

## Selected Quotations: The Impact of the Lynching of Emmett Till

When people saw what had happened to my son, men stood up who had never stood up before.

—Mamie Till-Mobley

I remember not being able to sleep when I saw [the photos]. Can you imagine being 11 years old and seeing something like that for the first time in your life and it being close to home? The death of Emmett Till touched us, it touched everybody. And we always said if we ever got a chance to do something, we were going to change things around here.

—Margaret Block, a long-time activist in Cleveland, Mississippi

The Emmett Till case was a spark for a new generation to commit their lives to social change, you know. They said, We're not gonna die like this. Instead, we're gonna live and transform the South so people won't have to die like this. And if anything, if any event of the 1950s inspired young people to be committed to that kind of change, it was the lynching of Emmett Till. . . . I think there are at least two distinct legacies of Emmett Till. One, that the level of violence that was commonplace in a place like Mississippi became known to the world, and that violence generated anger and outrage—and in some ways courage—for those fighting in Mississippi and those willing to come South to fight that fight. . . . I think the second legacy of Emmett Till is that Jim Crow racism, as it used to exist from the age of slavery, could no longer exist. Now something has to change. And black people in Mississippi itself were the ones who were going to make that change. And the great thing is that the change that they made, the extension of citizenship to all people, is a change that affected all of America, not just black people, but whites, Latinos, Asian Americans. It extended democracy to the country when democracy had never been extended to everyone before.

—Robin Kelley, professor of history, University of Southern California

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.

—Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, civil rights leader

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

—Rosa Parks, civil rights activist

I was not even born when Emmett Till was brutally murdered in Money, Miss., but growing up in Detroit in the early 1960s, I knew his name well. When I took the long train ride to my mother's hometown of Greenwood, Miss., in 1967, I learned even more about him. I learned that he had violated the rigid rules of racial deference and hierarchy that governed the South, and had paid for it with his life. He had allegedly whistled at a white woman in a store. As a result—and as a reminder to others—he was kidnapped from his uncle's home and was mercilessly beaten and tortured to death. His lifeless body was then thrown in the Tallahatchie River. His killers (who confessed later to *Look* magazine to kidnapping and beating Till) were tried and set free by an all-white jury. This story was told to me as an orientation for a northern black child traveling south in the era of Jim Crow segregation. The Emmett Till case instilled fear in me, of course, but it did something else. It steeled my determination to resist and defeat the kind of racial hatred and institutional inequality that had caused Till's death and given immunity to his murders. Even though I did not understand all the implications of the case at age 10, it left me angry and unsettled. This was the effect that the Emmett Till murder had on an entire generation of African Americans and anti-racist whites. But we would not have even known of Emmett Till if not for the courage and commitment of his mother.

—Barbara Ransby, professor of African-American studies and history, University of Illinois at Chicago

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 bulg-ing out of their sockets and his mouth twisted and broken. His mother had done a bold thing. She refused to let him be buried until hundreds of thousands marched past his open casket in Chicago and looked down at his mutilated body. [I] felt a deep kinship to him when I learned he was born the same year and day I was. My father talked about it at night and dramatized the crime. I couldn't get Emmett out of my mind.

—Muhammed Ali, boxer 13

I think the picture in *Jet* magazine showing Emmett Till's mutilation was probably the greatest media product in the last forty or fifty years because that picture stimulated a lot of interest and anger on the part of blacks all over the country.

—Congressman Charles Diggs 14