

Confronting Uncomfortable History: Contested Memorials on the American Landscape

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Americans are engaged in a persistent pathological debate over the nation's core values and identity. Though the Constitution espouses a commitment to the liberal ideals of freedom, democracy, and human equality, these principles never applied universally. From the United States' founding, national dialogue vacillated over the scale and scope of American citizenship. Many laud the ideals of freedom and equality, yet an equally vocal contingent believe these values are best protected through exclusionary laws and policies aimed at limiting civil and human rights. This contestation over American ideals and identity bleeds into a larger romantic narrative of the American people and their past—or more precisely, a mythology—that accentuates the extraordinary nature of the American nation and its belief in the liberal ideals of freedom and human equality.

However, this mythos becomes a public battle in contemporary politics as parents and politicians fight over the lessons that teachers may impart in their classrooms. Yet these power struggles over history education are not limited to classrooms or the halls of Congress—in fact, they are perhaps most visible or “invisible” on the nation's memorial landscape. The lynching of Emmett Till embodies the clearest contestation over U.S. memory and space—particularly because the story of his murder challenges patriotic notions of progress and equality. It recasts American idyllic notions of itself into a confrontation with the violent consequences of a deeply-entrenched racism that continues to plague the nation.

Memorials, at their most basic level, are a form of remembrance that remind the living of the past. Nevertheless, these towering statues and commemorative markers should not be mistaken for passive or static forms of remembrance. National monuments and memorials are inherently political as they serve as a physical reminder of, and testament to, a specific set of societal values—which may or may not embody those enshrined in the Constitution. To fully assess memorialization in the United States, it is also important to consider not only visible monuments but also, conspicuous absences on the landscape—people, places, or events that are shrouded in silence. Neglecting or muting the related narratives effectively preserves the mythos by obscuring the fact that national values and individual experiences often fail to align. The October 28, 2022 nation-wide release of Chionyne Chukwo's *Till* offered modern audiences an opportunity to confront this memorialized history in a cinematic setting. Nevertheless, the absence of a public monument in honor of the “sacrificial lamb” of the Civil Rights Movement is telling.

The crux of Till's story is set in Money, Mississippi and specifically, at the grocery store in which he allegedly made inappropriate remarks to Carolyn Bryant before her husband and brother-in-law kidnapped and murdered the Chicago teen. Though the site features an understated plaque that pays tribute to the history of the space, its memorialization is, nonetheless, mired in controversy.

In 1955, the town Money was home to Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market, a small shop run by Roy Bryant and his wife Carolyn. On August 24th of that year, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old from Chicago, ventured into the store with his cousins and their friends to purchase candy and other small food items after working in the fields all day. Unaware, or perhaps, doubtful of the severe level of racial intolerance in the South, Till allegedly made inappropriate, flirtatious comments—perhaps even going as far as letting out a “wolf whistle”—directed at Carolyn while in the store. When her husband, Roy, heard about the incident several days later, he, his half-brother J.W. Milam, and quite probably several others, kidnapped Till from his uncle Moses Wright's home in the middle of the night. The men tortured Till for several hours before ultimately murdering him and dumping his body in the Tallahatchie river. In a case that made national headlines, Bryant and Milam were tried, and summarily acquitted for their crimes.

For many, the lynching of Emmett Till marked the start of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Nevertheless, it took over fifty years for the state of Mississippi to memorialize the teen. In May 2011, the Mississippi Development Authority announced plans to create the Mississippi Freedom Trail. Later that month, the state held a dedication ceremony at the first stop on the tour: Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market. Though the store now has a historical marker out front, the building has slowly deteriorated over time. In 2005, the Mississippi Heritage Trust placed Bryant's Grocery

store at the top of their list of the “10 Most Endangered Historic Places” in the state.¹ Now, all that remains is the bare skeleton of a building covered in overgrown vines.

Though there is much interest from various civil rights groups in preserving the former grocery store, all efforts to restore and memorialize the space have been thwarted by the current owners, siblings Annette Morgan, Harold Ray Tribble, and Martin Tribble. The family claims to be interested in preserving the historic site, but they are unwilling to start the restoration process or to sell the building for a fair price. Though the store—or more likely, the land it sits upon—is only worth a few thousand dollars, the family refuses to sell it for anything less than \$4 million—a startlingly high price for some, but a bargain compared to the \$40 million they originally wanted for the decrepit structure.²

Nevertheless, Harold Tribble maintains, “We want to restore it. . . It’s a part of history, and it’s about to fall down. We’ve got all the signs, the cash registers, the shelves.”³ While Bryant’s Grocery holds important symbolic meaning for many Americans, it also holds a special personal meaning to the Tribble siblings as their father, Ray, served on the jury of men that acquitted Bryant and Milam of Tills’ murder in 1955. Given this connection, it is certainly possible that the family has no desire to preserve the building and would indeed prefer it if the space—and along with it, their family’s connection to the vile crime—faded into oblivion.

Yet the family’s inaction continues to frustrate those who want to preserve the space. Sherron Wright, the great niece of Moses Wright, has characterized the Tribble family’s continued ownership of the property as “a hostage situation.” She explained, “They’re saying, ‘We’re going to hold this building hostage, and once it crumbles, it’s no good to nobody.’”⁴ President of the Emmett Till Justice Campaign, Alvin Sykes agrees. They are “holding history hostage,” he contends, “They are demanding a ransom that no one can afford, ensuring that one of the nation’s most important civil rights sites will soon lie in ruins.”⁵

Though the Mississippi Freedom Trail memorial plaque remains outside of the store, it was defaced in 2017 in a manner that covered, and thereby erased, its text and images. According to the Mississippi Development Authority, “The Emmett Till marker is the only Mississippi Freedom Trail marker damaged in the history of the trail.”⁶ Though this is the only Freedom Trail marker that has been the target of erasure and animosity, other memorial markers related to Till have suffered a similar fate.

In 2008, the Emmett Till Memorial Commission (ETMC) created the Tallahatchie Civil Rights Driving Tour, which features twelve sites associated with Till’s murder. Each stop on the tour is marked with a memorial sign that details its historical significance. Within months of its installation, the sign marking the “River Site,” where Till’s corpse was located, was stolen and later found in the river. The ETMC replaced the sign and

shortly thereafter, it “was riddled with 317 bullet holes.”⁷ The third marker captured national attention in 2019 when an image of three University of Mississippi students brandishing a shotgun and an AR-15 in front of the memorial sign was posted on social media.⁸ The ETMC took down the sign, which was marred by ten bullet holes, and replaced it with a new bullet-proof marker. The second “River Site” marker now resides at the National Museum of American History and was featured in a 2021 exhibit titled *Reckoning with Remembrance: History, Injustice, and the Murder of Emmett Till*.⁹ The Smithsonian’s willingness to accept and display this sign demonstrates the important function of memory and remembrance in the larger story of Till and the Black Freedom Struggle. For those wishing to erase Till’s story from the landscape, these commemorative signs and sites serve as inconvenient reminders of the national attention that accompanied his lynching and the incomplete struggle for racial equality.

Just as the national battle for racial justice and freedom is ongoing, so too is the fight for control over the memory and memorialization of Emmett Till. Perhaps this is why so many would like to see care and attention paid to the physical building in which Till’s devastating story ultimately began. Unfortunately for all those who seek memorialization of Till at Bryant’s Grocery, it is the right of the Tribble family to let the story fall into disarray as it is indeed private property.¹⁰ And while the family’s behavior in this case is aggravating (especially considering that they applied for, and received, a Mississippi Civil Rights Historic Sites grant to restore the gas station that is adjacent, but otherwise unrelated, to the grocery store), it is illustrative of larger problems of memorialization in a country plagued by contested national values.

Given persistent debates surrounding national ideals, and the level of discord about the types of stories that should be included in history books, it is unsurprising that the memorial landscape in the United States is controversial and chaotic. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, 377 Confederate memorials have been removed from public spaces in the United States.¹¹ Though Americans may debate the future of these discarded monuments, their removal from public view limits their influence on the national mythos of progress and unity. Expelling Confederate memorials without offering further interpretation or explanation at the site allows Americans to ignore the illiberal impulses that led to their erection in the first place.

Avoiding memorialization of Till in Money has an analogous function. On both the memorial landscape and in historical narratives, a constant tension exists between presence and absence; that which is included in contrast to that which is silenced, forgotten, or ignored. The national mythos relies on these lapses in order to contain or erase the most sordid actions and inclinations of the American people. In its rise, the mythos softened and silenced episodes of trauma and cruelty that threatened the

notion of American exceptionalism—narratives that exposed the United States' deeply embedded roots of violence and intolerance.

In 1955, Till's story made national headlines and startled many into action. With renewed attention from the film *Till* and recent efforts to locate and try the surviving perpetrators in this crime, it seemed it might have the potential to do so again. Unfortunately, one of the few remaining opportunities for justice in the Till case was lost with the death of Carolyn Bryant Donham in April 2023. Recall Bryant Donham's central role in the case as she accused Till of accosting and making such inappropriate remarks toward her that her husband and brother-in-law were spurred to murderous action. While only the men were tried for this crime, many have pointed to the pivotal part that the then Mrs. Bryant played, not only as a witness in court but also, by possibly identifying Till for the men on the evening of the abduction and lynching. For many, it is obvious that Carolyn Bryant Donham is implicated in Till's lynching. This is exacerbated by the fact that in an interview with historian Timothy B. Tyson, she recanted her testimony and admitted that she lied about her interaction with Till.¹² Several years after Tyson published his revelation in *The Blood of Emmett Till*, an unserved warrant for Carolyn Bryant's arrest in the 1955 murder investigation was found among old files in a courthouse in Leflore County, Mississippi.¹³ Demanding an arrest be made, activists looked in vain for Bryant Donham in North Carolina, her last known location. Upon her death, it was revealed that Bryant Donham had been living in Westlake, Louisiana.

The death of Carolyn Bryant Donham marked the final opportunity for justice in Till's lynching. And though her passing adds salt to the unhealed wounds surrounding his death, there is merit in reconsidering the larger narrative that features the evil actions of just a few key figures in this case. Far more people than Carolyn Bryant Donham, Roy Bryant, an J.W. Milam are responsible for Till's murder and the subsequent miscarriage of justice in his case. As Tyson points out, "What this narrative keeps us from seeing is the monstrous social order that cared nothing for the life of Emmett Till nor thousands more like him. Neither the federal government nor the government of Mississippi did anything to prevent or punish this murder. Condemning what Donham did is easier than confronting what America was — and is."¹⁴ Considering the contentious nature of remembrance of Till, this sentiment rings true. Though national museums enshrine relics from Till's death, including the casket in which he was buried, the public landscapes surrounding this case are marked by controversy and discord. From a dilapidated grocery store to bullet-riddled commemorative markers, public memory of Emmett Till is unsettled and incomplete. In order to resolve this tension, Americans must confront this uncomfortable narrative and the landscapes that accompany it, and restore them to the larger story of the nation's past.

Notes

1 "2005: 10 Most Endangered Historic Places in Mississippi," Mississippi Heritage Trust, <https://www.10mostms.com/listings-entry/2005>.

2 Jerry Mitchell, "'They Just Want History to Die:' Owners Demand \$4 Million for Crumbling Emmett Till Store," Mississippi Clarion Ledger, August 29, 2018, <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2018/08/29/emmett-till-owners-crumbling-store-where-saga-began-demand-4-m/943941002/>.

3 Jeffery Mitchell, "Symbol of the Movement Sits in Ruin; Family Looking for Buyer," Mississippi Clarion-Ledger, February 11, 2007.

4 Mitchell, "'They Just Want History to Die.'"

5 Mitchell, "'They Just Want History to Die.'"

6 "Emmett Till Marker on Mississippi Freedom Trail Rededicated," Mississippi Development Authority, July 25, 2017, <https://mississippi.org/news/emmett-till-marker-on-mississippi-freedom-trail-rededicated/>.

7 "Defaced Emmett Till Historic Marker," National Museum of American History, 2020, https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1986561.

8 Jerry Mitchell, "We Found Photos of Ole Miss Students Posing With Guns in Front of a Shot-Up Emmett Till Memorial. Now They Face a Possible Civil Rights Investigation," ProPublica, July 25, 2019, <https://www.propublica.org/article/ole-miss-students-pose-with-guns-in-front-of-shot-up-emmett-till-memorial>.

9 "Reckoning with Remembrance: History, Injustice, and the Murder of Emmett Till," National Museum of American History, September 3-November 2, 2021, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/reckoning-with-remembrance>.

10 Dave Tell, "Remembering Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi," Places Journal, April 2019, <https://placesjournal.org/article/remembering-emmett-till/?cn-reloaded=1.&cn-reloaded=1>.

11 "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy, 3rd ed., Southern Poverty Law Center, February 1, 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/20220201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy-third-edition>.

12 Timothy B. Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

13 Jay Reeves and Emily Wagster Pettus, "1955 Warrant in Emmett Till Case Found, Family Seeks Arrest," AP News, June 29, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/arrests-mississippi-kidnapping-emmett-till-49708de557faf747ec3e9fa8c021e9cd>.

14 The Associated Press, "Carolyn Bryant Donham, Who Accused Emmett Till Before He Was Lynched, Dies at Age 88," NPR.org, April 27, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/27/1172489493/carolyn-bryant-donham-who-accused-emmett-till-before-he-was-lynched-dies-at-age->.

