

CLENORA HUDSON-WEEMS, PhD

The Legacy of Emmett Louis Till" (1941-1955): The Catalyst of the Civil Rights Movement

My journey of unearthing and establishing fourteen-year-old Emmett Louis "Bobo" Till as the true catalyst of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and the 1960s commenced during my first semester at the University of Iowa in the fall of 1985. Having received an invitation earlier in January to co-author, with Dr. Wilfred D. Samuels of the University of Utah, Toni Morrison (1990), the first critical study of the works of the Nobel Laureate, I shifted my focus as a PhD candidate in American / African American Studies to the tragic Emmett Till saga. My assignment from God was to establish the brutal murder of the Black Chicago youth as catalyst, culminating in the 1988 Ford Doctoral Dissertation, entitled "*Emmett Till: The Impetus of the Modern Civil Rights Movement*," later published as *Emmett Louis Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement* (1994).

My first, and biggest, challenge regarding this subject came from my Doctoral Committee at the University of Iowa during the Dissertation Proposal meeting in September 1986, at which time the Chair insisted that changing the catalyst of the Movement from Rosa Parks to Emmett Till was "virtually impossible," as all historians had agreed that the established catalyst of the Movement was Rosa Parks' demonstration on December 1, 1955. That incident occurred three months after the horrific Till incident, which escalated to a nation-wide public response, shortly thereafter becoming an international cause célèbre. The committee's final challenge to me came in the form of a warning: "What happens if you cannot defend the dissertation?" My reply was resolute: "Then I don't get the PhD and I'm willing to take that chance." I accepted that challenge from the Academy, which has the awesome power to legitimize concepts. With permission to go forth, I then vigorously worked, completing a nearly four-hundred page dissertation that ultimately liberated Till from the stigma of being an embarrassment to the Movement (some had mused, "He should have known better.") to its catalyst, thus, granting him his proper place in the historical account of the Civil Rights Movement, including having set the stage for the Montgomery bus boycott. Rosa Parks later said that she thought about Emmett and she couldn't go back to the back of the bus.

Although initially dissuaded by most regarding my interpretation of the Movement, I did, however, receive one particular encouraging initiative early on during my research. For the first time, the National Ford Foundation appointed a Pre-Doctoral Fellow to deliver an Opening Plenary at its October 1987 National Convention in Washington, D.C., a distinction traditionally held by Post-Doctoral Fellows. That Till slide presentation occurred the same day that Dr. Condoleezza Rice presented at the Afternoon Plenary and Dr. John Hope Franklin presented at the Closing Plenary. The receptivity of the pioneering Till position was captivating; even publishers, including Oxford U Press, expressed a strong interest in it, later followed by its letter of interest. On the other hand, the interpretation was not readily accepted, as Barry Morrow, Oscar Award-Winning Co-Writer of *Rain Man*, wrote in his endorsement of *The Definitive Emmett Till* (2006): "For nearly twenty years, Hudson-Weems was the lone voice calling for a fresh assessment of the true historical significance of the murder of Emmett Till." Other book endorsers expressed similar sentiments: Dr. John Blassingame (Yale University) — "When you really think about it, Hudson-Weems is absolutely right. We historians missed it." Dr. C. Eric Lincoln (Duke University) — "She [Hudson-Weems] challenges the most sacred shibboleths of the origins of the Civil Rights Movement." Mamie Till Mobley— "Hudson-Weems has dug relentlessly into Southern justice, revealing the stench and ugliness of race hatred, American style." My mission continued with a litany of supportive activities, including publications: four books on Till (*Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement*, 1994

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and 2006; *The Definitive Emmett Till*, 2006; *Plagiarism: Physical and Intellectual Lynching*, 2007; *Emmett: Legacy, Redemption and Forgiveness*, 2014), national and international speaking engagements, etc., which clearly contributed to the elevation of Emmett Till to the status of a household name. Today, the tragedy of “the Emmett Till continuum,” also in today’s Civil Rights Movement, still reigns high [1].

Africana people, and their supporters, in the global struggle for the birthright of all human beings, continue to collectively demonstrate, demanding “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” fighting ’til victory for true freedom and equity for all!

Emmett’s journey commenced a few days before his fourteenth birthday, July 25, 1955, and ended for him physically, though not spiritually, on August 28, 1955. The mother’s journey, then, commenced, as Mamie Till “made a lifetime commitment to her only child to change racist minds and laws in America with the help of God [and] Rayfield Mooty, a Labor Union leader, Civil Rights activist and her chief advisor” [2]. Hence, Emmett leaves the world a legacy of ultimate victory, speaking truth to power in unveiling what I call “the true ugliness of American racism staring us in the eye [3]. But it is important to note that this child, murdered for a simple whistle, not an alleged whistle, deserves to be defended. With this positive way of perceiving Emmett, the Movement, too, must carry a more accurate assessment relative to its inception. As noted in the 1988 dissertation, and later in its 1994 publication,

We cannot adequately reflect on Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther] King, Jr., the symbol (Father) of the Movement without reflecting on the 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, permanently etched in American consciousness, which could not die, thereby, setting the stage for the boycott [4].

And so, there you have it--the indisputable catalyst of the memorable Civil Rights Movement:

Emmett Louis Till was the child of the Movement, and hence, what we have is a TRILOGY of a sort. Clearly people responded without hesitation to the victimization of a child, Emmett in this instance. The child was “the heart of the matter” [African American Judge Higginbotham cited in the dissertation], for many Blacks had been sacrificed for racist ends; however, it becomes another whole story when one talks about the victimization of a child [5].

[1] See the article, “The Civil Rights Movement, Then and now: Anti-Racism to Stop the Emmett Till Continuum in a 5-Step Solution [2] Hudson-Weems, *Emmett: Legacy, Redemption & Forgiveness*, 2014, 147. [3] Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement*, 1994. [4] Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement*, 1994, xxxiv. [5] Hudson-Weems, “Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves, Fifth Edition, 2019, 123.

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On the flip side of the coin are 4 books on Emmett Till. Her 1988 Ford doctoral dissertation, *Emmett Till: The Impetus of the Modern Civil Rights Movement* (U of Iowa), later published in 1994 as *Emmett Louis Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement*, was the 1st to establish Till's brutal lynching as the true catalyst of the Movement. The last Till book, *Emmett: Legacy, Redemption and Forgiveness*, culminates in the possibilities of a racial healing via atonement and forgiveness.

She is co-author, with Dr. Wilfred D. Samuels (U of Utah), of Toni Morrison (1990), the first critical study of the works of Nobel Laureate, Toni Morrison, as well as editor of *Contemporary Africana Theory, Thought and Action: A Guide to Africana Studies* (2007).

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