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 Study Guide by Theresa M. Davis
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"We are in this business not just to move audiences with great art, but to support justice, to use the unique power of theatre to open hearts and minds."

—Sarah Bellamy, Artistic Director

ABOUT PENUMBRA THEATRE COMPANY

Conceived in the Black Arts Movement and Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director Emeritus Lou Bellamy, Penumbra Theatre Company has long served as a nurturing space for the artistic exploration of the African American experience. As the sole professional African American theatre in Minnesota, Penumbra carries forth a long, proud tradition of providing career-building opportunities to theatre practitioners of color, both on and off-stage. Penumbra has produced all ten of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson's Century Cycle plays, cementing his renown as one of the most important playwrights of modern time.

Penumbra Theatre's production history spans the depth and breadth of the African American theatrical canon, illuminating pioneers such as Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*, *Les Blancs*) and Charles Fuller (*A Soldier's Play*, *Zooman and the Sign*), genre-bender Ntozake Shange (*Spell #7, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*), late 20th century stalwarts August Wilson and Pearl Cleage (*Flyin' West*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*), and emerging stars such as Katori Hall (*The Mountaintop*) and Dominique Morisseau (*Sunset Baby*, *Detroit '67*). Langston Hughes' *Black Nativity* signifies the cornerstone of Penumbra's contribution to the black musical theatre tradition. Each year 40,000 people see a play or musical at Penumbra Theatre and experience the variety of lenses through which African Americans view and engage with the world. In its 41-year history, Penumbra Theatre has produced 37 premieres of new work by African American artists.

THE MISSION

Penumbra Theatre creates professional productions that are artistically excellent, thought provoking, and relevant and illuminates the human condition through the prism of the African American experience.

Penumbra's goals are:

- To increase public awareness of the significant contributions of African Americans in creating a diversified American theatrical tradition.
- To encourage and facilitate a culturally diverse and all-inclusive America by using theatre to teach, criticize, comment and model.
- To use theatre to create an American mythology that includes African Americans and other peoples of color in every thread of the fabric of our society.
- To continue to maintain and stabilize a black performing arts community.

EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Penumbra's Educational and Outreach initiatives provide opportunities for audiences to explore the synthesis of theatre with social engagement. The observer is able to experience storytelling on the visual, audial, and aesthetic levels, while also engaging with the ideas of a play at their own pace, and through their most effective methods of understanding.

Strong educational and outreach programming makes the theatre a safe space for individuals to process personal, local, national, and worldwide events in cooperation with theatre practitioners, scholars, community leaders, and teaching artists. Penumbra provides audiences with a broad range of educational tools for analysis and reflection, increasing the possibility for life to follow art from idea to action.

Each year, Penumbra exposes 5,000 students to nurturing opportunities that range from summer internships to a multi-year leadership development program for teenagers. These programs allow young people to use theatre as a tool to experiment with their ideas of creating a more just and peaceful world. While some of these young people may go on to become theatre professionals, many more will emerge with increased capacity in the areas of critical thinking, creative problem-solving, self-expression, and community leadership. These skills will serve young people in their lives as entrepreneurs, service members, employees, and citizens.

BENEVOLENCE

A World Premier

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About the Artist: Ifa Bayeza

by ArDonna Hamilton

"I chose to be a creative writer and not a scholar. Although I do scholarly work, it is all in this drive to create drama, still my first love."

—IFA BAYEZA



Ifa Bayeza (born Wanda Williams) is a playwright, novelist, and composer. As a conceptual artist and director, her art engages the intangible and often invokes the spiritual. Bayeza's written work tells the story that exists in-between the lines, as she effortlessly creates worlds and parallel realities through her masterful directorial and scenic vision. Bayeza flirts with non-linear concepts of time, space, and being. Like a jazz musician, Ifa constantly riffs on the notion of what theater is. Her name, *Ifa Bayeza*, was birthed as a reclamation of her African heritage and as a "rite of passage." She changed her name to embrace an Africanness she innately felt, but still kept the essence of *Wanda*.

Ifa Bayeza was born in Trenton, NJ and is sister to acclaimed artist and poet, Ntozake Shange. Ms. Bayeza describes her sister as a "poet who's dramatic" and herself as a "dramatist who's poetic." As Ntozake describes, "art was brought to us." Bayeza, inspired by the art around her, began writing plays in the sixth grade. She says, "I used to ask the principal if we could have the auditoriums, so I could do my plays for my captive audience..." True to drama, her first love, she would later convince Ntozake to release her poems, which ultimately birthed the Choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the Rainbow Is enuf* and catalyzed her sister's career.

A child of the Civil Rights Movement, Ifa Bayeza was always surrounded by art and social activism. Her father, a physician, and her mother, a social worker, welcomed the company of black artists and intelligentsia who paraded through Bayeza's childhood home. Dizzy Gillespie, Chico Hamilton, and

W.E.B. Du Bois were family guests, and her closest friend was Chuck Berry's daughter. One of Bayeza's early theatrical experiences was watching *The Crucible*, by Arthur Miller. Though the thirteen-year-old didn't know much about McCarthyism, she knew about oppression. Seeing the black experience within the historical bounds of *The Crucible* [onstage], opened up a broader view of the social complexities and decisions that African Americans faced. This realization of Bayeza's set the tone for the constant questions that she investigates throughout her trajectory as an artist and scholar.

While creating *Homer G. & the Rhapsodies...* an experimental theatre piece where the fall of Troy takes place in

modern-day Detroit—during the creative process, Ifa felt that a presence was haunting her. She was working on a character named, Prime, who was suffering from hallucinations because he was a witness to a murder and didn't tell anyone. Though Bayeza couldn't see the face of the presence that haunted her, she tried to visualize the character. She began to hear the phrase "bear witness" over and over again until the composite of a bird, angel, and man came into focus. She saw Emmett Till. This image would lead her on a ten-year journey researching and collecting archival images, trial transcripts, music, interviews, stories and more. From this image and massive amounts of research, and writing comes the critically acclaimed drama, *The Ballad of Emmett Till*. Ifa Bayeza's most well-known theatrical piece to date. The saga continues with *That Summer in Sumner*, which focuses on the trial of Emmett Till's accused murderers, Roy Bryant and JW Milam. In *benevolence*, Bayeza tells two stories—the transformation of two couples in the Mississippi Delta, one black, and one white. These Two plays with *The Ballad of Emmett Till*, form The Till Trilogy.

Among her many accomplishments, Ifa Bayeza was a Distinguished Artist-in-Residence and Senior Visiting Lecturer in the Department of Africana Studies at Brown University, the 2014 Rhode Island State Council on the Arts Playwriting Fellow, and directed Ntozake Shange's "a photograph: lovers in motion" in 2015 through the Negro Ensemble Company. Her additional works include: *Some Sing, Some Cry* (co-authored with Ntozake Shange), *Amistad Voices*, *Club Harlem*, *Ta'zieh-Between Two Rivers*, *Welcome to Wandaland*, *String Theory*, and *Homer G & the Rhapsodies in The Fall of Detroit*, *Charleston Olio*, and *Kid Zero*. Her awards include a Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference fellowship, the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Award for Best Play, six Ovation Awards, four Drama Desk Critics' Circle Awards, and the Backstage Garland Award for Best Playwriting.

Ifa Bayeza graduated cum laude from Harvard University with a Master's in Fine Arts in Directing and Dramaturgy from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Recently, when asked, "What are you about?", she responded, "...it's an ever-evolving question and answer..."

"I'm a playwright of the people, and the people have affirmed for me that I'm doing the correct thing."

—IFA BAYEZA

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benevolence

by Ifa Bayeza

Description¹

benevolence is the second drama in *The Till Trilogy*, exploring the epic saga of Civil Rights icon Emmett Louis Till.

The Ballad of Emmett Till, the first play in the series, recounts the boy's journey, the last two weeks of his life.

benevolence recounts the transformation of two couples in the Mississippi Delta. The quartet of actors plays all the characters. Like the land in its time, the play is segregated.

Like *The Ballad* this is an imagined story evoked from a real one. An interpolation of archives, oral histories, and observations.

Time ... travels from late August 1955 to today. The scenes like time are fluid. The Place: Mississippi, the towns of Money and Glendora.

While *The Ballad* is the tale of a quest, *benevolence* is a tale of love and loss.



¹ As written by the playwright

benevolence

Characters

“...the women are the essential storytellers. We navigate inside of their psychology, their imaginations, their dreams, they go through similar cycles in the [dramatic] arc, they transform in similar ways, they age in similar ways. They ultimately are our reflection, so I think the voices that are driving me in conceiving of the work are Carolyn and Bea,... those two are my windows into the way the pieces are structured.”

—TALVIN WILKS



Carolyn



Bea



Breland



Roy



Clinton



Medgar

benevolence

by Ifa Bayeza

Characters

(in order of appearance)

Caroline Bryant, 21, former local beauty queen, mother of two toddlers, wife of store-keeper Roy Bryant.

"Roy come in. Kissed me wet on the lips, his mouth showin me the tip of his tongue in the corner. We killed a niggah tonight."

Ray Bryant, 24, labor contractor, twin brother of Caroline's husband, Roy.

"I need something to spruce up, show I'm doing awright. Give me some status. Give the fam'ly some status. Make people look atchuh diff'ent."

Roy Bryant, 25, J.W.'s half-brother, Caroline's husband, a twin, store keeper.

"These niggahs think we ain't don nothin. What they gon think, how they gon act?"

JJ Breland, lawyer for the defense.

"We want you to know, the entire community of Sumner has come to your husband's defense, Miz Bryant."

David Killingworth, FBI interrogator.

"We're just tryin to get at the truth."

Clinton Melton (Melton), 29, gas station attendant and auto mechanic, husband to Beulah Melton, father of four small children

"I thought I could make more of this life."

Beulah "Bea" Melton, mid-twenties, housewife and seamstress, church-goer, mother.

"We only got each other, our family, our children."

Mary Johnson, Glendora resident, age nine.

"Call us Mule-lattuh cuz Mom's daddy was white. She say, she had to let him do what he wanted with her or no job, or he would move her off or kill her."

Medgar Evers, 30, NAACP field reporter.

"We're here to help—it's to help us all."

Delores Grisham, 65, Clinton and Bea's oldest daughter.

"Daddy used to call her Bea, I remember that...I like to imagine them finding each other in the afterlife. That would be kind of...benevolence."

benevolence

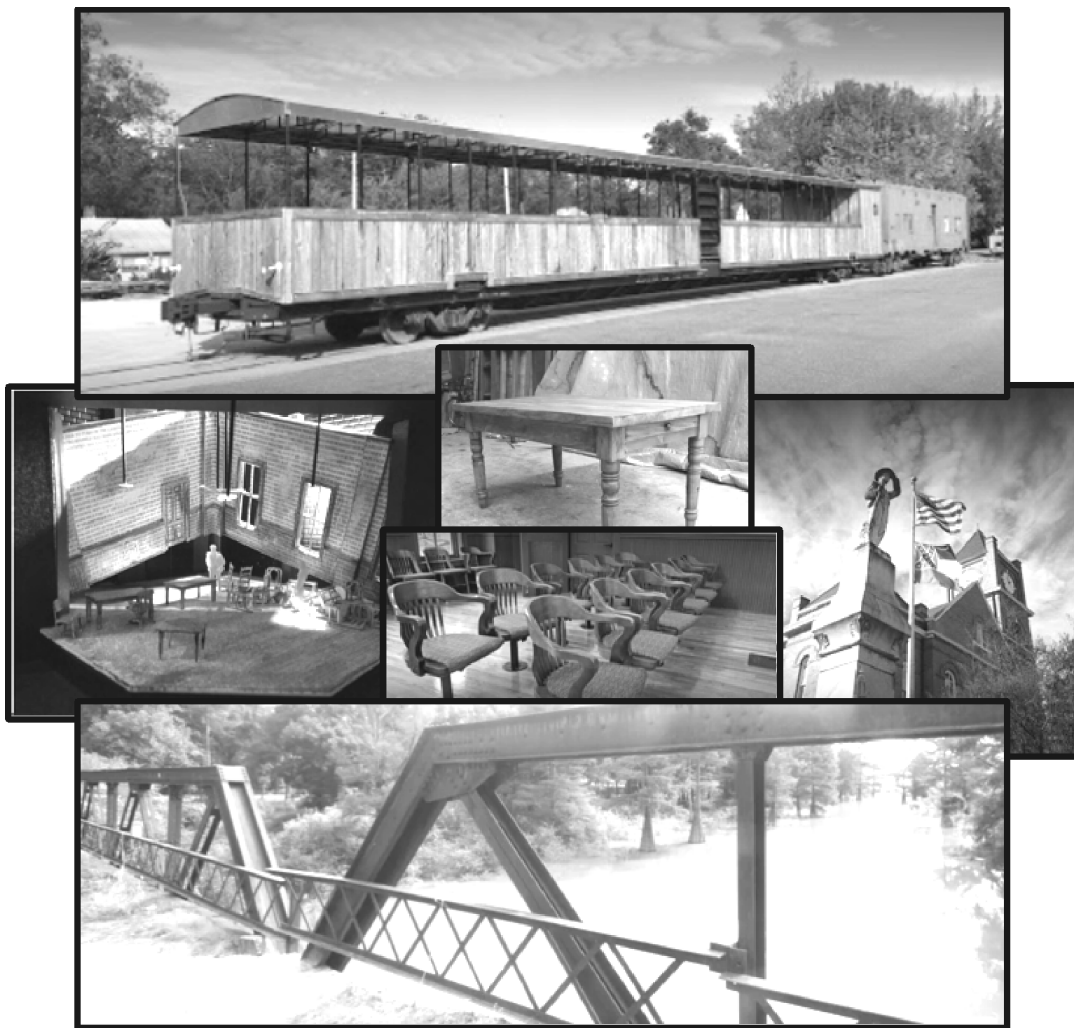
by Ifa Bayeza

Setting

"...the world is immediately abstract, we acknowledge things that are not present, but they are impactful. The design elements want to enhance the world in a suggestive manner...[not] "realistic representation. Elements are more surreal, imagined, dreamlike, a more psychological approach."

—TALVIN WILKS

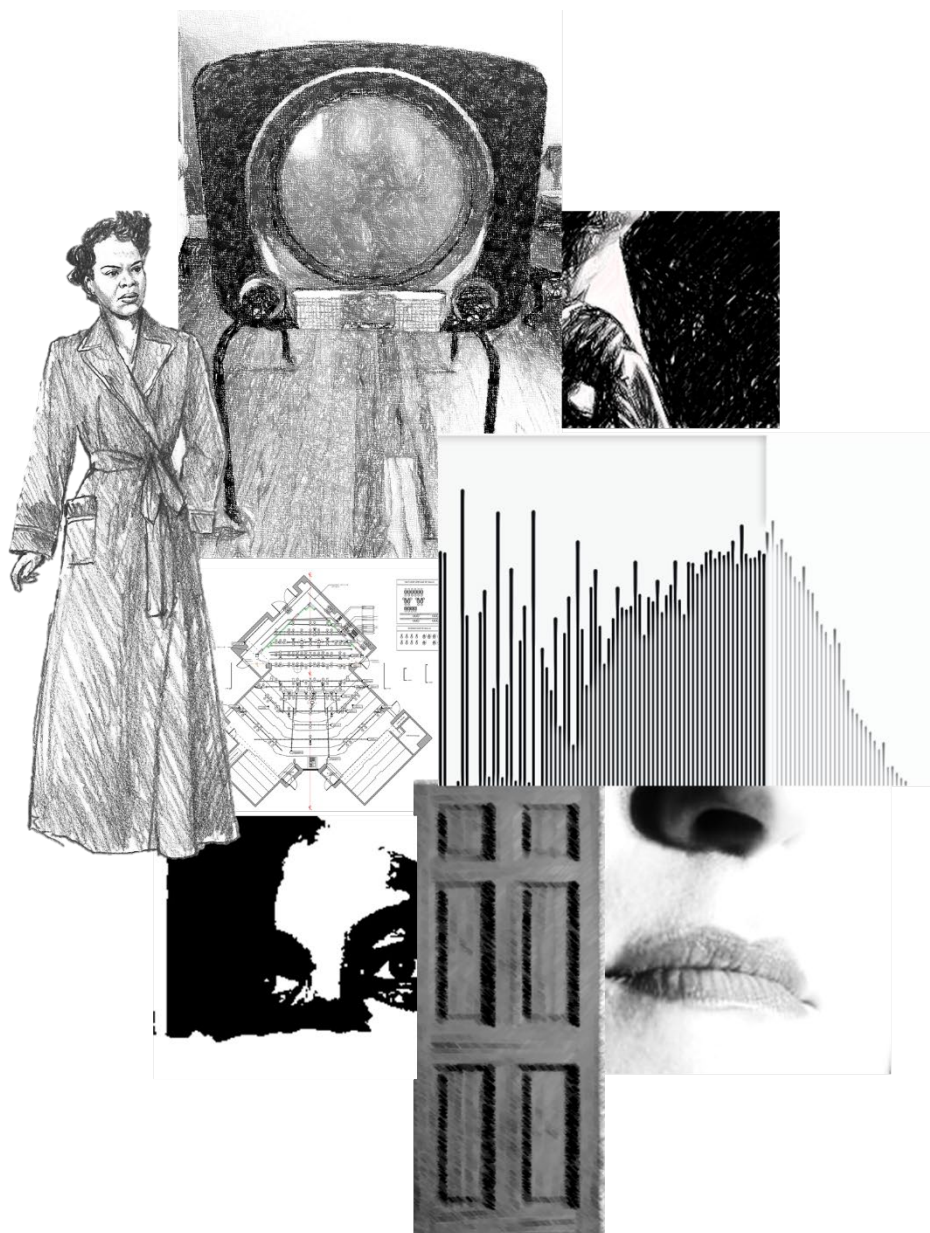
The Set: An empty stage; perhaps a scrim for projections, performance areas for various locations: railroad crossing at town's entrance, Bryant's Meat Market & Grocery; the gas pump out front, the store front porch, deli and candy counter; a bayou cottage; the river.



benevolence

by Ifa Bayeza

Design



Designers

Scenic Designer
Maruti Evans

Lighting Designer
Marcus Dilliard

Sound Designer
John Acarregui

Costume Designer
Matthew LeFebvre

Projections Designer
Kathy Maxwell

Wig Master

Andrea Moriarty
Props Master
Abbee Warmboe

"...in my conversation with designers, we've been talking about how do you heighten this sense of a character inside of their own contemplation, inside of their own psychology, inside of their own fantasy? It's easy to do that in film, but we're on the stage, so how do we heighten an audience understanding that we are inside of the imaginary? We are inside of the fantasy. Ifa loves to conflate reality with fantasy in the same moment, and these characters transform, and suddenly we're in one reality but the language reflects another."

—TALVIN WILKS

benevolence

by Ifa Bayeza

Scenes

ACT ONE

prelude

**It is an ordinary day
Weekday
Wednesday
Late August
Already hot**

**In the dark before dawn
Two couples**

**Prepare
To face the day
And each other**

Scene 1. Money, MS, August 24, 1955. railroad crossing at town entrance.

Scene 2. Store interior and exterior. The following Saturday, late afternoon.

Scene 3. Courtroom, Wednesday, September 21, 1955.

Scene 4. Bathroom in the rear of the store, sometime earlier. Scene 5. Courtroom, Caroline on the stand.

Scene 6. FBI interrogation room, 2005. Scene 7. Caroline alone.

Scene 8. The interior of the truck, outside one of the family stores, early evening, November 1955.

ACT TWO

prelude

**It's the weekend
Pay day, Saturday
The last in August
The heat of the sun still lingers
The sky purple above the bayou
There is no wind**

**The air is charged
Twilight Two couples
Consider
The night ahead**

Scene 1. Saturday evening, August 27, 1955.

Scene 2. Sunday. August 28th in the wee hours of the morning, near dawn. Melton's lean-to outside McGarrh's Filling Station on the edge of town.

Scene 3. Church steps, August 1949.

Scene 4. Sunday morning, August 28, 1955, the Melton's.

Scene 5. Melton and Bea's kitchen, September, 1955.

Scene 6. December 3, 1955, early evening.

Scene 7. Split: Medgar Evers home office, December 18, 1955 and the Melton's bedroom, December 7, 1955.

Scene 8. A dream.

Scene 9. March 6, 1956. Late Afternoon, Living room.

Scene 10. Medgar Evers' office, mid-March, 1956.

Scene 11. Living room of Delores Grisham, early evening, 2016.

Scene 12. Church picnic and dance, Spring 1949.



Sunset near the Tallahatchie River

benevolence

by Ifa Bayeza

Style

Symbolism: Poetic, dreamlike theatre seeking the profound or mysterious in life. –Robert Barton²

“This could be a poem by itself.” –Ruby Dee [As quoted by Ifa Bayeza³]

“I would call it...it’s a poetic ritual.” –Talvin Wilks⁴

“By ritualistic I mean a strong presence of symbols, characterizations, themes and language styles...” –Shelby Steele⁵

“Our writers felt themselves possessed of two distinct personalities, one facing the natural world with its sensuous qualities, its definable limitations, its laws of time and place; the other facing Godward with its circle of infinity...” –R. M. Wernaer⁶

SYMBOLISM MANIFESTO

Theatre should seek the profound and the unfathomable experience.

Suggestion is far more powerful than explicit representation.

Legend, myth, and spirituality come together to produce evocative theatre. –Robert Barton²

“Part history, part ghost story. Till is a jazz integration of past and present, the living and dead, factual accounts and creative interpolation.” –Ifa Bayeza⁷

² Barton, Robert. *Style For Actors 2nd Edition: A Handbook for Moving Beyond Realism*. Routledge, 2009.

³ Davis, Theresa M. Personal Interview. January 2019

⁴ Davis, Theresa M. Personal Interview. January 2019

⁵ Steele, Shelby. "Notes on Ritual in the New Black Theatre." *The Theatre of Black Americans*, ed. Errol Hill. New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers (1987).

⁶ Tisdell, Frederick M. "Symbolism in the Theatre." *The Sewanee Review* 28.2 (1920): 228-240.

⁷ Bayeza, Ifa. "The Ballad of Emmett Till."

The Till Trilogy

The Epic Saga of Emmett Till in Three Plays⁸



From left to right: Emmett Till, a billboard located in Sumner, Mississippi, and photos from the Emmett Till murder trial. (Sources: National Museum of African American History and Culture and Famous Trials).

The Ballad of Emmett Till

The now legendary story of Emmett “Bo” Till is believed by many to be the start of the modern civil rights movement of the 1950s and remains one of the most pivotal incidents in a monumental era. This widely acclaimed dramatization recounting the last two weeks of young Emmett’s life, part history, and part ghost story, is a jazz integration of past and present, the living and dead, factual accounts and creative interpolation. Ifa Bayeza captures the powerful truths at the heart of the story, creating a soaring work of music, brilliant poetry and theatricality. –DC Theatre Scene

BO: *Mama say I’m a Seeker.*

MOSE: *What is it that you seek?*

BO: *Everything! Excitement! Life! The the the BIGNESS of it, the wholeness of it.
I wanna do things. I wanna see things. I wanna feel things. I wanna know things!*

MOSE: *... Cherish what you have, son. What you got. I seen a wall of flesh, seven deep, nine across,
terrible winds, buildings blown like branches, people hung to trees, just leafless twigs. They put us to
work on the levy – and when the water began to wash over, they made us to lie down and form a human
levy of a hundred men. The high
water come, drownin’ men, the pressure, squeezing the life out th’others. Bodies buried in the clay.
Children, women, strong men, all the same. Gone. Lost. I wanted to bring them back. I wanted to make
them whole. My people swept away, swept away, swept away. All the time, over and over, swept away –
torn from they land, torn from each other
– I was not gonna let that happen. I was gonna hold this ground. I was gonna plant myself, right here. This
land was promised. We worked it. We earned it. I thought I’mo lose it again. I can’t. I can’t. I prayed for an
answer. A sign.
How I’mo do this? ... Then here you come. The Seeker.*

⁸ Citations for the descriptions of the plays are listed in the Sources section.

That Summer in Sumner

Based on the actual court transcripts, this part of The Till Trilogy tracks the 1955 trial of Emmett Till's accused murderers, Roy Bryant and JW Milam. "But in a stunning touch, Bayeza has Bo reappear throughout—the boy who came into our hearts in Part 1, given a sure place in shared memory thanks to this epic triptych docu-poem in his honor."

"They murdered that boy, and to hide their dastardly act, they tied barbed wire to his neck and to a heavy gin fan and dumped him into the river for the turtles and the fish."

—Prosecutor Gerald Chatham

benevolence

benevolence recounts the transformation of two couples in the Mississippi Delta. In this play, four actors play all the characters. The play is in two acts. The first is about a white couple, Caroline and Roy Bryant (introduced in *The Ballad of Emmett Till*). The second is about a black couple, Beulah (Bea) and Clinton Melton. "Like the land in its time, the play is segregated." Through these characters, we see points a view of those struggling to exist in the "state of siege" which is Mississippi.

BEA: *Don't nobody care bout no dirt poor niggahs like us. Some high yellah light n bright kid from Chicago show up, got the NAACP, national news. Where they at—where they at huh, when somebody disappear in the swamp, some gal get snatched from the side of the road, some stranger dangling from a tree with his manhood stuck down his throat. Where was they at then?! Emmett Till, Emmett Till, I'm sick of hearin' about him! Least he had a name. The Bayou can't hold all the dead bodies buried out there. No name nobodies.*

MELTON: *Like us? ... It don't have to be this way, Bea. We outnumber them. If we stand up, we got a chance to change.*

BEA: *We ain't got a chance in hell. They got guns, Melton, they got the law, they got the power. Always had and always will. We only got each other, our family, our children. The future here with me.*

MELTON: *It's not enough.*

BEA: *It's all we've got.*

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Making Peace and Moving Forward

A Conversation with Poet-Playwright Ifa Bayeza



On November 12, 2018, I had the honor of being present at Luther Place Memorial Church for “she who walked like a lion: a celebration of ntozake shange.” I had traveled with friends and was grateful to have arrived early to make my way to Ifa Bayeza, and other family members, who were generously greeting guests before the start of the event. In honor of her sister Ntozake’s Choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, Ifa chose to wear the color green. From a color psychology perspective, green is thought to encourage several feelings including hope, renewal, compassion, peace, and love. During our brief conversation, she exuded all these qualities. During one of the remembrances segments of the celebration, Ifa Bayeza told the audience, her sister, Zake, said, “You’re the artist.” So true, for when I first met Ifa Bayeza at the 30th Anniversary Conference of the Black Theatre Network, her passion for the art of theatre was unmistakable. I was struck by her artistic spirit and profound sense of curiosity. A curiosity that ever propels her forward as she continues the extraordinary saga of “The Till Trilogy.” During our interview on January 7, 2019, it was evident that Ifa Bayeza honors her talent as both an artistic and a spiritual calling. Her work inspires us to explore how to make peace with the past, and what to do to move toward greater expressions of **benevolence**.

-Theresa M Davis

“This work is about family. I would be nothing without my own—my inimitable sisters Bisa and Ntozake and my stalwart brother Paul, my calming Zen niece Savannah and my late and forever great parents Paul T. and Eloise O. Williams. I dedicate this work to the memory of my mother, to the end, my mentor and muse.”

—IFA BAYEZA

- TMD:** What would you like the readers to know about you and your work?
- IFA BAYEZA:** ...I do humanist stories, stories of resistance and liberation, and celebration of the African-American experience, struggle, genius, resilience. And I try to do those stories as emblematic of the basic human quest for life, for dignity, for happiness.
- TMD:** It seems in your work you explore what scholar James V. Hatch describes as drawing energy from both sides of the hyphen of African-American.
- IFA BAYEZA:** It's really interesting that my work is really this amalgam of the African and the American. There's something about my work that is really committed to pursuing and exploring the promise of this idea of democracy, however utopian that might be, that all individuals are created equal, and that we have the right to pursue full life, liberty, and this odd thing called happiness. What a strange thing to put inside a government document.
- TMD:** So true. Yes, the promise of democracy and the idea of the "American Dream". Your comments remind me of the poem by Langston Hughes "Let America Be America Again".
- Note to the Reader:**
 Let America be America again.
 Let it be the dream it used to be.
 Let it be the pioneer on the plain
 Seeking a home where he himself is free.
- (America never was America to me.)
- Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed--
 Let it be that great strong land of love
 Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
 That any man be crushed by one above.
- (It never was America to me.)...
- IFA BAYEZA:** As African-Americans...coming from an enslaved population. We bought into this idea, sometimes it seems more than anyone else, that we constantly hold the nation up to the charge. And a lot of my work explores that from the personal lens. For example, in *Welcome to Wondaland*, which is my childhood story grappling with understanding race, racial struggle, and school desegregation, 4th grader Wanda ["is on a mission to learn everything there is to know in the world so that she can pass an intelligence test and catapult into a newly desegregated "gifted" school"].⁹ On the journey she experiences stories of intersections of race, nationality, and culture in the United States. She learns about history, from String Theory which is about the Amistad Rebellion, to The Till Trilogy, which is another vortex of racial confrontation that propels our country toward its promise.

⁹ [Welcome to Wondaland](#)

- TMD:** Speaking of *The Trilogy*, when I spoke to *benevolence* director, Talvin Wilks, one phrase he used to describe the play was “poetic ritual”. Would you talk a bit about the influence of poetry and poetic language in your work?
- IFA BAYEZA:** Oh, okay, well, let me break it down. It's funny, I had to be called to task by none other than the inimitable, iconic artist of multiple dimensions, Ruby Dee. She was a founding board member of the SonEdna Foundation, which sponsored a lot of my research in Mississippi. And I shared with her a very early draft of *The Ballad of Emmett Till*, and you know, I had never done that before, you know, it's like, "What is she going to say?"
- Note to the Reader:** Artist-Activist Ruby Dee grew up in Harlem and joined the American Negro Theatre in 1941. Her film career spans a generation and includes 1950's *The Jackie Robinson Story*, 1961's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and 1988's *Do the Right Thing*. In 2008, Dee received her first Oscar nomination for playing Mama Lucas in the hit film *American Gangster*. She was the second oldest person ever nominated for the award. In 2008, Dee received the prestigious NAACP Spingarn Award. She continued to perform well into her 80s. She died in her home in New Rochelle, New York on June 11, 2014. She was 91.¹⁰
- “SonEdna celebrates and promotes the literary arts and writers of all genres and backgrounds in the Delta, in Mississippi, and the world. [The] programs and residencies support the development and creativity of diverse, divergent, and emerging writers. We champion the essential value of literature by providing a rich artistic and stimulating intellectual environment for writers and the public.”¹¹
- IFA BAYEZA:** So, [Ruby Dee] came out and she said, "This could be a poem by itself. I hear blues, I hear jazz". And it was just a beautiful quotation, but I was stuck on those seven words, because I had never really thought of myself as a poet. That was my sister's realm, you know?
- TMD:** Yes, of course. Poetry was your sister, Ntozake Shange's sphere.
- IFA BAYEZA:** She had many dimensions as well, but...that was her primary love. That was her primary focus. And so, I carved out my identity as something different from that. I've been writing plays since I was 12. I thought of myself as a dramatist. I used to ask the principal if we could have the auditorium so I could do my plays for my captive audience and the rest of the school.
- IFA BAYEZA:** So, it was only when Ruby Dee said that to me that this light bulb literally went off and said, "Why are you boxing yourself into a category?" And it was only then that I actually started looking at my work as poetic. And it's very funny, as I now look at it, my goodness, I do have a very poetic way of writing. I think the difference to me is that my poetry is literally spoken word. I find the poetry within the dialogue of the characters.

¹⁰ [Ruby Dee](#)

¹¹ [Soneda Foundation](#)

And so, I come at the phrasing differently. It was really my own realization that I need to embrace this. And at the same time, when you have a sister like Ntozake [Shange], or colleagues and admired writers, Pulitzer Prize winners like Tyehimba Jess, Natasha Trethewey, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes even, when I really look at the precision of their work and the care with which they interact with language, I am so humbled.

TMD: Earlier you described *The Ballad of Emmett Till*, “as a work of spoken words”. Author Daniel Banks, when speaking of Spoken Word Theatre says, “There is a particular ethic in Hip Hop culture that language creates reality”. I feel in *benevolence* that's what you're doing. You are using poetic language to create the reality. And also, giving us a remix. In your 2013 Penumbra interview with Joshua Wilder, you responded to a question about play style and structure with the following: “In relation to the Aristotelian technique I relate to my own writing as a personal jazz deconstructionist technique. To challenge the premise of Mr. Aristotle and his sense of what is allowable play structure”. Would you talk more about the jazz element in your work?

IFA BAYEZA: ...It's fascinating to think about it in relation to what's the baseline. I think the baseline in *The Ballad of Emmett Till*...was looking at the journey of a youth, that rite of passage of the black male warrior caste if you will, from boyhood to manhood. And how perilous that journey is up to this very moment in which we're speaking. And so, the elemental structure for *The Ballad*...was a ritual rite of passage, a failed rite of passage that is also a triumphant rite of passage.

TMD: When we are thinking about the jazz chord, it's typically three or more notes sounded together create the harmony. In *benevolence*, what three notes, or themes, become the melody that brings support and context to the melody?

IFA BAYEZA: In *benevolence*, it's shifting around. Those three notes would be in this case a relationship, the capacity of love in relation to racial pathology. And the impact of place, because this is in the two sites of the architecture of the murder, Glendora and Money. And then looking at the literal toll of segregation by segregating the play.

TMD: Yes, you're referring to the separation of the characters within the play. The white characters placed in Act One and the black characters in Act Two. So, if I'm hearing you correctly, the three elements are: the idea of relationship and the impact of racial pathology, then the influence of place and also the burden of segregation.

IFA BAYEZA: Yes, right. If I could add one more element...the idea of the diminished chord...

TMD: Please explain.

IFA BAYEZA: This is woman-centered work as well. Two women were at the center of this saga. One known and one unknown. One visible and the other invisible. One white, one black. It's an examination of this story in its relation to gender and the particular struggle of women to find value, safety, and survival in their lives.

- TMD:** The diminished chord...I'm so glad you shared that particular insight. Playwright Pearl Cleage has mentioned characters speaking to her during the writing process. How did the characters of *benevolence* speak to you?
- IFA BAYEZA:** *benevolence* in its way was a kind of surprise piece. I was never quite sure where it was going, or even whether the language was doing ... The characters came alive in their own ways. They talk in such specific and sometimes peculiar ways that I wasn't even sure originally whether their language would fall naturally off someone's palette. So, I had some friends of mine read a couple of scenes in both acts just to say, you know, what is this? And in each instance, they said, "You have to finish this. We have to find out what happens." So, I'm like, "Okay." I'm waiting to see how this cast manifests the work.
- TMD:** In my interview with Director Talvin Wilks, we discussed the audition process. He said, "The play was just leaping off the page." He repeatedly gave the actors a note, "I want you to tell this story, like it's a ghost story, like it's a haunting..." In "These Conversations Are Long Overdue: An Interview with Ifa Bayeza"¹², you shared with Corey D.B. Walker, "Even if I'm just reporting my nonfictional experience, there is a quality of haunting related to the story and psyche of Emmett Till." What part or aspect of the Till Trilogy has been the most evocative or haunting for you?
- IFA BAYEZA:** Well, they all are, in different textures if you will. In *The Ballad...*, I'm looking at the effect of Emmett's [spiritual] presence. I always imagined this as a group of souls who are caught in the half-light between life and death. When the story gets repeated, and it does get repeated in our corporal lives, it gets relived. Because I have imagined that Emmett Till's spirit is not able to move on [to the next life]. He serves this purpose of ritually reminding us of our past and our future responsibilities.
- TMD:** In that same interview you said a "spiritual entity appeared", while you were working on another story, "and commanded that [you] bear witness." In *The Ballad of Emmett Till* as well as *benevolence*, I believe we as audience members are also called to bear witness.
- IFA BAYEZA:** Yes, and I had another experience very similar to the bearing witness experience with [*That Summer in Sumner*]. There was a self-published photo journal by a photographer named Ernest Withers who becomes a character in the play.

Note to the Reader: "Withers, Ernest C. (1922–2007) was the photographer who defied Judge Swango's orders and captured a photograph while court was in session during the Milam-Bryant murder trial. The photo was that of Moses Wright standing at the witness stand, pointing out J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant as the men who kidnapped Emmett Till from his home." He got his start as a military photographer while serving in the South Pacific during World War II and became a photographer by profession upon his return to Memphis after the war. He published a photo pamphlet of the Emmett Till murder case, and also

¹² [These Conversations are Long Overdue](#)

photographed important events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the strike of Memphis sanitation workers. At the funeral of Medgar Evers, he was beaten and arrested by a police officer.”¹³

IFA BAYEZA:

Wheeler Parker, who's one of Emmett's cousins whom I interviewed, had a very damaged copy... The paper literally would fray in your hands. And he had taped the sides with duct tape, black duct tape, but it still was really, really fragile. So, I asked him if I could scan it and make a photocopy, color photocopy, and then give him back the original that he could store, and then just take the scanned copy out if he wanted to share it with anyone until the work could be archived. So, I'm scanning and scanning, you know, it's maybe a 24 page booklet. And when I got to the last three pages that were really torn with sections missing, when you folded it onto the scanner, the part that was missing was in the shape of like a jazz cat with a pork pie hat.

Images for the Reader:

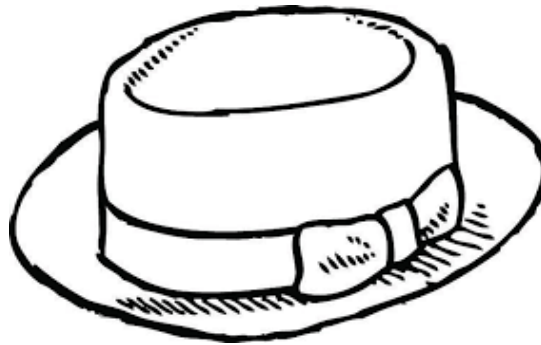


Illustration of a pork pie hat by Matt Bustin and Lester Young (inspiration for Charles Mingus's *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat*).

IFA BAYEZA:

Because of the duct tape around the sides of the page, it looked like this figure was literally going through a doorway. And as it went from the second to last page, to the last page, there were literally three kinds of animated images as this figure went through the threshold. It's 2:00 in the morning, and I'm thinking, "Oh my God, there's Emmett coming right out of my screen..." That's when I saw this image attending the trial...an almost palpable presence. In the second play, Emmett begins with a monologue and ends with a monologue. He will float in and out of the trial...embodying character. The trial was September 19th, Emmett was killed on the 28th of August [of that same year], so it's not even, according to many metaphysical systems...not time for a soul, that has died naturally or peacefully, to have made the transition, let alone one that has been subjected to violence.

IFA BAYEZA:

And then in the trial, which is *That Summer in Sumner*, the second work, because it happened so close to the time of death,

TMD:

May I interrupt? You just referred to *That Summer in Sumner* as the second play.

¹³ Ernest C. Withers

IFA BAYEZA: Yes...

TMD: Last year Mosaic Theater in Washington, DC, produced staged readings of all three pieces in this order: 1) *The Ballad of Emmett Till*; 2) *benevolence*; and 3) *That Summer in Sumner*.

IFA BAYEZA: Right. *That Summer in Sumner* is the third play that I'm writing. It's the one I'm working on right now.

TMD: *Are you considering a new order to the Trilogy?*

IFA BAYEZA: Originally, I outlined them in relation to the order that I was creating them: *The Ballad of Emmett Till*, *benevolence*, *That Summer in Sumner*. Now that I have a first draft of Sumner, it feels more like it is the second play.

TMD: I see.

IFA BAYEZA: Although they all should stand alone. I think one of the experiments, future tense, will be to discover, what happens when people see them in a different sequence, or when people see one and not the others, because each one should be able to stand alone. This a very new development.

TMD: Thank you for clarifying that. Please continue discussing Emmett's presence in Trilogy.

IFA BAYEZA: With *benevolence*, the bulk of the action happens just before and then after [Emmett Till's] death, I wanted to write a play where I acknowledge that he has died and that he is not there...to recognize the finality of death and the absence of the living being. And I struggled with, how will I do that? And I had that monologue from Caroline, which was in the original Goodman production. And so, I thought that was a good place to start, when she felt this presence.

Note to the Reader:

Scene 7. Caroline alone.

CAROLINE

Cold. I'm so Cold. I could not get warm. My bones, my skin – was cold. My feet. Like my blood was cold. Exhausted. I went to take a nap. All my clothes on. Threw off my shoes. Got under the cover and forgot everything. Disappeared. (Then) woke up... to a presence. On my back. Dark like a shadow. I could feel it feathered, no bounds, all air, but heavy. A weight on me. Stealin my breath, squeezing. It pressed down upon me. I couldn't move – I thought to feel rage or terror or vengeance or fury – I knew – instead I felt ... longing ... not for me – not for truth or even justice ... but for life ... – I thought to feel his wrath or hate and – instead I felt ... ? Wake up, ... I told myself, wake up and turn over. But I was awake. (*benevolence*, page 41)

IFA BAYEZA: So, I built the sense of [Emmett's] presence through the sensations and feelings of the characters in the play. So, [*benevolence*] is the experience of his absence, whereas, with the other two plays, he is fully embodied. I wanted to create the total fullness of a life so that we, as an audience, could experience the tragedy of death in a very personal way.

IFA BAYEZA: In *benevolence*, I hope we feel the weight of his soul. Because he's not present. It's the only play in the Trilogy, in which Emmett does not physically appear.

TMD: Crossway Church in Lancaster Pennsylvania uses an image of the word BENEVOLENCE, where the letters E, V, O, and L are flipped and appear in red. This draws the readers eyes to the word LOVE. In "An extract from the notes of *The Amen Corner*, James Baldwin writes: "The first line written in [the play] is now Margaret's line in the Third Act: 'It's an awful thing to think about, the way love never dies!' In *benevolence*, are we witnessing the birth, the death, or the rebirth of love within *benevolence*?"

Image for the Reader:



IFA BAYEZA: I think it's all of the above. That's the challenge of it. Can it be reborn? And in Caroline's case, [at the end of Act I] when she comes and asks, "*Morning, Mrs. Faulkner...May I come in?*"...she's asking us, you know, what do you do with this history? What do we do with it? Do we have a conversation about how do we get past it? How do we trust it? Do you let it into our lives? And yet, if it stays on the outside, the impact remains there.

TMD: Yes. The stage directions, and last line on page 44 are thought-provoking:

"A train whistles turns her around. The approaching train gets louder and louder as she steps from the truck.

As the train roars by, she approaches the tracks letting the wind gusts unsteady her, standing arms outstretched till the last car.

Emptiness. No one.

Caroline, the beauty queen, walks downstage, stepping across the tracks gingerly in her heels. As she reaches the lip of the stage light, she stops.

CAROLINE

Morning, Mrs. Faulkner ... May I come in?

-End Act One-

- IFA BAYEZA:** But it's that question she asks at the very end...can you show this love? Can you show this warmth or hospitality? Can you trust it? And how do you reach someone else's humanity when we have a culture so steeped in...social and racial pathology.
- TMD:** *Those are challenging questions.*
- IFA BAYEZA:** Then near the end of Act Two, when the daughter of Clinton and Beulah Melton says, "...I like to imagine them finding each other in the afterlife." That last segment is my hope. That love does survive death, that love does survive hate, that love does survive violence. And Dolores is a living example of this survival. But at what cost?
- TMD:** Anna Deavere Smith has been quoted as saying, "*Racism has been for everyone like a horrible, tragic car crash, and we've all been heavily sedated from it*". And then she said, "*If we don't come into consciousness of this tragedy, there's going to be a violent awakening we don't want*". Do you think that this violent awakening is impending, or has it already reached us?
- IFA BAYEZA:** Well, I think we've been in a violent waking dream from the very beginning. We are in a weird period of absurdism. But it's the natural—I can't say natural—but it's a logical evolution. In the 1960's there was a strategy that was called the Southern Strategy that ... It was to appease the Dixiecrats who left the Democratic Party because Fannie Lou Hamer stood up in 1964 and demanded that her party be seated. [see *Learning from Fannie Lou Hamer*]
- IFA BAYEZA:** And literally those two words, Southern Strategy, over a period of generations has produced the character who's to my mind very similar to the character of J.W. Milo. Someone insulated by wealth. But, the African-American struggle has been one that had always pushed the nation towards its promise and we are still in that same position. We're now joined by some other really beleaguered people of color, and increasingly women, or I should say working class women. I don't see any period in our history when the violence abated. It just has shifted. Now, we have made progress, for sure. We couldn't go into a public building. We couldn't ride on the train. We couldn't go to a lunch counter and sit down and have a meal. We couldn't go to the bathroom. We couldn't stay ... I mean, when you think about the transitions within my lifetime. At the same time, the basic premise of white power and white supremacy is really quite entrenched and has its own resilience. And we're seeing it squirm around in the dust as it tries to grow a new head. We thought we had cut it off, but it's regenerative.
- TMD:** Your knowledge of history is vast. Amiri Baraka has said that the teaching of history is revolutionary. What are you attempting to teach or illuminate with the Till Trilogy and specifically with *benevolence*?
- IFA BAYEZA:** In trying to do the trilogy, to do the trio of plays, I think one of the things that I was trying to do was also just to enliven the shock itself. By humanizing it and showing it from perspectives that are either unknown or unexpected, my hope is that we can begin to appreciate the complexity of our history, which is part of its beauty. I see it as a challenge but also see it as giving way to greater understanding, so that as we now

embark on social engagement, political engagement, we have a better understanding of the forces at play and the amount of energy and invention that our contemporary challenges are going to take. I'm hoping the work emboldens the audience to pause, take a deep breath, and say, "Okay, what are we about?" and to look at things with more insight and more clarity.

TMD: You are definitely giving the audience much to ponder with this World Premiere. Ifa, you have been extremely generous with your time. Thank you so much. Is there anything you would like to share in these last moments?

IFA BAYEZA: Well, I'm just truly grateful to Sarah Bellamy for embracing the work and committing to doing it fully. It has been a struggle for me to get my work into the world. I am thrilled, at this juncture in time, to be premiering *benevolence* in St. Paul, Minneapolis, at Penumbra. I think there are a lot of different angles by which this play can be perceived...Black Lives Matter, the Me Too Movement, the historic challenge of the veracity of testimony in relation to black men, and how we reconcile our contemporary feelings within the social and political history that has entrapped so many people of color. I hope [*benevolence*] will stimulate a much-needed dialogue on our humanity, and how we as a species are going to move forward.

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Staging Poetic Ritual

A Conversation with Director Talvin Wilks



Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he could not defeat him, he struck Jacob's hip socket as they wrestled and dislocated his hip. Then he said to Jacob, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

-GENESIS 32:24-31

In an interview with Sydne Mahone, Talvin Wilks stated, "I wanted to create an 'Immediate Theatre' that could explore political, sociological and psychological issues in a very direct and personal way for the performer and the audience."¹⁴ Several years later, his intent is as strong as ever as he wrestles with the challenges and joys of approaching *benevolence*. Ten days before the start of the rehearsal process, Wilks took a break from his work, and generously offered time to discuss family, *benevolence* and the "Till Trilogy, his directing process and beyond.

—Theresa M. Davis

TMD: The subject of family and family ties are mentioned repeatedly in *benevolence*. How about we begin our time together with you sharing about your family and where you were born?

TALVIN WILKS: Certainly. I was born and raised in Dayton, Ohio. That's home town. That's where most of my family still resides, my living family still resides. The trail on my mother and

¹⁴ *The National Black Drama Anthology*

father's side are family from Georgia and Knoxville, Tennessee. Those are the threads of early migration. My grandmother, part of the [major part of] migration era. Her parents came up to Ohio from Tennessee, sort of in that whole 1920s era, and then one brother ... It's a great tale. Two brothers. One brother stayed in Dayton, Ohio. One brother traveled as far as Ontario, Canada, so I have family pretty much in the Dayton, Detroit, and Windsor. One side of the family and then the other family from Georgia, of course, has connections to African-American, Cherokee reservations, so we have relatives that are in the lower west, west, and Midwest.

- TMD:** You work as a playwright, a director, and a dramaturge, are any other members of your family artists?
- TALVIN WILKS:** Well, I don't consider my family artists, but I would say they're orators. My father was a minister. My mother was a bit of an old school musician herself, but it was not a surprise that I went down this path of theater. I was a science and an English literature major, so I could've gone in many different directions, but ultimately went the way of theater. I was always very supported by my family in those endeavors, so there was never much of a surprise, and definitely the oration, the speechmaking, I used to introduce my father as a young child when he was a minister, so there was always this tradition of oral celebration in the family.
- TMD:** When did you become a part of the Penumbra family?
- TALVIN WILKS:** Very early on, like in 2001, I did a collaborative project between Penumbra and the Walker Arts Center, and it was more of a presenting production, so I would say that *The Ballad of Emmett Till* was my first official directing project for Penumbra.
- TMD:** Do you hope to direct all three plays in the saga?
- TALVIN WILKS:** I'm hoping to direct all three. I think I'm in line for that. I'm a long-term colleague and friend of Ifa Bayeza, so I've known Ifa for quite some time, and in fact, we had had initial conversations when she was first developing the *Ballad of Emmett Till* when it premiered at the Goodman Theater a few years prior.
- TMD:** In 2008?
- TALVIN WILKS:** Correct. Then Ifa redeveloped it and turned it into a much smaller ensemble chamber piece. Lou Bellamy has been trying to get me out to Penumbra for many years and we just never quite found the right project. So, when he brought up *The Ballad of Emmett Till* and working with Ifa, that just seemed to be automatic for me. Then Lou told Ifa that he was interested in my directing it. Her statement was, "That's who I wanted to direct it in the first place."
- TMD:** It was meant to be.
- TALVIN WILKS:** It all came together in a perfect way at the perfect time, and that started not only a continuing relationship with Ifa but a fairly strong since 2014 ongoing relationship with

Penumbra. This will be the fourth production that I've directed there in that period of time.

TMD: What initially drew you to *benevolence*?

TALVIN WILKS: Well, I think I was committed to the idea even before I read the play. Once we finished *The Ballad of Emmett Till* and that was a very significant production for Penumbra. It was part of their return from their hiatus. They had been dark for a few years as they were restructuring, so it was that first season in what I would call their comeback, so it was very significant for me to be a part of that season, and then for *Ballad* which had been such a successful production and incredibly well-received. It was a very significant moment for everyone involved. And it really rekindled a collaborative relationship with Ifa. I hadn't worked with her for a while, so that was really a great beginning. From the time Ifa mentioned she was developing a trilogy, I think Penumbra had already made a commitment that they wanted to produce all the plays in the trilogy once Ifa finished them. A lot of these commitments occurred sight unseen, so reading the play, I felt an immediate connection to it because there are similarities to *The Ballad of Emmett Till*. Particularly in some of the form and structure. It seemed like the perfect continuation of that type of exploration, and I think an ongoing sense of collaboration with Ifa.

TMD: Please talk more about the structure and form of the plays.

TALVIN WILKS: Well, I think there's something that directly relates the two plays, one in its episodic form, in its imaginary landscape that I won't call it fact or fiction. It really is a meditation of historical context, I think. She's navigating this interesting sort of terrain of history and discovering the possibilities of relationships and stories behind the facts. We can research the facts or find the facts or follow the trail or follow the lies of the documented trial, but as the playwright, she is adding flesh and blood to the facts. What I love about it, she imagines the day-to-day. She does not imagine just the event or the event of violence or what came after. She imagines the next day, and the next day and how did people continue to live their lives after these particular events so that we see this other notion of humanity or the rejection of humanity inside of the storytelling itself.

TALVIN WILKS: So, it lives in this ritual place, it lives in a spiritual place, it lives in a psychological place. Ifa presents all of these ideas inside the contemplation of storytelling, so it's not a factual retelling. It's a contemplation of what happened in between the facts that I think are so fascinating. I think what's she did in *Ballad* by giving Emmett his adolescence back. He's not a victim in that place even though you know the facts of the violence. What she does for him is to remind us that he was a teenager just turning 14. Emmett was playful, he was a jokester, he loved bubblegum, he loved life. I think the success of *Ballad* is the vibrancy that emanates from that play. So inside of *benevolence*, she's really giving us the complexity of this quandary of guilt, and the lies and the whole notion behind the terrorism of Jim Crow and how people lived their lives. It wasn't just one act of violence. Folks lived under this tyranny, this terrain of violence every day, and so I think that's what *benevolence* does that's different from *Ballad*. *benevolence* reminds us that this legacy of violence was potentially an everyday occurrence. Yet people found their way to live inside this realm of found love, found humanity, found

whatever it was they needed. They were living inside of domestic terrorism, so Ifa's reminding us, and that's what I think is so lovely about Bea and [Clinton] Melton. Ifa's reminding us of the beauty of everyday lives inside of this land of daily diminishment and threat.

TMD: With the notion of ritual, I think about an offering. What would you like to offer up to the audience? What do you hope the audience will return in terms of energy in this ritual experience or this ritual theater experience of *benevolence*?

TALVIN WILKS: I think we often jump to conclusions about certain events and then those events become quite reductive, and we think we know them and that we understand them and that we move on, and I think what these, I call them these present day witnessings, these present day witnessings as ritual help us to understand, like I said, the everyday complexity of how these people lived their lives. We need to understand that beyond just the notion of guilt, the notion of violence, of ... we have to understand this is an everyday psychology that has a long-term impact on the way we think about ourselves as Americans, as citizens, as a collective humanity, and when that is often diminished and absent, we have to remind ourselves that this is us, this is how we have lived in places, it's how we continue to live, so when we have these present day reoccurrences of such events like Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown, that they're not anomalies. They don't just come out of the blue. They come out of everyday contexts that people are still living inside of these types of conditions where events, these racialized violent events can occur at any given minute, so that's what the wonderful thing about the theater does. The stage can give us this opportunity in ways I think other forms cannot. I call this the ritualized immediate, immediacy... it reminds us that we have to be diligent in our addressing of these circumstances and these conditions.

TMD: I agree. In James Baldwin's book "The Fire Next Time", he wrote, "The Negroes of this country may never be able to rise to power, but they are very well placed indeed to precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the American dream." Do you think that Ifa Bayeza as a playwright is also walking in this tradition of challenging the status quo, and writing work that "precipitates chaos to ring down this curtain on the American dream"? And as an artist do you seek to do the same?

TALVIN WILKS: There are two things inside of that. I am a devotee of Sir Baldwin as well, and definitely understand the lineage and appreciate seeing *benevolence* inside of that lineage, but I think from our vantage point in 2019 we have a particular perspective that's different than Baldwin's perspective, of course, but it does have those issues about these notions of power. I put into place notions of power and notions of humanity, because ultimately, is it really about power, or is it really about a greater understanding of our common humanity, that I think relegates power to a secondary place? I'm not so sure that the plays themselves are really about chaos to ring down the veil of the American dream, but they are about elucidating the importance of a common humanity that I think puts all of those things in check. So, it's yes ... it's part of it, but I don't feel it as conclusive as Baldwin was saying, per se, in what is it, '64 or '63, that particular point in time, but definitely Ifa as playwright and *benevolence* in its own particular trajectory are connected to that lineage of using, definitely using what the Negro can do, what black folks can do, but also what the black artist can do inside of that, if nothing else, we can

call it an agenda or call it an ongoing trajectory or an evolution.

TMD: In regard to the notion of agenda, as you've been getting ready to direct *benevolence*, are there some characters or character agendas that have been speaking to you more persistently than others?

TALVIN WILKS: I'm very interested in each playwright's particular sense of logic. I work a lot in what one would consider to be experimental theater, avant-garde, abstract, it's kind of been my historical landscape, and so inside of Ifa's play, I'm really trying to understand her sense of logic, how we move from one theme to the next, how are we propelled inside of the storytelling, what triggers that, because she doesn't work within a linear sense of time, memory can be just as strong as realism, just as strong as fantasy or flashbacks. They all, in many ways, carry an equal weight in the way she tells stories, so for me, I've been looking at who are the essential storytellers inside of the piece?

TALVIN WILKS: We just recently ... She was here in town and we had a wonderful conversation just about where we are in thinking about the work, and one of the things that she helped me conclude was this idea that in one way, she structures it as two and two. This relationship and then the second relationship, but it really comes down to one and one, that in both of the first act and the second act, the women are the essential storytellers. We navigate inside of their psychology, their imaginations, their dreams, they go through similar cycles in the arc, they transform in similar ways, they age in similar ways. They ultimately are our reflection, so I think the voices that are driving me in conceiving of the work are Caroline and Bea, that those two are my windows into the way the pieces are structured. So even in my conversation with designers, we've been talking about how do you heighten this sense of a character inside of their own contemplation, inside of their own psychology, inside of their own fantasy? It's easy to do that in film, but we're on the stage, so how do we heighten an audience understanding that we are inside of the imaginary? We are inside of the fantasy. Ifa loves to conflate reality with fantasy in the same moment, and these characters transform, and suddenly we're in one reality but the language reflects another. The actions then can reflect another. That's really how I'm anchoring what I would say the ritualized staging of Act One and Act Two and looking at the two women as being the central components of those ritualized journeys. In order to pull these pieces off, you have to find the balance of what I would say is the stylized staging. Ifa has you moving from one action to the next action with very minimal time and she loves time to be fluid, so you're not really looking at blackouts and restaging and then a new scene. You're utilizing the transitions from each scene as part of the ritual, or else I think you're in trouble. You have to figure out how to shift in these different places with a greater ease, so what we've been dealing with is how do we set the stage so that the transitions are as effortless as possible, and that if they are visible, they feel a part of the storytelling? We're not trying to mask anything. That then puts another kind of detail on everything that's there and within hands' reach and how do we shift and how do costume changes happen if they happen, what is the most minimal aspect that we can get away with that will allow the audience to know that we've had a passage of time, even if it's only happened within one second to the next? So those are the things now that sometimes it's a visual image that leads that idea. Sometimes it's a lighting shift. Sometimes it's going to be a soundscape. We're really now choreographing all of the design elements

as part of the storytelling...Because even Ifa talks about, when I ask her questions, about how you get from scene four to scene five, you're moving from a sensual, sexual interaction right to a court room scene. What's transpiring there? She gave me an interpretation of the physicality. One is the, shall we call it, it becomes ritualized when you start using it in this way, but the simple gesture of Caroline putting on her shoes or taking off her shoes for Ifa is a symbolic trigger that leads her to a place of seduction, sensuality, fantasy, just hearing her talk about, "When I was thinking of Caroline just repeating that gesture of putting on her shoes," it reminded me of the moment of putting on the shoe after the sexual engagement with Ray, and that triggers her, so when Breland tells her to put on these shoes, when she actually removes her shoes, she suddenly thinks of Ray, and that's what triggers the transition into that scene. Reading the text, you don't necessarily get that. It's like, "Huh? How did we go from here to here?" But, I know this is how Ifa thinks, so I'm always looking for her gestural vocabulary, because it's as important as the text itself.

Note for the Reader: Act I, Scene 3

Breland whips out another handkerchief and wipes his brow and gestures toward the shoebox then exits upstage. Caroline opens the box. Horrified at the shoes, she angrily puts the lid back, places the box to her right begins to take off her shoes.

... Okay, okay, I got it. Hand me the, the wrench.

Caroline hesitates ... then puts her hand in his.

Away from the click and hiss of cameras or perhaps cicadas, Caroline and Ray stand and face each other. They then begin to tidy themselves. She unfurls his shirt. He turns and from behind she helps him put it on. She smooths down the back, then takes her seat and begins to put on her shoes, straighten her collar. He stands, his back to us and to her, puts on tie and glasses, and then turns. Hunched over and handkerchief in hand, he becomes Mr. Breland as we return to ...

TMD: How would you describe the style of the piece?

TALVIN WILKS: I would call it ... it's a poetic ritual. I'm staging a poetic ritual. It's different than *Ballad* because *Ballad* was a bit more fluid in its musicality and there were many more aspects of show and performance. Actually, we were just talking about this yesterday, I had a conversation with Ifa because I had to ask her a question about music and how music is so recognized and identified inside of *Ballad*, and less so in *benevolence*. She mentioned the rhythms of the environment itself, the train, the train tracks, the whistle of the train, the whistle of the boy, the slamming of the door. Those sounds have become the percussive elements inside of *benevolence*. So, she doesn't really hear music per se in the same way that she did in *Ballad*. I think that's the other clue, that there's something very specific about the mechanics in *benevolence* that's different than ritual. The slam of

the door triggers something, the flash of a camera triggers something. There are very specific symbolic in ways, iconographic elements that she's utilizing to punctuate the way she's telling the story. Things are done in flashes and we arrive at different places, and then we shift in and out of those places, and we're called back into a moment... It's very filmic, of course, and that's part of some of its challenges as a stage piece, because some of its shifting in time is almost a filmic shift as opposed to a theatrical shift, so those are the things that we're trying to understand inside of live performance.

TMD: How do you think this will influence the movement of the actors when you talk about these triggers? It's almost as if these images and sounds become another character in the play. How do you foresee working with the actors so that they integrate or have a conversation with these sounds and various triggers?

TALVIN WILKS: I think a lot of it is going to have to be, I would call it a discovery of, shall we say, sense memory in a way, that the triggers have to be their triggers and the triggers have to trigger the right thing. They have to bring up the action that we want in any given time, so I think we're trying to be very, like I said, mechanical in breaking it down, all the different components, and then piecing it back together, and then find the fluid way so that it doesn't feel staccato, that it feels very natural and it's shifting even though the rhythm and the punctuation are there. They really have to turn on a dime. They have to drop in and drop out of these different characterizations and these different moments in time and these immediate moments of desire. It's also really thinking of theories of ritual, that wonderful scene when Bea is making biscuits—

TMD: Yes, in Act II, scene 6...

TALVIN WILKS: Yes. The flour, the kneading of the dough...

Note for the Reader:

Bea is busy in the kitchen, making biscuits. In a large mixing bowl, she combines flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt, then begins to cut butter into the mixture, slowly adding milk. She begins kneading the dough, all the while talking. Outside the sound of pelting rain, storm drains overrunning, occasional light flash followed by thunder.

TALVIN WILKS: Exactly. So much is revealed inside of the action...so that each of those moments, those beats or those scenes, so to speak, are really kind of their own ritual. They're doing something. They're trying to discover. I think with the actors... it's less acting, more discovery. It's discovering what is coming out of that act of kneading the dough that's magical, that's summoning a release... In many ways it's conjuring. That's what ritual does ultimately.

TMD: I'm so intrigued when you talk about this notion of conjuring and the idea of ritualized action. Do you foresee that this will impact the movement style of the piece?

TALVIN WILKS: Well, there's definitely already a sense of a very stylized kind of movement. I'm not sure

yet what it's going to look like. We're going to discover that together, but I do know that there's so many aspects of putting on and taking off, just the gestural, even as Ifa has described it, the notion of putting on glasses, taking off a jacket, rolling up the sleeves, changing the shirt, all of these things are visual acts that we watch and therefore they become these transformative acts. Even just trying to identify the transformation between Roy and Ray and back to Roy is going to be another kind of stylized, discovery, what is the physicality of Roy, what is the physicality of Ray, what is the sense of moving from one to the other, how does the audience recognize that the same actor is playing these multiple characters? So there's already this need to create a movement vocabulary that very strongly stamps the physicality of these very distinct characters, so that will be a part of it, and like I said, the act of putting things on and taking things off, definitely part of the gestural vocabulary, but also in the psychology, the psychological. I'm really using the soundscape a great deal to remind of us how we're thinking of the past and present because Ifa recognizes and identifies there are many people present, we just don't see them, so it's not even that the stage is peopled, but we only see two manifestations. When they're in the store, there are meant to be elements of people moving in, moving out, they address them, he attacks most of the black men, they're there, they're present, but we don't see them, so there's an energy that we have to manifest of a presence and an absence and how the player sort of enacts with that void so that you get a sense of a multiplicity of people even though we're only ever seeing at most two at a time. You can see there are many challenges that Ifa has set before us. These are the pieces that Sarah [Bellamy] throws my way because she knows they're the ones I have a hard time saying no to—they intrigue me. Most people know me as the artist who is very interested in making those discoveries inside of the process.

TMD:

I searched and found the word benevolence is only spoken two times in the script? What does the title *benevolence* mean to you? And what do you think is the plays' central concern?

TALVIN WILKS:

That's a fascinating one. I was interviewed a month or so ago with that one ... you're asking a different question, but someone was asking me about the title itself, and I just said that I just was not ready to answer that question. I don't know yet. There are those specific references inside of the play, but I'm still in search of fully realizing and understanding that meaning, but there's some things, there's a moment in the play that I understand so viscerally, and it came through inside of the audition process. The auditions were incredible. The play was just leaping off the page. The actors were really just stepping into it. I was just amazed. Those of us on the other side of the table watching the auditioners, we just were blown away at the power of stepping into the language and how it propels you, but there was just that one moment in particular in the second act when Melton is talking about the truck and the blood is jelly, and there was something ...

Note for the Reader:

Act II, Scene 4

MELTON

“Com’ere, lemme show you sompin,” he say I never seent blood like that befoah.

Smeared cross the bottom like they had dragged somethin' — "This what happen to smart niggus." He leaned on the truck. It shook. Like ... jelly it twas. It shook.

BEA

They just words, Clint. They just words.

MELTON

He leaned on the truck. It shook. Like ... jelly it twas. It shook.

I kept giving this note to the actors and I kept telling them, "I want you to tell this story like it's a ghost story, like it's a haunting, like you've seen the most disturbing thing you have ever imagined even though you're just seeing the after effects of it." The horror of the after effects alone are as traumatizing as if one had actually witnessed the act, so for me, that's what this place is. It's the horror of the after effects alone that are just as traumatizing, and that is what we are meant to experience. She doesn't depict the act. We did that in *Ballad*. Here, this is mostly all aftermath.

TMD: So, we're meant to experience the absence of *benevolence* and the aftermath of that. That is so powerful. Can you believe, we've been speaking for almost an hour—

TALVIN WILKS: Are you sure?

TMD: Yes. You are a fantastic storyteller. I love it.

TALVIN WILKS: I'm enjoying it just as much as you are. These things do help me because I carry an understanding of these things, but until I'm asked the question, I'm not sure that I've ever had to articulate it. I think I know what I'm talking about-

TMD: As we wrap up our time together, do you have a particular question that you wish I had asked you?

TALVIN WILKS: Not necessarily. This has been a wonderful conversation. The one thing that always challenges me, even with *Ballad* and *Reception* and *benevolence* and the telling of these stories, is that I'm curious about what people take away with them. What are they compelled to do? As an audience member are you compelled in any fashion to change, to respond, to act, to engage? Especially when you're dealing with a play that's wrestling with elements of historical fact, and the witnessing of these events. What do we do with [this story]? Where do we go from here, so to speak? Do these plays propel us, or compel us to think about how we act or understand or change? I'm not satisfied with the notion of, "Oh, I just didn't know." I want us to know better and to do better around this, what I call this suppressed history. I know this isn't really another question. It's just what I'm still left with, am wrestling with, when one thinks of the purpose of plays of this nature, even in the realm of what we consider theatre, on one level as being entertaining or cathartic or revelatory. You do want there to be some hope out of the knowing or the witnessing. That's the positive of it. *benevolence*, I think...is much darker than *Ballad*. You want to come up, but it shows the immediate continuation of the level of violence that existed and still exists...We think we've come so far, yet these

situations remind us, that we still are, at any given moment just one step away from these acts, these events.

TMD: These are excellent questions and insights. I believe this production will help the audience discover, as you mentioned a few moments ago, “this suppressed history.” You and Ifa Bayeza are giving us a significant charge. Thank you. And thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. It was truly enlightening.

TALVIN WILKS: I so appreciate your effort and care in guiding this conversation. It was elucidating for me as well, so thank you very much.

TMD: Take care. Have a wonderful day.

TALVIN WILKS: You take care as well.

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The Gift within *benevolence*

by Leslie Scott-Jones

The second installment of the trilogy about Emmett Till by Ifa Bayeza is a gift of understanding told through the feminine psyche. The story of Till's murder often starts with descriptors of his body and concludes with a recounting of events as they unfolded. This play focuses on the pressure points unknown to most of us who may have found it unsettling to go deeper into the story. Taking into account the place and attitudes, these points are used by Bayeza to tell a more nuanced story. This play embodies the true meaning of its title, *benevolence*. This gift is the feminine understanding of a segregated, intricate story about the tragedy of oppression in Mississippi while navigating marriage and love.

Understanding deliberate word choices or omissions and how they play their own role within the play dictates specific definitions. Benevolence is defined as well-meaning and kindly, charitable rather than profit-making. Love is a strong feeling of affection. Racism is *"the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by white supremacy."*¹⁵

Mississippi 1955, the murder of Emmett Till and the weeks and months following would be a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement. His murder and the subsequent trial galvanized Black people to resist and called them to action. It was a call heard by the likes of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Selma Clarke, Diane Nash, and countless others, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which then lead to a large-scale mobilization of resistance.

These three elements, benevolence, love, and racism, converge to tell us a story we have a passing understanding of, yet have never *really* listened to before. The Jim Crow laws governing mainstream society and the society of marriage demand that women act and react a certain way. The distinctiveness and similarity illustrated between Bea Melton and Caroline Bryant is an original and crucial portal into understanding how brutal oppression can be, what it creates, and what it can leave in its wake.

The parallels drawn between Caroline and Bea illustrate how women, in particular, are forced to navigate within a society constructed without their input. Though not discussed, we are aware of the ever-presence of abuse in relationships which we now term intimate partner violence. Between 1995 and 2015, over 50% victimizations reported to police in the United States was intimate partner violence. Of those victimizations, 48% would be physical or sexual. The National Crime Victimization Survey estimates that in 37% of reported instances the victim is a white woman and 45% of reported cases the victim is a black woman.¹⁶ No woman has ever believed she is alone in this experience. However, in 1955 within the throes of trying to raise children, working, and community obligations, keeping up the appearances of a happy marriage proves easier than revealing the truth. The truth of marital oppression is messy and bothersome and would only bring ruin to the female reputation. It is a loneliness that only women knew, only women could experience. Rebellion behind the closed doors of the master bedroom, or imposing oppression onto someone else, was a way to maintain some semblance of sanity. It also ensured the survival of the all-important 1950's version of the family. This

¹⁵ Lawrence, Keith, Aspen Institute on Community Change and Terry Keleher, Applied Research Center at UC Berkeley For the Race and Public Policy Conference. 2004

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, NISVS, psychological aggression includes: name calling, insulting or humiliating an intimate partner, and behaviors that are intended to monitor, control, or threaten an intimate partner. Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, Concatenated File, 1992-2015. 2018

malignancy within marriage devoured any kindness between couples like a cancer.

Accordingly, the oppressors halt by any method (including violence) any action which in even incipient fashion could awaken the oppressed to the need for unity. Concepts such as unity, organization, and struggle are immediately labeled as dangerous. In fact, of course, these concepts are dangerous – to the oppressors – for their realization is necessary to actions of liberation.¹⁷

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire highlights how white people are put into a divide and conquer attitude, believing in their superiority, and therefore allowed to create a reality, an alibi, to justify their cruelty. The malignant myth of white supremacy brainwashes the oppressor to cling to these beliefs in hopes that one day they will benefit. The two women in *benevolence*, face the same kind of malignancy in their relationships, but they experience it in distinct ways, to varying degrees, and with very different outcomes. From a perspective most of us have never perceived before, we are invited to unravel the intricacies of this tale.

“In the dark before dawn

Two couples

Prepare

To face the day

And each other”

-benevolence by Ifa Bayeza

Female Struggle within Privilege

When we meet Caroline Bryant, she is feisty and sarcastic to her brother-in-law, Ray. She has no problem being openly defiant to him, talking down to him as if he is there to serve her. As we find out later, he does serve her by giving her the lustful affection she cannot get from her marriage, which is a luxury afforded to her as a white woman, that would rarely, if ever, be provided to a black woman during this time. Within Caroline’s world of privilege, she is allowed to take out her frustrations with her marriage on other people. A white woman knows that she can kill with a word, without lifting a finger. Caroline, as the wife of a storeowner, inside the white community has even higher status.

As soon as her husband Roy Bryant enters, Caroline becomes obliging, even sexually aggressive, despite her anger about working instead of being at home. She transforms for several reasons. First, if he responds sexually to her, the odds are Roy was faithful while he was gone. Second, over years of living in this type of relationship, Caroline has learned the things she must be and do in order to get through the day unscathed by Roy’s wrath. That is, while certainly not impossible, it is a challenge for a man to be physically and emotionally abusive to a woman while engaged in sex. Finally, she transforms because he might have accused her of being unfaithful, as any wife in an abusive relationship might be if she wasn’t sexually compliant toward her husband.

Nothing can protect Caroline from Roy’s anger and self-loathing. He drags her around by her wrist, yells at her until she tells him what he wants to know—all under the threat of violence. Her survival threatened, she relents. Within the context of 1950’s America, (the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement and Jim Crow) Caroline has few choices. To preserve herself, she is forced to acquiesce to her oppressor husband. Even though she has privilege within the constructs of society, it is albeit limited by the era’s marital construct.

The coveting of the white woman by the Black man, as assimilation or rebellion, has a long history. Eldridge Cleaver speaks of another fallout of the white supremacy myth experienced by Black men in his book,

¹⁷ Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic. 2018 pg. 141

Soul on Ice.

My interest in this area persisted undiminished and then, in 1955, an event took place in Mississippi which turned me inside out: Emmett Till, a young Negro down from Chicago on a visit, was murdered, allegedly for flirting with a white woman...I was, of course, angry over the whole bit, but one day I saw in a magazine a picture of the white woman with whom Emmett Till was said to have flirted. While looking at the picture, I felt that little tension in the center of my chest I experience when a woman appeals to me...I arrived at the conclusion that, as a matter of principle, it was paramount importance for me to have an antagonistic, ruthless attitude toward white women.¹⁸

The purity of white women in American society was established long before Emmett Till walked into a general store in the Mississippi Delta. Caroline's loneliness compelled her to accept the advances from this Black boy, although it was a gamble that necessitated her telling of the instance in a certain way and his eventual kidnapping and murder.

In the end, Caroline was able to divorce. What we learn about her life and how she navigates it in *benevolence*, comes only through loneliness, lust, anger, and subjugation. Roy, her husband, his brother and Caroline's lover Ray, and even Caroline herself never use the word love when speaking of each other or any relationships.

Female Struggle without Privilege

"Like the land in its time, the play is segregated."

-benevolence by Ifa Bayeza

Just as Act Two is the mirror to Act One, Bea is the mirror to Caroline. In Act Two, we see a similar story, from a Black perspective. We see Bea laying out sewing work on the bed, making dolls. She is in a marriage that, until recently, has been loving and warm. She has been forced to reevaluate her marriage. Her husband, Melton, has fathered a child out of wedlock. Once again, we experience a woman tied to a relationship that involves betrayal, and the malignancy created is a burden for the woman to carry. As she stitches the doll back together, she ascertains that she can do the same with her relationship. Unlike Caroline and Roy, who are allowed to keep their secrets, Bea has to endure the humiliation of her peers knowing. In this "land" that Bayeza illuminates, Bea knows that this is a reflection on her, not him.

"You hurt me, Mel, like you reached in my chest and pulled out my heart still beatin ... I don't even feel it. I don't feel nothin. That's why I'm mad the most. You stole my heart. Again. Thief in the night. Go on back to your darkness. Nothin left for you here....You make the mess. I am stuck with the clutter. Altar to my failure."

-Bea Melton, benevolence

Bea knows she has to wear this scarlet letter that is not of her making. She has to find a way to hold her head high when everyone will look down on her. The difference between Caroline and Bea is privilege, the weight that systemic racism asks Black women to carry. Bea has to carry her oppression, oppression from her husband and ease her husband's oppression from the outside world. While Caroline dons a sexual mask as the performative aspect of her broken heart and the way she survives her loveless marriage, Bea is not afforded the same. White society will dismiss Bea as an illustration of the worthlessness of Black folk and Black society will speak of her in hushed tones because she "couldn't keep her man at home." All the while, Bea is relegated to what Hanif Abdurraqib describes in his essay, *Rumours and the Currency of Heartbreak*:

¹⁸ Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice*, Dell Publishing. 1992. pg.28-31

"...Heartbreak is akin to a brief and jarring madness. Keeping up the fight - any fight - to not have to reckon with your own sorrow isn't ideal, but it might help to keep a familiar voice in your ears a bit longer than letting go would." 19

As a Black woman, Bea turns to the Black church for refuge, which is the performative way she can quell the humiliation from Melton's transgression. Bea's church involvement emboldens the Black community with pity, thereby ensuring her survival. It is the performative aspect of a broken heart that can become addictive and therefore normalized by society. Reactions in familial and romantic relationships are acted out in certain ways, more than experienced. The family could not survive without Melton, the only real breadwinner. While neither woman can survive without the performance, genuine or not, and Bea cannot leave for the same reasons as Caroline. Bea rebels behind the doors of her marital bedroom and she tells Melton that she can no longer trust him. He will not be invited back to her bed, because as much as she tries to forgive, she cannot forget.

Bea's predicament is then elevated when Melton reveals he knows the details of the murder of a young Black boy perpetrated by white men. Melton recounts the nightmare of seeing the body, the blood, and being forced to clean up behind the white men who did it. As he professes his need to make things right by coming forward, Bea must stop him. No matter how betrayed and angry she feels, Bea knows she cannot allow Melton to come forward. She is forced to ingratiate herself to her oppressor, her husband, to save his life and in turn save the life she has, however imperfect. Additionally, his secret has now become hers. She knows the pain of losing a child, yet, she is not allowed to give any peace to another Black mother by allowing the truth to come out.

BEA: You think that's where it is? In fatherin another woman's child? Spittin' in the face of my misery, our last not cold in the ground? The grief I feel cannot measure to the anger I have toward you. Now, you that chile's father on top on your own. What lesson you gon show him?

Bea has to carry Melton's grief about his oppression. Black women, viewed as disproportionately strong compared to Black men, become saviors, which created a syndrome within the Black community, "The Black Superwoman," which songs have been written to dispel. Michelle Wallace best explains it in her book *"Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman"* as a woman who has "inordinate strength" and is "stronger emotionally than most men." *The Black nationalist movement, she said, viewed women as "one of the main reasons the black man had never been properly able to take hold of his situation in this country."* ²⁰

When Melton says,

"I need you to be strong, Bea. I need you to be strong for me.",

she has no choice but to comply. Bea's attempt to save her husband and family is unsuccessful. Is Melton shot to death to eliminate a witness to their crime? Similarly, did Bea get run off the road or drive off the road, which is emblematic of the plight of Black people in America? Are we driven off the road by a system, or do we choose to leave to avoid the system? Or is the death poised at the end of a gun barrel patiently waiting for us to speak of freedom?

Love: Benevolent or Malignant?

¹⁹ Abdurraqib, Hanif. *Rumours and the Currency of Heartbreak in They Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us*. Two Dollar Radio. 2017. pg. 165-171

²⁰ Author unlisted <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/02/16/black-history-month-the-myth-of-the-black-superwoman-revisited/>. Feb. 16, 2011

Love can be transcendent, transformative and it can also be tremendously destructive. Black love means more than a simple attraction or infatuation. Segregation, white supremacy, and systemic racism make Black love a revolutionary act, no matter the outcome. To endure and thrive under this system is our legacy, not the oppression, and that is the story we need to be proud of and tell more frequently.

In *benevolence*, the outcome of Black love is a woman who remembers how much her parents loved each other. Deloris, Bea and Melton's daughter, recalls her mother's nickname, her house, hugs from her father, and that her mother cooked dinner only eaten when her father came home. She remembers the love. Talvin Wilks, the director of *benevolence*, talks about how he approached the play, with Bayeza's guidance, through the presence and voices of the women. Insight into situations and relationships, the inner voices, are from the feminine perspective.

Most deliberate in this play is the use of words, who says them, and to whom they refer. Love is mentioned nine times in the script. Black characters are the users, and they only use it when speaking of Bea Melton, the heartbroken woman who forgets her pain to try and save her husband's life. There are seven instances of benevolence, (five of which are stage directions,) said once by Bea and again by her daughter. Are they crying out for it? Are they stating that they cannot enjoy it even if offered on their side of the segregation line? Is this gift, this well-meant kindness, something that they dream of as a distant possibility they are working toward, only to be derailed by life? Alternatively, is the death poised at the end of a gun barrel patiently waiting for us to speak of freedom?

Self-love, activism, romantic, altruistic, no matter what form love comes in it has the same possibility to take us from the highest heights to the lowest lows. When we see how Bea and Melton meet, there are soft, loving and respectful words spoken between them. There is a reverence he gives her, and she returns it.

MELTON: I am ... moved by you, by your story, the mystery of it, the softness and sorrow I see, the truth of it, but I fear you will find my words unworthy. Unwanted?

BEA: I dream sometimes. They tell me things. Don't tell preachuh. He'll make it out to be something it aint ... Dreamed bout you. I seen you comin', Clinton Melton. I couldn't make out your face. But seen your overalls. Highwater and everythang. Yup, your overalls and your hands. I said, Oh, that's not lookin' like a gentle man ... Just goes to show. Dreams only offer up a little part. Life to fill up the rest I guess.

After his betrayal of their wedding bed, Bea cannot let go of the anger planted in the middle of her relationship.

BEA: (What he sees in that woman, what he doesn't see in me anymore? Fixed up muhself. Put on a nightgown). And fuh what!) WHAT! (Heart actin up today.)

Through Caroline and Bea, we enter their relationships, altered by the actions of their partners and the construct of Jim Crow within Mississippi. Caroline must point out the Black boy to her racist husband to prove she did not like the attention he gave her. Bea must throw all her attention to the church to save face within her community. Bell Hooks, in her book, *Salvation* posits, "Since our leaders and scholars agree that one measure of the crisis black people are experiencing is lovelessness, it should be evident that we need a body of literature, both sociological and physiological work, addressing the issue of love among black people, its relevance to political struggle, its meaning in our private lives."²¹ This play illustrates these couples' attempts to survive in love and in crisis. It is the telling of the varied and complicated stories of love. Each pair, from heartbreak, loneliness, fear, anger, or numbness chooses their path and accepts the consequences of their actions. The tragic intricacy of love and life are seen and felt through the women's interaction with the world.

Audre Lorde in her essay *Scratching the Surface* said, "The supposition that one sex needs the other's

²¹Hooks, Bell *Salvation: Black People and Love*, Harper Collins Publishers. 2001 pg. 5

acquiescence in order to exist prevents both from moving together as self-defined persons toward a common goal."²² *benevolence* illuminates how neither member of the couple is allowed to define themselves without the other. It is also a statement about white supremacy and whiteness cannot exist without Blackness. Oppression occurs with belief in the myth of white supremacy and adherence to a patriarchal societal structure. White supremacy creates "other" by marking its difference to Blackness, then goes about explaining why Blackness is inferior, therefore making whiteness superior. The same logic happens within a marriage, no matter the race of the people involved. One half is seen as more important, making the other by default less critical. This hierarchy can create a malignancy that chokes kindness to death. In the case of this story, this loss of breath happens from inside and outside the relationship. Roy's cruelty and Melton's transgression shapes one tendril around the lung. The murder and secret forms the second proverbial hand encapsulating the couples. Both steeped in white supremacy and systemic racism. This strangling originates with the actions or witness of men and is deposited on the lap of women for them to "fix". The only constant is the persistent, searing light of Black love, presented for our consideration, for our mending, and for our benevolence.

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**EXTRA! EXTRA!
SPECIAL
THANKS**

Penumbra Theatre
The *benevolence* Creative Team

"Mississippi lead the South in an extraordinary battle to maintain racial segregation. Whites set up powerful citizens groups and state agencies to fight the civil rights movement. Their tactics were fierce and, for a time, very effective."

- KATE ELLIS AND STEPHEN SMITH

Mississippi: A Place Apart²³

by Kate Ellis and Stephen Smith

Mississippi occupies a distinct and dramatic place in the history of America's civil rights movement. No state in the South was more resistant to the struggle for black equality. No place was more violent. As historian David Oshinsky states, "vengeance, the effects of poverty, ignorance, and isolation had all left their bloody mark. Mississippians earned less, killed more, and died younger than other Americans."

Likewise, Mississippi set the trend in racial oppression. As historian Charles Payne recounts in detail, the state had the highest rate of lynchings, recording 539 between the end of Reconstruction and the early 1960s. Historian Neil McMillen

describes Mississippi as the most "racially restrictive state" in the South, though one with comparatively few Jim Crow segregation laws. They weren't needed. "Where popular convention and white sensibilities governed virtually every phase of interracial contact, there was little cause legally to separate black from white," McMillen explains. "Indeed, so powerful was the force of custom that even the legal pretense of equality in separation was unnecessary."

In the first half of the 20th century, Mississippi more nearly resembled a feudal society than anyplace else in America. In the state's plantation economy, conditions for many black farm workers weren't much better than slavery. African Americans had virtually no education, no rights and no legal recourse against whites who exploited, cheated or attacked them.

Social transformations following World War II that affected all of the South were especially potent in Mississippi. The increasing mechanization of farm work made for substantial dislocation among whites and blacks in the state. Thousands upon thousands left the land to find work. "In cities, blacks and whites competed for jobs, housing, recreation and seats on public transportation, and the problem of the color line assumed pressing urgency," historian Pete Daniel writes. Like African Americans across the South, many returning to Mississippi from military service had experienced life in other countries with far less racial prejudice. Having fought to secure democratic freedoms abroad, they were determined to fight for freedom at home. With African Americans making up roughly half the population, Mississippi whites were terrified of losing political control. "As [civil rights] demonstrations swirled through the South," Pete Daniel writes, "Mississippi whites stood out as the most obstinate and violent in the protection of segregation."

When the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision outlawing school segregation, whites across the South vowed never to send their youngsters to school with black children. They



CIRCA 1959: people holding signs and American flags protesting the admission of the "Little Rock Nine" to Central High School. Source: [Teen Vogue](https://www.teenvogue.com)

²³ Excerpt from: American Public Media. "State of Siege: Mississippi Whites and the Civil Rights Movement." APM Reports - Investigations and Documentaries from American Public Media, American Public Media, americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/mississippi/a1.html

launched a campaign known as "massive resistance." Southern white legislators and school boards enacted laws and policies to evade and defy the Court's ruling. As Richard Kluger writes in *Simple Justice*, "the South interpreted 'all deliberate speed' to mean 'any conceivable delay'." In 1956, nearly every congressman in the deep South—101 in total—signed the Southern Manifesto declaring the Brown decision, "a clear abuse of judicial power." Law-abiding Southerners who once justified Jim Crow with the Court's *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision now defied the Court's authority. Opponents of the Brown decision argued that the federal government had no power to force states to integrate schools. The state's rights argument had been a Southern rallying cry against the emancipation of slaves 100 years earlier. It was central to the South's battle against Reconstruction after the Civil War. Now, the state's rights banner was unfurled in a campaign against school desegregation. Where local laws could no longer keep black and white children from attending the same schools, organized white people would.

The virulence of racial oppression in Mississippi during Jim Crow was equaled by the force of white opposition to desegregation. Historian Neil McMillen writes, "In terms of preparedness for organized resistance to the Supreme Court's mandate of May 17, 1954, white Mississippians were, indeed, in a class by themselves."

The danger of challenging Jim Crow in Mississippi led the state to produce more than its share of powerful civil rights leaders, including Fannie Lou Hamer, James Meredith, Medgar Evers, Aaron Henry and many others. These seemingly ordinary people were propelled by a conviction that the racial order had to change. Activist and Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party leader Fannie Lou Hamer described her determination: "Sometimes it seems like to tell the truth today is to run the risk of being killed. But if I fall, I'll fall five feet four inches forward in the fight for freedom. I'm not backing off that and no one will have to cover the ground I walk as far as freedom is concerned."

The civil rights battle in Mississippi also produced its share of white warriors—a majority devoted to preserving segregation at almost any cost. Arrayed against civil rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and others, was a potent combination of segregationist forces, especially the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, the Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan.

These white supremacy organizations used many techniques, including surveillance, severe economic reprisals, and brutal violence to thwart civil rights activists. Likewise, these groups were quick to ostracize whites who didn't openly join their ranks or support their cause. "Not unlike pro-slavery zealots of the 1850s," Neil McMillen writes, "the pro-segregationists of a century later were inclined to brook no latter-day abolitionism among fellow southerners...In this repressive atmosphere the moderate was vilified and he who was found 'soft' on integration was adjudged treasonous."

The Mississippi Citizens' Council effectively "closed Mississippi," writes historian Joseph Crespino. "They policed a white racial authoritarianism that ran roughshod over the civil and political rights of white and black Mississippians both. Because of the Council's influence, no place in the United States...came closer to resembling the repressiveness of apartheid South Africa than did Mississippi."

Medgar Evers is interviewing Beulah Melton about the murder of her husband, Clinton Melton, in 1955. Mrs. Melton died (likely killed) before she could testify. This is one of many murder cases Evers investigated. Photo: Library of Congress.

Mississippi Reckoning²⁴

by Kate Siber

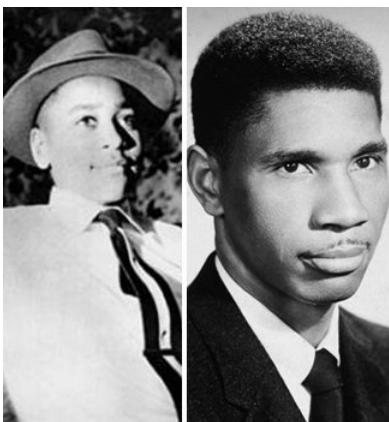
When 14-year-old Emmett Till left Chicago for Mississippi on a southbound train in the summer of 1955, he almost forgot to kiss his mother goodbye. The bright-eyed youth was excited for a big trip to visit his great-uncle, Mose Wright, a sharecropper and preacher who lived in a small home near Money, a Mississippi Delta whistle stop.

Till was a confident, fun-loving kid, quick to play pranks and joke around. He loved baseball and had a soft spot for animals. His mother, Mamie Till Bradley, knew he was unaware of the Jim Crow mores of the South and how dangerous it could be there for African-American children like him. Before he left, she tried to impress upon him that Mississippi was different. “Even though you think you’re perfectly within your right, for goodness sake take low,” she said, according to subsequently published accounts. “If necessary, get on your knees and beg apologies.”

It took all day to travel 650 miles to Mississippi, and Till was flowing over with excitement, barely able to sit still. In the great alluvial plain of the Delta, agricultural fields stretched as far as Till could see, punctuated by small coves and the occasional rural settlement. In the depths of August, stifling heat hung heavily over the land, some of the most fertile in the world.

With his cousins, Till fished and swam and horsed around. Then one evening, they went to a local store, Bryant’s Grocery, and just before leaving, Till allegedly whistled at the 21-year-old white proprietor, Carolyn Bryant, breaking one of the South’s most notorious taboos.

A few days later, Till was sleeping when the men came for him. In the predawn darkness, the family could see the gun in the beam of the white men’s flashlight. Wright and his wife, Elizabeth, begged them not to take their nephew. But the men ordered the boy to get dressed, led him out of the house and into a vehicle, possibly a truck, and drove west on gravel roads with the headlights off. Several days later, a fisherman found Till’s body, grossly disfigured from torture, in the Tallahatchie River. Someone had tied a 70-pound cotton gin fan to his neck, hoping he would never be seen again.



Left: Emmett Till, Right: Medgar Evers

But unlike so many African Americans in Mississippi who were murdered, Emmett Till was not forgotten. [Mamie] Till Bradley had his body shipped north for the funeral and then demanded that the casket remain open during the viewing and service, so the world could see what white racists had done to her son. Jet magazine subsequently published photographs of Till’s mangled corpse accompanied by his devastated mother, laying bare the racial realities of the Jim Crow South. Till’s murder sparked international outrage and, according to many scholars, helped catalyze the modern Civil Rights Movement. When she refused to give up her seat on the bus, Rosa Parks said she had Till on her mind.

“The stories of Medgar Evers and Emmett Till are very important chapters in both Mississippi and U.S. history,” said Alan Spears, cultural resources director at NPCA. “Our hope is that we can commemorate their legacies

without tying such an administrative action to a rollback of existing national monuments.”

²⁴ Siber, Kate. “Mississippi Reckoning.” National Parks Conservation Association, National Parks Conservation Association, Jan. 2019, <http://www.npsca.org/articles/2020-mississippi-reckoning>.

Though some Mississippians would prefer to sweep the state's disturbing civil rights history from view, that resistance has lessened over time, and there is widespread support for new park sites in the state, whether they are established through the Park Service study or other avenues. "I think there's a hunger for people, black and white, to know the story — in Mississippi and everywhere," said Jerry Mitchell, the journalist whose investigative reporting at The Clarion-Ledger in Jackson helped bring some of Mississippi's most notorious Klansmen to justice, including Medgar Evers' killer.

During the slavery era, Mississippi was known as a particularly violent state, perhaps because of the sheer effort required to tame this fertile, forested, swampy land and the incredible wealth at stake. After the Civil War, slavery ended in name, but the system of violent subordination remained. One of the most gut-wrenching displays in the museum is a glowing list of names of the people lynched in the state. According to a placard, between 1877 and 1950, Mississippi mobs murdered 600 people, many of whom were tormented in carnival-like affairs that white families, including young children, attended. No other state can claim as brutal a history of lynching.

The extrajudicial violence that enforced racial oppression continued in different forms as the Civil Rights Movement gained steam. Just north of downtown Jackson, Medgar Evers' trim turquoise home sits on a serene, leafy street. Evers was serving as the first field secretary for the Mississippi NAACP when a white supremacist shot him in his driveway with a high-powered rifle one evening in 1963. His wife and children heard the gunfire from inside the house. No ambulance ever came for him, and when he was taken to the nearest hospital, the staff almost didn't treat him because of the color of his skin. Evers died within 40 minutes of arriving.

Now a museum operated by Tougaloo College, the house is open by appointment. Minnie White Watson, the sole staff member, was a freshman in college when she first met Medgar Evers, whom she described as gentle and hardworking. Hearing him speak opened her eyes to the civil rights struggle, and she worked with him briefly. Now she gives tours of the home and tells his story — but she doesn't much like talking about her own involvement. "I get emotional," she said.

Evers, a World War II veteran, saw and experienced injustice and violence throughout his life. As a kid, he knew that a black boy who had dared to venture to the whites-only fair in his town had been lynched. While working as an insurance salesman as a young man, he had witnessed the deep poverty of people who still lived in dirt-floor houses in plantation-style servitude, and that helped shape him into an activist. He went on to organize voter registration drives and boycotts in the 1950s and '60s and investigated Emmett Till's murder for the NAACP. The Evers' house received numerous threats, from menacing phone calls to a Molotov cocktail.

"We would ask questions of Medgar — 'Why are you doing it?'" Watson said. "He said it was on his shoulders. Somebody has to do it." Evers knew that he lived with a target on his back, she said, but he was committed to the cause. His conviction inspired others.

"If I die, it will be in a good cause.

I've been fighting for America just as much as the soldiers in Vietnam.

I do not believe in violence either by whites or Negroes. That is why I am working tirelessly with the NAACP in a peaceful struggle for justice."

—MEDGAR EVERS



Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers²⁵

by Frank X Walker

Introduction to Poems

Much of Mississippi's and the South's past is characterized by increased resistance to white supremacy in the face of overt and subtle racism that resulted in a multitude of crimes. These include crimes against the body, crimes against property, the collusion of public and private institutions in preventing access and opportunity to all people, and conspiracies of silence that continue today. This collection of poems seeks to interrupt that silence and shine a light to the important legacy of a civil rights icon all too often omitted from summaries of the era, by giving voice to a particular chapter in this history from multiple and often divergent points of view.

On June 12, 1963, in Jackson, Mississippi, Medgar Evers, the head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Mississippi, was shot in the back by Byron De La Beckwith in his own driveway and died soon after being transported to a nearby hospital by neighbors. This was the first in a series of high profile assassinations that would cast a shadow on civil rights activities in American in the early 1960s.

The primary speakers in the narrative are Byron De La Beckwith, Medgar Evers's assassin; Beckwith's wives, Mary Louise (Willie) and Thelma De La Beckwith; Medgar Evers's brother, Charles; Evers's widow, Myrlie Evers; and a sixth voice that works like a Greek chorus. Medgar Evers's voice is silent beyond lifting his final words, ". . . turn me loose," for the title, but his presence, like a ghost, speaks loudly throughout the poems.

I believe acknowledging and working to fully understand history can create opportunities to better understand racism. I offer these imagined poems in hope that art can help complete the important work we continue to struggle with—the access to economic and social justice that Medgar Evers and so many others died for, and ultimately the healing and reconciliation still needed in America.

Heavy Wait

by Frank X Walker

If Mississippi is to love her elephant self
she needs a memory as sharp as her ivory tusks
with as many wrinkles as her thick thick past.

If she forgets, she need only reach back,
caress her keloid skin, and run her fingers across
the Braille history raised on her spine
or the bruised couplets around her supple neck.

For Mississippi to love her elephant self,
she need only open her blue/gray eyes and move.

Move, as if she carries the entire weight of history
and southern guilt on her massive head.

Move, in any direction, as long as it is forward.

For Mississippi to love her elephant self,
she must ask for, extend, and receive
forgiveness.

But she must never ever ever forget.

²⁵ Walker, Frank X. *Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers*. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2013.

Getting Away With Murder²⁶

by Public Broadcasting Service



Carolyn Bryant, Courtesy:
Chicago Defender

Roy and Carolyn Bryant and J. W. Milam will always be linked to the 1955 murder of Emmett Till. In the minds of many, they live in history as the trio that got away with murder

Southern Beauty

Carolyn Bryant, the daughter of a plantation manager and a nurse, hailed from Indianola, Mississippi, the nucleus of the segregationist and supremacist white Citizens' Councils. A high school dropout, she won two beauty contests and married Roy Bryant, an ex-soldier.

Store Serving Blacks

The couple ran a small grocery, Bryant's Grocery & Meat Market, that sold provisions to black sharecroppers and their children. The store was located at one end of the main street in the tiny town of Money, the heart of the cotton-growing Mississippi Delta. They had two sons and lived in two small rooms in the back of the store.

"Handling" Blacks

To earn extra cash, Roy worked as a trucker with his half-brother J. W. Milam, an imposing man of six feet two inches, weighing 235 pounds. Milam prided himself on knowing how to "handle" blacks. He had served in World War II and received combat medal.

Incident at the Store

On the evening of August 24, 1955, Emmett Till went with his cousins and some friends to Bryant's Grocery for refreshments after picking cotton in the hot sun. The boys went into the store one or two at a time to buy soda pop or bubble gum. Emmett walked in and bought two cents' worth of bubble gum. Though exactly what happened next is uncertain, Emmett flirted with, whistled at, or touched the hand or waist of Carolyn. She stormed out of the store. The kids outside said she was going to get a pistol. Frightened, Emmett and his group left.



Bryant's Grocery & Meat Market, Courtesy: Chicago Defender

Men Outraged

Carolyn told her sister-in-law, Juanita, who was in the back of the store with their children, what had happened. They agreed not to tell their husbands, who were out of town on a trucking job. When Roy and J. W. returned, one of the kids at the scene told them what had occurred. In the Deep South, an environment where the divisions between blacks and whites were severely defined, Roy and his half-brother decided Emmett had crossed the line and needed to be taught a lesson.

²⁶ "Getting Away with Murder." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/emmett-biography-roy-carolyn-bryant-and-jw-milam/.

Crime in the Night



Bryant and Milam, Courtesy: AP/Wide World

At about 2:30 a.m. on August 28, under the cover of darkness, the two white men showed up at **Moses Wright's** home, where Emmett was staying, and took him away. Wright said he saw a person in the car, possibly Carolyn, who helped identify Emmett. The boy's corpse would be found several days later, disfigured and decomposing in the Tallahatchie River. Moses Wright could identify the body only by an initialed ring, which had belonged to Emmett's father, Louis Till.

Savage -- But Supported

Bryant and Milam had already been rounded up as murder suspects, and Southern papers were decrying the "savage crime." Yet Northern outrage prompted many Southerners to resent outside agitators and rally in support of the suspects. When Bryant and Milam could not afford a legal defense, five local lawyers stepped up to represent the two suspects *pro bono*.

The Trial

When the **trial** opened in September, the national and international press descended on the scene.

Roy, Carolyn and J. W. became celebrities. Some reporters talked about Roy and Carolyn's "handsome looks" and J. W.'s tall stature and big cigars. They even alluded to Carolyn as "Roy Bryant's most attractive wife" and a "crossroads Marilyn Monroe."

During the trial, the families arrived with their sons dressed in their Sunday best. Roy and J.W. in starched white shirts while their wives donned cotton dresses. Many whites in the surrounding counties showed up to watch the show. They brought their children, picnic baskets and ice cream cones. Meanwhile, African American spectators were relegated to the back and looked on in fear.

Carolyn testified under oath, but outside the presence of the jury, that Emmett said "ugly remarks" to her before whistling.

Confession

When they were acquitted, the men later sold their story for \$4,000 to reporter William Bradford Huie. Two of their defense attorneys helped facilitate the interview that was published in **Look** magazine in January 1956. After the town's show of support at the trial, the men talked freely about how they killed the young teen from Chicago. But soon after the article came out, both men were ostracized.

Ostracism

Blacks stopped frequenting groceries owned by both the Bryant and Milam families. The stores soon went out of business. Unable to find work, Roy took his family to East Texas and attended welding school. His half-brother J. W. followed him soon after. Years later, both men would return to Mississippi.

A Revealing Interview

John Whitten, one of their defense attorneys, told National Public Radio's *Soundprint* program in a 1994 interview that he later regretted defending the case. "I'm not proud of it," Whitten said. "I wished I had never been associated with it."

Roy Bryant was also interviewed for the same *Soundprint* program. Legally blind and plagued with back trouble, he refused to talk about the case. Even though he was protected by double jeopardy, he still feared he would

have to pay for his crime before he died.

"Let that goddamn stuff die," Bryant said. "Look what they done with Beckwith. And now they want to get me, well, to hell with them. I'm not gon' talk about it. Can't ever tell what they might do nowadays, they might change the Constitution."

(White supremacist Byron de la Beckwith was convicted of murder in 1994, 31 years after assassinating black NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers.)

Embittered, Roy also claimed that his half-brother J. W. got all the money from the *Look* deal. "A lot of people made a bunch of money off of this. I ain't never made a damn nickel."

In 1981, Milam died of cancer of the bone. In August 1994, shortly after the *Soundprint* interview, Roy Bryant died of cancer.

No one ever did time for Emmett Till's murder.



The Meltons of Glendora²⁷

by Susan Klopfer

Once the 1955 J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant trial ended in Sumner, Mississippi for the murder of Emmett Till, less than a month later in the nearby small cotton town of Glendora, a black service station attendant and father of four children was killed by a friend of Milam's.

Elmer Kimball murdered Clinton Melton and then nineteen days later, Melton's young wife was killed, only a week before Kimball's murder trial opened.

Fourteen-year-old Till of Chicago was visiting relatives in the Mississippi Delta at the end of August when he was kidnapped, tortured and killed after he was accused of whistling at a white store clerk.

Then in December, Clinton Melton was murdered only four miles from where Emmett Till's body was dumped into the Tallahatchie River six months earlier. Kimball, Milam's friend, had lived in Glendora for a short time, managing a local cotton gin, and had an account at the gas station where Melton worked.

On the day of the murder, Kimball, 35, was driving a car borrowed from his friend, J.W. Milam, one of the two men accused and acquitted of killing Till, when he drove to the gas station and asked for a fill-up. Melton's daughter, Deloris Melton Gresham, was a toddler when her parents were killed, but she later was told what occurred at the service station:

"When Kimball drove up to the station, my father's boss told my father to go out and fill up his car. But when he was done filling the car, Kimball went into a rage and said he only wanted a dollar's worth of gas, and that he was going to go home and get his gun to shoot him. The gas station owner tried to talk him down but couldn't. He told him my father was a good negro and that he did not deserve to be hurt. He really pleaded with Kimball."

As soon as Kimball left, his boss told him that he had better leave, fast. But his car was out of gas, and he had to fill it first. Kimball came right back and began shooting at my father. Another man was in his car with him and yelled for him not to shoot. He jumped out of the car and ran into the station to hide. On arrest, Kimball claimed Melton shot at him first. McGarrh [the white owner of the gas station] denied this, adding that Melton did not have a gun at any time during the quarrel. A bullet hole was found in the windshield of Melton's parked car.

An angry Southern newspaper publisher, Hodding Carter, reacted to the murder of one of "Mississippi's own," comparing it to the Till case in a Delta-Times editorial:

[Melton] was no out-of-state smart alec. He was home-grown and "highly respected." There was no question of an insult to Southern womanhood. There was only an argument about ... gasoline. There was no pressure by the NAACP, "credited" with the outcome of the Till trial... So, another "not guilty" verdict was written at Sumner this week. And it served to cement the opinion of the world that no matter how strong the evidence, nor how flagrant is the apparent crime, a white man cannot be convicted in Mississippi for killing a negro.

LITTLE ATTENTION was given to the death of Gresham's mother that occurred on or around December 21, 1955, approximately nineteen days after Clinton Melton was killed on December 3. Officially, her mother's death was blamed on faulty driving. "Later, a relative told me that was not true, that everyone knew she was run off the

²⁷ [Where Rebels Roost, Mississippi Civil Rights Revisited](#)

road,” Gresham said.

Gresham, a toddler at the time, recalled being trapped inside her mother’s car as it sank to the bottom of a murky bayou near Glendora. A relative driving by saved her life and that of her baby brother. But Beulah Melton drowned.

“My mother was a pretty woman, known for being bright and outspoken,” Gresham said. “People who knew her have told me we are very much alike – both in looks and in personality.”

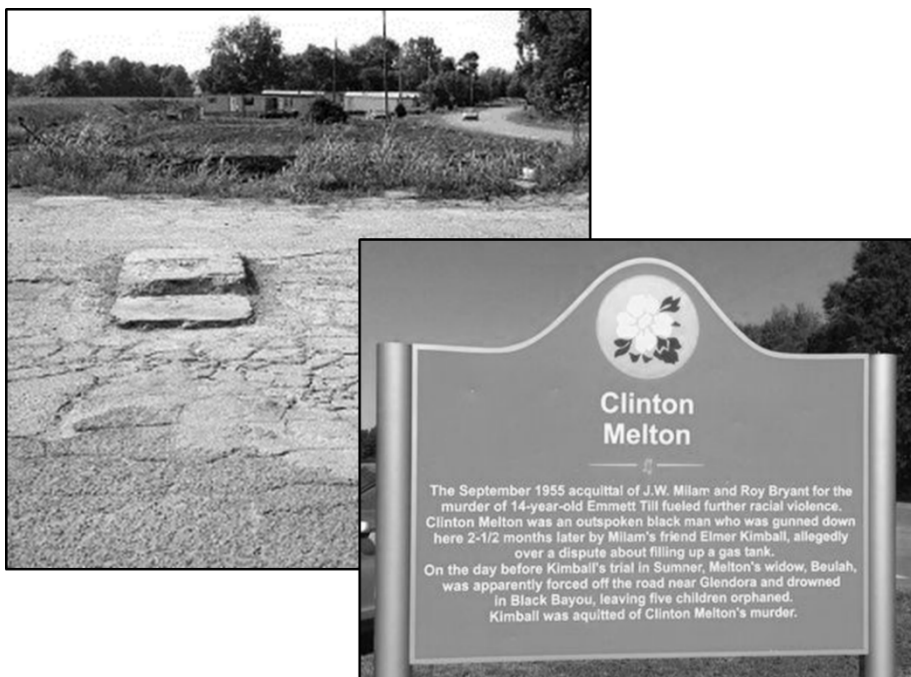
Beulah Melton had been picking up information on her husband’s death and would have been a “problem” for Kimball at the trial, Gresham said.

From news accounts and the talk around Glendora, there was no provocation of her father’s killing. It was outright murder, according to white witnesses, including the white service station owner. The Melton family was well known in Glendora. Clinton Melton had lived there all his life and, “for once, white people spoke out against the killing of a negro. The local Lions Club adopted a resolution branding the murder ‘an outrage’ [and pledging to donate \$400 to the family],” Myrlie Evers, the wife of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers, later wrote.

Melton’s widow told Medgar Evers she feared justice would not be done if the NAACP interested itself in the case and asked him not to become involved. “Her wishes were respected.”

In a later investigation after her death, Medgar Evers discovered the club had given the widow only twenty-six dollars and that a local white minister had given her sixty dollars of his own.

Relatives took in Delores Melton Gresham and her siblings, and Gresham continued to live in Glendora with her grandmother. “My grandfather was so upset, he left Glendora and never came back.”



Left: Site of Clinton Melton murder in Glendora, Mississippi. Right: Clinton Melton historical marker

Who's Who in the Emmett Till Case²⁸

by Devery Anderson

Note from Anderson: *This page will be updated regularly as I do more research on these, and perhaps other players in the Emmett Till case as I discover them. I also understand that there will be some errors of fact that may be unavoidable at this stage. If you have pertinent information on anyone below, or know of people I may have overlooked, please contact me with that information. I have listed people with the names they had at the time of the Emmett Till murder and trial. This page was last updated on April 13, 2018.*

Note from Theresa M. Davis: I have edited the original document written by Devery Anderson to focus on persons who appear, visibly or invisibly, as characters in the play *benevolence*.

Booker, Simeon S. (1918–2017) was a correspondent for *Jet* magazine from 1955 until his retirement in 2007. He covered the Milam–Bryant murder trial for that publication and soon after published his “Negro Reporter at the Till Trial” in the *Nieman Reports*. He had earlier won the Harvard Nieman Fellowship and then in 1952 became the first black reporter to work for the *Washington Post*, where he stayed until 1955. He was also the first black to win the National Press Club’s Fourth Estate Award. He was educated at Virginia Union University, where he received a Bachelor’s degree in 1942. He afterward attended Harvard University. He is also the recipient of the Washington Association of Black Journalists, Career Achievement Award (1993), the National Black Media Coalition, Master Communicators Award (1999), and the WABJ Lifetime Achievement Award (2000).

Bradley, Amanda (c.1905–?) lived on the Sturdivant plantation near Drew, Sunflower County, Mississippi at the time of the Emmett Till murder. This plantation was managed by Leslie Milam, brother of J. W. Milam and half-brother to Roy Bryant. As one of the surprise witnesses gathered by the prosecution, she testified at the murder trial that she saw four white men entering and exiting a barn on the plantation the morning after Emmett was abducted. She also saw a truck outside of the barn. After the trial she, like most of the other black witnesses, moved from Mississippi to Chicago. She is rumored to have moved back to Mississippi before her death, but her whereabouts after 1956 remain unknown. A granddaughter believes she died sometime in the 1960s.

Bradley, Mamie Elizabeth Carthan Till (1921–2003) was the mother of Emmett Louis Till. She was born to Wiley Nash and Alma Smith Carthan in Webb, Tallahatchie County, Mississippi. When she was two years old, the family migrated north to Argo, Cook County, Illinois, a racially mixed community near Chicago. From 1936–1941 she was employed as a domestic worker; from 1941–1943 she worked for the Coffey School of Aeronautics, and from 1953–1956 she was employed by the Federal Government, in charge of confidential Air Force files. She married Louis Till in 1940 and gave birth to her only son, Emmett, in 1941. She and Louis later separated but were never divorced. Louis, later serving in the army in Italy, was executed in 1945. Mamie married a second husband, Lemorse Mallory, on August 19, 1946, but they later divorced. After moving to Detroit, she married Pink Bradley on May 5, 1951, but that marriage also failed. On June 24, 1957, she married Gennie Mobley, and this time, she found a love that lasted. In 1956 she entered the Chicago Teacher’s College, where she graduated Cum Laude in 1960. She taught in Chicago schools until her retirement in 1983. During her years as a teacher, she earned a master’s degree in Administration and Supervision at Loyola University. In 1973, she trained the first group of children, who would become the Emmett Till Players, to recite speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She continued to speak and push for justice in her son’s slaying up until the time of her death, during which

²⁸ An excerpt from <http://www.emmetttillmurder.com/new-page-1/>

time she served as president of the Emmett Till Foundation. She also co-authored a play with David Barr, *The State of Mississippi vs Emmett Till*, which was performed in such cities as Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Diego beginning in 1999. She also co-authored her own memoir with Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Hate Crime That Changed America*, published soon after her death in 2003.

Breland, Jesse Josiah "J. J." (1888–1969) was one of five defense attorneys representing Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam in their murder trial. He was a graduate of Princeton University and began to practice law in Sumner, Tallahatchie County, Mississippi in 1915. He married Sue H. Savage in 1917 in Sumner. He later went on to become Tallahatchie County chairman of the Republican Party.

Broadway, William Henry, Jr., "June" (1907–1957) was the foreman of the grand jury that met in Greenwood, Mississippi in November, 1955, to consider kidnap charges against J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant. The grand jury returned a no true bill and therefore, all charges against Milam and Bryant were dropped. He committed suicide on a plantation in Mississippi where he was a supervisor. Some family members dispute that he actually took his own life and believe he may have been murdered.

Brownell, Herbert, Jr. (1904–1996) was United States attorney general at the time of the Emmett Till murder, and recipient of a telegram from NAACP attorney William Henry Huff urging the federal government to conduct a complete investigation into the killing. He received intense pressure from groups, individuals, and from those at rallies to bring justice to the case, especially after the acquittal of the defendants in the murder trial. He graduated from Yale Law School in 1927 and was admitted to the New York bar. He practiced law in New York City. He also served three terms in the New York assembly from 1933–1937. In 1944 and 1948, he served as campaign manager for Republican presidential candidate Thomas Dewey. As attorney general, he filed the first desegregation suits that followed the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* and drafted the legislative proposal that became the Civil Rights Act of 1957.

Bryant, Carolyn (1934–) was born in Indianola, Sunflower County, Mississippi. She won two beauty contests in two different high schools, and at age seventeen, left school to marry Roy Bryant on April 25, 1951. She was the target of the "wolf whistle" by Emmett Till while she was running the counter at the Bryant Grocery and Meat Market on August 24, 1955, in Money, Leflore County, Mississippi. She testified during the murder trial that on the occasion of the whistle, "a Negro man" entered the store, grabbed her, asked her for a date, and used various obscenities. Judge Curtis Swango decided that her court testimony of the incident inside the store was not admissible before the jury and so they never heard it. She admitted in 2008 that this part of her testimony (that Till grabbed her) was not true. She had already borne two sons with Roy Bryant by the time of the trial, and later bore a third son and a daughter. The store in Money closed soon after the murder trial, and the family later moved to East Texas and then to Vinton, Louisiana. They returned to Mississippi in 1973. She and Roy Bryant divorced in 1975. She married Griffin Chandler in 1984, and after his death in 1988, she married David Donham. She lived for several years in Greenville, Mississippi. She was a major focus of the 2004–2005 investigation by the FBI as a possible accomplice in the kidnapping and murder of Emmett Till, but there was not enough evidence to support that and in February 2007 a grand jury failed to indict her. After the death of her son Frank in 2010 she left Mississippi. She suffers from rheumatoid arthritis and lives with her son, Thomas Lamar, in Raleigh, North Carolina

Bryant, Roy (1931–1994) was one of the accused killers of Emmett Till. He was born a twin in Charleston, Tallahatchie County, Mississippi to Henry and Eula Lee Morgan Milam Bryant. He attended the Baptist church in Charleston as a child, and for a time lived in Tutwiler, Tallahatchie County. He later spent three years in the military as a paratrooper (1950–53). He married Carolyn Holloway on April 25, 1951, and the couple had three sons and a daughter. After the murder trial, due to black boycotting of his store, he was forced to close the

business. Around this time he and J. W. Milam sold their story confessing to the murder of Emmett Till, to reporter William Bradford Huie for \$3,150, and it was published in *Look* magazine in January 1956. In 1956, he went to the Bell Machine Shop in Inverness, Mississippi, and learned welding with the help of the G. I. Bill. He worked as a welder and boilermaker for 16 years in East Texas and Louisiana. He and his family then moved to Ruleville, Sunflower County, Mississippi, in 1973, and Bryant lived there until his death. Legally blind as a result of his years as a welder, he came to own another general store in Ruleville, which he ran until it burned down in 1989. As his store in Money three decades earlier, the Ruleville establishment catered mainly to a black clientele. He and Carolyn divorced in 1979 and he married Vera Joe Orman in 1980. In 1983, while running his grocery store, he was indicted for buying food stamps for less than their value and then selling them at full price to the government. He plead guilty to two counts of food stamp fraud, but due to the pleas of his attorney, he was sentenced to only three years of probation and a \$750.00 fine. Four years later, however, he was again charged with food stamp fraud and was sentenced to two years in prison. However, he was released after only eight months. The Till case was not discussed in the court in either conviction, and both times, he received the minimum sentence because his attorney argued for leniency. Bryant had been “a good citizen,” the attorney argued. Toward the end of his life he spent most of his time at home but sold watermelon and other fruit at a stand along the road in Ruleville in the summertime. Plagued with health problems, he nearly lost his feet due to diabetes and eventually died of cancer at the Baptist Hospital in Jackson, Mississippi.

Caldwell, James Hamilton, Jr. (1898–1962) was one of three members of the prosecuting team representing the state of Mississippi at the Milam-Bryant murder trial. He was married to Sarah Petterson and at the time of the trial he was recovering from a heart attack and was unable to bear much of the responsibility of the prosecution team. He had initially opposed the grand jury indictment, stating his belief that “the case was lost from the start.” Unfortunately, he drowned seven years after the trial.

Campbell, Melvin L. (1925–1972) was a brother-in-law to J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant, and according to the recent FBI investigation, was with Milam and Bryant when Emmett Till was kidnapped and murdered. He married Mary Louise Bryant on August 26, 1948 in Tallahatchie County Mississippi, and at the time of the Emmett Till murder, he and his wife owned a small store in Minter City, Leflore County, Mississippi. According to the FBI report of their interview with Mary Louise, Campbell told his wife of his involvement in the crime.

Carlton, Caleb Sidney (1915–1968) was one of five defense attorneys representing Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam at their murder trial. He was admitted to the bar in 1939 and began practicing law in Sumner, Mississippi in 1945. He later became president of the Mississippi Bar Association.

Carter, Hodding (1907–1972) was a journalist who covered the Milam-Bryant murder trial for the *Delta-Democrat Times*, which he founded by merger in 1938. He remained with the paper as editor and publisher until the mid 1960s. He received a B.A. from Bowdoin College in 1927 and did graduate work in journalism at Columbia University. He was awarded a Neiman Fellowship at Harvard in 1940 and later that year helped found the daily *PM*. During WWI, he served in the Mississippi National Guard. He was a progressive journalist and known as the “Spokesman for the New South.” In 1946 he won a Pulitzer Prize for his editorials against segregation and racist injustice and was censured in 1955 by the Mississippi legislature for his criticisms of the White Citizens Councils. He was the author of numerous books.

Carthan, Wiley Nash “John” (1902–1969) was the father of Mamie Till-Mobley and grandfather of Emmett Till. He was born in Mississippi and lived there until moving to Argo, Cook County, Illinois with his wife and daughter in 1924. He worked for Corn Products in Argo until his divorce from Alma Smith Carthan in the early 1930s. He later moved to Detroit, Michigan and remarried. His relationship with Mamie was an estranged one until she and Emmett moved briefly to Detroit and in with the Carthans around 1950. He accompanied Mamie to the

murder trial in Mississippi in August 1955, providing emotional support during that difficult week. He died at the home of his brother Emmett Carthan while visiting his relatives in Argo and Chicago. He went by the name of John Carthan by the time of the trial.

Chatham, Gerald (1906–1956) was the district attorney who prosecuted J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant in their murder trial. He had practiced law in the district since 1931. He had also served as a state representative, county superintendent of education, and county prosecuting attorney before he was elected district attorney in 1942. He held that office until 1956. Unfortunately, he died of a heart attack at home one year after the trial in Sumner. His family blames his health issues on stress related to the Till case.

Clark, Hubert (1920–1972) was alleged to have been involved in the murder and kidnapping of Emmett Till. According to the 2004-2006 FBI investigation, this claim originated in reports issued in 1955 as well as being confirmed by J. W. Milam several years later in a conversation with a friend. Clark was a World War II veteran. He married Francis Norene Mitchell in 1939.

Coleman, James Plemon “J. P.” (1914–1991) was Mississippi Governor-elect at the time of the Milam-Bryant murder trial and assigned his own special agent, Robert Smith, to aid the prosecution. Prior to his election as governor, he had been an aid to a U. S. congressman, and served as district attorney, circuit judge, state attorney general, and justice of the Mississippi Supreme Court. As governor, he was successful in maintaining racial segregation in Mississippi. After his term as governor ended, he was elected to the state House of Representatives. He ran for governor again in 1963 but lost. In 1965 he was appointed to the United States’ Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals and held the rank of chief judge from 1979 to 1981. He retired from the fifth circuit in 1984.

Collins, Levy “Too Tight” (1935–1992) has been tied to the murder of Emmett Till by various witnesses. At the time of the murder, he was employed by J. W. Milam, and was allegedly in the truck the morning Emmett was taken to the Shurden plantation near Drew, Sunflower County, Mississippi. Investigators learned that to prevent him from witnessing in court, Sheriff H. C. Strider placed him in jail elsewhere in Tallahatchie County under a false name. In an interview published in the *Chicago Defender* shortly after the trial, he denied any involvement with the murder. Later in life, he was working in a cotton compress warehouse in Drew.

Crawford, John (1933–) was one of several youths who was with Emmett Till in the evening before his kidnapping. He is the brother of Roosevelt Crawford and uncle of Ruth Crawford, two of the local teenagers who witnessed the incident at the Bryant Grocery and Meat Market. He currently lives in Detroit, Michigan.

Crawford, Roosevelt (1939–) was one of several youths with Emmett Till who went to Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market on August 25, 1955, when the incident between Emmett and Carolyn Bryant occurred. He maintains that Till did not whistle at Bryant but that Till was responding to a bad move made by a checker player on the porch. He is the brother of John Crawford, who was with Till on the day he was kidnapped, and uncle of Ruth Crawford, who was also present at the store when Till whistled. He currently lives in Detroit, Michigan.

Crawford, Ruth Mae (1937–) was one of several youths with Emmett Till who went to Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market on August 25, 1955, when the incident between Emmett and Carolyn Bryant occurred. Speaking publicly for the first time in Keith Beauchamp’s film *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*, she says she watched Till through a window and that all Till did to upset Bryant while in the store was place his money in her hand, rather than on the counter. She is the niece of Roosevelt Crawford, who was also present that evening, and John Crawford. She lives in Greenwood, Mississippi.

Dogan, Harry H. (1895–1959) was Tallahatchie County Sheriff-elect at the time of the Milam-Bryant murder trial. He served from 1956-1960. He allegedly helped pick jurors for the trial that would likely favor an acquittal of the accused. According to one of the defense attorneys, Dogan sent word to the jurors while they were deliberating to stall the verdict in order to make it “look good.” He died in office during this, his fifth term as sheriff.

Evers, Medgar (1925–1963) was field secretary for the Mississippi chapter of the NAACP at the time of the Emmett Till murder. He, with other NAACP officials, helped to seek out witnesses for the trial. He was inducted into the army in 1943 and served in Normandy. He attended Alcorn College (now Alcorn University), where he met his wife to be, Myrlie Beasley. The two were married on December 24, 1951. The following semester, he graduated with a degree in business administration. They moved to Mound Bayou, where he worked as an insurance agent until 1954, and was active in the NAACP and in civil rights activities. He applied for, and was denied entrance into the University of Mississippi Law School. He moved his family to Jackson, where he and Myrlie set up the office of the NAACP and began investigations into violent crimes perpetrated against blacks. His work to bring down segregation made him many enemies, and late in the evening on June 12, 1963, he was gunned down in his driveway as he returned home. His killer, Byron De La Beckwith, was tried twice in 1964 and set free due to two hung juries. Beckwith was finally convicted in 1994 and died in prison.

Ford, Louis Henry (1914–1995) was the bishop who preached Emmett Till’s funeral sermon. He was also the presiding bishop of the Church of God in Christ and the namesake of the Bishop Ford Freeway in Chicago. He began his ministry in 1926, and became national director of public relations for the Church of God in Christ in 1945. He was elevated to the position of assistant presiding bishop in 1972 and in 1990, became presiding bishop. A graduate of Saints College in Lexington, Mississippi, he moved to Chicago in 1933. In 1963 he founded the St. Paul Church of God in Christ and later the C. H. Mason and William Roberts Bible Institute for Bible Studies.

Frasier, John, Jr. (?–?) was a Leflore County prosecutor who worked on the kidnapping case against J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant. The kidnapping occurred in Leflore County.

Garrett, Simon (1924–2007) was a funeral home assistant to Chester Miller at the Century Burial Association and assisted in bringing the body of Emmett Till to Greenwood after it was retrieved from the Tallahatchie River. He pulled a ring off of Till’s finger that was later used to identify the body. He lived in Greenwood, Mississippi until the time of his death.

Henderson, Robert Harvey (1921–2007) was one of five defense attorneys representing J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant in their murder trial. At 34, he was the youngest of the legal team. He had been a life-long resident of Tallahatchie County and had been in practice since 1947. As the last surviving member of the defense team, his death came just five days after Tallahatchie County apologized to the Till family for the injustices of the trial on October 2, 2007.

Hodges, Robert (c. 1938–) was the young fisherman who discovered Emmett Till’s body in the Tallahatchie River at a spot called Pecan Point, near Philipp, on August 31, 1955. He was a witness for the prosecution at the murder trial.

Hubbard, Joe Willie (c. 1928–?) was alleged by T.R.M. Howard to have been with J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant in the murder of Emmett Till. This claim was also put forth by two other writers who published investigative pieces on the murder in 1956: Olive Arnold Adams in *Time Bomb: Mississippi Exposed and the Full Story of Emmett Till*, and Amos Dixon (pseudonym) in a series of articles in the *California Eagle* (although Adams uses the pseudonym

“Herbert” for Hubbard). Although Willie Reed and Henry Loggins recently recalled having once known Hubbard, no one knows what happened to him.

Huff, William Henry (1888–1963) was a NAACP attorney who represented Mamie Bradley after Emmett Till was murdered. He later terminated his services with her when the NAACP ended its sponsorship of Mrs. Bradley’s speaking tour. He attended Georgia Normal and Industrial Institute and Knox Institute in Athens, Georgia. He also attended the Chicago Law School, obtaining his L.L.B., and the John Marshall Law School for his J.D. He was admitted to the Indiana Bar in 1936 and the Illinois Bar in 1946. He was also admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court. In addition to law, he was trained at the National Medical University in Chicago and practiced pharmacy.

Huie, William Bradford (1910–1986) was the reporter who paid J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant \$3,150 to tell their story after their acquittal. Their confession appeared in an article by Huie in *Look* magazine in 1956. He graduated from the University of Alabama in 1930 and worked as a reporter for the *Birmingham Post* from 1932-1936 and as associate editor for *American Mercury* from 1941-1943. He served in the U. S. Navy from 1943-1945, and then returned to the *Mercury* as editor and publisher until 1952. In the 1950s, he interviewed political figures for the CBS series, *Chronoscope*. He authored numerous books over the years, including *Wolf Whistle*, in 1969, a chapter of which deals with the Emmett Till murder.

Hurley, Ruby (1913–1980) was southeastern director of the NAACP who, with Amzie Moore and Medgar Evers, helped seek out witnesses for the prosecution in the Milam-Bryant murder trial. To do so, she disguised herself as a field worker. In 1951 she had moved from New York to Birmingham to establish the first permanent office of the NAACP in the deep south. She was the first professional civil rights worker in the south. She was later involved in the 1952-56 case of Autherine Lucy, who was the first black woman to be admitted to the University of Alabama.

Jackson, David (1922–1966) covered the Milam-Bryant murder trial as a photographer for *Ebony* and *Jet* magazine. He took the famous photo of Emmett Till on the slab at the A. A. Rayner & Sons Funeral Home, published in *Jet*, which shocked the nation. Just before the trial, while interviewing Mose Wright at his home, with Clotye Murdock, he witnessed a truck carrying six armed white men slow past the house.

Johnson, Otha, Jr. (1934–2002) was, according to his son, with Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam on the night they kidnapped and murdered Emmett Till, as stated in the FBI report of its 2004-2006 investigation. He may have been one of four black men seen by Willie Reed on the back of a truck on the morning of Till’s murder.

Jones, Curtis (1938–2000) was a cousin of Emmett Till. He traveled from Illinois to Mississippi to spend time with Mose Wright’s family shortly after Emmett and Wheeler Parker had left, and was in the Wright home the night Emmett was abducted. He is quoted in the film *Eyes on the Prize* as having been at the store at the time of the incident between Emmett Till and Carolyn Bryant, although he had not yet arrived in Mississippi. He served with the Chicago Police Department for years.

Jones, Willie Mae Wright (1917–) is the oldest child of Moses and Lucinda Larry Wright. She was the mother of Curtis Jones, a cousin of Emmett Till who traveled from Chicago to Mississippi shortly after Emmett and Wheeler Parker left, and was in the Wright home the night Emmett was abducted. It was Willie Mae’s phone call on Sunday morning, August 28, 1955, that notified Mamie Bradley that Emmett had been kidnapped from her father’s home. As of 2008, she is still living in Chicago, and is the oldest living direct link to the Emmett Till case.

Kellum, Joseph W. (1911–1996) was one of five defense attorneys representing J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant in their murder trial. He had lived in Tallahatchie County since 1920 and was admitted to the bar in 1939. In 1955, he ran for District Attorney and lost that race just a week before Emmett Till was murdered.

Kimbell, Elmer O. (1922–1985) was a friend of J. W. Milam, and according to Carolyn Bryant, in her testimony before the FBI in its 2004-2006 investigation, he was present with Milam and Roy Bryant on the night Emmett Till was kidnapped. Shortly after the Milam-Bryant murder trial, he shot and killed a black man, Clinton Melton in Glendora, Mississippi, at the gas station that Melton worked at, because Melton put more gas in Kimbell's car than he had asked for. Kimbell was acquitted by an all-white jury in Sumner, Mississippi shortly thereafter.

Loggins, Henry Lee (1923–2009) is believed to have been with J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant during the kidnapping and murder of Emmett Till. He was employed by J. W. Milam at the time of the murder and went missing shortly thereafter. During the trial, it was rumored that he, and another possible accomplice named Leroy Collins were placed in the county jail at Charleston, Mississippi under false names in order to keep them from testifying, but this was never substantially proven. He later moved to Ohio. During the 2004-2006 FBI investigation he denied having anything to do with the murder.

McGarrh, Lee (1920–2002) lived in Glendora, Leflore County, Mississippi, and was one of the character witnesses for J. W. Milam in the Milam-Bryant murder trial. A few months after the trial, his employee at his service station, a black man named Clinton Melton, was murdered at the station by a white man, Elmer Kimbrell. The trial was held in Sumner, Mississippi, with several of the same cast of characters as the Milam-Bryant trial. This time, McGarrh, outraged at the murder, testified for the prosecution.

Melton, Garland (1907–1962) was deputy sheriff of Tallahatchie County who arrived at the scene at the Tallahatchie River when Emmett Till's body was found. He and Robert Hodges (who discovered the body) took separate boats into the river in order to retrieve the body. He married Myrtha Campbell in 1939 in Charleston, Tallahatchie County.

Milam, John William "J. W." (1919–1980) was one of the accused murderers of Emmett Till. He was born in Charleston, Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, to William Leslie and Eula Morgan Milam. He married Juanita Thompson on December 11, 1949 in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, and they had two sons. He possessed only a ninth grade education and fought in Europe during World War II. While in the military he won a purple heart, a silver star, and other medals. Soon after the trial and acquittal, he and Roy Bryant sold their story confessing to the murder of Emmett Till to reporter William Bradford Huie for \$3,150, and it was published in *Look* magazine. By 1956, Milam found he was unable to rent land and was refused a loan due to his notoriety in the case. The Milam's moved to Texas for several years, and later returned to Mississippi. They moved to Greenville, Washington County, Mississippi in 1965 and were said to have later divorced, but he is listed as married to Juanita in his obituary, and there is no divorce record for them in Greenville or Washington County. He had worked as a heavy equipment operator in Greenville and was retired at the time of his death from cancer.

Milam, Mary Juanita Thompson (1927–2014) married John W. Milam on December 11, 1949 in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi. She was at the back of the Bryant Grocery and Meat Market, in the apartment, when the incident between Emmett Till and Carolyn Bryant occurred, and was a witness for the defense at the trial. She and J. W. Milam were the parents of two sons and the family moved to east Texas in 1962. They later returned to Mississippi around 1965 and lived in Greenville, Washington County. She and J. W. were said to have later divorced, but she is listed as his wife in his obituary, and there is no divorce record for them in Greenville or Washington County. She moved to Ocean Springs, Mississippi around 1994 and died there at age 87.

Milam, Leslie F. (1925–1974) was born in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi to William Leslie and Eula Morgan Milam. He was the brother of J. W. Milam and half-brother to Roy Bryant, accused murderers of Emmett Till. He married Francis Moody Waldrup in 1949. According to witnesses, Emmett Till was beaten and shot in a tool shed at the Shurden plantation that Leslie Milam managed, and that they saw Milam present. According to the 2004-2006 FBI investigation, Milam confessed to a local minister shortly before his death that he had been involved in Till's murder and that he had been troubled by that involvement.

Mims, Benjamin "B. L." (1925–2001) was in the boat with Garland Melton when Emmett Till's body was pulled from the Tallahatchie River on August 31, 1955. He married Carol Dyanne Gregg in 1950 and lived in Philipp, Tallahatchie County, Mississippi. He served as a witness for the prosecution and testified to the condition of Emmett's body.

Mobley, Gennie (1923–2000) married Mamie Till Bradley two years after Emmett Till's death, and had several children from a previous marriage. He was a barber in Chicago when he met Mamie, and during their courtship grew close to Emmett. He accompanied Mamie Bradley to the A. A. Rayner funeral home where she examined the body for identification purposes. Gene aided in this effort as he recognized the haircut that he had given Emmett two weeks prior. He later became a well-respected Cadillac salesman in Chicago. He traveled the country with his wife whenever she spoke on her son's case and remained her greatest supporter until his death.

Parker, Thelton "Pete" (c.1938–) was one of the local youths who was with Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi the evening of the incident between Emmett Till and Carolyn Bryant at Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market. He currently lives in Michigan.

Parker, Wheeler (1939–) was a cousin of Emmett Till who accompanied him to Mississippi from Chicago to visit relatives. He was with Emmett at the Bryant Grocery and Meat Market the night that Emmett allegedly whistled at Carolyn Bryant. He was in the home of Moses and Elizabeth Wright the night that Emmett was abducted. He was born in Mississippi and moved with his parents and two siblings to Argo, Illinois in 1947. He operated a barber shop in Argo until 2007. He also became a minister in 1977. In 1993, he became pastor of the Argo Temple Church of God in Christ, the church Alma Spearman, Emmett's grandmother, helped to found.

Rayner, Ahmed A., Sr. (1893–1989) was the funeral director who received Emmett Till's body after its arrival in Chicago on September 2, 1955. He defied orders from Mississippi to keep the casket sealed and allowed Mamie Bradley to examine the remains of her son.

Reed, Add (1879–1977) was one of the surprise witnesses at the Milam-Bryant murder trial, who testified that the morning after Emmett was abducted, he walked past the barn at the Shurden plantation and saw Leslie Milam and another white man. He was the grandfather of Willie Reed, who also testified.

Reed, Willie (1937–2013) was one of the surprise witnesses at the Milam-Bryant murder trial. He lived next door to the Shurden plantation managed by Leslie Milam and testified that he heard beating and yelling coming from a tool shed near the barn on the plantation. He also saw J. W. Milam leave the shed and get a drink of water. After the acquittal, he moved to Chicago, where, upon his arrival, he suffered a nervous breakdown due to the stress built up over the trial. He worked as a surgical orderly for forty-eight years at Jackson Park Hospital in Chicago. It was there that he met his wife, Juliet Mendenhall, who was then a nurse's aide, now a registered nurse. They married in 1976. After years of declining health, he died of gastronomical bleeding at age seventy-six.

Sanders, Stanny (1919–1971) of Indianola, Leflore County, was a district prosecutor who worked on the kidnapping case against J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant. He later served on the defense team during the 1964 murder trials of Byron De La Beckwith, accused killer of civil rights leader Medgar Evers. The library at Mississippi Delta Community College is named after him.

Smith, Crosby (1908–1993) was an uncle to Mamie Till Bradley and brother of her mother, Alma Spearman. Through his efforts, Emmett Till's body was released from the state of Mississippi after attempts were made to bury it in Money. He accompanied it on the train back to Chicago. He remained a resident of Sumner after the trial until his death.

Spearman, Alma Smith Carthan Gaines (1902–1981) was the mother of Mamie Bradley and grandmother of Emmett Till. She helped her daughter in the days after Emmett was kidnapped and murdered, and it was at her home that Chicago reporters first congregated. She was born in Mississippi and married Wiley Nash Carthan in 1919. She lived in Mississippi until moving to Argo, Illinois with her husband and daughter in 1924, where she was a founder of the Argo Temple Church of God in Christ. In the early 1930s she and Nash separated and divorced, after which she married Tom Gaines. He died in 1944 and she married Henry Spearman in 1947. After his death in 1967, she moved in with Mamie and Gene Mobley, where she lived until her death.

Swango, Curtis M. (1908–1968) presided as judge at the Milam-Bryant murder trial. He graduated from Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, and from the University of Mississippi law school. He was appointed to the Circuit Court bench in 1950 by then Governor Fielding Wright and was a judge of the Seventeenth Judicial District. He was praised by black and white journalists for the even-handed way he conducted the trial.

Washington, Johnny B. (1928–1980) was a black male who worked for Roy Bryant and, according to the 2004–2006 FBI investigation, was alleged to have assisted in the kidnapping and murder of Emmett Till. He may have been the “third man” who appeared on Moses Wright's porch and remained outside when Milam and Bryant entered Wright's home and abducted Till.

Whitten, John W. (1919–2003) was one of five defense attorneys representing Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam in their murder trial. He was born in Tallahatchie County and began practicing law in Sumner in 1940. He served as Tallahatchie County chairman of the Democratic Party and attorney for the board of supervisors. He was the first cousin of Jamie Whitten of the U. S. House of Representatives.

Withers, Ernest C. (1922–2007) was the photographer who defied Judge Swango's orders and captured a photograph while court was in session during the Milam-Bryant murder trial. The photo was that of Moses Wright standing at the witness stand, pointing out J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant as the men who kidnapped Emmett Till from his home. He got his start as a military photographer while serving in the South Pacific during World War II, and became a photographer by profession upon his return to Memphis after the war. He published a photo pamphlet of the Emmett Till murder case, and also photographed important events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the strike of Memphis sanitation workers. At the funeral of Medgar Evers, he was beaten and arrested by a police officer. During his 60 year career, he accumulated over five million photographs. His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Jet*, *Ebony*, *Newsweek*, and *Life*. He won the National News Association's Best Photograph of the Year in 1968. In 1988 he was elected to the Black Press Hall of Fame and received an honorary doctorate from the Massachusetts College of Art. He continued to operate his photography studio on Beal Street in Memphis, Tennessee until near the time of his death.

Wright, Elizabeth Smith (1900–1970) was the wife of Moses Wright, sister of Alma Spearman, and great aunt of

Emmett Till. She was present the night Emmett was abducted from her home, and offered J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant money if they would leave Till alone. She left her home the night of the abduction and never returned. She moved to Chicago and remained there during the murder trial while her husband and sons stayed behind to pick cotton and for Moses to testify at the trial.

Wright, Maurice (1939–1991) was one of several youths who accompanied Emmett Till to Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market on August 25, 1955 and witnessed the incident between Emmett and Carolyn Bryant. He was a son of Moses and Elizabeth Smith Wright. It was believed by some that he may have been the one who told Roy Bryant about the incident, setting off the events that led to Emmett's murder, although this is denied by his family. After a troubled life, he lost contact with his family and died an alcoholic and homeless.

Wright, Moses (1892–1977) was the great-uncle of Emmett Till, who visited Chicago in August 1955 and brought Emmett and Wheeler Parker to Mississippi. He was born in Mississippi and married Lucinda Larry on December 16, 1911. After her death, he married Elizabeth Smith around 1925. Until 1949 he preached at a black church in Money, Mississippi, and also worked as a sharecropper. Since 1946, he worked on a plantation in Money owned by Frederick Grover. He identified J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant in court as the men who came to his home the morning of August 28, 1955 and kidnapped Emmett Till. After the trial, he moved to Argo, Illinois, with his family and did some speaking engagements on the Emmett Till case that were sponsored by the NAACP. Due to his notoriety in the case, he was offered a lifetime job in a nursery in Albany, New York. However, he chose to move to Argo, where he lived quietly after the case died down and his speaking engagements ended, working as a janitor in a night-club in Chicago and at a restaurant in Argo. He died in the White Oak Nursing Home in Indian Head Park, Illinois. Recall that J. W. Milam asked him how old he was on the night of the kidnapping of Emmett Till, and he said "sixty-four." Milam's response was that if Wright knew anyone there that night, he would never live to be sixty-five. Wright's obituary in August 1977 says he was 85 years old at his death, and his death record in the Social Security Death Index, as well as the 1900 U. S. Census says he was born in April 1892. If these are all correct, then he was actually 63, not 64, when Emmett Till was kidnapped.

Wright, Robert (1940–) is a son of Moses and Elizabeth Wright and was in the house, sleeping in the bed with Curtis Jones in a nearby room on the night Emmett Till was kidnapped.

Wright, Simeon Brown (1942–2017) is the son of Moses and Elizabeth Smith Wright. He lived with his family near Money, Mississippi and was in the bed with Emmett Till at the time of Till's abduction on August 28, 1955. He left Mississippi with his family after the murder trial and was raised in Argo, Illinois. He later moved to nearby Countryside, Illinois. For several years he worked as a pipe-fitter for Reynolds Metals, Co. During the 2004-2006 investigation, he spoke out publicly many times about the need for justice in the case. In 2010 he published his own memoir about the case, *Simeon's Story: An Eyewitness Account of the Kidnapping of Emmett Till*.

Young, Frank (c. 1920–?) was a field worker who volunteered names of accomplices of J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant in the kidnapping and murder of Emmett Till to Dr. T. R. M. Howard, as well as leads to possible witnesses. It was intended that he testify on behalf of the prosecution at the Milam-Bryant murder trial, but for whatever reason, he left the courthouse and did not testify.

LEGACY: BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

Bearing Witness in the Name of Justice

Emmett Till... You will live forever!
 When you died—the world woke up
 People streamin', marchin', fightin' for justice
 Freedom Summer! Montgomery, Selma, Birmingham ...
 Righteousness Rolled Down like a Mighty Stream! It was like the river
 Unleashed, hurlin' in a wave of Glory! Changing forever, everything in its path!
—The Ballad of Emmett Till, Mamie Till

For many young men and women who grew up in that time or the generation after, Emmett was used as the cautionary tale and also as the tale to stiffen our resolve and our commitment to struggle.”

—Ifa Bayeza

“I thought about Emmett Till, and I could not go back. My legs and feet where not hurting, that is a stereotype. I paid the same fare as others, and I felt violated. I was not going back.”

—Rosa Parks

“So for me not to forgive the people who killed Emmett Till...I am setting in my very personality a structure of evil which can cause a disintegration in my personality.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Two months ago I had a nice apartment in Chicago. I had a good job. I had a son. When something happened to the Negroes in the South I said, ‘That’s not my business, not mine.’ Now I know how wrong I was. The murder of my son has shown me that what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of us all.”

—Mamie Till

“And the fact that Emmett Till, a young black man, could be found floating down the river in Mississippi, as, indeed, many had been done over the years, this set in concrete the determination of people to move forward.”

—Fred Shuttlesworth

“Emmett Till and I were about the same age. A week after he was murdered...I stood on the corner with a gang of boys, looking at pictures of him in the black newspapers and magazines. In one, he was laughing and happy. In the other, his head was swollen and bashed in, his eyes bulging out of their sockets, and his mouth twisted and broken...I couldn’t get Emmett Till out of my mind, until one evening I thought of a way to get back at white people for his death.”

—Muhammad Ali

“America is race. From its symbolism to its substance, from its founding by slave holders to its rending by the Civil War...from Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin and to Michael Brown.”

—Julian Bond

“One day, I know the struggle will change. There’s got to be a change—not only for Mississippi, not only for the people in the United States, but people all over the world.”

—Fannie Lou Hamer