

Liberating Emmett: “Hidden Figure” Chronicles 30 Year Commitment-- From Stigma to Catalyst of the Civil Rights Movement

Appropriately I shall open this presentation with the 1st televised coverage of Emmett Louis “Bobo” Till as the true catalyst of the Modern Civil Rights Movement. This important event took place here in Salt Lake City, Utah, FEB 1989 on *Midday News*, just prior to my evening lecture at the U of Utah for its Black History Month celebration.

In a quasi “In media res” fashion, this happened 9 months after I received my PhD from the U of Iowa on May 14, 1988, which in turn occurred roughly 2 and a half years after my inquiry into this new area, DEC 1985. Now moving forward, during my Spring Break in April 1986, I conducted the 1st interview of many on the Emmett Till Murder Case with Rayfield Mooty, Labor Union and Civil Rights Activist, 2nd. cousin and constant advisor for Mamie during the entire ordeal. During the interview, I succumbed to Mooty’s assertion that “Emmett ain’t no chapter; Emmett’s a book, all by himself.” My research paper for my history class paper entitled “Emmett Till: The Lost Chapter in the Historical Account of the Modern Civil Rights Movement,” was then becoming just that, a “chapter” in the newly focused doctoral dissertation, “Emmett Till: The Impetus of the Modern Civil Rights Movement,” a shift away from my initial plans to focus

on Black women writers, after receiving a contract to co-author with Dr. Wilfred Samuels, the 1st book on Toni Morrison, later published in 1990.

After a long hot summer with numerous interviews with people in MS and elsewhere, both in person and via phone, as well as going to the Sumner Court House to commission all of the court records on the infamous Till trial, I returned to Iowa that fall (1986) to witness the *Iowa City Press Citizen* newspaper picture story announcement, “U I Student Wins \$10,000 grant for lynch trial study,” The Ford Foundation National Research Council graduate Fellowship. My comments—“It’s been challenging. There are truths about the Civil Rights Movement that have not yet been revealed.”

Having set down the ground work, my next step was to get the approval of my dissertation committee to write on Till as Catalyst of the Civil Rights Movement, rather than Till as a significant factor in the rise of the Movement. Warned that this was virtually impossible, as all historians had agreed that Rosa Parks’ demonstration, which occurred months after Emmett’s brutal murder, they asked what happens if I were unable defend the dissertation, to which I responded, “Then I don’t get the PhD and I’m willing to take that chance.” Needless to say, the Proposal Defense was successful. I promised then not to let them, nor Emmett, nor the Almighty down, who had given me both the vision and the assignment to execute.

The following year, the fall, 1987, I was selected to present at the Opening Plenary at the Annual Ford Foundation Conference in D.C. on my Till dissertation in progress. That was, indeed, unique, as it was the 1st time a Pre-Doctoral Student presented at a plenary, as those slots routinely went to Post Docs, like Condelezza Rice, who delivered the Afternoon Plenary and Dr. John Hope Franklin who delivered the Closing Plenary on that day. Another such Post Doc, Dr. William Turner, Vice President/Associate Provost, U of Kentucky, later blurbed my 2nd Till book, saying,

"I met Dr. Clenora Hudson-Weems in D. C. at the National Ford Annual Conference in 1987. She was one of the plenary speakers [delivering] a slide presentation on her groundbreaking thesis of Till as catalyst. . . Thus, anyone who lays claim to exhuming the Till saga before Hudson-Weems demands to be questioned." (*The Definitive Emmett Till*, 2006)

A couple of months after the Ford Conference, the U of Iowa's American Studies/African American Studies Program held its Black Graduate Students and Alumni Conference, where I met Dr. John Blassingame of Yale U, who witnessed my presentation on my current Till work at that time. He later wrote a jacket blurb for my dissertation-turned- book, entitled *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement*, stating

“I found *Emmett Till* to be an unusually revealing and exciting narration of an important 20th century event, crucial in the origins of the Civil Rights Movement. When you really think about it, Hudson-Weems is absolutely right. We historians missed it.” (1987 & ‘1994)

Shortly after our meeting, in fact 2 weeks later, I deposited the 1st draft of my lengthy dissertation, DEC 23, 1987. 2 weeks after that, JAN 6, 1988, for the 1st time, I met Mamie Till Mobley at her home for our 1st interview. It was wonderful. In order to do this without exceeding the time limitations for completing the PhD in May, I promised that it would only be taverbatim transcription and that they did not have to read that chapter which, gave the mother the last word, leaving only Chapter X, the Conclusion.

Then came the Grand Finale for me, which was in two parts—The Dissertation Defense, April 1988, and the Confirmation of the PhD at the Commencement, May 1988. The former was rigorous but I was very resolute and sure of my findings. It was exciting and the questions by my committee and the audience were invigorating. One of the professors in the audience, expressed how pleased he was with my defense, but warned me that this exercise was only the tip of the iceberg of the kinds of opposition and challenges I would meet with such a controversial work relative to my

career. I did not know then just how true his comments were until I later reflected on the challenges I was experiencing throughout the years, beginning with securing a major publisher for the dissertation, although many publishers flooded the podium after my presentation at the 1987 Ford Conference, which was followed up with written requests, but also suggestions for revisions relative to the focus of Till as catalyst. Declines ensued and the rest is history. Still, I will say that despite the opposition to the focus of my thesis, my pioneering work laid the foundation and blazed the trail for later Till “experts” who emerged well over a decade and a half after I remained the lone voice in speaking truth about Emmett’s rightful place in the Movement both nationally and internationally. According to Oscar Award-Winning co-writer of “Rain Man,” Barry Morrow,

"For nearly 20 years, Hudson-Weems was the lone voice calling for a fresh assessment of the true historical significance of the murder of Emmett Till. That voice has lately been joined by a host of others. But there is disharmony in the choir--the de facto failure to credit . . . her pioneering work . . .” (*The Definitive Emmett Till*, 2006).

Needless to say, however, the major challenge of Emmett Till as catalyst, rather than Mrs. Parks, had been met, and with substantial justification:

Remarkably, however, no historian has ever fully gauged the impact on the American conscience of the widely publicized lynching on August 28, 1955, of a fourteen-year-old black Chicago youth, Emmett (BoBo) Louis Till, and the subsequent “trial” of Till’s assailants. The incident **shocked** and stunned some; it instilled terror in countless others.

We cannot adequately reflect on Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the symbol [father] of the Civil Rights Movement, without reflecting on the established mother of the movement, Mrs. Rosa Parks. She heroically refused to relinquish her bus seat to a white man on December 1, 1955, which was the seed for the year-long 1956 Montgomery bus boycott. And likewise, we cannot adequately reflect on the Montgomery bus boycott without reflecting on and remembering the infamous lynching of Till, just three months and three days before Mrs. Parks’ personal demonstration. Till’s brutal lynching in Mississippi was undoubtedly impressed on the minds of the Alabamians, giving them strength to carry the boycott through. Indeed, the image of Till, permanently etched in American consciousness,

could not die, thereby setting the stage for the boycott.

(Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till*, p. xxxiv)

In the final analysis, my scholarly Till activities moved from unearthing Emmett (See “Unearthing Emmett Till” *Iowa Alumni Review*, Fall 1988), via 1st challenging the Academy at the U of Iowa in 1986 at the Dissertation Proposal Defense; to conducting rigorous research, and interviews with well-known icons like Molefi Asante, Temple U Chair of African American Studies, who coined the term Afrocentricity; Talmadge Anderson, Editor-in-Chief of *Western Journal of Black Studies*, who asserted that “the lynching of Till may no longer be denied as the genesis of the chronology of the Civil Rights Movement;” and Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Harvard U (quoted in a chapter by William Turner in an edited Till book by Hudson-Weems), therein stated "What we know about the details of Emmett Till is because [of] Dr. Clenora Hudson-Weems, who made his life and death her life’s work.” (2007). There was also interpretations and continuing efforts in getting the word out that Emmett was not an embarrassment to the Movement, shunned by historians, but rather its catalyst. And now we’re at the point of the film, myself being the Script Writer, “Liberating Emmett—Legacy, Redemption, Forgiveness,” in telling the whole story, both sides of the coin. Indeed, all of my efforts from the

very beginning, my dedication in setting the record straight about the Emmett Till story, was pointed toward my life's mission and assignment by the Almighty--"Liberating Emmett." However, despite my massive work and my commitment to "liberating" Emmett, my seminal role in unearthing and establishing Emmett Till as catalyst of the movement has been grossly underplayed by both the media and new Till "experts," much like Emmett himself. Today, however, Emmett Till is a household name, and now that he is well established, major presses are publishing one Till book after another.

Still, being a "hidden figure," while others take the distinction of being the "experts," is not easy. Their refusal to reference my Till works, while using much of the information and getting credit for it, is by far the most painful. But again I thank the Almighty for the support I have from some of our most reputable/creative/visible scholar-activists, who attest to the validity and originality of my Till work:

Dr. C. Eric Lincoln, Distinguished Professor, Duke U--"In Emmett Till, she . . . challenges the most sacred shibboleths of the origins of the Civil Rights Movement. Not everyone will want to agree with what she has to say. But few will lay the book down before she has her say. And she says a lot America needs to hear again right now." (Emmett Till, 1994)

Evelyn Coleman, Award-Winning Author—“It is the responsibilities of all writers to cite the research and writings of those who came before them. We can ill afford to ignore the work of the scholars who paved the way for us to craft story. Hudson-Weems’ Till writings are clearly the first full-length work to establish the lynching of this martyr as the true catalyst of the Movement. To claim ignorance of her work is an obvious sign of fraud, inferior research or arrogance.” (*The Definitive Emmett Till*, 2006)

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor/Chair, California State U, Long Beach--“*Emmett Till* is a significant contribution to our understanding of the nature of racial oppression in U.S. history. It places the morally monstrous lynching of Till in its proper historical context, posing it as a major catalyst of the Movement.” (*Emmett Till*, 1994)

And to add to the voices of book endorsements is the mother of Emmett:

Mamie Till Mobley, the Mother of Emmett—“Hudson-Weems has dug relentlessly into Southern justice, revealing the stench and ugliness of race hatred, American style. She has captured

the essence of Emmett, a ‘sacrificial lamb’ whose death has provided an escape to life for millions who were trapped in a web of hate.” (*Emmett Till*, 1994)

Be that as it may, historians failed to document this fact in their research:

Consider the historical account of the black American struggle in the fifties and the sixties as documented by the foremost black historian, John Hope Franklin. In his most recently revised edition, the 1994 seventh edition of *From Slavery to Freedom*, there is only one reference to the Till case, and it is not even indexed. Franklin wrote, in a brief catalogue of black victims during that period: “Near Greenwood a fourteen-year-old Negro boy from Chicago was murdered for allegedly whistling at a white storekeeper’s wife.”(p. 71) He failed to even identify the victim. So much for the Till murder case in this standard textbook.

Consider Kenneth G. Goode’s *From Africa to the United States and Then: A Concise Afro-American History*. Nowhere is Till mentioned in the text, not even in the chronological table of events, which appears in the back of the book. Consider Peter

M. Bergman's *The Chronological History of the Negro in America*. Here Till receives minimum coverage, as he appears in the list of three victims of lynchings occurring in Mississippi in 1955: "Lynching returned to the South. Mississippi accounted for three: Rev. George W. Lee at Belzoni, Lamar Smith at Brookhaven, and Emmett Till near Money."⁷² While there is some elaboration on the other two, Rev. George Lee and Lamar Smith relative to their involvement with the Mississippi voter registration drive, no additional comment on the Till case is made.

Consider co-authors Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando who wrote *Civil Rights and the American Negro: A Documentary History*. In the entire 671-page book on the African-Americans' civil rights from 1619 until 1968, only one reference is made to Emmett Till: "Moreover, segregationist and states' rights opposition had encouraged the formation of such organized groups as the White Citizens' Councils and the initiation of such unorganized violence as the kidnap-lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till at Money, Mississippi, in the summer of 1955."⁷³ Even then, the reference does not reflect

the impact Till's murder and trial had on the American people, particularly African-Americans. On the contrary, it merely emphasizes intimidation of the black community by the dominant culture.

Consider one of the greatest black historians of the twentieth century, Benjamin Quarles and *The Negro in the Making of America*. Nowhere in his entire book is the Till murder case mentioned. In recapitulating the activities of the fifties, he asserts that "This movement [Civil Rights Movement] started on December 1, 1955, when seamstress Rosa Parks boarded a bus in downtown Montgomery, took a seat in the section reserved for whites, and refused to surrender it to a white man who subsequently entered the bus."(p. 74)

Consider the recently published co-authored historical account of the black American by two highly credible black historians, Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*. Again the reference to the Till murder case is limited to one sentence, and like other historians they fail to put this case in the historical perspective of the Civil Rights Movement. Hence, "Emmett

Till, a fourteen-year-old boy, was kidnapped and killed in Money, Mississippi, in 1955 because he allegedly whistled at a white woman.”(p. 75) Their reference to the Till case only exemplifies the taboo of the black man and the white woman in the long debated issue of sex and racism.

According to Gunnar Myrdal, who devised what he called “The Rank Order of Discrimination” in *An American Dilemma*, he found that whites contended that blacks wanted sexual relations and intermarriage with white women more than other forms of equality. When he questioned blacks, he found that they contended that they valued the sexual attraction least.⁷⁶ Calvin Hernton discusses this issue in *Sex and Racism in America*, in which he concluded “that the race problem is inextricably connected with sex ... The sexualization of the race problem is a reality, and we are going to have to deal with it even though most of us are, if not unwilling, definitely unprepared.” (p. 77)

Finally, consider the interpretive historian Vincent Harding in *The Other American Revolution*. Till is not mentioned at all.

Others, too, have been guilty of side-tracking or bypassing the Till case, as reflected in the records of both *The World Almanac* and the *Reader's Digest*. In recording the significant events of the month and year, the World Almanacs cite the Rosa Parks incident, but fail to mention Till. The *Reader's Digest*, too, mentions Parks, but not Till. Clearly, the Till murder case is a lost chapter in the history books on the Civil Rights Movement.

There is a discrepancy between the underplayed account of the Till case in history and the detailed media coverage it received. (Hudson-Weems, pp. 50-51)

Many initiatives I made followed--Till Forums, Conferences, etc I will close with a quote from my first Till publication, representing the very *raison d'etre* regarding the significance of my subject—Emmett Louis Till—and moreover, the critical need for my 30-year work on that subject::

Emmett Louis Till lived and died. His murder and trial were a mockery of the value of African-American life [which] exemplified racial atrocities in modern history. As the people were keenly cognizant of this case then, through mass media, so should they be today through recorded history. Indeed, it so

pressed upon the minds of Americans then that it ultimately exploded into the Civil Rights Movement. It is crucial for the civil rights struggles of today, yesterday, and tomorrow that the importance of Emmett Till to the Modern Civil Rights Movement be written, understood for its merit, and become a focal point for positive, consciousness-raising thought and action for all American citizens who love the ideas of trust, truth, integrity, and justice. (Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till*, 61)