Till case included in each of these three novels passes through markedly different aesthetic filters over time: from Campbell's psychological realism, to Nordan's magic realism, to McFadden's spectral account, which could be seen as a balanced mix of Campbell's realism and Nordan's experimentation.

With regard to the extensive array of characters analyzed, the three novels share a number of aspects. To fictionalize the Till case, these narratives construct a set of archetypical characters who help to trace and further reflect on the traumatic aftereffects of the lynching. In *Your Blues*, all the main characters suffer from an old childhood trauma, which explains their behavior in the narration, that is powerfully triggered by the murder of the fictional Till, and that also coalesces with their shared, but diverse, sense of guilt in order to complicate their lives, as well as their coming to terms with the murder itself. In *Wolf Whistle*, the ending of the novel shows how the inhabitants of Arrow Catcher, except for the born-again Cyrus, who seems to have coped with it, are still acting out the tragedy, but this in turn leaves the door open for a putative coming to terms with the case and a cathartic communal healing. In *Gathering of Waters*, Tass' personal

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experience evinces the individual post-traumatic effects of the gruesome fictional murder of Till and how, after a lifetime acting it out, working through trauma and achieving a certain closure are always feasible.

Other additional parallelisms between the three novels are Ida's and Runt's shared abandonment trauma in *Your Blues* and *Wolf Whistle*, respectively, and the ulterior motive of returning to the native land manifested by two African American characters, like Wydell and Tass in *Your Blues* and *Gathering of Waters*, respectively; but the most significant one seems to be the inner psychosexual frustrations that the perpetrators of the crime carry in each of the three narratives. Floyd, Solon, and J.W. clearly demonstrate the role that their respective frustrated masculinities play in the perpetration of the lynching, with Floyd's and Solon's particular cases showing how their severe inferiority complexes also contribute to both determine their actions and to shape their violent behavior through the development of the story.

As the multiple ways of coming to terms with the traumatic case of the young Till show, the varied casts of characters in the three novels, who are constructed on the basis of the intersections of race, class, and gender that comprised the US southern collective imaginary of the time, compose a palimpsest of archetypes that reflects their different experiences but signals a common, or perhaps universal, trend with regard to the processes of post-traumatic acting out and working through. Those characters who remain, for a shorter or longer period, stuck in an uncontrolled and unremitting acting-out phase only find temporary or definitive misery and self-destruction. On the contrary, those characters who, for a variety of reasons, do work through the tragedy, be it to a greater or lesser degree, find themselves on a proactive path that brings them change and transformation, and that ultimately hints at a potential cleansing of their frustrations.

In light of the findings of this dissertation, the two initial hypotheses have been proved, since I have extensively demonstrated, first, that fiction undoubtedly provides a better understanding of the real impact of the cultural trauma raised by the Emmett Till case in the US collective imaginary; and, second, that fiction is very effective in helping writers and readers to come to terms with traumatic experiences. Over the course of such an analytical process, the dissertation has also revealed a central finding with regard to the academic scholarship within the Emmett Till literary tradition, which has to do with the fact that, even if we only take into account the less than three-decade time frame

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embracing the publication of the first and last novel under study, the general trend shows that, with the passing of time, the mythical figure of Emmett Till has unquestionably come to lean toward somewhat ghostly or spectral aesthetics in its literary representation in US fiction.

While a number of limitations should be considered at this point, it may also be useful to suggest seemingly unexplored directions that could complement this dissertation for a better understanding of the Emmett Till trauma in US literature. My study has merely covered the three major novels based on the Till case; if a future project were to turn to further significant narrative works, this might serve to strengthen the hypotheses and premises of the current dissertation and further illuminate the remaining hidden intricacies of this complex object of study. On top of this, the theoretical framework constructed for the analysis undertaken in my study, along with the structural organization of each of the chapters, could also be applied to a similar exploration of the Till trauma in literature focused on influential dramatic and/or poetic manifestations inspired by the case, since in the current study I have dealt with them only tangentially. Finally, it would also be interesting to complement the findings of this dissertation with the analysis of recent literary work inspired by Till's mythical figure, and those which will surely continue to appear in the near and distant future, since the infamous case and its unfortunate racist connotations have proved to be an inexhaustible source of discussion over time.

In the year of the sixty-sixth anniversary of the tragic incident, the Emmett Till case continues to affect a contemporary US society that continues to struggle with the brutalization of black lives on an almost daily basis. Amid the restrictive times of the Covid-19 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 person led to passionate 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 that connects 2020 cases like the murder of Breonna Taylor, a twenty-six-year-old black woman fatally shot at her house by Louisville police

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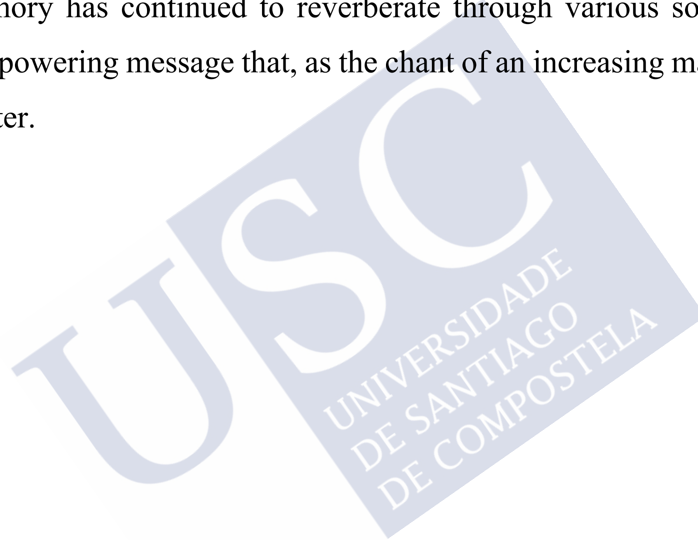
officers during a no-warrant search in March, and Ahmaud Arbery, a twenty-five-year-old black man gunned down while jogging by armed white South Georgia residents in February, to many previous black victims, murdered at the hands of abusive police authorities or white supremacist vigilantes. As Cal State LA student Jaime Carter told the *LA Times* during the demonstration protesting Floyd's death on May 28, 2020, in Los Angeles, California, "he came 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'" ("Vandalism"). More than half a century ago, Emmett Till's powerful narrative contributed to the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement and the tearing down of the tyrannical rule of Jim Crow in the US South. Despite the passing of time, his memory has continued to reverberate through various social movements, spreading the empowering message that, as the chant of an increasing majority resonates, Black Lives Matter.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