

69. Lucy Freeman, review of Feminine Mystique by Friedan, New York Times Book Review, April 7, 1963, 46; review of Feminine Mystique by Friedan, Virginia Quarterly Review, Summer 1963, cviii; Smith, "Too Tame the Shrew," 44; Fava, review of Feminine Mystique by Friedan, 1054; Freeman, review of Feminine Mystique by Friedan, 46; review of Feminine Mystique by Friedan, Yale Review, March 1963, xii.

70. Friedan, Feminine Mystique, 325.

The murder of the fourteen-year-old African American Emmett Till in the summer of 1955 was a grisly one. Late Saturday night on August 28, Roy Bryant, twenty-four years old, and his half-brother J. W. Milam, thirty-six, kidnapped Emmett Till, a native of Chicago, at gunpoint from his relatives' cabin in Money, Mississippi. Several days after the abduction, a white teenager found Till's body in the nearby Tallahatchie River. He had been brutally beaten, one eye was gouged out, and he was shot in the skull. In the hope of weighting the mutilated body in the water, Till's murderers had tied a 100-pound cotton gin fan to his neck with barbed wire.1 Till allegedly had whistled at Carolyn Bryant, Roy Bryant's wife, and mother of two young sons. The two white men felt compelled to avenge what they perceived as a racial and sexual transgression.

The brutal murder transfixed the country. Thousands attended Till's funeral in Chicago and saw his mangled body. Bryant and Milam were arrested, indicted, and tried for murder. During the five-day trial in September, three television networks
flew footage from Mississippi to New York daily for the nightly news.2 “Will Mississippi Whitewash the Emmett Till Slaying?” asked Jet magazine in a photo essay depicting Till in life and death.3 On Friday, September 23, the all-white, all-male jury deliberated for only sixty-seven minutes before returning a verdict of not guilty. Less than two months later, a grand jury chose not to indict Milam and Bryant on charges of kidnapping. They were free men. The acquittal fueled the horror and collective anger that the murder had evoked. In the weeks before and after the trial, dozens of protest rallies with thousands in attendance were held around the country. Till’s relatives and others involved in the trial told of their experiences, raised funds for the NAACP, and urged voter registration. “Not since Pearl Harbor has the country been so outraged as by the . . . [Till] lynching . . . and the unconscionable verdict,” commented one magazine.4

Till’s murder occurred in 1955, a year of growing defensiveness and violence on the part of many white southerners. It marked the first year in the life of White Citizens’ Councils, “respectable” and middle-class white supremacist organizations born in response to the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka.5 In Mississippi alone, two other black males were shot to death between May and August 1955; both had registered to vote. Yet 1955 was also a year of cautious optimism in some black communities and activism for civil rights workers. The African American newspaper, the Chicago Defender, for example, celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with an 80-page edition that “epitomizes the position of the American Negro today in relation to his native country. All of the elements that have gone into his development and progress in the United States are embodied in this issue . . . a hefty, tangible symbol of our democracy.”6 The year would end with the onset of the Montgomery bus boycott, a campaign that would break segregated public transportation in the Deep South city and bring an obscure black minister, Martin Luther King, Jr., to national attention.

Of course, the year of Till’s murder was marked by many other, seemingly unrelated, events and attitudes. These included a sexually conservative message emphasizing that a “good” woman was concerned primarily with her home and family and, perhaps most important, was a nurturing mother. In a commencement address at Smith College in May 1955, liberal democrat Adlai Stevenson urged each graduate to become a mother and inspire “in her home a vision of the meaning of life and freedom . . . help her husband find values that will give purpose to his specialized daily chores.”7 Television moms projected images of fulfilled and fulfilling white motherhood onto recently acquired screens across the country, and these representations of motherhood frequently prevailed despite increases in women’s labor force participation and alternative gender roles offered in popular culture. And although these were prescriptions for white women, African American periodicals, too, often celebrated motherhood and domestic security.8 “Goodbye Mammy, Hello Mom,” declared Ebony, heralding the alleged postwar retreat of black women to the home and giving thanks that “Junior” has “been getting his bread and butter sandwiches regularly after school and [now] finding that rip in his blue jeans mended when he goes out to play.” Indeed, columnist Roi Ottley praised black mothers for disciplining their children successfully—more readily and effectively than did “modern” white mothers. “Perhaps the Negro mother’s attitude is old-fashioned,” he wrote, “but in the final analysis it is more practical and indeed involves a sense of personal responsibility.”9

Mamie Till Bradley,10 a thirty-three-year-old African American woman, worker, and mother living in Chicago, was a part of these overlapping and seemingly conflicting currents on race relations and gender roles. When Bryant and Milam murdered her son, these currents forcefully collided and their interdependence crystallized. As this essay makes clear, a discourse on motherhood was not incidental to the widely publicized murder of Emmett Till—an episode frequently cited as critical to the “birth” of the civil rights movement.11 Instead, constructions of gender were at the center of a case hailed solely as a landmark in the history of the civil rights movement. An analysis of the southern born but Chicago-bred Mamie Bradley demonstrates that motherhood itself was a battleground on which the meaning of Till’s death was fought. Both racists and anticommunist conservatives and liberals invoked, constructed, and relied on meanings of motherhood to formulate their views both on race relations and on American citizenship.12

Scholars analyzing this murder have emphasized the racial, regional, and class conflicts that Till’s death brought to the fore. Initially, the majority of white southerners condemned the murder and praised the speedy indictment of two men now labeled “white trash” or “peckerwoods” by many southern whites who, regardless of Bryant and Milam’s financial positions, used class distinctions to distance themselves from such blatant and violent racism.13 In the days after their arrest, local lawyers intentionally demanded payment they knew Bryant and Milam could not afford, and the men had no counsel.14 But as white southerners concluded that the South itself was under attack and on trial, and as blacks around the country mobilized politically to protest the murder, a racially specific alliance developed to defend Milam and Bryant—and to protect power relations in the region. Within a week of the murder, all five of Sumner’s attorneys agreed to collaborate in Bryant and Milam’s defense; a “defense fund” raised $10,000 for the two. The impact of the case, then, scholars have argued, stemmed in part from the way in which one region of the country felt itself set against another.15
Because Bryant and Milam murdered Till for alleged “advances” toward Carolyn Bryant, gender has not been wholly overlooked in discussions of the murder. But analyses situate gender onto a white woman exclusively, so Carolyn Bryant becomes “the woman” relevant to these events. Similarly, race is situated onto black men exclusively, so either Till or Moses Wright, Till’s uncle and a prominent witness in the trial, are “the blacks” relevant to these events. As a result, the relationships among gender, race, and class and the ways in which together these fluid categories interact and structure power relations have not been considered. The power of Carolyn Bryant’s gender as racially specific and class informed, for example, is obscured. Further, a central figure in understanding how the meaning of Till’s death was constructed has been largely effaced: Mamie Till Bradley.16

Mamie Bradley—as an African American woman and an African American mother—was central to the politicization of her son’s death. She chose to open her son’s casket to the world and thus helped make his death an international civil rights issue. Bradley actively involved herself in the events that followed the murder—the funeral, the trial, and the political mobilization the murder spurred—and in the process defined her own subjectivity as a black woman. She claimed the public role of grieving mother and thus reformulated conceptions of both white and African American motherhood.17 Her actions enable a consideration of the political—even radical—potential of motherhood in the 1950s and a reconsideration of a women’s history paradigm that renders mothers in the 1950s apolitical.18 Bradley explicitly politicized motherhood on a number of levels—challenging black women’s exclusion from the racially specific discourse of white motherhood and challenging women’s exclusion from the gendered discourse of politics.19 She thus exposed the ways in which citizenship relied on false distinctions between public and private and unquestioned assumptions about race and gender.20

As the story of Mamie Till Bradley suggests, an intervention into the dominant discourse on motherhood could have multiple meanings and consequences. In claiming her role as a grieving mother she helped inject motherhood more forcefully into the political landscape, but she could not control the terms of the debate or the ways in which she herself was a symbol. Till opponents consistently invoked assumptions about natural motherhood that privileged Carolyn Bryant and excluded Mamie Till Bradley in order to preserve citizenship as it was defined in the South. But more progressive claims to citizenship that included African Americans were also gendered, dependent on traditional divisions between a public and rational masculinity and a private and emotional femininity. As part of its political battle for black citizenship, the NAACP, too, would ultimately seek to contain Bradley and define the meaning of motherhood on these more “progressive” terms. Representations of Bradley underscored the fact that meanings of motherhood sat on the cusp between public and private—clearly relegated to the private sphere, yet infused with political meaning. The meaning of Till’s death was structured around these tensions between public and private, between exposure and concealment. And precisely because Mamie Till Bradley existed and acted as she did—as mother, woman, and African American, in the public and private spheres—she became an object to be positioned, defined, and contained by those across the political spectrum.

“A Mother’s World Came to an End”:
The Meanings of Respectable Motherhood

The meanings of Till’s death pointed to the contested meanings of motherhood and respectability. Who and what was a “natural” or a “good” mother? What sources of authority did this role confer, and who was excluded from this category? Who was and was not respectable? Could either the African American and northern Mamie Till Bradley or the white, southern, less financially stable Roy and Carolyn Bryant be cast as respectable?

Powerful as these categories were, their meanings were not fixed in 1955. Motherhood did not automatically confer on Mamie Bradley or Carolyn Bryant authority or sympathy. Indeed, despite the fact (or perhaps because of it) that motherhood was considered the ultimate form of womanhood, “experts” in psychology, sexology, sociology, and other “sex role” or “race relation” disciplines understood motherhood as the linchpin to a range of social and political problems—from communism and homosexuality to juvenile delinquency and poverty. In many instances, middle-class white mothers in particular were vilified in this period.21 Nevertheless, white motherhood afforded potential power and demanded at least rhetorical loyalty. Since well before World War II, motherhood, for white women, had been explicitly prescribed and at least conditionally valorized.22 In the same week that thousands waited in lines to view Till’s body, reviewers praised Herman Wouk’s novel Marjorie Morningstar—the tale of aspiring actress turned mother and homemaker. She “fulfilled her destiny,” sang one voice in the chorus of praise, and was a model for women everywhere—“their lives at last disposed into the state which becomes them.”23 Even as mom bashing became something of a national pastime, then, critiques of “bad” white mothers were based on a basic belief in their potential power and importance as civilizers of men. Or, in the words of anthropologist Ashley Montagu, author of The Natural Superiority of Women: “It is the function of women to teach men how to be human . . . the true genius of women.”24

The historian Elaine Tyler May has analyzed the emphasis on “early marriage, sexual containment and traditional gender roles” in the context of the
Cold War: "Domestic containment," she explains, was a way men and women could "bolster themselves against potential threats"—including atomic war and communism within America. When the quest for civil rights is considered part of the 1950s, the political implications of domestic containment widens. For whites, and especially for financially insecure southern whites like Roy and Carolyn Bryant, adherence to traditional gender roles and the belief in motherhood's power were ways of containing "threats" to the racial caste system on which they depended for their socioeconomic security. Although both white families were notches above the sharecroppers and tenant farmers of both races who populated the rural South, the Bryants in particular lacked economic security. Whiteness established the code in which "protecting" white womanhood enabled violence against African Americans. Relying on idealized images of white womanhood to strengthen white racial dominance was surely not new in 1955; doing so, however, meant something different when it drew on a prevailing emphasis on motherhood to contest a burgeoning racial liberalism.

Although for Bryant and Milam definitions of masculine power and respectable womanhood were informed by both race and class, over the course of the trial their class status was curiously elided. Indeed, for racially conservative white southerners defending the two men, Milam and Bryant became symbols of all that was good about the middle-class white family—veritable commericals for Father Knows Best: clean-cut, seemingly pillars in their communities; quintessential family men; veterans of the Korean war; and "heroes."

Consequently, Carolyn Bryant had access to the image of motherhood as the ultimate state of womanhood despite her family's financial insecurities. The "feminine mystique" might envision women in middle-class suburbia and in fact rely on an economic expansion that depended on working women's labor outside the home; nevertheless, symbolically, this ideology of womanhood accommodated all white women. Mama, for example, a popular television program on CBS, celebrated a working-class Norwegian immigrant family, especially the hard-working but domestic "mama" of the title. A 1956 Look magazine on American women lauded "this wondrous creature" who "married younger than ever, bears more babies and looks and acts far more feminine than the emancipated girl of the 1920s or even 1930s. Steelworker's wife and Junior Leaguer alike do their own housework."

Carolyn Bryant, twenty-one years old in 1955, was married and had two young sons; she worked in her home as well as in the small country store she and her husband struggled to maintain. She too, then, was a "wondrous creature."

African American motherhood was far more fraught with potential pitfalls and damaging effects, according to "race relations" authorities in sociology and psychology in this period. In part because of discriminatory hiring practices toward black men, a third of all black wives worked for wages

in 1950, compared to a quarter of all married women in the population. Nevertheless, as black women struggled to support and care for their families, twentieth-century race relations scholarship rendered them the cause of "Negro pathology" and as "not only damaged but also as damaging to black masculinity" and the black community generally. According to an emerging consensus of liberal researchers led by E. Franklin Frazier in the 1940s, unmarried or otherwise overly dominating black mothers (the "matriarchy") transmitted "loose sexual behavior" and caused "moral degeneracy" in their children.

By the 1950s, in part the result of the ascendancy of Frazier's theories, matriarchy and black pathology had become so interwoven, particularly for progressive intellectuals fighting discrimination, that "black departures from patriarchal gender relations and white-defined sexual norms became equated with the Negro's cultural inferiority and therefore inequality." According to this analysis of race relations, to fight both racism and "Negro pathology" black men and women had to adhere to "traditional" (white-defined) gender roles. In this contradictory context Bradley's "credentials" as a mother, as a working single mother especially, were highly contested issues. Those who condemned the murder required confirmation that Bradley was a good mother and an appropriately feminine woman.

Thus, for Till defenders, constructing Mamie Bradley as a respectable mother was a means through which African Americans could assert their right to the American credo of equal rights to all. The message was that if Till came from a family that loved him, that cried for him—a "good" family—then his murder, and racial discrimination generally, violated these American values. Indeed, the degree to which Till had been successfully mothered would corroborate his innocence and his "Americanism." His identity as an innocent victim depended on his position as a son in a stable family.

Mamie Till Bradley worked as a voucher examiner in Chicago's Air Force Procurement Office and earned $3,900 annually, well above the median income of black families in this period. Bradley could afford the $11.10 ticket for her son to take the segregated train for a vacation in Mississippi. That the urban-bred Till was killed while vacationing in the country—a wholesome teenage experience gone awry—was not lost on observers, particularly sympathetic whites. "The boy's mother could not send him to the mountains, not to the seashore," editorialized Commonweal. "His uncle is poor and his home is a cabin, but to the boy from Chicago's streets, a vacation in Mississippi sounded fine." Race had intruded into the vacation, continued this editorial, and "tragically, a mother's world came to an end and thousands of Negroes stood in line to see what a vacation in Mississippi had done to one of their sons."

In 1955, a vacation was a desirable and potent symbol, signifying respectability.
a healthy family life, and a strenuous work ethic that entitled one to leisure. Situating the teenager on vacation was a way of assigning a respectable and moral middle-class ethos to Till and his mother; indeed, garnering sympathy from progressive white audiences depended in part on erasing her race and foregrounding this middle-class lifestyle as a sign of respectability.

Within Chicago’s black community, however, visiting southern kin had a long history and neither salary nor class position necessarily reflected a person’s status or respectability. “What’s a Middle Classer?” asked a Chicago Defender editorial unrelated to Till’s murder. The answer, in a complex interweaving of class and race, indicted the African American “so-called middle class” for “adding to the racial separation” and indicted the poor who “strive to be middle class with a two car garage, a bath room and a powder room.” Middle classers are “eagle-eyed against ‘rosion’ and ‘intrusion,’ they are America’s most vigilant snobs.” 36 For black women in particular, money or class position did not confer respectability. The Association of Mannequins’ tenth annual “Ten Best-Dressed Women” awards, for example, honored “those women of the Race who have achieved an appearance that is fashionable and appropriate. . . . such women help to hold high the standard of good grooming . . . they deserve the accolade of best dressed, regardless of financial status.” 37 One columnist bemoaned the black working woman who “flaunts her independence and makes it clear that she can take care of herself. She resents and resists any inclinations to lean upon a man and to seek his help. She hardly ever cries.” 38 A woman’s competitive salary, then, was dangerous, even if it might enable a seemingly respectable middle-class lifestyle, because it endangered the equally important respectable femininity. These ideas would culminate in The Black Bourgeoisie, E. Franklin Frazier’s scathing critique of an effeminate and frivolous black middle class. Women play a salient role in this analysis, appearing as selfish social climbers, dominating emasculators, and sexually frustrated self-haters—all qualities that Mamie Till Bradley would have to avoid in order to “earn” the politically necessary designation of respectable mother. 39

As coverage of Till’s funeral, trial, and protest rallies indicate, Bradley’s “status” as a good mother and a respectable, feminine woman was as precarious as it was essential to a condemnation of the murder. Reestablishing the innocence and respectability of both Emmett Till and his mother was of particular importance to antiracists because of accusations that Till had violated racial and sexual boundaries. Bradley needed to confirm her role as a respectable mother in order for her son to be cast as an “innocent victim,” but she needed to do so along multiple valences: to emerge as protective to Emmett, yet not emasculating; fashionable and well-groomed, yet not ostentatious and luxury laden; hardworking, yet not ambitious; and “universal” enough to attract the sympathy of whites without distancing herself from the black community.

“Mother Breaks Down”: Constructing Mamie Till Bradley

Mamie Bradley learned on Wednesday, September 1, that her son’s corpse had been discovered in the Tallahatchie River. Till’s body then became the physical sign of what Mississippi wanted to forget and Bradley wanted remembered. The sheriff of Tallahatchie County and soon-to-be vocal defender of Bryant and Milam, Harold Strider, ordered that Till be buried in Mississippi—immediately. But Bradley insisted that her son’s body be returned for burial in Chicago. “We [relatives] called the governor [William Stratton, Illinois governor], we called the sheriff . . . We called everybody we thought would be able to stop the burial,” she later explained. To the sympathetic white and black press in the North chronicling Till’s murder, it was “the grieving mother of a Chicago boy” who “barely averted” this “hasty burial.” 40

When the casket arrived in Chicago, Bradley insisted that it be opened so that she could know for sure that it carried her son. And at that point, when she saw Till’s beaten and bullet-ridden body, she decided he would have an open-casket funeral to “let the people see what they have done to my boy!” 41 Till’s body lay first at Rayner Funeral Home and then at Roberts Temple of the Church of God in Christ until the burial on Tuesday, September 6. Thousands stood in long lines winding around the block outside the church to view the disfigured corpse dressed in a suit and the three enlarged photographs of Emmett Till in life. A public-address system broadcast the Saturday memorial service to crowds outside the church. Bradley postponed the burial for a day so that the many who wanted to could pay their respects. 42 Estimates regarding attendance vary, ranging from ten thousand to six hundred thousand, but there was little dispute that “the memorial service for young Till” had mobilized Chicago’s “Negro community as it has not been over any similar act in recent history.” 43

Emmett Till’s funeral blurred the boundaries between public and private; as a result of the open casket, his body and the individual pain he endured became the locus for a collective political mobilization of African Americans demanding citizenship for all blacks. 44 At the same time, this collective mobilization occurred on gender-specific terms. As thousands passed the bier, for example, one observer noted that “stern men gritted their teeth and turned tear-filled faces away from the ghastly sight, while women screamed and fainted.” 45 Indeed, images of femininity were consistently central to the meaning of Till’s death and funeral. And because the meanings of motherhood and respectability were so negotiable, crucial “American” categories—motherhood, femininity, citizenship, and respectability—were invoked and contested during the funeral, during the trial, and during the protest rallies before and after the trial.

The symbolic construction of Mamie Till Bradley during the funeral pro-
vided the basis on which Till’s murder was challenged and at once afforded Bradley a degree of power even as it contained her. Sympathetic accounts of the funeral and protest rallies offered images of her that reconciled the various positive meanings of motherhood and respectability. She was represented not just as a mother but as “Mrs. Mamie Till Bradley,” “a cautious, God-fearing, law-abiding mother.”

In photographs, she was frequently flanked by ministers or pictured in familial domestic settings, “the elm-shaped stretch of St. Lawrence Avenue where Bobo [Emmett’s nickname] lived. It is a family neighborhood where many own the buildings where they live.” Descriptions of Till as “polite and mild-mannered . . . with a near-perfect attendance at Sunday School” enhanced the image of Bradley as a good mother. A neighbor shared an anecdote when the dutiful son “was going to surprise his mother with a cake.” One photograph even pictured Mamie Bradley holding a dog; according to the caption, “Mike [the dog] keeps nightly vigil in the boy’s room, not knowing that his young master will never play with him any more.”

Mamie Bradley’s patriotism was another component in her construction. Newsweek reported her “concern that the murder would be used by the Communists for anti-American propaganda.” (According to one account, Bradley “found it necessary to play sick . . . as a means of ducking ‘Red’ rallies”—a curious example of women’s notoriety for dissemblance harnessed to patriotism.) Patriotism was invoked most explicitly in ubiquitous accounts that the “bereaved mother” was the widow of a war hero. “Private Louis Till must have turned in his grave last week” began one account of the murder. Bradley had suffered “a double tragedy . . . for the boy’s father had died abroad as a soldier in World War II.” Indeed, Louis Till’s allegedly heroic death was the cornerstone to a dramatic editorial in Life, saturated with religious imagery comparing Till to Jesus. Southerners who condemned the murder “are in far worse danger than Emmett Till ever was. He had only his life to lose, and many others have done that, including his soldier father who was killed in France fighting for the American proposition that all men are equal.” The condemnation of the murder in Life and elsewhere thus relied on Louis Till’s heroism and patriotism.

But being religious, familial, and patriotic was not sufficient in the construction of Mamie Bradley as an appropriate symbol of exemplary motherhood and womanhood. References to Bradley as “the attractive Chicago woman” abound and serve multiple functions. To some degree, the equation between “successful” womanhood and physical appeal suggests that certain types of sexism knew no racial boundaries. “At What Age Is a Woman Most Beautiful?” queried Jet (shortly after an issue with pages of bathing-suit-clad “1955 Calendar Girls”). But stories and advertisements that seemed simply to highlight black women’s physical appeal “counter[ed] the image of black women as domestic drudges.” A repeated emphasis on Bradley’s stylish appearance and physical appeal thus contested a racially specific standard of womanhood and beauty that had historically excluded black women. Photographs and physical descriptions of both Emmett Till and Mamie Bradley were integral to coverage of the case. Their bodies became icons and, in evoking horror and pleasure respectively, were agents in the politicization of the murder.

Simultaneously, images of Bradley as “well-dressed” or attractive reassured readers that she was “feminine,” had not usurped any “male” prerogatives, and was ladylike—all without being overtly sexual. Descriptions of her appearance and body, and references to her as “Till’s Mom,” tend to appear at precisely those moments when she was most public—during public speeches or her testimony at the trial, for example—and thus “prove” that while she might make her private grief a public and political issue, she was not questioning that feminine private role as her primary source of identity. In New York, “Mamie Bradley hardly had time to powder her nose from the time she stepped off a plane until after the rally.” Bradley had brought a long-denied racial violence and motherhood into the public and political sphere. These transgressions needed to be contained, even by her “supporters.”

Bradley’s emotionalism and her consequent dependence on men or male-dominated institutions were the crucial components in assuaging doubts regarding her respectability and motherhood. From the outset, her weakness, even hysteria, and her need to defer to men confirmed her femininity and her religiosity and were vehicles for asserting Bradley’s “authenticity” as an American woman and mother. “Mother Breaks Down” announced the Chicago Tribune. “Mother’s Tears Greet Son Who Died a Martyr” proclaimed the Chicago Defender. She was a woman “limp with grief”; an accompanying photograph showed her in a wheelchair, “sobbing” and “near collapse.” Bradley’s physical weakness was politically valuable—an important resource in the mobilizations the trial generated—even as the emphasis on her body’s limits suggested that, somehow, she was not a part of the active political community around her seeking power.

Contemporary depictions and subsequent analyses of the funeral are more readily understandable in this context. For although numerous accounts acknowledge that Mamie Bradley insisted on the open-casket funeral, representations of her as hysterical obscured her role in this political process. Emotion, long coded as a feminine quality, precluded consideration of her as a political player, even as foregrounding emotionalism afforded Bradley some moral and maternal authority. Evidence indicates, however, that this emotionally infused decision was neither haphazard nor apolitical. “Lord, you gave your only son to remedy a condition, but who knows, but what the death of my only son might bring an end to lynching!” she said when she first saw the body at
Illinois Central Station. In the days before the burial Bradley explained that "she wanted people 'to realize the threat to Negroes in the Deep South and to what extent the fiendish mobs would go to display their hate."^{59} Opening the casket, then, represented a challenge to false though enduring dichotomies between political, public (and masculine) subject and emotional, private (and feminine) nonsubject.

Segregationists and others drew on these same values—religion, family, patriotism, and femininity—to paint a very different picture of Mamie Bradley. The funeral was not a religious event but a fund-raising spectacle that attracted "curiosity seekers" because "against the advice of the undertakers" Bradley had insisted that the casket be opened—"macabre exhibitionism" according to a "moderate" southern newspaper. In these accounts, "Mamie Bradley of Chicago" was not a religious woman, but (at best) a pawn of NAACP "rabble rousers"; the funeral was not a religious ritual with political meaning but cheap "exploitation."^{60} According to journalist William Bradford Huie, at the funeral "cash was collected at the bier in wastebaskets: Mamie Bradley received five thousand dollars the first week... The explosion was a godsend to the NAACP... It was a godsend to the Negro press."^{61} Suggesting that the NAACP exploited Till's death also cast suspicion on Bradley's status as a mourning mother experiencing "authentic" grief in her church.

Milam and Bryant defenders also drew on a discourse of patriotism. Accusations ranged from the NAACP being "Red-inspired" to suggestions that a communist–NAACP plot had staged the murder to make the South—and the United States—look bad abroad. After Milam and Bryant had been acquitted, southern reporters learned that the army had hanged Louis Till in Italy for alleged murder and rape; Mississippi Senators James O. Eastland and John Stennis had obtained and released the information from the War Department. Although the details remained unclear, this news was the "most explosive of the developments" in the Till case, according to the New York Times. Till's Dad Raped 2 Women, Murdered a Third in Italy, shouted an oversized headline on the front page of one Mississippi paper.^{62} To many, clearly, "like father like son"; given racist stereotypes of black men, if Louis Till had been hanged for rape, then his son must certainly have been guilty. Not only was Emmett's innocence imperiled, but so too were his family's claims to Americanism and Bradley's claims to respectable motherhood.

Images of Carolyn Bryant as a victim and as the wife of a hero provided the necessary antithesis to the rendering of Mamie Bradley as greedy, unfeeling, and unwomanly. One reporter, for example, located Mamie Till Bradley at Emmett's heavily publicized funeral where "a collection was still being taken up at his casket," in the same story that located Carolyn Bryant "in seclusion"
These contradictory configurations of race and sex, and the degree to which emotionalism was a sign for race or for gender would be even more pronounced during the trial of Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam—a trial in which far more was being judged than the actions of two men.

"Who Else Could Identify That Child?":
Black Motherhood on Trial

The murder trial of Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam began on September 19, 1955, in Sumner, Mississippi. Above a Coca-Cola billboard, a sign welcomed some seventy reporters to a town with a population of 527: Sumner, A Good Place to Raise a Boy. Here, for five brutally hot days, competing notions of womanhood, motherhood, and respectability—what it actually meant to raise a son successfully—occupied center stage and helped determine the outcome of the trial. Few had expected a conviction of two white men for the murder of a black teenager. Criteria for the defense and acquittal of the two men, however, revolved around a racially specific gender discourse that excluded Mamie Till Bradley. The defense refused to acknowledge that a black woman could be a worthy mother, and the prosecution countered by asserting a universal version of motherhood that crossed racial boundaries. Nevertheless, this assertion of universal motherhood, radical as it could be, further circumscribed Bradley and was, in any event, compromised by other constructions of her as a racialized mother, used by the prosecution as well as the defense. Meanings of motherhood, then, were central in the outcome of what has been hailed exclusively as a "race relations" battle.

The state presented its case first. Special prosecutor Robert Smith III and District Attorney Gerald Chatham offered six witnesses who confirmed the fact that Milam and Bryant had kidnapped Till and, with Bradley’s testimony, confirmed the identity of the body found in the river three days later. Two “surprise witnesses” filled in some of the intervening time, testifying that they had seen Till with Milam and Bryant in a truck and had heard them beating the youth in a barn. Moses Wright, a sixty-four-year-old preacher and sharecropper, “Uncle Mose” to defense attorneys and simply “Mose” to the prosecution, stood up in the witness chair and, with his “Dar he” and an outstretched arm, identified J. W. Milam and Bryant as Till’s abductors.

Four key witnesses for the defense raised questions regarding the identity of Till’s body on the one hand and reminded the all-male, all-white jury of his alleged advances toward Carolyn Bryant on the other. These strategies simultaneously cast doubts on the death and implied that in any case, it had been deserved. Sheriff Strider asserted that the body had been in the water for “at
least ten days, if not fifteen,” so it could not be Till’s. “Experts”—physicians and morticians L. B. Otken and H. D. Malone—agreed and elaborated; the former testified that no one could identify this body because even the race of the body was a mystery.⁷⁴

That motherhood and its power knew no lines of race—and challenges to this perspective—began during coverage of the funeral and continued in representations of Mamie Bradley during the trial. It “was her duty as a mother” to be in Mississippi, according to forty out of fifty blacks polled in the Washington, D.C., area; but, as her (male) “spokesperson” conveyed to the press and to District Attorney Gerald Chatham, she would not travel to Mississippi without official protection. As one headline proclaimed, Mother Arrives with Her Pastor. Her agreement to testify reinforced the image that Bradley was a mourning mother, committed to her dead son’s memory. Speaking through a spokesperson, appearing most frequently with two male relatives “who stood like bodyguards,” and demanding protection for herself further reinforced the image that she was a respectable woman, who adhered to “traditional” gender roles.⁷⁵

This position was in fact highly untraditional. Mamie Bradley effectively drew attention to a long history of black women’s physical vulnerability at the hands of white men. By insisting on physical protection, she challenged assumptions about black women’s promiscuity; moreover, she bridged the chasm between women that had enabled the dichotomy between “chaste white woman” and “promiscuous black woman” to persist.⁷⁶ As well, in accommodating the two positions of mourning—emotional mother and public, respectable woman—in suggesting that emotional expressiveness and public decisiveness could co-exist, Mamie Till Bradley bridged the chasm between the public man and the private woman.

White supremacists repeatedly challenged this view of womanhood that crossed racial boundaries. Many southern newspapers suggested that Bradley’s wariness about coming to Mississippi stemmed not from her physical vulnerability but from her indifference toward her son. According to the Memphis Commercial Appeal, District Attorney Chatham had to remind Bradley, repeatedly, of her duties as a mother. “It is important to the state’s case that you appear,” said one telegram. “Your failure to make yourself available as a witness for the state is not understandable.”⁷⁷ Indeed, Till opponents would permit no rivals to their racially specific version of womanhood. According to one southern paper, Mamie Bradley, “the fashionably dressed Negro woman . . . caused a sensation [among the press] when she walked into the courtroom flanked by her father and advisers” and consequently “swept an expression of almost painful dislike across the faces of local spectators.”⁷⁸

The juxtaposition of Mamie Till Bradley to Carolyn Bryant escalated throughout the trial. Contrasting images of the two were central to competing views of who—and what—was on trial. Captions below adjacent head shots of “Mrs. Carolyn Bryant” and “Mrs. Mamie Bradley” in the Pittsburgh Courier, for example, were “doesn’t like whistles” and “would avenge her son.” While “Mrs. Bradley” was “plump and dimpled,” the “coldly attractive” Carolyn Bryant appeared in “a family portrait which can be described in one word: unhappy.”⁷⁹

Similarly, those hoping to preserve the racial status quo relied on images of Carolyn Bryant to convey the message that the white nuclear family itself was on trial and must be preserved at all costs. Cooperative if embarrassed, Carolyn Bryant “wore a black dress with a white collar and red sash” on the stand and “demurely told a court” that “a Negro man” (the teenage Till) had grabbed her. One defense attorney positioned himself as Till to re-create the alleged scene between them. Judge Swango ruled that most of her testimony was inadmissible to the jury; Woman’s Story Barred, explained one headline. Nevertheless, she was still regarded as the “key witness” for the defense, and jury members (who had heard these accusations previously) were reminded of the threats to “the pretty brunette” when they were briefly removed from the courtroom.⁸⁰ Carolyn Bryant’s name rarely appears anywhere without the adjectives “attractive,” “comely,” or even more typically, as “Roy Bryant’s wife, an attractive twenty-one-year-old mother.” Newsweek successfully condensed the multiple attributes of respectable white motherhood into one sentence: “It was Bryant’s wife, Carolyn, an attractive, dark-haired mother of two, whom Emmett was accused of insulting.”⁸¹

Carolyn Bryant was thus central in the campaign to underscore her husband’s innocence and to cast him, too, as a respectable and upstanding southern citizen. Wives Serious, Children Romp as Trial Begins, declared one headline, in a story with detailed attention to Milam and Bryant playing peek-a-boo with their “four handsome sons” as attorneys selected the jury. While guards frisked African Americans at the door of the jammed courtroom and had them sit at a segregated, crowded bridge table, Milam and Bryant came to the courtroom with “their wives and children” in a new “green 1955 Chevrolet” and sat “quietly and without handcaps.” The two men received daily shaves at the Sumner barber shop and lunched with the wealthy Sheriff Strider “at an air conditioned cafe.”⁸² In many respects, the trial deflected attention away from class differences in Mississippi and provided Bryant and Milam and their families access to middle-class standards and values—temporarily.⁸³ That segregationists managed to shape the trial into a tale about the white nuclear family tragically imperiled by Emmett Till and his family is evident in coverage of the acquittal: The not-guilty verdict marked a “happy ending” and was “a signal for Roy Bryant and his half brother J. W. Milam to kiss their wives.” The
sheer repetition of these accounts—of the two lighting cigars, of the women, both “the mother of two small sons,” smiling radiantly—serve to celebrate the reconstituted white families.  

Mamie Bradley’s testimony was the crucial space in which motherhood’s meaning as universal or racially specific was negotiated. Because the defense challenged the identity of the body, her identification based on her authority as “the boy’s mother” was pivotal; she was the “expert.” Bradley testified on Thursday, September 22, that she knew that the body was that of her son because she had “recognized Emmett’s hair line, his hair, the general shape of his nose and his teeth. Especially his teeth, because I used to tell him daily to take care of his teeth.” The jury could not discount Bradley’s identification, according to Robert Smith in his closing statement, because “the last thing in God’s creation a mother wants is to believe that her son is dead.” Prosecutor Gerald Chatham concurred. “Who else could identify that child?” he asked dramatically. “Who else could say, ‘That’s my boy’?” Black women “too,” this argument went, loved and cared for their offspring and recognized their bodies almost viscerally. 

But on closer inspection, “the grief-stricken mother’s” authority was in fact predicated on racially specific behavior; further, assertions of universal womanhood were highly problematic and based on gendered distinctions between public and private. Once again, Mamie Bradley’s efforts to define herself as a subject were open to manipulation on all sides. First, as had been the case throughout the funeral and the rallies, Bradley had to “prove” that she had been a good mother to Till and had raised him “correctly.” Concern about juvenile delinquency was widespread in 1955, and ineffective parenting was perceived as causing this new social ailment. “Discipline is a must, starting in infancy,” stressed one advice column. Mamie Bradley thus testified that she had warned Till “to be very careful” in Mississippi, cautioning him to “say ‘yes sir’ and ‘no, ma’am’ ” and “to humble himself to the extent of getting down on his knees” to whites if necessary. This portion of her testimony—widely quoted in the white press, North and South—indicates that Bradley had to prove herself a credible mother not in “universal” but in racialized and racist terms. Assigning guilt to Bryant and Milam required proof that Mamie Till Bradley had raised her son to “know his place”—specifically, to know his race—and that being polite and respectful was itself constructed by race.  

Second, Bradley’s expressiveness during her testimony was highly contested, intersecting as it did with assumptions about respectability and motherhood, race, and gender. According to the New York Times, “young Till’s mother . . . sturdily maintained that the dead body sent to her was that of her son . . . Mrs. Bradley was a composed and well-spoken witness,” who, when shown photographs of her son’s body, “removed her glasses and wiped at her eyes.” In choosing to maintain her composure throughout these public proceedings, Bradley resisted gender and racial stereotypes that rendered women and African Americans emotional and lacking control.  

Nevertheless, many Till defenders who condemned Milam and Bryant did not mention self-control; instead, Bradley was represented as a highly emotional “tragic figure” who “wept on the witness stand as she identified a police picture of the body of her son . . . She ran her hand quickly across her eyes as tears trickled down her cheeks.” More “objective” accounts, too, foregrounded her inability to control her emotions as “proof” of her maternal authority. “The boy’s mother, Mrs. Mamie Bradley, a $3,600 civil-service employee, weepingly told the jury that she was certain the body was that of her son,” wrote Newsweek. Images of the “naturally” emotionally distressed mother were resources in the condemnation of the verdict; those fighting racism needed Mamie Till Bradley to express her private emotions to corroborate her femininity and her maternalism. To Till defenders, private emotion was a sign for gender, “evidence” of her womanliness, which surpassed that of Carolyn Bryant, and of respectable gender difference among African Americans generally. The jury of white southern men “chose to believe” that the body was not Till’s as a way to acquit Milam and Bryant and preserve power relations in Mississippi. “What could a black mother say that would be of any value?” asked L’Aurore, a French daily. They thus rejected Bradley’s identification of the body and rejected a definition of “natural” motherhood that included black women, privileging instead the rational, “scientific” testimony of the “experts.” The jury’s dismissal of her testimony derived from what they perceived as her lack of authentic expression of maternal grief. “If she had tried a little harder,” said jury foreman J. A. Shaw, “she might have got out a tear.”  

In this interview with Shaw, in fact, Bradley emerges a manipulative, denigrated woman who did not cry “naturally” and had thus forfeited her moral and maternal authority to identify her son’s body. This depiction was consistent with racist representations of the funeral and the protest rallies: Bradley was not a “natural” mother because she did not express or experience true grief; she was, instead, a public performer of sorts, capitalizing on her son’s death. This version of Mamie Bradley as morally undeveloped and unwomanly drew on race and gender-specific constructions of morality and motherhood.  

In sum, during the trial, Bradley’s potential power as a respectable African American mother was simultaneously subversive and reactionary. Her authority as a mother relied on racist assumptions that required Till to be “humble” and on an essentialist discourse that required mothers to be emotionally overwhelmed. And the all-black, all-white jury rejected even these condi-
tional sources of power. "Where else," asked liberal critic I. F. Stone, "would a mother be treated with such elementary lack of respect and compassion?" Racially specific constructions of both motherhood and respectability prevailed in Sumner, most powerfully evoked in photographs of the reconstituted Bryant and Milam families. But, significantly, Mamie Bradley chose not to be in the courtroom when the jury returned the verdict. "I was expecting an acquittal," she said, "and I didn't want to be there when it happened." Her absence indicated her ongoing rejection of the values through which the verdict had been offered and her refusal to be contained—even in the walls of the courtroom. Even as Mamie Bradley absent herself, she further exposed the inequities of the southern judicial system; or in the words of one front-page editorial, the unpunished murder of blacks now lay "Naked Before the World!"  

"What Is True Story about Mrs. Bradley?": The Tide Turns

Protest rallies continued for six to eight weeks after the acquittal of Bryant and Milam, with their focus shifting from the case itself to the ongoing battle for African American citizenship and civil rights. It was time to "stop being emotional and start being smart," according to NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins. "Worry about those who are alive," said NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall at a New York protest rally and repeatedly urged the crowd to register to vote. The NAACP placed a nearly full-page advertisement in the New York Times on October 3 entitled Help End Racial Tyranny in Mississippi. The ad detailed a "slaughter of personal rights" that included "Three Unpunished Murders—Open Defiance of Supreme Court School Decree" and "Over 900,000 Mississippi Negroes without an Effective Voice in Their Government" and concluded that Till's murder "climax[ed] a series of blows to American ideals that has horrified the country." Within a month, the ad generated $5,500 in donations and multiple requests for similar fund-raising appeals from newspapers across the country. But the sympathetic construction of Mamie Bradley as the perfect mother—respectable, all-American, feminine, and deferential—did not persist alongside this bid for equal rights.

On November 8, the NAACP publicly severed its relationship with Mamie Bradley. The rupture—or divorce, as the marriage metaphors suggest—occurred as rumors regarding the propriety of Till-related fund-raising drives percolated, immediately after a grand jury refused to indict Milam and Bryant on kidnapping charges, and on the eve of Bradley's NAACP-sponsored West Coast speaking tour. Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins publicly condemned Bradley's request for remuneration, declaring that the "NAACP does not handle such matters on a commercial basis." Shortly thereafter, NAACP attorney William Henry Huff resigned as her legal representative. Reporters wondered, Will Mamie, NAACP Kiss, Make Up? but the organization quickly made the separation official when they arranged for Moses Wright to replace Bradley on the West Coast speaking tour.

The conflict triggered a transformation in constructions of Mamie Till Bradley within the African American press that drew with remarkable consistency on entrenched images of motherhood and respectability. NAACP officials implied and others concurred that if Till's mother had asked for a $5,000 fee for public speaking engagements, she was neither a respectable woman nor a good mother, and in fact was little better than racist representations had suggested all along. Whereas those who defended Mamie Till Bradley did so by emphasizing her gullibility, vulnerability, and poor judgment—qualities implicit in earlier positive depictions of her. No one changed the terms of this debate by suggesting that as a public figure working exclusively for the NAACP—she had been on an unpaid leave of absence from her job since Till's murder—Bradley might be entitled to a professional salary or might even be ambitious. Both sides in this conflict, then, reinscribed motherhood as a private, pure, and apolitical role—the very assumptions that Mamie Bradley had troubled.

As a result, the antiracist dichotomy that pit the good, respectable, and maternal Mamie Till Bradley against the bad, immoral, and cold Carolyn Bryant was reconfigured. Polarized views of good versus bad woman endured, but were now contained in opposing views of one woman—Mamie Bradley. Or in the words of one headline, What Is True Story about Mrs. Bradley?  

The backdrop to this "rift over money" was the ongoing negotiation of respectability and motherhood as each informed civil rights activism. From the moment that Mamie Bradley helped make her son's death a public issue, there were those who expressed concern about the money being raised. Fears of exploitation were allayed with guarantees that funds were for the collective cause rather than for personal gain. Immediately after the funeral, for example, the Chicago Daily Tribune reported that "the mother" authorized the NAACP to use donations made in her behalf for legal expenses the Till case incurred. Local NAACP branches asked churches to assume fund-raising responsibilities to ensure an air of virtue to these campaigns; the organization designated October 2 "NAACP Church Day." By mid-October, however, hostility toward "the sycophants, moochers, jackals and charlatans who are always ready to ply their trade of capitalizing on human outrage" and who were "as busy as a pack of vultures on a freshly killed carcass in the Till case" would not be quelled—and were fueled by anger about the acquittal. "It is the opinion of myself and perhaps that of thousands of other Negroes throughout the country," wrote an Ohio woman, that "if the NAACP had worked as hard presenting evidence in the Till case as they did collecting money, more would have been done to con-
victr the suspects. . . . The NAACP [should] make publicly known the amount of money they collected and the amount to which they have participated in gathering evidence in the Till case." 107 Proliferating rumors were evident in their denial: William Henry Huff, for example, issued a formal statement that he was not "clearing a lot of money in the unfortunate Till case"; in another instance, an editorial assured readers that Bradley "is taking her job very seriously of speaking out against the lynching of her son . . . in spite of reports to the contrary, she is not making any profits from her appearances." 108

During the period after the trial, representations of Bradley continued to underscore her emotionalism and dependence on men and her relative unimportance to the larger political forces around her: "HEAR THE MISSISSIPPI STORY!! FROM THE LIPS AND HEARTS OF EMMETT TILL'S MOTHER AND Mrs. Ruby Hurley," said one advertisement; the name "MRS. MAMIE BRADLEY" appears in parentheses, in small type and below "EMMETT TILL'S MOTHER." 109 According to a "verbal agreement" made in mid-October, the NAACP exclusively would coordinate Bradley's public appearances during her unpaid leave of absence from her job; the "mother of the slain boy" was to be at their disposal. 110

Nevertheless, while her deference was highlighted and her authority emulated from these seemingly traditional sources, Bradley was increasingly a public figure with something to say. In late October, she went to Washington, D.C., in (an unsuccessful) effort to urge federal intervention into the case and to speak before the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights. 111 This extension of her public role was met by many with surprise, if not derision. "The demand for Mrs. Bradley at these mass meetings is astounding," wrote one black male columnist. Following her Washington, D.C., trip, a Chicago Defender editorial referred to "Mamie, who is really learning fast the ways of public officials." 112 The tension between two positions—grieving mother and public figure—was evident when Mamie Bradley asserted at a rally in New York that perhaps her sacrifice had not been in vain, if "a little nobody like me and a little nobody like my boy can arouse the nation." 113 It was this tension which could not be sustained indefinitely.

Doubts about Mamie Bradley's role, allegations about the propriety of Till fund raising, and frustrations regarding NAACP campaigns for African American citizenship, were resolved conjointly through the "break-up" between the NAACP and Bradley. She became a scapegoat of sorts, a receptacle for anger at the trial's outcome and overlapping anxieties about gender relations and the future of civil rights activism. Many reacted to reports that Bradley had requested a speaking fee by characterizing her as a "mercenary hard-hearted gold digger, seeking to capitalize on the lynching of her child" or a "greedy" woman who "had changed from a simple griefstricken mother to an arrogant celebrity full of her own importance." 114 "Don't Need to Worry About Ma"—

The NAACP promised that Mamie Till Bradley would speak from the "heart" as "Emmett Till's mother," as this announcement suggests. Courtesy of the New York Amsterdam News

She's Loaded!" was the title of a sardonic letter in the New York Amsterdam News, which described the less-than-positive transformation of one mother after Till's death: "Ordinarily, Ma is the quiet sort and legs it off to church every Sunday. . . . But ever since those two peckerwoods up and killed Mamie Bradley's boy, she's been riled up to the point of blaspheming." This fictional Ma had even "broke loose from her religion and . . . sent the rent money off to the NAACP Legal Fund." 115 With Bradley's credentials as a respect-