

12-2016

# The Trauma of the Routine: Lessons on Cultural Trauma from the Emmett Till Verdict

Angela Onwuachi-Willig  
*Boston University School of Law*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty\\_scholarship](https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty_scholarship)

 Part of the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Angela Onwuachi-Willig, *The Trauma of the Routine: Lessons on Cultural Trauma from the Emmett Till Verdict*, 34 *Sociological Theory* 335 (2016).

Available at: [https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty\\_scholarship/294](https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty_scholarship/294)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Commons at Boston University School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons at Boston University School of Law. For more information, please contact [lawlessa@bu.edu](mailto:lawlessa@bu.edu).



# The Trauma of the Routine: Lessons on Cultural Trauma from the Emmett Till Verdict

Sociological Theory  
2016, Vol. 34(4) 335–357  
© American Sociological Association 2016  
DOI: 10.1177/0735275116679864  
stx.sagepub.com  


Angela Onwuachi-Willig<sup>1,2,3</sup>

## Abstract

Cultural traumas are socially mediated processes that occur when groups endure horrific events that forever change their consciousness and identity. According to cultural sociologists, these traumas arise out of shocks to the routine or the taken for granted. Understanding such traumas is critical for developing solutions that can address group suffering. Using the African American community's response to the not guilty verdict in the Emmett Till murder trial as a case study, this article extends cultural trauma theory by explicating how cultural traumas can arise not only when routines are disrupted but also when they are maintained and reaffirmed in a public or official manner. In so doing, this article analyzes the interplay between the history or accumulation of the "routine" harm at issue, the shocking or unusual occurrences that frequently precede such "routine" harms, the harm itself, and public discourse about such harm's meaning in cultivating a cultural trauma narrative.

## Keywords

cultural trauma, collective trauma, race, collective identity, Emmett Till

In her article "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?' Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," poet and scholar Elizabeth Alexander examines the 1991 videotaped police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles against a backdrop of longstanding, dehumanizing violence against African Americans in the United States. In so doing, Alexander (1994:78, 80) explicates how "[b]lack bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle," how African Americans as a group have become "crucially forged by incidents of physical and psychic violence [that] boil down to the 'fact' of abject blackness," and "how bodily experience, both individually experienced bodily trauma as well as collective cultural

---

<sup>1</sup>Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

<sup>3</sup>University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Angela Onwuachi-Willig, University of California, Berkeley, 442 North Addition (Boalt Hall), Berkeley, CA 94720, USA.  
Emails: [angela.onwuachi-willig@yale.edu](mailto:angela.onwuachi-willig@yale.edu); [aonwuachi@law.berkeley.edu](mailto:aonwuachi@law.berkeley.edu)

trauma, come to reside in the flesh [of African Americans] as forms of memory reactivated and articulated at moments of collective spectatorship.”

Over the past decade, cultural sociologists such as Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka have developed a rich literature for understanding trauma in such social, as opposed to psychological, senses. In so doing, they have created a lens and a language through which society can better comprehend what is now known as cultural trauma and have helped lay a foundation upon which remedies to such traumas can be erected.

Building on Kai Erikson’s scholarship regarding collective trauma, Jeffrey Alexander (2004:1) has provided one widely used definition of cultural trauma, noting that “[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.” Although scholars of cultural trauma do not agree on every element required for the emergence of this social phenomenon, they generally agree on two points. First, they agree that cultural traumas are not born but made—that is, cultural traumas are socially mediated processes (J. C. Alexander 2004; David 2008; Eyerman 2013, 2015; Hughson and Spaaij 2011; Smelser 2004). Second, they contend that cultural traumas arise out of shocks to the routine, or at least to happenings, real or imagined, that are interpreted as shocks to the routines that communities have come to take for granted (J. C. Alexander 2004; Eyerman 2013, 2015; Giesen 2004; Smelser 2004; Sztompka 2000).

In this article, I seek to build on this already rich framework for understanding cultural trauma by highlighting how cultural trauma narratives can arise not only when the routine is disrupted but also when regularly expected occurrences—the matters that communities have come to know and take for granted—occur and in fact get reaffirmed in a public or official manner. Specifically, I maintain that for certain subordinated groups and under certain circumstances, it is not the interruption of common routines that lays the foundation for a cultural trauma but rather the continuation of what is considered to be a given or expected subordination, usually through law or government sanction, that creates the context in which a cultural trauma can be narrated.

That said, the fact that a cultural trauma stems from a routine occurrence does not mean that a shock to some norm was completely absent from the construction of the trauma. Indeed, in cases where a routine occurrence develops into cultural trauma, a shocking or unique incident has usually preceded the routine injury. Frequently, these prior shocking incidents have helped generate one of the conditions that I contend enable a cultural trauma to emerge out of a routine harm: widespread publicity—whether regional, national, or international—that causes individuals to focus on and pay attention to the actual occurrence of the routine harm.

In fact, I argue that three elements must be present for a cultural trauma to materialize out of an expected, negative occurrence. First, there must be a longstanding history of the routine harm, a history that essentially leads the subordinated group to expect nothing other than the routine yet cultural trauma-inducing injury. Second, underlying facts related to the routine injury must have garnered the type of widespread media attention that makes a large audience, both within and outside the subordinated group, take notice of the routine occurrence. Usually, these underlying facts are shocking or at least halting or unique enough to inspire broad media coverage. Third and finally, there must be public discourse about the meaning of the routine harm, a harm that usually occurs in the form of governmental or legal affirmation of the subordinated group’s marginal status. In such cases, the narrative of cultural trauma arises because a public or official sanctioning of the everyday denigration and

subjugation of the subordinated group reinforces that group's historically supported view that neither they nor their rights are protected and respected in society. In this sense, the cultural trauma—inducing routine injury—here, the public or official sanctioning—reignites the subordinated group's consciousness of its second-class citizenship and punctuates its already existing distress and suffering, thereby causing such tensions and pains to boil over and lay a foundation for the development of a cultural trauma narrative.

As support for my arguments, I examine and analyze one particular case study: the response of the African American community to the September 23, 1955, not guilty verdict for John William (J. W.) Milam and Roy Bryant, the two white men who were charged with and tried for the murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old, African American, Illinois native who was visiting relatives in Mississippi during the summer of 1955. In so doing, I rely on evidence from a variety of sources, including newspaper articles that were published after the Till trial verdict was announced, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) 2006 Prosecutive Report following the agency's reopening of the case half a century later, and a number of personal narratives and memoirs, to reveal how the African American community experienced collective and cultural trauma in response to the not guilty verdict, even though this denial of African Americans' humanity and civil rights was foreseeable and anticipated and in fact had been regularly experienced by African Americans, particularly in Mississippi. In the Till case, I explain, it was not any shock to the routine but rather the judicial affirmation of African Americans' routine exclusion from full citizenship and legal protection (as represented by the not guilty verdict for the two known murderers) that formed the basis for the group's cultural trauma. After all, based on the long history of non-punishments (both non-indictments and non-convictions) for white men who had brutalized and lynched African Americans in the South and in Mississippi in particular, African Americans, including Till's mother, largely expected the all-white, all-male jury in Mississippi to acquit Milam and Bryant of the murder charges against them ("After the Acquittal" 1955; Whitfield 1988). In essence, the routine yet cultural trauma—inducing harm from the Till trial—here, the acquittal of Milam and Bryant—was not a surprise but instead an expectation in the minds of African Americans. Although it is true that both the brutal lynching of Till, a mere child, and his mother's courageous decision to allow the black press to print photographs of his mutilated face on their magazine and newspaper pages<sup>1</sup> shocked the nation and together produced their own separate, cultural trauma, that particular trauma narrative should not be confused with the one that emerged due to the legal sanctioning of lynching and the official devaluation of African American life that occurred when the jury announced its not guilty verdict in favor of Milam and Bryant.<sup>2</sup>

Before I demonstrate these points, however, I first describe the components of collective trauma and cultural trauma. Thereafter, I show how the African American community's reaction to the acquittal in the Till case satisfies all the elements of both types of social trauma, except the shock-to-the-routine or taken-for-granted element. In so doing, I identify and explain the conditions under which a cultural trauma can arise out of the routine. Finally, I end this article by briefly exploring the implications or potential applications of this theory to the series of non-indictments and non-convictions that have occurred after police and quasi-police killings of unarmed or nonthreatening African Americans in recent years.<sup>3</sup>

### *Understanding Collective and Cultural Trauma*

During the 1970s, Kai Erikson became the first sociologist to develop a theory regarding trauma and its social dimensions. Focusing his research on the effects of a devastating flood at Buffalo Creek in West Virginia, Erikson developed and described the concept of *collective*

*trauma*. In so doing, Erikson (1995:184) first looked to individual psychological trauma, defining it as “the state or condition produced” by a “stress or blow that may produce disordered feelings or behavior” in a person (see also Caruth 1996). With the understanding that individual psychological and physical traumas often arise out of painful, long-term happenings, such as “a continuing pattern of abuse,” or shocking, short-term events, such as “a single searing assault,” Erikson (1995) explained that social trauma can occur at the community level just as it does at the individual level (Eyerman 2015). Erikson (1995:185) wrote, “Sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of the mind and body.” In fact, as part of his research decades earlier, Erikson (1976:154) proffered a specific definition of this form of community trauma:

*By collective trauma . . . I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma.” But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. . . . “I” continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. “You” continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But “we” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body.*

As Erikson (1995:185) later clarified, trauma also can create community. He stated that even when “the tissues of a community” are not damaged, “traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos—a group culture, almost—that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up.” Erikson detailed how the sense of difference that people frequently experience after enduring traumatic occurrences can unify and draw similarly situated individuals together in a group. After all, victims of tragic or shocking events and conditions usually go on to feel distant and set apart from others who have not undergone the same experiences, and as a result, they begin to share a greater closeness or kinship with those who have encountered similar obstacles. In other words, their “estrangement becomes the basis for communality” (Erikson 1995:186).

However, as Erikson (1995) also noted, such communality is not limited to those individuals who were present during a disaster or any other shocking event. All that is required is that the individuals are a part of the “damaged social organism,” that is, the community that has endured a blow to its system (Erikson 1995:188). For instance, speaking of his research in Buffalo Creek, Erikson (1995:188) noted:

*The Buffalo Creek incident provided a telling case of that idea . . . since a number of residents who were clearly traumatized by what had happened proved to have been a long way from home when the disaster struck and thus never experienced the raging waters and all of the death and devastation at first hand. They were injured by the loss of a sustaining community.*

In summary, Erikson (1995:186) wrote that “trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can.” In this sense, he explained, trauma contains both “centripetal” and “centrifugal” dimensions, setting individuals apart from others who have not sustained the same surprising experiences while at the same time pulling them toward persons who will be better able to relate to them as a result of shared realities (Erikson 1995:186).

Years later, Ron Eyerman applied and extended Erikson's theory regarding collective trauma to the institution of slavery in the United States and its role in the formation of African American identity. Pulling from an extensive literature on collective memory, Eyerman (2004:60) argued that the cultural "trauma in question is slavery, not as an institution or even an experience, but as a collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people." Much like Erikson explained, Eyerman (2001, 2004) detailed that the fact that all African Americans, and certainly all African Americans living today, had not experienced slavery did not stop the institution from playing a central role in the construction of African Americans' identity as a racial group. Rather, it was the remembrance or memory of slavery—"traumatic in retrospect" and "represent[ed] through speech and art works" by African Americans—that served as a foundation for uniting the racial group (Eyerman 2004:76–77). In this respect, Eyerman (2004:62) maintained, what he referred to as the "cultural trauma" of slavery was no different than trauma as defined by psychoanalytic theory, where "it is not the experience itself that produces traumatic effect, but rather the remembrance of it." What mattered was how the narrative was made and remade for African Americans around art, music, literature, and speeches and after the occurrence of events that both created pain and reactivated the pain of past injuries for the group.

Eyerman, alongside Jeffrey Alexander, Bernard Giesen, Neil Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, published an edited collection of essays titled *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* that expounds on the foundational theories of collective and cultural trauma (Alexander et al. 2004). Through this edited collection and in other published works, Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, and Sztompka explain that not all catastrophic occurrences result in cultural traumas. As Smelser (2004:35) makes clear, "[n]o discrete historical event or situation automatically or necessarily qualifies in itself as a cultural trauma" (see also Eyerman 2015). Qualifying events, whether real or imagined, must have a quality of disturbance or disorientation to create possible narratives of cultural trauma, but that "range of events or situations . . . is enormous" (Smelser 2004:35). In the end, what matters is whether a disorienting event or situation is effectively communicated as a trauma to the appropriate audience, whether the event is perceived as creating a permanent stain on life for the traumatized group or groups, and whether the "traumatic occurrence" transforms into "the basis for . . . understanding . . . the incident or occurrence as traumatic" (Eyerman 2015:6). In other words, to become a cultural trauma, an event or situation must not only be disorienting but must also get defined and narrated as a trauma (Eyerman 2015). The meanings attached to the disorienting events do not arise in a vacuum; rather, they are "draw[n] . . . selectively from their surrounding culture and [applied] . . . to the potentially traumatizing events" (Sztompka 2000:457). The crux of the matter becomes how the problem is represented, whether it be as "a fundamental threat to [the group members'] sense of who they are, where they came from, [or] where they want to go" (Alexander 2004:10–11). As Eyerman (2015:131) explains in his book *Is This America? Katrina as Cultural Trauma*, "a cultural trauma . . . is 'cultural' because it invokes meaning and identity," and it is "trauma because of the powerful emotions evoked."

In defining the "trauma process" as the gap between an event and a representation and identifying "carrier groups" as "collective agents of the trauma process" who communicate the collective pain of their group, Alexander (2004:12–15) pinpoints four major components to creating a master narrative of cultural trauma: (1) the nature of the pain, which is the injury the group endured; (2) the nature of the victim, which is the group affected by the traumatizing pain; (3) the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience, which is the extent to which "members of the audience for trauma representations experience an identity with the immediately victimized group"; and (4) attribution of responsibility, which is who caused the trauma or who were the perpetrators. Alexander also explains the

role that official governmental bodies and institutions can play in substantiating a trauma narrative. For instance, Alexander (2004:19) indicates that

[d]ecisions by executive branches of government to create national commissions of inquiry, votes by parliaments to establish investigative committees, the creation of state-directed police investigations and new directives about national priorities—all such actions can have decisive effects on handling and channeling the spiral of signification that marks the trauma process.

Most relevant to this article, Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, Sztompka, and many other cultural trauma scholars seem to agree on one major point: Trauma processes begin with some sort of shock to the usual routine or system, whether real or imagined. Indeed, Sztompka (2000:457) argues that the larger the disruption to the usual system, the bigger the trauma:

First, the larger is the gap between the accustomed, orderly environment, and the condition resulting from some traumatizing event (i.e. the stronger the “shock”), the stronger will be the experience of a trauma (e.g. in a peaceful, orderly, law-abiding community, the murder of a member may produce collective trauma, whereas in a crime-ridden neighborhood the same event might go virtually unnoticed).

Other scholars have sought to extend cultural trauma theory in important ways. For example, Inge Schmidt (2014) introduces the concept of “perpetual trauma” in explaining how groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) continue to flourish despite no noted increase in drunk driving accidents. Schmidt challenges the assumption of temporality in cultural trauma theory, which is the assumption that cultural traumas arise out of past events. Specifically, Schmidt (2014:240) argues that cultural trauma, in addition to being “based on actual events and people,” may emerge based “on potentiality, a sense of future danger, and iconic victims/perpetrators.” She further contends that trauma organizations play a critical role in maintaining fears about future tragedies that might occur, such as deaths caused by drunk drivers. Finally, Schmidt (2014:242–44) declares, in perpetual traumas, the “categories of victim and perpetrator are depersonalized” and do not align with “salient social identities,” such as African American identity with respect to slavery or Jewish identity with respect to the Holocaust.

In this article, I, like Schmidt, hope to add to and enrich the already powerful and resonant body of literature on cultural trauma theory. Unlike Schmidt, however, I do not contest the notions of temporality underlying the theory. Instead, I focus solely on past incidents and their impact, and I seek to extend cultural trauma theory by rethinking the notion that collective and cultural traumas based on past events occur only when cultural expectations are shattered. In so doing, I reveal how one’s position and status in a society, and thus how one experiences certain routine occurrences, can shape the emergence of the cultural trauma process. In such cases, I argue that the accumulation of routine harms and any corresponding publicity, rather than the disruption of the routine itself, are what enable dialogue about the meaning of the routine injury and thus the narration of a cultural trauma.

Specifically, I identify and explicate three necessary elements for constructing cultural traumas out of routine happenings (as opposed to surprising ones). In doing so, I reveal how institutionally oppressive structures, as well as conscious and nonconscious individual behaviors, work to demean and subjugate less powerful social groups in ways that can leave such subordinated groups with a sense of exclusion, powerlessness, or hopelessness.

Relatedly, I explain how the longstanding history of a routine harm against a subordinated group creates a constant simmering of individual and collective distress, tension, and psychological trauma underneath the surface for the subordinated group's members and leads them to expect not much more than a continuation of past harms, even as they may be fighting to change that status quo. Second, I detail how each routine harm, whether the injury is an unjust verdict, a police killing of a subordinated group member that goes unpunished, or the denial of a job opportunity due to group status, deepens and increases the pain and suffering felt by the group.<sup>4</sup> Like Eyerman (2015:132) describes for African Americans following the federal government's failed response to the suffering of poor African Americans in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, I explain how each negative, routine harm to a subordinated group reminds its members of their marginal status and intensifies the group's pain. Finally, I explicate how a cultural trauma can emerge when one specific routine harm (usually a public or official sanctioning of the group's subjugated status) garners enough media attention for a regional, nationwide, or worldwide audience to take note of its occurrence. In these instances, although the injury to the group is routine and, most of all, anticipated and expected, the well-publicized routine harm ends up causing the everyday simmering of distress, tension, and psychological trauma of group members to boil over. This boiling over eventually advances to broad-based discourse among individuals, groups, and subgroups about the meaning of the routine harm for the group and all others in society, which then creates a space for a cultural trauma narrative to form.

Before fully delving into this analysis, however, I detail the many ways in which the case study for this article—the African American community's response to the not guilty verdict for the murder of Emmett Till in 1955—falls within the current frameworks for understanding collective identity and trauma and cultural trauma.

## THE FITTING PUZZLE PIECES: HOW THE AFTERMATH OF THE EMMETT TILL CASE COMPORTS WITH PARADIGMATIC CASES OF COLLECTIVE AND CULTURAL TRAUMA

The response of the African American community to the announcement of the not guilty verdict for Milam and Bryant offers a solid foundation from which to extend the rich and complex theories concerning trauma on a social dimension. This response by the African American community in Mississippi and beyond during the mid-1950s offers classic examples of the formation of collective identity and trauma as well as cultural trauma.

### *Collective Trauma Out of the Acquittal of Milam and Bryant*

Even *before* the acquittal of Milam and Bryant produced group-based cultural trauma for African Americans, the slaying of Till and the discovery of his mutilated body had already resulted in *collective trauma* for the residents of Leflore County, where Till was kidnapped, and Tallahatchie County, where Till's body was found. The shared community of Leflore and Tallahatchie Counties in Mississippi could hardly be called a supportive environment for African Americans in 1955, but the rules and laws that had shaped life in those counties for nearly one-and-a-half centuries were unravelling even before the all-white and all-male jury acquitted Milam and Bryant of Till's murder. The strict race-based hierarchy that had formed the "we" in those counties first began to pull apart with the previously unimaginable indictment of two white men for the murder of a black person: the September 5, 1955, indictment of Milam and Bryant for the murder of Till, a 14-year-old African American. In fact, the indictment was such a shock in the state of Mississippi "that the black newspaper in

Jackson felt obliged to praise ‘white men [who] took this step against other white men for a crime against a Negro’” (Whitfield 1988:24).

Furthermore, inspired in part by the actions of Mamie Till-Mobley, a Chicagoan whose parents had roots in Mississippi but had long before relocated to Illinois, African Americans in both Leflore and Tallahatchie Counties engaged in actions that just weeks before had been completely unthinkable and that further tore at the social fabric, which, though oppressive for African Americans, had once held these Southern societies together. Most notably, two African American men who saw Milam and Bryant with Till on August 28, 1955, the day Till disappeared, testified in open court against the two white male defendants. First, Reverend Moses Wright, the 64-year-old uncle whom Till had been visiting in Mississippi, testified about what happened on the day that Milam and Bryant kidnapped Till, driving off with the young boy to what later became his untimely death (Goldsby 1996; Harold and Deluca 2005; M. M. Russell 2005). Wright even stood up in the courtroom, pointed at Milam, who had come to his door with a pistol and flashlight, and said, “There he is” (U.S. FBI 2006:9). Second, an 18-year-old African American male named Willie Reed, who was working near a barn owned by a relative of J. W. Milam, testified against the two murderers. Reed proclaimed that he saw someone who “favored” Till on the back of Milam’s truck; that he witnessed Milam come out of the barn, with his “pistol” at his side, to get a drink of water; and that he also heard “hollering” and “a whole lot of licks” coming from the barn on the day of the murder (U.S. FBI 2006:217, 222). As Till’s mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, later explained in her memoir, Wright and Reed’s testimonies served as a jolt to the local community and “a shock to the defense team” because “[n]o one had ever imagined that witnesses [of any race] might come forward to testify against white men accused of killing a black person” (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:170).<sup>5</sup> In summary, even before the acquittal of Milam and Bryant that later served as a source of collective trauma for African Americans, related events had already begun to tear at the fabric of society in Leflore County and Tallahatchie County.

Still, it was the actual acquittal of Milam and Bryant—which, as I will show later, was not a surprise to African Americans—that truly tore at the shared sense of community in Leflore and Tallahatchie. With its not guilty verdict for Milam and Bryant, the all-white and all-male jury in Tallahatchie County communicated to everyone that a black person’s life meant nothing to those tasked with enforcing the law in Mississippi. In so doing, the jury laid the foundation for the emergence of a collective trauma for African Americans based on this routine harm of no punishments for whites who murdered African Americans and the resulting public devaluation of African American life. As Kai Erikson himself might explain, following the not guilty verdict in the Till case, African American residents of Leflore County and Tallahatchie County—the “I” in Erikson’s definition of collective trauma—continued on with their lives, damaged and demeaned even further in what had already been an explicitly oppressive system. African Americans also became forever altered by the verdict’s official devaluing of African American life.

Additionally, after the not guilty verdict was announced, the “You” in Erikson’s definition of collective trauma—white residents in those counties (who had always been distant from the “I” in the state’s highly segregated and violent world)—became even more distant from African Americans. Again, this tearing of the social fabric began even before the jury announced its not guilty verdict. Although white Mississippians had initially condemned the murder of Till (so much so that Milam and Bryant were initially unable to find legal representation), they later retreated from this position when the national spotlight zoomed in on Mississippi and they felt compelled to defend “the Southern way of life” (Whitfield 1988:25). At that point, Leflore County, Tallahatchie County, and Mississippi in general changed from

being locations in which newspapers called the Till killing “an evil act” and a “brutal and senseless crime and[,] just incidentally, one which merits not one iota of sympathy for the killers” to a state where the white community raised more than \$10,000 for Milam and Bryant’s defense and where these two murderers received pro bono legal representation from all five attorneys in Tallahatchie County (Whitfield 1988:26). Once the verdict came down, the fabric tore even further because the acquittal made the white community as a whole, particularly the jurors, an accomplice to the murder of Till. Moreover, the acquittal made the two murderers’ supporters formal cogs in the wheels of a justice system that routinely denigrated and devalued the lives of African Americans. After all, absolutely no one in the area, including whites, ever doubted that Milam and Bryant had murdered Till (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003; Whitfield 1988). Whatever cross-racial “We” had existed in that region of Mississippi before the not guilty verdict completely dissolved after its announcement.

Furthermore, much like Erikson detailed in his scholarship regarding Buffalo Creek, the heightened estrangement and alienation that African Americans experienced as a result of the verdict drew the black community closer together, and it did so in ways that white residents of Leflore County and Tallahatchie County, including Milam and Bryant, had feared most. Indeed, Milam and Bryant personally felt the consequences of this new and stronger African American communality. Once the owners of three family grocery stores that received and depended on the business of the African American community, the families of Milam and Bryant had to shut down their stores due to a successful post-verdict boycott by black residents in the area. Additionally, Bryant, the husband of the woman whom Till allegedly whistled at, “had trouble getting a job” after the verdict and ultimately went to welding school, which Milam, at the time, claimed could be of no help to Bryant and his family because “by the time you’ve learned it, you’ve ruined your eyes” (Huie 1957:65). Fifty years later, in its 2006 investigative report for the reopening of the Till case, the U.S. FBI related that Bryant had gone “partially blind from his earlier welding work” and operated a store in Ruleville, Mississippi, before he was twice convicted in federal court for food stamp fraud violations (U.S. FBI 2006:25).

Similarly, Milam, who prior to the murder had employed African Americans to operate his mechanical cotton picking machines and who used to brag that he knew how to handle African Americans, could no longer find any African Americans who would accept employment with him following the not guilty verdict and his 1956 post-trial confession to the murder in a *Look* magazine article.<sup>6</sup> As a result, Milam had to shut down his cotton picking business; without African American employees, he had to hire white men as workers, and white men received higher wages—an added expense that his business simply could not handle. Milam told Bradford Huie (1957:67), a white journalist, that “I had a lot of friends a year ago. . . . Everything’s gone against me—even the dry weather, which has hurt my cotton. I’m living in a share-crop with no water in it. My wife and kids are having it hard.”

In summary, much like Erikson explained in his chapter “Notes on Trauma and Community,” for African Americans, the sham verdict that came out of the trial against Milam and Bryant had both centripetal and centrifugal forces. Specifically, the shameful acquittal of Milam and Bryant caused African Americans to feel even more alienated and distant from the white community in the area at the same time that it brought them closer together into a tight-knit community that could lead a successful boycott against the two defendants’ families. The verdict also brought whites closer together as a community and further apart from African Americans as a group intent on preserving the racial hierarchy in Mississippi.

### *The Cultural Trauma of an Unjust Verdict*

All four components of a master narrative for cultural trauma, as defined by Jeffrey Alexander, are also present in the cultural trauma that emerged for African Americans after the acquittal of Milam and Bryant. To begin, after the not guilty verdict was announced, there was no shortage of individuals who became part of the carrier group for the trauma narrative, which is the first component of cultural trauma. Three strong voices for the trauma narrative emerged in particular: Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley; the NAACP, which had long advocated for the rights of African Americans; and the black press, which previously helped make Till's death a national news story by printing pictures of his mutilated face, and which, after the acquittal, continued to speak out about the injustices that African Americans endured in the Jim Crow South (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003).

For Mamie Till-Mobley, one of her goals as part of the carrier group was to make sure that her son did not die in vain and that other African Americans would not suffer the injustices that she and her son had suffered. Speaking of how the acquittal of Milam and Bryant inspired people of all races, especially journalists, to push for the recognition of African Americans' civil rights, Till-Mobley asserted, "People were determined to keep Emmett Till alive. The tragedy had moved them to tears. *The injustice had made them angry enough to fight back. And the unanswered questions, well, they kept nagging for some kind of resolution*" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:210 [italics added]).

With respect to the second component of identifying the pain of the traumatized group, Till's mother, the black press, and the NAACP performed that role with exquisite skill. Specifically, this multilayered carrier group used the injustice that many felt after Milam and Bryant's acquittal to identify the numerous forms of discrimination and abuse that African Americans faced in the United States as the source of African American pain. This list of pains and injustices included not only sham trials with predetermined outcomes but also the much more common non-indictments that followed the murder of African Americans by whites; numerous lynchings and murders of African Americans in the country; the deep financial oppression and silencing of black people across the nation, particularly in the South; the widespread exclusion of African Americans from many key facets of life, such as education, work, and housing; and the denial of political rights that African Americans regularly experienced all over the nation (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003).

With respect to the third component of cultural trauma, the identification of victims, Till-Mobley, the black press, and the NAACP broadly defined the victims in this cultural trauma narrative as being all African Americans and, to some extent, all Americans. Speaking of the harms that Milam and Bryant's acquittal exposed, Till-Mobley explained that by seeking and insisting upon the prosecution of Milam and Bryant, despite its failure to result in justice for Till and her, what she and other "outside agitators" had done was "reveal to the world, not only the injustice [she] had suffered, *but also the unfairness that blacks were suffering every single day of the year*" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:198 [italics added]). She had uncovered the government's utter failure to offer any protection to African Americans. In essence, Till-Mobley, the black press, and the NAACP used Milam and Bryant's acquittal to expose the complete lack of legal protection that African Americans endured in the South, a lack of protection that extended all the way back to twentieth-century lynchings where, over and over again, grand juries held no whites responsible for such atrocities (Cox 1945; Draper [1933] 2003; Dray 2002).

Furthermore, Till-Mobley worked to identify the entire nation as victims of the routine harm of legal injustice. She argued that such routine harms moved beyond African Americans and extended to all Americans. For example, she wrote the following passage in her autobiography:

[I]njustice would be a recurring theme playing out in the months and years to come. Those people down there in Mississippi thought that they could stage-manage a trial, and force people to accept their warped version of reality. They thought wrong. Those lawyers down in Mississippi figured they had stopped the NAACP in its tracks. They miscalculated. . . . Things would never be the same again. . . . For an entire nation, the murder of Emmett Till [and the sham verdict that followed it] marked the death of innocence. (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:200)

Finally, with regard to identifying the perpetrators—the fourth component of cultural trauma—the carrier group of Till-Mobley, the NAACP, and the black press broadly identified a group of culprits. These culprits were all individuals whom Till-Mobley viewed as guilty of enabling the routine injustices that African Americans endured, including routine non-punishments for whites who lynched black American citizens because of their race. Specifically, Till-Mobley, the NAACP, and the black press named all those who were working to defend the Southern way of life as the perpetrators of the emerging broad-based, cultural trauma. These culprits included people like J. J. Breland and John Whitten, two of the attorneys who represented Milam and Bryant and who continued to use intimidation to maintain the subordination of African Americans after the acquittal.

More broadly speaking, Till-Mobley, who worked very closely with the black press and the NAACP,<sup>7</sup> articulated the view that everyone in the nation who remained silent or inactive while injustice took place was a perpetrator of the violence and damaging consequences of routine, legal harms as well as other types of injustices against African Americans. Speaking in reference to both the murder of her son and the acquittal of his killers, Till-Mobley proclaimed, “No one could plead ignorance. Everyone had to take responsibility for what our society had become. Anybody who did anything to make it happen. Anybody who did nothing to stop it from happening. There could no longer be any innocent bystanders” (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:200).

This carrier group for the acquittal-inspired cultural trauma was very successful in reaching the appropriate audiences with their constructed narrative. African Americans all over the nation, and in fact people all over the world, not only knew about the murder of Emmett Till but also learned about the acquittal of his known murderers and were angered by it. Across the United States, there were demonstrations and demands for legislative change to work toward eliminating the systemic discrimination that African Americans faced in all areas of life. Other countries, such as France, also saw protests, and in Germany, an editorial writer sharply critiqued Milam and Bryant’s acquittal, commenting “that a black life in Mississippi wasn’t ‘worth a whistle’” (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:191).

In the end, the dramatic and painful process that occurred after Milam and Bryant’s acquittal enabled the carrier group to shift moral responsibility to all of society for what was happening in Mississippi and all over the South in terms of devaluing black life and depriving African Americans of the legal and other governmental protections afforded to whites in the country. As Alexander (2004:27) has explicated, regardless of how “tortuous” a trauma process is, it “allows collectivities to define new forms of moral responsibility and to redirect the course of political action.”

Indeed, some scholars have argued that the news of Milam and Bryant’s acquittal functioned as a major catalyst for the national Civil Rights Movement, which took off just a few months after the unjust verdict was announced (Goldsby 1996; Hudson-Weems 2006). Speaking of the trial, literary scholar Jacqueline Goldsby (1996:246) asserted that the murder of Till and the not guilty verdict for Milam and Bryant demonstrated to greater society how “uncivil and unjust we could be to one another,” and these events impressed upon society the

social, psychological, and cultural costs that frequently arise when people are systematically denied their rights. In fact, Till-Mobley and other members of the carrier group were effective in reaching groups other than African Americans. This carrier group's telling and retelling of the Till murder and verdict brought a much needed awareness to sympathetic white individuals in the North, who otherwise would have been oblivious to what was happening in the South. One good example comes from Charlotte Kuh, a white economist and educator, who explained the effect of the narrative about Till on her, stating: "What it did to us as northern liberals was it really brought home that the South was a dangerous place filled with rednecks, really violent, irrational people" (Hudson-Weems 2006:310).

In summary, as Alexander (2004:24) has explained, "[b]y allowing members of wider publics to participate in the pain of others, cultural traumas . . . broaden the realm of social understanding and sympathy, and they . . . provide powerful avenues for new forms of social incorporation." In this case, the trauma narrative crafted after the verdict in the Till trial accomplished these feats. Indeed, the cultural trauma based on the verdict in the Till case provided a critical avenue to one of the greatest new forms of social incorporation and change in the nation. As I previously noted, just months later, that post-verdict narrative of injustice helped ignite the Civil Rights Movement, which ultimately resulted in legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Importantly, the Civil Rights Movement began with Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat on bus in Montgomery, which prompted the Montgomery Bus Boycott; Parks once famously stated the following to explain her own courageous actions: "I thought of Emmett Till, and when the bus driver ordered me to move to the back, I just couldn't move" (Carrier 2011). And this post-verdict, cultural trauma narrative maintained its power for decades. Indeed, in 2006, the U.S. FBI reopened the Emmett Till case and released an investigative report, which reaffirmed the narrative's importance and buoyed the carrier group's goals of trying to correct for the injustices that had been committed against Till, Till-Mobley, and all African Americans. In essence, the FBI's report gave the narrative the authority and validation that so frequently come with government recognition.

## HOW THE ROUTINE CAN RESULT IN THE EMERGENCE OF CULTURAL TRAUMAS

The only way in which the reaction of the African American community to the Till verdict does not fit the paradigmatic cases of collective and cultural traumas is that the instigating blow that enabled such traumas was not a shock to the routine. Rather, it was business as usual. It was routine. It was expected. Still, cultural trauma arose out of that routine harm.

In this section, I explicate how a cultural trauma narrative emerged after the acquittal of Milam and Bryant even though the jury's decision was not a surprise to African Americans. In so doing, I briefly explicate why expected harms, which by definition do not disrupt the norm, can result in cultural trauma for subordinated groups. I then identify the three conditions necessary for creating a cultural trauma from the routine, explaining why each factor helps establish a cultural trauma narrative. These necessary conditions are (1) an established history or accumulation of the routine harm for the trauma group; (2) widespread media attention, usually based on preceding events, that brings regional, national, or international attention to the occurrence of the routine harm; and (3) public discourse (whether in familial homes, in schools, through protests, or in public streets) about the meaning of the routine harm, which consists of public or official affirmation of the subordinated group's marginal status. Finally, I explain how all three factors functioned together to produce the cultural trauma narrative that sprang from Milam and Bryant's acquittal.

### *The Difference Routine Oppression and Discrimination Make*

The primary reason why a disruption to the taken for granted can result in cultural trauma is the effect that shocks to the norm tend to have on people's sense of security and stability. In general, disruptions to the routine can result in a cultural trauma process because "[i]ndividual security is anchored in structures of emotional and cultural expectations" (J.C. Alexander 2004:10). When people know what they or their group can expect in the future or when people can rely on certain promises for the future, they can and do feel settled. After all, "expectations and capabilities . . . are rooted in the sturdiness of the collectivities of which individuals are a part" (J.C. Alexander 2004:10). So when societal expectations are not fulfilled, a space emerges in which certain individuals can begin to mold, shape, and define the meaning of that lost stability for their group or for society as a whole.

However, when the routine in a society involves systemic oppression and discrimination against a group (as opposed to desired or improved maintenance and security), the promise of the continued norm does not reassure or soothe the people who are disadvantaged by that norm; instead, it disconcerts them. It may even wound them. In essence, within systems that regularly and disproportionately subjugate and devalue certain groups, much like the criminal justice system does with African Americans, the reliability and predictability of routine norms do not bring a sense of comfort and security for the denigrated group; rather, they bring greater stress, a stronger sense of exclusion, and the immense anxiety associated with the group's not feeling protected under the law or any other governmental system.

Such was the case with the verdict in the Till case. In 1955, African Americans had no desire for a continuation of the routine when it came to law enforcement, the criminal justice system, or any governmental system in the United States, particularly in Mississippi where Jim Crow reigned supreme. What was at stake for African Americans during the trial against Milam and Bryant in 1955 was not the stability of the collectivity's—here, Southern society's—identity in terms of meaning. African Americans had no desire to perpetuate the social hierarchies and structures that had placed them outside the country's, particularly Southern society's, collective identities and that had done so in the harshest and cruelest of ways.

For African Americans, continued stability meant exactly what the acquittal of Milam and Bryant had resulted in: a reminder to all black people that they were not part of the country's or state's core identity and that the laws of the nation and the state did not exist to protect them. In this sense, the not guilty verdict set the stage for a public debate not only about the meaning of the specific courtroom outcome in the Till case but also about the meaning of routine non-convictions—really, the routine non-indictments—of white men who had brutally murdered African American adults and children for decades.

Before the public debate about the meaning of this type of routine injury could take place, there also had to be a longstanding history of the routine harm, such that African Americans were essentially led to expect the acquittal, even though Milam and Bryant's murder charge and trial were the first of any such actions against white men for the death of an African American in Mississippi (Crowe 2003; Whitfield 1988). Additionally, there had to be enough media attention focused on the potential occurrence of the routine harm so that people were actually paying attention to the routine injury—here, Milam and Bryant's acquittal—when it took place. All of these factors were present when the Emmett Till verdict was announced. In the next section, I lay out how each factor operated to help create a cultural trauma narrative based on Milam and Bryant's acquittal for the murder of Till.

### *The Conditions for Cultural Trauma Out of the Routine*

*The Path to Expectation.* One of the conditions required for a culture trauma to develop out of a routine harm is a longstanding history of the regularly occurring, painful incident or injury. Taken together, these past incidents create the circumstances under which a targeted group comes to expect the persistence of the routine harm.

Prior to the Till murder trial and the acquittal of Milam and Bryant, African Americans in the South, and particularly in Mississippi, had endured a long and devastating history of lynchings that failed to result in punishment for the whites who participated in offending lynch mobs. According to several studies, including one at the Tuskegee Institute, between 1881 and 1956, 4,735 lynchings occurred within the United States (primarily in the South), and 3,443, or approximately 73 percent, of those lynchings involved African Americans victims (Archives at Tuskegee Institute; Tolnay and Beck 1995). Furthermore, when focused solely on the most intense period of lynching—1882 to 1930—and the 10 border and Deep South States, the same studies reveal that African Americans were the victims of 88 percent, or 2,462, of the 2,805 lynchings that occurred during that time and in those areas (Tolnay and Beck 1995). Others, such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, an African American woman who became one of the nation's first anti-lynching activists, estimate an even higher number of lynchings during that period. Indeed, Wells-Barnett asserted that the number of lynchings of African Americans *during the 1890s alone* exceeded 10,000 (Dray 2002:xi).

As important as the fact that lynchings of African Americans were a common and vicious part of life between the 1880s and 1960s is the fact that police repeatedly neglected to protect African Americans from such lynchings; police frequently handed over African Americans to lynch mobs or became a part of those lynch mobs themselves, and the judicial system failed, over and over again, to hold the whites who participated in these lynchings accountable for their actions (Cox 1945; Dray 2002). In nearly all lynching cases, whites who participated in these murders went free, receiving no punishment for their heinous acts (Cox 1945; Crowe 2003). As sociologist Oliver Cox (1945:577) explained, in such cases, the grand jury nearly always returned “findings that ‘the deceased [the lynched victim] came to his death by hanging and gun shot wounds at the hands of parties unknown’” (see also Draper 1933; Dray 2002).

This history of whites lynching African Americans with impunity was widely known by African Americans throughout Mississippi and other parts of the South. These facts were passed down through family and neighborhood stories, in part because African Americans viewed such knowledge as necessary for their families, particularly their children, who needed the information and warnings to best survive the racial terrorism that marked the lynching era. As historian Philip Dray (2002:xi) explains,

Almost every black American family has a story in its history of an ancestor who “come up missing,” who vanished into that empty place—the rural crossroads or rail siding, the bayou or jail cell. . . . [I]t is a living memory to most black Americans that their forebears were lynched and routinely subjected to violence and intimidation, and that they lived in almost constant fear of seeing a loved one lynched or being targeted themselves.

Indeed, Mamie Till-Mobley's own stories about what she learned as a child from her parents about African Americans' vulnerability to white violence and lawlessness and her warnings to Till before he left to visit his cousins in Mississippi in August of 1955 illustrate how African Americans passed on lessons to each other about the dangers of lynchings, other forms of white violence, and the lack of legal protections extended to African Americans as a means of

increasing the chances of each other's mere survival (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003). First, speaking of such stories "that grow[] and [are] cultivated, like cotton in the Mississippi sun," Till-Mobley recounted a childhood story that she heard about a little African American girl whose mother brought her to work at a white family's house: The girl had a disagreement with the similarly aged white daughter in that white family, and the African American girl was later pushed so hard against a tree by the white girl's father that she died from her injuries that day (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:19). Till-Mobley explained, "That story left a mark on me. . . . For black people, every generation has a cautionary tale like this. A story based on events, on shared experiences that teaches us something important" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:19; see also Holloway 2013; Pollack and Metress 2008).<sup>8</sup>

Years later, as Till-Mobley prepared her Illinois-born and raised son, Emmett, for a visit with relatives in Mississippi, she relayed to him similar warnings about the physical dangers he could encounter in Mississippi. She explained to Till that "white people down South could be very mean to blacks, even to black kids" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:101). Till-Mobley told her son to "humble" himself, even "[g]et on [his] knees, if [he had] to" and use the honorifics "Sir" and "Ma'am" when speaking to whites, even those younger than he was (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:101). When Till responded in part, "Oh, Mama . . . it can't be that bad," Till-Mobley stated matter of factly, "Bo [Emmett], it's worse than that" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:101).<sup>9</sup> In 1955, African Americans, especially black Mississippians but also northerners like Till-Mobley, endured lives that made them well aware of the nation's sordid and plentiful history (and present) of brutal lynchings and killings of African Americans.

More importantly, African Americans were very aware of the absence of courtroom or legal justice in nearly all of those cases. Thus, in 1955, when Milam and Bryant were being tried for the murder of the 14-year-old Till, African Americans may have hoped for and even fought for a different outcome than an acquittal, but they knew they had no reason to truly expect anything else. As Alexander (1994:81) explicated about African Americans after the Rodney King beating and trial and the state court acquittal of the officers who beat King, because of the reality of having to confront and witness regular, brutal violence against black people for generations, African Americans in 1955 "ha[d] been taught a sorry lesson of their continued physical vulnerability in the United States that concurrently help[ed] shape how" they understood themselves and their position in society. In summary, Milam and Bryant's acquittal was exactly what history had taught black Mississippians to expect from their judicial system: a system of law that protected white people and routinely failed African Americans. Whites knew to expect the same (or rather, knew they could rely on the same) too. In fact, historian Stephen Whitfield (1988:24) noted that Hamilton Caldwell, the white prosecuting attorney who received praise from Till-Mobley and the NAACP for his vigorous prosecution of Milam and Bryant, initially opposed the indictment of the two murderers precisely "because he doubted that a jury would convict any white man found to have murdered a black who was accused of such insults to a white woman."

With respect to the state of Mississippi in particular, Caldwell's concerns and predictions were not unfounded. Not long before Milam and Bryant kidnapped and killed Till on August 28, 1955, two other African Americans were murdered by white locals close to where Till was visiting his family in Leflore County. First, Reverend George Lee was shot to death in May 1955 because he was trying to organize other African Americans to register to vote. And just two weeks before Till disappeared, Lamar Smith was murdered in broad daylight in front of a *courthouse* in Brookhaven, Mississippi, because of his work on voter registration and other political activities (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003; Wright 2010). In neither of these cases were the whites involved punished for their actions. Indeed, no indictments were

ever issued. Moreover, no discussions about potential indictments for the whites who committed the two murders took place (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003). Given this reality, there was little, if any, reason for African Americans to expect anything other than an acquittal in the case against Milam and Bryant, and really none did. For instance, African American Congressman C. O. Diggs Taylor, who assisted Till-Mobley as she forced the country to confront the ugliness of Mississippi, remarked, “The verdict was decided before the jury retired” (“After the Acquittal” 1955:1). Similarly, Till-Mobley, who left the courtroom before hearing the jury’s verdict, stated the following after Milam and Bryant’s acquittal was announced: “I was expecting an acquittal verdict, and I didn’t want to be there when it happened. . . . [E]ven so I was a little amazed at the brevity of the jury session. The jurors could have at least made it look like they were considering the case” (“After the Acquittal” 1955:1).

Even in non-black newspapers, journalists and readers expressed their expectation of the “not guilty” verdict for Milam and Bryant. For example, in a piece in the *Washington Post and Times Herald*, writer Welburn Franklin (1955) made the following statement:

The verdict of not guilty in the “wolf whistle” murder case in Mississippi came as no surprise to even the most humble laymen. It was an obvious fact that even before the trial began, odds were 20 to 1 that Roy Bryant and his half-brother J.W. Milam would be acquitted of the kidnaping [*sic*] and murder of 15-year old Emmett Till.

In summary, the long-term accumulation of the routine harm of African American murders with no legal consequences for the whites who committed them had established a base from which a cultural trauma narrative could emerge after an expected outcome or routine harm. In other words, this history and accumulation of legal injustice essentially led African Americans to expect nothing but the worst possible traumatic outcome at the end of Milam and Bryant’s trial: an acquittal and no justice for Till or his mother.

*The Publicity That Brings the Routine to the Fore.* Another condition that must be present for a cultural trauma narrative to emerge out of expected occurrences is a public focus on the routine harm at issue, so much so that large numbers of people, both within and outside the group, take notice of that routine harm. After all, people rarely pay attention to recurring, predictable events—their frequency tends to make them less noteworthy. Rather, people tend to notice the unusual, the unexpected, or the unpredictable. For this reason, when a cultural trauma grows out of a routine harm, that expected occurrence is usually preceded by a shocking or distinctive incident that draws publicity and sets the stage for casting a media spotlight on the routine harm. Both of these elements—a shocking incident and the resulting media coverage that shines a light on a subsequent routine harm—appeared before and played a role in the cultural trauma narrative that developed out of Milam and Bryant’s acquittal.

The legacy of slavery, Jim Crow racism, and the complete disregard for the rights and lives of African Americans had created a culture in which very few individuals with power or influence would have paid attention to yet another unpunished death of an African American in Mississippi. Mamie Till-Mobley altered that reality with the help of the black press in late 1955. After the shocking lynching of a mere child, her son Emmett, Till-Mobley made a courageous decision that placed pressure on the state of Mississippi to indict Milam and Bryant for murder and that ultimately forced the entire world to stop and focus on their ensuing trial. Specifically, Till-Mobley bravely decided to allow the black press to publish photographs of her son’s mutilated face and body. She did so precisely to get people around the country to “recognize the horrible problems [that African Americans] were facing in the South” (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:139). Her efforts succeeded: More than 100,000

people walked past Till's mutilated face in his open casket in Chicago over a four-day period. Millions more viewed photographs of a lynched Till in magazines and newspapers all over the world (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003).

By allowing magazines like *Jet* and *Ebony* to publish the pictures of Till's disfigured face, Till-Mobley altered the meaning of her son's death and more generally, the meaning of lynched black bodies. Specifically, she changed the meaning of the lynched black body from its usual understanding as a display of white power and a warning to all African Americans who dared to challenge racial hierarchy to an indictment against Mississippi for its legally enforced racism (Harold and DeLuca 2005).<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the extensive media attention that Till-Mobley brought to the trial created a situation in which the entire nation was focused on the trial when the routine harm at issue—the acquittal of Milam and Bryant for their lynching of Till—occurred. In other words, because the lynching of Till, a child, and the bravery of Till-Mobley in forcing the nation to confront the horrors that African Americans regularly endured had the effect of creating pervasive shock throughout the country, the entire nation was watching carefully when the all-white and all-male Mississippi jury set Milam and Bryant free despite their heinous acts. Here, one sees the interplay between shock or disruption to the norm and the routine harms that come from legal or public sanctioning of a group's subjugated status in creating cultural trauma. The resulting, widespread knowledge about the routine harm from such unpunished murders forced Americans of all races to ask themselves: "How do we ensure that no more of these injustices occur?" Ultimately, the posing of this question transformed into a public conversation about the social meaning of the acquittal, the third factor that I contend is necessary for creating a cultural trauma from a routine harm.<sup>11</sup>

*Discourse about the Social Meaning of the Till Verdict.* The widespread media attention that Milam and Bryant's acquittal received made the routine harm of unpunished murders of African Americans by whites ripe for public discourse about its social meaning. Such public discourse is the third and final condition that I argue must precede cultural trauma from the routine. In the Emmett Till case, public discourse about the trial verdict's meaning centered not only on African Americans but also on the nation as a whole, and it publicly took place in cities across the country, including Chicago, New York City, Detroit, Birmingham, Des Moines, Boston, Nashville, Atlanta, Baltimore, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Washington, DC, and dozens more cities ("Lynch Case Verdict Stirs Whole Nation" 1955:9).

Throughout this public conversation, many expressed the view that "[t]he jury's decision . . . signal[ed] that in the South, Jim Crow laws and racial segregation were not going to go away," even in the face of the two decisions from *Brown v. Board of Education*, the last of which was announced just months before the verdict in 1955 (Crowe 2003:24).<sup>12</sup> As Myrlie Evers, the wife of noted civil rights activist Medgar Evers, declared, the acquittal of Milam and Bryant communicated to everyone that whites could murder African Americans with impunity and that white people would continue to uphold such decisions and oppression through both the police and the courts (Crowe 2003). Or as a *Baltimore Sun* article declared in November 1955, the verdict left Mississippi "defenseless against the charge that in its jurisdiction allegations of crimes committed by whites on Negroes are in a special category" ("Unsatisfactory End of the Till Case" 1955:20). Here, one sees how a cultural trauma emerges precisely because the routine discrimination and exclusion that subordinated group members have experienced gets officially sanctioned, leaving them with a sense that they and their rights are essentially unprotected and disregarded. Indeed, one of the stories that emerged after the verdict was that African Americans simply could not have truly free lives in Mississippi and thus had to be aided in escaping the state by entities like the NAACP.

Others linked the courtroom decision to broader issues, such as the deprivation of other rights for African Americans, including political rights, and the country's contradictions and weaknesses in a budding war against Communism. For instance, Walter Douthet, the President of the CIO union, issued a statement that read in part:

The trial which resulted in the acquittal of the men charged as his murderers make a mockery of civil liberties and the judicial process.

America cannot stand before the bar of world opinion as a symbol of the fight of free men against Communist tyranny and at the same time condone this kind of violation of civil liberties. . . .

The handling of this trial and the verdict, in view of the evidence, is a threat to the democratic rights of all Americans. ("Want Brother Freed" 1955:2)

Finally, others, like Till-Mobley and the press, black and white, added a more hopeful social meaning to the shameful acquittal of Milam and Bryant, identifying the legal wrong as a hard reminder of African Americans' marginalization but also the beginning of future widespread social change. For instance, one white journalist not only repudiated the acquittal in an article in the *New York Post* but also asserted that the jury's decision would be the beginning of a social transformation in the United States. Specifically, the writer proclaimed, "[T]his trial has rocked the world, and nothing can ever be quite the same again—even in Mississippi" (quoted in Crowe 2003:108). In the end, as previous sections have detailed, the trial verdict inspired a greater number of citizens to push for social and legal change in the United States, which ultimately resulted in significant, *formal* civil rights gains for African Americans under law.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, cultural trauma scholars have started an important and complex conversation regarding the forces that both pull apart and push together citizens within a community and that enable groups to narrate their stories in ways that can allow for the incorporation of new social forms and structures. In this article, I extended cultural trauma theory by challenging the widely held belief that such traumas arise only out of shocks to the system. Utilizing the response of African Americans to the acquittal of the two men tried for the murder of Emmett Till in 1955 as a case study, I demonstrate that cultural trauma can emerge not only when normal routines are disrupted but also when common inequities in society repeat themselves—in other words, when no shocks occur—and, more so, when such inequities are reaffirmed by public or official government entities. Specifically, I show and explain why the standard or routine system can be trauma inducing for historically and systemically subordinated groups. In so doing, I identify and analyze three conditions that I argue are needed for a cultural trauma process narrative to develop out of a routine type of harm: (1) an established history or accumulation of the routine harm, which is usually a public or official affirmation of the subordinated group's marginal status; (2) widespread media attention, usually based on preceding events, that brings regional, national, or international attention to the occurrence of the routine harm; and (3) public discourse about the meaning of the routine harm.

Ultimately, I show that the trauma narrative that followed the acquittal of J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant, who were prosecuted for the murder of Emmett Till, emerged from a disorienting event but that the acquittal was not a surprise to the African American community,

whether in Leflore or Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, or in Chicago, Illinois. Rather, the event was part of a longstanding practice of disregarding African American life and rights, exhibiting lawlessness toward African Americans, denying African Americans all protections from the justice system, and depriving African Americans of full standing as American citizens.

Sadly, much of my analysis about the cultural trauma narrative that arose from the acquittal of Milam and Bryant can be applied to the trauma narratives currently growing out of a series of non-indictments and non-convictions for police officers and quasi-police officers who have killed African Americans—victims such as Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Shelly Frey, Freddie Gray, Alexia Christian, Meagan Hockaday, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile, nearly all of whom were unarmed and none of whom were brandishing or threatening an officer with a gun. In far too many ways, today's pattern of police and quasi-police killings of African Americans, followed by no indictments or convictions for the officers, has come to resemble the pattern of twentieth-century lynchings that were routinely followed by grand jury findings that the victims died at the "hands of persons unknown" (Cox 1945:577).<sup>13</sup> This pattern also closely resembles the sequence of tragic events that occurred in late 1955: the lynching of Emmett Till, which ended with the acquittal of two of his known murderers, Milam and Bryant. All one needs to do is replace Milam and Bryant's outward expressions of racial hatred with today's consequences of implicit racial bias (and in some instances, conscious racial bias) and then substitute the findings of dying "at the hands of the unknown" during the twentieth century with dying because the killer "feared for his life."

The police and quasi-police killings of today, along with the lack of punishment following them, have similarly torn at the fabric of American society in recent years, revealing the deep chasms between how whites and African Americans view such killings and their resulting court decisions (Horowitz and Livingston 2016). Similarly, today's routine harm of African American deaths without indictments or convictions of the police officers who killed these persons have left many African Americans (and whites) with the expectation of only more future non-indictments and non-convictions. For instance, much like in the Till case in 1955, Sasha Ginzberg, an attorney for the family of Tamir Rice—a 12-year-old African American boy who was playing with a toy gun outside a recreation center when he was shot and killed by Officer Timothy Loehmann—asserted that "Tamir's family is saddened and disappointed by this outcome but not surprised" after a grand jury failed to indict Loehmann, who shot Rice within two seconds of arriving on the scene (Silva, Fieldstadt, and Siemasko 2015). On July 12, 2016, just days after Alton Sterling and Philando Castile had been shot and killed by police in Baton Rouge and Minneapolis, respectively, *Newsweek's* website ran an article titled "The Police Officers Who Shot Philando Castile and Alton Sterling Probably Won't Go to Jail" (S. Russell 2016).

Additionally, a cultural trauma narrative arose out of what African Americans generally view as a routine dismissal of the value of black lives. This cultural trauma is emerging in part because of the publicity that today's courtroom decisions are receiving due to the actions of family and community members who have captured the killings on video and then shown them to the public. For example, in the spirit of Mamie Till-Mobley, who allowed pictures of her son's mutilated face to be published in black newspapers and magazines, Diamond Reynolds live-streamed the immediate aftermath of a police officer's shooting of her fiancé, Philando Castile, in July 2016. Much like Till-Mobley, who wanted to show the world "just how twisted, how distorted, how terrifying, race hatred could be" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:142), Reynolds explained that she live-streamed what happened to her fiancé "so that the world [could see] that these police are not here to protect and serve us. . . . They are here

to kill us because we are black” (Dwyer 2016). Each of these visual images has deepened the pain of African Americans, but they have also exposed many whites to the overpolicing, the bias, and the tragic killings that African Americans have endured, complained about, and protested for centuries. In this regard, women like Diamond Reynolds have “broaden[ed] the realm of social understanding and sympathy” (J.C. Alexander 2004:24).

Finally, the messages that African Americans have taken from today’s routine harms of African American killings without indictments or convictions mirror the meanings that many believe were communicated by the acquittal of Milam and Bryant after they lynched Till. For instance, speaking about the spate of killings and the videos of such killings on the news and the Internet, Dr. Monnica T. Williams, a licensed clinical psychologist and the director of the Center for Mental Health Disparities at the University of Louisville, declared that seeing such images without resulting consequences “really sends a message that black lives don’t matter and that the people who are supposed to be protecting and serving us can just beat us and kill us with impunity” (Dwyer 2016).

What remains to be seen are the “new forms of social incorporation” that these latest cultural trauma narratives might inspire and produce (J.C. Alexander 2004). In the end, though, the wish for African Americans remains the same: that these routine harms will soon end, creating no space for the narration of the resulting cultural traumas.

## NOTES

1. Till was not the first teenager to be lynched by white men in the United States. As several of the newspaper articles republished in Ralph Ginzburg’s book *100 Years of Lynching* reveal, African American children (and women) were also the victims of horrific lynchings in the North and South (Feimster 2009; Ginzburg 1962). However, Till’s age, the atrocious beating and killing he suffered, and his mother’s courage in allowing the black press to publish photographs of his mutilated face and body created shockwaves throughout the nation. Mamie Till-Mobley’s decision to publish the ghastly photographs of Till made it difficult for African Americans and whites, regardless of region, to ignore the type of racial hatred that had encouraged, reinforced, and condoned lynchings of African Americans for more than a century (Goldsby 1996; Whitfield 1988).
2. These two shocks played a role in creating the acquittal-induced, cultural trauma for African Americans through the media attention they inspired. This media coverage focused the entire world’s eyes on the jury trial against Milam and Bryant. In this sense, shock played a role in the construction of the verdict-inspired trauma narrative, but its role was more limited and attenuated than the role that shock generally plays during standard cultural trauma processes.
3. I analyze these issues in two additional articles that address cultural trauma and police and quasi-police killings of African Americans in today’s society.
4. In most instances, the harm does not come about under circumstances or in contexts that ignite wide-scale public debate and discourse about the meaning of the harm (Eyerman 2015).
5. After Wright’s and Reed’s testimonies, the two men were immediately smuggled out of Mississippi. Reed suffered a nervous breakdown soon after arriving safely in Chicago (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003).
6. Milam stated the following during his *Look* magazine confession to Huie (1956):

What else could I do? . . . I like niggers—in their place—I know how to work ‘em. But I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers gonna stay in their place. . . . I stood there in that shed and listened to that nigger [Till] throw that poison at me [Till’s alleged talking back], and I just made up my mind. “Chicago boy,” I said, “I’m tired of ‘em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddam you, I’m going to make an example of you—just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand.”

7. A misunderstanding between Till-Mobley and the NAACP later led to an end of their official partnership (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003).

8. Till-Mobley recalled a similar lesson she learned from her grandfather when she visited Mississippi as a child: "He told me about the great danger that I had just faced. . . . [H]e pounded the fear of every black person in Mississippi into me" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:21).
9. In fact, when Till-Mobley and her mother received news of Till's kidnapping in the middle of the night, Till-Mobley wrote the following about the reaction of her mother, who was born in Mississippi and grew up there before moving to Argo, Illinois: "[A]s I looked at Mama, I began to realize she had already given up hope. Mama had lived in Mississippi. . . . She had a look that made me pause. It was the look of someone who could see something she didn't want to see" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003:118–19).
10. Before Till-Mobley, Ida B. Wells and her crusaders also successfully altered the meaning of lynched black bodies on the postcards that whites often widely distributed after lynchings in the South, changing the "narrative of black savagery . . . [to] one of black vulnerability" and recasting "white victimization" as "white terrorization" (Raiford 2011:40).
11. This factor is really a requirement for any cultural trauma (Alexander 2004; Eyerman 2015).
12. The first *Brown* decision held that legally mandated racial segregation in public schools is unconstitutional in 1954, and the second decision famously declared that public schools must be integrated with "all deliberate speed."
13. I explore these patterns in another article, tentatively titled "The New Status Quo."

## REFERENCES

- "After the Acquittal . . . Here's What Was Said." 1955. *New Journal and Guide*, October 1, p. 1.
- Alexander, Elizabeth. 1994. "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)." *Public Culture* 7(1):77–94.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2004. "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma." Pp. 1–30 in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by J. C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser, and P. Sztompka. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C., Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, eds. 2004. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Archives at the Tuskegee Institute. "Lynchings: By Year and Race." Retrieved October 27, 2016 (<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingyear.html>).
- Carrier, Jim. 2011. "Traveling the Civil Rights Trail." *Washington Post*, August 26. Retrieved October 24, 2016 ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/traveling-the-civil-rights-trail/2011/08/26/gIQAAV-L7gJ\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/traveling-the-civil-rights-trail/2011/08/26/gIQAAV-L7gJ_story.html)).
- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cox, Oliver. 1945. "Lynching and the Status Quo." *The Journal of Negro Education* 14(4):576–88.
- Crowe, Chris. 2003. *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- David, Emmanuel. 2008. "Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Gendered Collective Action: The Case of Women of the Storm Following Hurricane Katrina." *NWSA Journal* 20(3):136–62.
- Draper, Arthur F. [1933] 2003. *The Tragedy of Lynching*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc.
- Dray, Philip. 2002. *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. New York: The Modern Library.
- Dwyer, Liz. 2016. "The Collective Trauma of Watching the End of Black Lives." *TakePart.Com*, July 7. Retrieved October 24, 2016 (<http://www.takepart.com/article/2016/07/07/racism-and-black-ptsd>).
- Erikson, Kai. 1976. *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Erikson, Kai. 1995. "Notes on Trauma and Community." Pp. 183–99 in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by C. Caruth. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Eyerman, Ron. 2001. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Eyerman, Ron. 2004. "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity." Pp. 60–111 in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by J. C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser, and P. Sztompka. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Eyerman, Ron. 2013. "Social Theory and Trauma." *Acta Sociologica* 56(1):41–53.
- Eyerman, Ron. 2015. *Is This America? Katrina as Cultural Trauma*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Feimster, Crystal N. 2009. *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Race and Lynching*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Franklin, Welburn. 1955. "The Case of Emmett Till." *The Washington Post*, October 2. Retrieved October 24, 2016 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/24/AR2007082401505.html>).
- Giesen, Bernhard. 2004. "The Trauma of Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference of German National Identity." Pp. 112–54 in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by J. C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser, and P. Sztompka. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ginzburg, Ralph. 1962. *100 Years of Lynching*. Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press.
- Goldsby, Jacqueline. 1996. "The High and Low Tech of It: The Meaning of Lynching and the Death of Emmett Till." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9(2):245–82.
- Harold, Christine, and Kevin Michael DeLuca. 2005. "Behind the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8(2):263–86.
- Holloway, Jonathan Scott. 2013. *Jim Crown Wisdom: Memory & Identity in Black America Since 1940*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Horowitz, Juliana Menasce, and Gretchen Livingston. 2016. "How Americans View the Black Lives Matter Movement." Retrieved October 24, 2016 (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/08/how-americans-view-the-black-lives-matter-movement>).
- Hudson-Weems, Clenora. 2006. *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement* (Rev. Ed.). Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.
- Hughson, John, and Ramón Spaaij. 2011. "'You Are Always on My Mind': The Hillsborough Tragedy as Cultural Trauma." *Acta Sociologica*. 54(3):283–95.
- Huie, William Bradford. 1956. "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi." *Look Magazine*, January 24. Retrieved October 24, 2016 ([http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf\\_look\\_confession.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf_look_confession.html)).
- Huie, William Bradford. 1957. "What's Happened to the Emmett Till Killers?" *Look*, January 24, pp. 63–66.
- "Lynch Case Verdict Stirs Whole Nation." 1955. *Afro-American*, October 8, p. 9.
- Pollack, Harriett, and Christopher Metress. 2008. *Emmett Till in Literary Memory and Imagination*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Raiford, Leigh. 2011. *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Russell, Margaret M. 2005. "Reopening the Emmett Till Case: Lessons and Challenges for Critical Race Practice." *Fordham Law Review* 73(5):2101–32.
- Russell, Steve. 2016. "The Police Officers Who Shot Philando Castile and Alton Sterling Probably Won't Go to Jail." *Newsweek*, July 12. Retrieved October 24, 2016 (<http://www.newsweek.com/fatal-police-shootings-prosecution-479834>).
- Schmidt, Inge B. 2014. "Perpetual Trauma and Its Organizations: Mothers Against Drunk Driving and Drunk Driving Revisited." *Memory Studies* 7(2):239–53.
- Silva, Daniella, Elisha Fieldstadt, and Corky Siemasko. 2015. "Grand Jury Declines to Indict Officers in Tamir Rice Case." *NBCNews.com*, December 28. Retrieved October 24, 2016 (<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/grand-jury-declines-indict-officers-tamir-rice-case-n486876>).
- Smelser, Neil J. 2004. "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma." Pp. 31–59 in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by J. C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser, and P. Sztompka. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sztompka, Piotr. 2000. "Cultural Trauma: The Other Face of Social Change." *European Journal of Social Theory* 3(4):449–66.
- Till-Mobley, Mamie, and Christopher Benson. 2003. *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America*. New York: Random House.
- Tolnay, Stewart E., and E. M. Beck. 1995. *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- "Unsatisfactory End of the Till Case." 1955. *Baltimore Sun*, November 11, p. 20.

U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation 2006. *FBI Prosecutive Report of Investigation Concerning Roy Bryant—Deceased; John William Milam, also known as J.W. Milam—Deceased; Leslie F. Milam—Deceased; Melvin L. Campbell—Deceased; Elmer O. Kimbrell—Deceased; Hubert Clark—Deceased; Levi Collins, also known as, Too Tight Collins—Deceased; Johnny B. Washington—Deceased; Otha Johnson, Jr., also known as Oso—Deceased; Emmett Louis Till—Deceased—Victim; Civil Rights Conspiracy, Domestic Police Cooperation*. Jackson, MS: FBI. Retrieved October 24, 2016 (<http://vault.fbi.gov/Emmett%20Till%20>).

“Want Brother Freed: Mississippians Backing Acquitted Killers.” 1955. *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 8, pp. 1–2.

Whitfield, Stephen J. 1988. *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Wright, Simeon. 2010. *Simeon’s Story: An Eyewitness Account of the Kidnapping of Emmett Till*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Angela Onwuachi-Willig** is a PhD candidate in sociology and African American studies at Yale University. She also is Chancellor’s Professor of Law at the University of California, Berkeley. She studies cultural trauma, social stratification, social movements, and law and society. She is the author of *According to our Hearts: Rhinelander v. Rhinelander and the Law of the Multiracial Family*.