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History Repeats Itself: Emmett Till and the Continued Struggle for Civil Rights

Emmett Till's murdered body is one of the most recognizable images of anti-black racist violence. His partially decomposed body, swollen by the Mississippi River, water-borne parasites, and the suffocating heat of the racist South, became an emblem from which the modern Civil Rights Movement was born. At his funeral, his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, deliberately left his coffin open, enabling attendees to see the crevices of his disfigured face, and photographers to share his image on the front of newspapers, and into the minds of the polarized public.

The 2014 murder of Mike Brown continues to have the same effect. The image of his blood seeping into the summer concrete, his body—bold, bulky, and bullet-ridden—lying uncovered as black passersbys helplessly looked on; their bodies immobilized by terror, incredulity, confusion, and exasperation.

The streets were Brown's open coffin. Cell phones captured his image, and minutes after his death, the picture of his body traveled through social media feeds, days before newspapers. Till's murder sixty years ago launched a landmark movement in our history, and Brown's body, disfigured by a racist police officer, underscores that very same moment. His body reignited global conversations about the role of police and their roots in anti-blackness. Brown's murder added a new layer contemporary racial analyses, depth to the spirit of intersectionality, and birthed a global discussion in which black people are unapologetically centered.

Mike Brown is our Emmett Till.

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