Taken In Water:
The Photograph as Memorial Image in Sally Mann’s *Deep South*

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ABSTRACT

ALISON R. HAFERA: Taken in Water: The Photograph as Memorial Image in Sally Mann’s *Deep South* (Under the direction of Carol Mavor.)

After spending nearly ten years working on the project *Immediate Family* (1984-91), Southern photographer Sally Mann (b. 1951) turned her camera to the surrounding lush, bucolic and ephemeral Virginia landscape, in a subtle transition she describes as the children slowly slipping from the frame, the landscape coming into primary focus. Using her large-format vintage camera with damaged lenses, sometimes installed in reverse, Mann employed the nineteenth-century wet collodion technique to create atmospheric and haunting images of the Virginia, Georgia and Mississippi landscapes in two sequential bodies of work entitled *Mother Land* (1996) and *Deep South* (1998). Mann’s landscapes examine the uneasy confluence of past and present, history and memory, life and death. Through close looking at one image, *Untitled (Mississippi Landscape)*, this paper explores the intersection of personal and public memory and investigates how photographs have the particular power to function as memorial images.
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CHAPTER 1
EMMETT’S STORY

“What have they done?’ cries the child /’Why have they beaten me, tortured me, /wound me in wire from the cotton gin that tore our years across /sunk me deep in the river of no forgetting?’” Martha Millet

In August 1955 Emmett Louis Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy, left his hometown, Chicago, Illinois, to visit his mother’s relatives in rural Mississippi. Emmett is described as someone who loved telling and hearing jokes, someone who occasionally acted with impunity (lighting firecrackers within the city limits), and a good student in science and art. He spent his long summer days in Mississippi helping his great uncle pick cotton in the Delta fields, chasing snakes out of a pond with his cousins so that they could swim in the heat of the day, and taking trips to the nearby town of Money to buy a cool drink and a few pieces of candy. On August 28, he and his cousins walked into Bryant’s Grocery store and what happened between young Emmett and Carolyn Bryant, the twenty-one year old white wife of Roy Bryant, the owner of the store, will never be known for certain. Emmett spoke regularly of both black and white friendships, with both

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1 Martha Millet, “Mississippi,” Masses and Mainstream, October 1955.

boys and girls. It is possible that his cousins dared him to speak to Mrs. Bryant, to prove that he was not afraid to have conversations with white women. Emmett is said to have whistled, possibly on purpose or as a symptom of a stutter brought on from a childhood case of polio (his mother told him to whistle when he could not form words.) Mrs. Bryant refused to repeat what Emmett said to her, but she did testify to a juryless courtroom that he touched her wrist and grabbed her by the waist. Whatever did in fact happen in the isolated, rural store that day led to the kidnapping and murder of Emmett Till by Roy Bryant and his half brother J.W. Milam. The men disposed of Emmett’s body in the Tallahatchie River, tying a seventy-five pound cotton gin fan around his neck to insure that his body would remain submerged within the river’s indolently moving water. He was meant to be lost, to be made invisible, to be carried unseen and undiscovered through the interconnected water system of the Mississippi Delta, beneath the water’s cloudy membrane, silenced and forgotten. Southern photographer Sally Mann does not want to forget.

Rivers and deep bodies of water are mythically associated with memory formation and retention, especially the inevitable act of forgetting. For the ancient Greeks the river Lethe was able to erase a dead soul’s entire memory of life with only one drink.

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3 Whitfield, looking at contemporary newspaper reports, discovers that at least two of Till’s cousins claimed that Till “was definitely whistling” at Carolyn Bryant. See A Death in the Delta, 19. When William Bradford Huie later interviewed the cousins he said that neither of them had mentioned the whistle until he asked them about it; then they only agreed that Emmett “may have whistled, at the store. But it had not struck them as important” See Metress, 243.

4 The judge orders the jury out of the courtroom when Mr. Bryant gives her testimony in court, citing the exchange between defense attorneys and Carolyn Bryant as inadmissible. Ibid., 309.

The Tallahatchie River is a deep, muddy backwater river, rising in northwestern Mississippi before dropping into the dark, flat marsh lands known as “the Delta.” The Tallahatchie is only one veiny water source that feeds the Mississippi Delta, a place identified by its especially fertile flood plains, relative isolation, and shockingly violent racial history. When Mann, a photographer known for her compelling familial series *Immediate Family* (1984-1991) who recently turned to landscapes, first visited Mississippi in the fall of 1998 she experienced the unique sensation of traveling “into the Delta;” the implication being not only traveling through physical space but rather of passage back in time, to a setting that seems even more southern that the rest of the state.6

Even for Mann, a native Virginian and a photographer skilled at capturing the allusive formality of the southern vernacular of family, land, memory and loss, the Mississippi landscape represents an otherworldly place. She describes the unique aroma of the fertile plains, the whirling “tornadoes” of cotton flies and the “lazy shafts of Mississippi light” with the wonder of someone seeing the southern landscape for the first time.7

Commonly referred to as “the most southern place on earth”8 the torrid and proliferant Mississippi Delta somehow appears to transcend the continuum of time. In the

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8 This phrase is used by James C. Cobb and is also the title of his book on the region. In the preface of the text, Cobb writes: “In May 1985 I appeared on a Center for the Study of Southern Culture videotape, standing in a cotton field on the outskirts of Marks, Mississippi, describing the Mississippi Delta as a land of astounding economic and social disparity and declaring it ‘the most southern place on earth.’ Although at the time I felt terribly pleased with the cleverness and originality of my observation, I soon learned that I was actually but one of a host of commentators who over the years have treated the Mississippi Delta as an isolated, time-warped enclave.” See James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), vii.
text that accompanies the photographs in *Deep South*, Mann describes the power that the particular Delta landscape held over her ability to judge and record time:

> From the moment I passed into Mississippi, my time became ecstatic. A radiance coalesces about the landscape, rich in possibility, supercharged with something electric. Time slows down. Time becomes ecstatic...I broke through into that dimension of revelation and ecstacy that *eludes historical time*.10

Because of this unique sensation of suspended time, of eluding historical time, Mann’s southern excursion into the Mississippi Delta afforded the opportunity to study and photograph in sharply defined geographical miniature the particular history and culture of the Deep South. Furthermore, in *Deep South* (1998), Mann’s landscape series that includes the Mississippi images, the landscape becomes uniquely held by a photograph which is itself a practice of time travel. Through the photographic image the past is brought into the present with a promise of existing into the future.

The element of suspended time Mann perceives in the Southern landscape also has a wounding effect. She finds that living in the South and traveling through its landscape “often means slipping out of temporal joint, a peculiar phenomenon that both

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9 There are two series of Southern landscapes by Sally Mann: *Motherland* which includes photographs of Virginia and Georgia, and *Deep South*, which includes photographs of Mississippi and Louisiana. Originally, *Motherland* was shown at the Edwynn Houk Gallery in New York in 1996. *Deep South* was shown in 1999 at the Edwynn Houk Gallery as well. Although I am unable to quote the total official number of photographs included in Mann’s Southern landscapes, in the latest publication of the two series there are sixty five plates included. See *Deep South*. I address only five photographs in this paper, selecting images that I see as specifically associated with the themes of the watery landscapes, the use of the wet-plate collodion process, and evocation of a precise historical moment through memory. According to Mann, her landscapes from *Motherland* and *Deep South* are the most popular and sell more than any of her other photographic series. See *What Remains: The Life and Work of Sally Mann*, directed by Steven Cantor, produced by Steven Cantor, Daniel Laikind, Mandy Stein, Pax Wasserman. USA, 2006, 86 minutes, video. For information on Mann’s landscapes also see Sally Mann, *Motherland: Recent Landscapes of Georgia and Virginia*. New York: Edwynn Houk Gallery, 1997.

10 Mann, *Deep South*, 49.
nourishes and wounds.”\textsuperscript{11} The sensation of nourishment and wounding that comes from slipping between time stems from a seeming closeness with a past that is itself wounded by violence and segregation. Her particular journey into Mississippi eventually takes her to the shores of the Tallahatchie River and to a plot of southern land deeply symbolic in its confluence of past and present, history and death as told through the formal evocation of a physically wounded earth. If in Mississippi time slows to a morbid crawl, then the Tallahatchie River had barely enough time to wash away any evidence deposited along its red-clay shores of Emmett Till’s kidnapping and murder before Mann encounters the spot in October 1998.

The Tallahatchie photograph, identified like all the images in the series as simply \textit{Untitled (Mississippi Landscape)} (fig.1), was “taken one serenely mote-floating, balmy, yellowish October afternoon” and the image is itself yellow and steamy. The moistness and tonality of the image possibly reflects Mann’s use of the nineteenth century wet-plate collodion process. The collodion technique consists of carefully coating a glass plate with a solution of nitrated cotton dissolved in ether and alcohol.\textsuperscript{12} The Mississippi images in \textit{Deep South} represent Mann’s initial experimentation with wet-plate collodion and the choice to use the nineteenth century process seems a deliberate choice based on the solitude and timelessness Mann finds in the Mississippi landscape:

\begin{enumerate}
\item Mann, \textit{Deep South}, 7.
\item Wet-plate or collodion photography was invented in 1851 by the Englishman Frederick Scott Archer. The coated plate is bathed in silver nitrate to make the surface sensitive to light and exposed in the camera while the collodion is still wet. The resultant collodion has a syrupy consistency that is then poured onto clean, tilted glass plate as the first step in the production of a negative. The coated glass plate is then sensitized by bathing it in a solution of silver nitrate to make the surface sensitive to light. The plate is then developed and fixed. For most working photographers, wet-plate negatives were preferable to paper negatives because of their great clarity and speed. See Gordon Baldwin, \textit{Looking at Photographs: a Guide to Technical Terms} (London: J. Paul Getty Museum and British Museum, 1991), 27.
\end{enumerate}
That part of the South is a kind of netherworld. I was asking the land to give up its ghosts. Collodion is the ideal medium for such landscapes. It is contemplative, memorial...In the face of some extraordinary sight or place you do not just take a picture. It is ceremonial. I am not a religious person, but there is an experience of communion in wet-plate photography. It is not a drive-by shooting.\(^{13}\)

To describe an experience as communion carries both bodily and spiritual connotations; a person feels connected to the land as if they are “taking a part” of the place with them in their memory as they leave or the consumption of the physical body by the earth which eventually takes every(body). Following in the same spiritual evocation, with the collodion process the land can be seen as becoming sanctified through a series of on-site bathes and pourings.

The placid stillness of the Tallahatchie photograph reflects the amount of time spent within the landscape, preparing the plate, capturing the image and developing the negative. Vaporous and breathless, as if all the air has been sucked out of the space, the image seems to slowly peel itself open to the viewer while the darkened, unexposed edges collapse and push in on the central cut in the clay dirt near the shoreline, combining to create a sense of inescapable claustrophobia. The central cut is moist, jagged and deep, and the gently rounded earth on either side appears to give way to its weighted pull. The earthen spot directly around the cut’s rough edges is barren of any vegetal growth as if the ground, having been sapped of all its nutrients, is unable to support new life. The cut seems to descend rapidly into the deep waters of the Tallahatchie River just beyond, quickly disappearing from sight beneath the river’s murky, opaque skin.

\(^{13}\) Interview with Sally Mann. See Lyle Rexer, from *Photography’s Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The New Wave in Old Processes* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 80-81.
Within the text of *Deep South* Mann identifies this photographed place as “the very spot from which the fourteen-year-old Emmett, naked and necklaced with a cotton-gin fan, was heaved into the Tallahatchie River.”¹⁴ As the scar in the clay ground descends into the river and disappears beneath the water, so too was Emmett’s body taken away in the slowly moving fluid. In Mann’s watery landscape the integral relationship between the wounded earth and the flowing water is reflected in the darker gestural reference of foliage mirrored in the Tallahatchie water which drags and points to the heavily broken earth. The river water beyond is still, flat, placid as if, just like time, the flowing water of the Tallahatchie River has slowed to an eerie stop in reverence to Mann’s memorial photograph. The ceremonial quality of the photographic moment is strengthened by the subtle encroachment of rough grasses and vines along the edge of the photograph; like the image, the flora and fauna peel away from this hallowed ground, their weighted stems, heavy with humidity, bow towards the ground and water, allowing only a momentary glimpse of the existence of this humble and haunted place to photographer and viewer.

The story I tell is the story of Emmett’s death as embodied within Sally Mann’s memorial to him made manifest in a photograph of the muddy Tallahatchie waters. Within the image the reference to an open wound, more capable of maintaining the emotive traces of the painful trauma of Till’s murder than his own open casket, symbolically connotes both the physical and historical scars of Emmett’s murder. Mann’s particular exploration of the Southern landscape in this photograph of the Tallahatchie shoreline seems to beg the question, does a place remember? I am interested

¹⁴ Mann, *Deep South*, 50-51.
in the memorial function of photography as a materialization of both personal and public memory. By exploring the mythic, memorial and historic associations with watery landscapes, I read Mann’s Tallahatchie image as capable of opening the narrative of Till’s short life and violent death through layered acts of recollection. Where much attention has been paid to how Mann’s landscapes are associated with the memory of the Civil War and the antebellum South,\textsuperscript{15} or the formal elements of romanticism, I am interested in how her landscapes might engage with personal memory and a more complicated investigation of the haunted Southern past. Her landscape becomes the truest posthumous portrait of Emmett Till, capturing the painful essence of the culture that killed him as held in memory by the Southern motherland.

\textsuperscript{15} Mann points directly to the trauma of the Civil War, describing the loss as “the lingering aftertaste of defeat.” See \textit{Deep South}, 7; David Levi Strauss in a review of \textit{Motherland} writes “The land shown here is that of the Civil War South.” See “Sally Mann – Edwynn Houk Gallery,” \textit{ArtForum} (February, 1998) 31; Lisa Barnett describes Mann as “a Civil War photographer,” who “is able to pack history into her photographs; affording a vision of the Deep South, literally through the lens of another era.” See “Sally Mann,” \textit{Art Criticism} 14, no. 1 (1999), 29.
CHAPTER 2
THE SOUTHERN LANDSCAPE AS PORTRAIT

“It will come as no surprise to anyone who knows my family pictures that the name Emmett means a great deal to me. The murder of Emmett Till has haunted me since I first became aware of it early in my life...I was three years old at the time.” Sally Mann

The Mississippi writer William Faulkner wrote about how he envisioned the role of the artist as not only to arrest time, but to “strive with all the means and all the talents he possesses, his imagination, his experiences, his powers of observation, to put into more lasting form than his own frail, ephemeral instant of life, what he has known first hand.”16 Mann locates the impetus of her work as a southern photographer within the realm of the known and the experienced in much the same way Faulkner describes. Mann too reflects on the importance of “the local” in her own body of work stating, “For me the local has two parts: my family and the land. They give me comfort in times of failure and of course they are the wellspring and the inspiration for all my work.”17

16 William Faulkner, “Address Upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, Stockholm, 10 December 1950.” In William Faulkner: Essays, Speeches and Public Letters, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: Random House, 1965). It is also interesting to note that the Tallahatchie River appears in a number of Faulkner’s works as part of Yoknapatawpha County landscape. Also, after the story of Till’s death was released in the press, Faulkner, who was in Rome at the time, was so deeply disturbed by the Till lynching that he issued a press dispatch predicting that if he and his country men “have reached the point in our desperate culture when we must murder children, no matter for what reason or color, we don’t deserve to survive, and probably won’t.” See “Press Dispatch Written in Rome, Italy, For the United States Press, on the Emmett Till Case,” New York Harold Tribune, September 9, 1955.

17 From What Remains: The Life and Work of Sally Mann, Steven Cantor.
trajectory of her photographic work effectively embodies themes of the local, her family, and the land, investigating the elements of the surrounding environment that are constantly available and may seem to everyday lookers even boring and mundane. But Mann, with her instinctive, unflinching gaze and the meditative beauty of her photographs, is able to draw the most vital aspects of life into an operatic dialogue, establishing a benevolent narrative that grows exponentially upon each look.

In the last remaining years of the twentieth century, Mann began work on two sequential series of landscape photographs, *Motherland* (1996) and *Deep South*, which capture the anomalous bucolic terrain of the American South. Beginning in her homeland of Virginia with the images that would become *Motherland*, Mann’s transition from the familial series *Immediate Family* to the landscape photographs is manifest as a gradual shift in focus. As her children grew-up and moved beyond the boundaries of Mann’s environment, the teeming natural spaces they occupied steadily crawled into the center and forefront of the frame. In her own words Mann describes the shift as both inevitable and performative, “The kids seem to be disappearing from the image, receding into the landscape...Emmett, Jessie and Virginia, of 1992, is exemplary: It seems to catch the moment just when the characters are exiting the stage” (fig. 2). This exiting can be understood as the children’s absorption into the landscape, as if by some form of osmosis they become part of the landscape itself. In *Emmett, Jessie and Virginia* the children’s figures become mere ghostly gray outlines against the horizon line, appearing to almost

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18 Mann spent the decade documenting the everyday habits of her three young children, Emmett, Jessie and Virginia. The resulting body of work *Immediate Family* explores childhood in an intense, tender and autonomous way. The photograph’s power stems from the individuality of each of Mann’s children and from the underlying current of push and pull between a child’s desire to be independent while still wanting and requiring parental care and guidance. See *Immediate Family*.

evaporate into the atmosphere. Here the primacy of the land dominates the previously powerful familial figures. There is something adolescent about the “in between-ness” of the image itself; not quite family portrait, not quite landscape, growing into something new from something that came before. Just as the earthy backgrounds consume the children, they also “ambushed” Mann, affording the opportunity to explore an entirely new set of formal queries as a prone, anticipatory subject that is constantly available, silently sprawled across the field of vision. The themes of life, belonging, growth, loss and memory that are so present in Mann’s family series remain a prominent thematic thread that is drawn throughout the landscape images. The act of portraying the diorama of her home land in Virginia is both personal and organic.

Mann treats her excursion into the Southern landscape as an excursion into historical memory. Mann quotes the discovery in the early seventies of a cache of glass negatives taken by the Civil War veteran Michael Miley as a catalyst for her own interest in exploring the relationship between landscape photography and history. Miley, known primarily as Robert E. Lee’s personal portrait photographer, left a body of work entirely dedicated to representing the ecological scenery of Lexington, Virginia. After cleaning and printing a series of Miley’s plates, Mann recounts holding the negatives up against the current day Virginian terrain and realizing that the land had hardly changed in over a hundred years. It was as if time remained transfixed, as if history was eminently available and present through the perspicuity of the surrounding vistas. The Civil War is not the only, or even the most recent, formative historical moment to play out across the

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20 Mann discovered the plates in an attic at the University of Lexington. See *Motherland*, 6.

21 Ibid. As Mann states: “To identify a person as a Southerner is always to suggest not only that her history is inescapable and profoundly formative but that it is also paralyzing present.”
Southern landscape, in its towns and major cities. The American Civil Rights Movement was also acted out within the landscape of the American South and Mann’s Tallahatchie image is representative of only one location linked in some form to the Movement.

Within *Motherland* and *Deep South* the Tallahatchie photograph represents the only overt reference to the South’s turbulent segregationist racial past and the trauma endured on the long-fought road to civil rights in America. Unlike the nationally recognized memorials that manifest repeatedly in *Motherland* and *Deep South* in the form of demarcated and preserved Civil War battlefields (fig. 3) recognizable by the presence of canons still standing in the distance, or the imposing stone ruins of forts, factories and Neo-Classical plantations (fig. 4), the evidence of the undeniable African American historical presence in the American Southern states materializes in Mann’s landscape series in much more subtle visual cues.22 The repeated visual references to splits, cuts, and fissures in the Southern topography, some caused by the sluggish flowing waters of Southern rivers, can be read as part of a layered visual vocabulary capable of speaking to a specific traumatic history.

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22 This paper could be made different through the close examination of how blackness is represented in photography. While my interest is in the confluence of personal memory and remembered history as embodied in the landscape and captured through the memorial photograph, this discussion could be further developed through closer examination of critical texts that directly address the issues of blackness and the photograph. Dr. Lyneise Williams has been generous in guiding me to sources that may help my project as it continues to develop in the future. There is a large, new body of scholarship on representations of black bodies and blackness in photography. See Deborah Willis, Richard Powell, Camara Holloway, Kellie Jones, Isaac Julien, and Kobena Mercer. Also see *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self.*, edited by Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: International Center of Photography in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc.: 2003) a book on black representations in photography. There are also people writing on the way black bodies inform white American forms. See Toni Morrison *Playing in the Dark: whiteness and the literary imagination.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).
Visual representations of race surface in much of Mann’s photographic work. In her first major publication *At Twelve* (1983-5) Mann includes images and narratives of young girls across class and racial lines. In one such image *Theresa* (fig. 5) Mann depicts the twelve year old with her newborn child. The interior bedroom is divided between the spaces of childhood and motherhood as if the two moments in Theresa’s life, like a landscape, could be physically divided. Mother and child float in a soft light on a wide bed between the realm of Theresa’s childhood represented by dolls, plush toys and books and her new existence as young mother represented through her physical closeness to her newborn. The image speaks a universal language of how so many young female lives experience the traumatic cutting short of childhood due to an early thrust into motherhood. The affect of a cut life is visually referenced in Theresa’s cut body in the photograph; her legs are cropped out of the image cutting her body off at the waist. Like Theresa, Emmett’s childhood was cut, and like Theresa whose life remains suspended between adolescence and adulthood, Emmett is forever in memory a fourteen-year-old boy.

The story of Emmett Till is one very much grounded in the dark racial history of the South and the United States as a whole. It seems that the story had a particularly personal effect on Mann. As she reflects in the text of *Deep South* “It will come as no surprise to anyone who knows my family pictures that the name Emmett means a great deal to me. The murder of Emmett Till has haunted me since I first became aware of it early in my life...I was three years old at the time.” Mann grew up and named her first child, a son, Emmett, possibly after the photographer Emmett Gowin, a fellow Virginian

23 Mann, *Deep South*, 50.
whose body of photographs is mirrored in Mann’s. (Gowin too focused on his family as a source of inspiration throughout his career, and like Mann, he eventually turned to representations of the landscape in his photographic work.)\textsuperscript{24} These three Emmet(t)s, all a source of personal inspiration for Mann, speak a mingled conversation of memory and identity. The repetition of naming links Mann distinctively to Emmett Till. The name means “a great deal to her” own life on three levels. The name Emmett is important to her because it is the name of her son, it is the name of a photographer she admirers, and because she is unable to forget what happened to Emmett Till. By equating Emmett Till’s name directly with the name of her son, she alludes to sense of linked pasts and paths. When Mann steps on the Tallahatchie shoreline she remembers something tragic through physically entering the landscape where that event occurred. Consequently she enters into her own past through that place and its memory of a specific moment. She remembers Emmett Till, her own childhood and her son.

In one \textit{Immediate Family} photograph of Emmett Mann he stands between two wide tree trunks in front of a receding expanse of water (fig. 6). Emmett, leaning on one tree, looks confidently into his mother’s lens, giving the appearance of total self-awareness. Another boy, close in age to Emmett, stands in the photograph as well. He holds his right hand up to his mouth, as if hiding behind it, and looks out tentatively unable to match Emmett’s assuredness. The photograph is titled \textit{Emmett and the White Boy}. Both boys appear to be Caucasian (white) but Emmett, presumably having spent the warm weather months swimming in the water behind him, is tan: evidence of the ecological environments action on his body. His skin is darker than the pale skin of the

boy beside him. In the photograph and its title, Mann plays with the visual nuances of tonality in black and white film. The color of both boys’ skin becomes some variation of color from white to black. What does Mann mean to say about race in this image?

Reading *Emmett and the White Boy* formally, through the idea of co-existing tonalities in black and white film, the image begins to point out the fact that race is constantly an undertone in the southern locale, even if not explicitly represented. The relationship between the two boys becomes a commentary on the relationship between communities of color in the South as Mann pictures it. Although the two boys do not overtly interact with one another, I can easily assume through their physical proximity and the pictured informal moment that they are friends, or at least acquaintances. The two boys seem to be in mid-swim, ready to dive back in. Black and white interact and exist together while still maintaining a sense of autonomy in the South Mann pictures here. Yet when Mann ventures into historical memory through her landscape photographs she finds that within the same South, and at the same time a different unfamiliar Deep South, the interaction between a black boy and a white woman ended tragically, absolutely because of race.

The ambiguity of reading race in a figural representation helps open up the possibility of reading a landscape racially or reading the landscape as a portrait. The story behind Mann’s Tallahatchie image is largely about one boy’s race. A black boy spoke to a white woman and he was murdered for it. And yet, the image is literally of a landscape, of a place where something horrible happened. In Mann’s photograph of the Tallahatchie shoreline there is no body, no fixed marker of corporeal death or of race, but rather a deliberate absence of human presence. This barely titled *Untitled (Mississippi*
Landscape) reflects the consistent absence of specificity and of naming in reference to all of Mann’s southern places and spaces in both her landscape series, Motherland and Deep South. The photographs have been described as “unpeopled portraits” because the images seem incredibly intent on demonstrating the unique character and history of Mann’s observed American South strictly through topographical elements. The Tallahatchie image is no different. The scarred earth communicates something precise about the history of the place. The lack of overgrowth reveals the plot instead of concealing it from view, emphasizing the centrality of the break in the ground and further evoking a sense of chance discovery. These captured elements of the landscape begin to piece together the story of Emmett Till and his association with the place, as if materializing into a portrait.

In the series What Remains (1997-2002) Mann once again focuses on the landscape and the human body to explore the inevitable experience of death. Here too, the body and the landscape merge to become formal reflections of the other. In What Remains Mann includes close-up images of her children where their faces, pushed close to the picture plane, begin to look more like rises and pitches in a mysterious landscape than a known, familiar face. Their noses catch light while their eye sockets dip into darkness. The faces almost appear to be pressed up against the glass plate, or submerged beneath water or fluid. In one photograph, Virginia (fig. 7), the wetness of the plate is physically apparent in small droplets gathered around her chin and mouth. It is unclear whether the fluid is meant to obscure or preserve the face visible beneath. The figures remain transfixed, caught between the fluttering movements of blinks and open mouths as if communicating silently though the water and glass.

In *Motherland* and *Deep South* human absence culls from the landscape secret narratives of loss, death and history. The valleys, forests, rivers, and hillsides encapsulated in the grainy and tactile prints take on the role of physical body and cognitive spirit. It is foremostly the absence of human beings in the Southern landscapes which allows the photographs to appear vulnerable, penetrable, and wildly clandestine. As Minor White decreed, “the function of camera work, when treated as a treasure, is to invoke the invisible with the visible.”26 The effect of displaying the landscape as a beautiful, aesthetic yet darkly complicated enveloping space opens the imagery up to metaphoric interpretations not unrelated to mythic and literary expressions of life and death metaphors. In Mann’s work the landscape is seductive in its elegant, deeply cast shadows and its moist palpability; the prone land, harnessed and cropped into Mann’s frame, is ripe and brimming with metaphoric implications associated with constructing and illustrating Southern myths of the land, history and memory.

Mann’s landscapes, born out of the family series and kin to Miley’s nineteenth-century plates, are representative of both personal lineage and a broader investigation of cultural history. *Motherland* and *Deep South* firmly situate Mann as a Southern artist because of the evoked sensation of traveling through time, the focus on the metaphoric meanings within the landscape, and the preoccupation with memory and myth as a form of historical reference. Consequently Mann’s landscapes become as much a narrative of history as they are an expressionistic form of breathtaking photographic pictorialism.27

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27 The timelessness of Mann’s photographs is due in part to the conventions of pictorialism which imbue the landscape images with a lyrical nostalgia for lost time and an almost naïve beauty. Championed by
representative of the visual construction of the complex identification of the American South. Just as the family images become the landscape, Mann’s landscapes become portrait photographs of her home, of the South.

Edward Steichen, Edward Weston, Alvin Langdon Coburn, and others of Alfred Steiglitz’s photo-secession group at the turn of the century, pictorialism established photography, beyond its mimetic quality, as an art form capable of revealing the poetic truths and metaphors latent in the physical world. See W. I. Homer, *Stieglitz and the Photo-Secession, 1902* (New York: Viking Studio, 2002).
CHAPTER 3
WATER THAT CUTS BODIES, CUTS MEMORIES

“That’s the trouble with this country: everything, weather, all hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image.” William Faulkner.\(^\text{28}\)

Cutting through the ground, silently eroding away at the soil, turning and smoothing stones until they are nothing but particles of sand; moving waters are relentless. Ancient rivers, like Southern rivers, are often associated with fertile land and a stable agrarian economy. The ancient Nile systematically flooded and receded, supplying the soil with rich silt. The Mississippi doubly nourishes its banks with minerals while feeding the American economy as a system for commercial transport that stretches from Minnesota to New Orleans before disappearing in the marsh lands along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.\(^\text{29}\) The Mississippi River, too, is a destructive organism, occasionally flooding with brutality while constantly cutting the central North American continent in two. In Emmett Gowin’s aerial photographs of rivers, the cutting, alienating affect of wide bodies of water is readily apparent thanks to the “birds-eye-view” of his airborne


camera lens: one living body is cut into two; one side severed from the other, creating an autonomous *here* and *there* from one bank to the other (fig. 8). When Faulkner wrote, “like our rivers...opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image” he equated the forming nature of water with the human body. The land is like a living body and the water flowing through it can be likened to blood flowing through veins.

Just as water disseminates minerals through the landscape, blood circulates nutrients through the body. In *Landscape and Memory* Simon Schama accentuates the symbolic narrative between bodies of water, blood and the life cycle:

> Were they not figured as *bodies* of water because, since antiquity, their flow was likened to the blood circulating through the body? So if the self-regulating arterial course of the sacred river, akin to the bloodstream of men, has constituted one permanent image of the flow of life, the lines of waters, from beginning to end, birth to death, source to issue, has been at least as important.”

According to Schama, to link bodies of water with the life processes of the human body is to recollect the round, watery-womb origins of every human life. Thus the cutting of a landscape in two by a river recalls the initial cut of life: that of the newborn’s umbilical, separating mother and child. A photograph too is a cut that leaves a trace, a remnant of the person who was there. A photograph of a landscape where a death occurred then may bare the trace of that person. The photographic trace is tactile like a footprint, or perhaps more accurately like the scar of the navel given that in one passage in his treatise on photography, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes photography as “a sort of

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umbilical cord that links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.” In a description that draws on the imagery of medieval theory, rays move from the subject of the photograph, to the sensitive plate, to the finished photograph and finally to the viewer of the photograph who is literally **touched** by the photograph. A photograph touches the eyes, grazes the skin, affects the body with traces of light. Because of this communication between the past and present a photograph has a memorial element that relates directly to death.

The Southern landscape also becomes a symbolic microcosm of the life cycle in Faulkner’s novel *As I Lay Dying*. Faulkner links the watery trace of life from birth to death through the physical and moral journey of the Burden family as they carry wife and mother Addie to her final resting place. The flooding tributaries of the Mississippi River become a personification of death and a testament to the brooding Southern landscape’s resistance to human advancement. At the same time the youngest Burden, Vardaman, experiences an epiphany of rebirth along the trek by equating the experience of his mother’s death with the experience of catching, preparing and ingesting a fish: “My mother is a fish.” His realization that the human life cycle is symbolically reflected within the natural surrounding landscape signals that he is ready to join a community of

33 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 81. It is important to note here that Barthes memorial book to his mother also turns on blackness as the image that cannot be reproduced but also as referenced by Barthes in his discussion of a James Van der Zee photograph. While the issue of race and *Camera Lucida* is extremely provocative and must be acknowledged, my project is interested in how the memorial photograph becomes personally transfixed within the mind and can function as a form of mourning, eulogizing and remembering. See Maragert Olin, “Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes’ “Mistaken” Identification, *Representations*, No. 80. (Autumn, 2002), pp. 99-118.

34 Ibid., 80-81.

35 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 84.
characters “who incessantly equate or locate parallels to their experiences within the Southern ecology.”

Mann’s photographs of southern rivers in the *Motherland* and *Deep South* series reflect a severing of land like the cutting of a body that reminisce with Gowin’s aerial photographs but are distinguished in their connotations of passage, time and memory. For instance, in the *Untitled (Virginia Landscape)* (fig. 9) the distance between one shore and the other is exaggerated by the diagonal perspective up river. A dark branch from a nearby tree hangs over the shoreline the viewer and camera occupy, obscuring the gaze to the opposite bank and further marking off the area as a self-contained space. The sharp focus of the leaves, the pebbled ground, and of the rocks emerging out of the slowly swirling water set against the soft, grey blurriness of the opposite tree line emphasize the isolating distance from “here” to over “there.” The overall sensation of peering into a space that circles in on itself, an element in all of Mann’s landscape photographs, builds into her watery images an exaggerated sense of rotating into unplumbable distances or of floating into oblivion while simultaneously evoking the roundness of a womb. In fact, when describing the affect she hoped to achieve in her landscape photographs Mann states, “I was trying to get that experience in your childhood, that moist enveloping womb-like moment in the landscape.” The moistness of the water photographed, like the moist collodion plate, facilitates a remembered moment that is stirred first through the senses of the body.

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In another watery image, *Untitled (Georgia Landscape)* (fig. 10) the act of cutting the earth multiplies. As the central, wide river meanders endlessly into the horizon, a spindly sapling rises out of the middle of the water cutting the image in two. The landscape becomes a series of slightly asymmetrical pairs: two facing shores, two halves of the same body of water, the sapling and its reflection in the surface of the river, a photograph cut in two. As much as the sapling rises out of the water, catches light and throws its reflection onto the river, it also drops beneath the silvery surface into the unforeseen depths of the river in an attempt to mark the total descent of the dark waters. The watery associations with immeasurable depth reference conceptions surrounding the formulation of memory, and are especially poignant in illustrating myths set forth by the Greeks in connection with visualizing the relationship between forgetting and death.

The idea of visually splitting two spatial and cognitive realms through water directly relates to mythic interpretations of *moving* rivers. The most powerfully effective of all the images and similarities of forgetting comes down from early Greek writers such as Hesiod and Pindar. Among the Greeks, Lethe is constructed as a feminine divinity opposed to Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory and the mother of the muses. Above all, Lethe is the name of a river in the underworld that confers forgetfulness on the souls of the dead. One of five rivers in the underworld, the Lethe, located under a white cypress tree, was the first thing seen in the underworld by the soul of the dead. Overcome with thirst, the shades (or remains of ghosts) would be tempted to drink from the river. When

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38 According to genealogy Lethe descends from the race of the Night (Greek *Nyx*, Latin *Nox*), and Discord (Greek *Eris*, Latin *Discordia*), the dark element in Lethe’s family. See Turner and Coulter, *Dictionary of Ancient Dieties*, 289.

39 Ibid., 290.
the soul travels the Lethe all pain and anguish from the past is forgotten. The soul is prepared from this trip to enter the eternal Elysian Fields, the destination of the blessed.\textsuperscript{40} On the banks of another underworld river, the Styx, the souls of the dead congregated to seek passage to the afterlife. Unless they successfully bribed Charon to ferry them across the stream the souls wandered aimlessly on the near bank forever. Those who made it across the Styx, having drunk from the waters of the Lethe were left with nothing to reminisce for eternity.\textsuperscript{41} As Harold Weinrich states in \textit{The Art and Critique of Forgetting}:

> In this image and image field forgetting is wholly immersed in the fluid element of water. There is a deeper meaning in the symbolism of magical water. In its soft flowing the hard contours of the remembrance of reality are dissolved and, so to speak, \textit{liquidated}.\textsuperscript{42}

In Mann’s watery landscapes two banks, separated by a single flowing river, represent a space of to and fro, of here and gone, of past and future, of memory and forgetting. The river then becomes a negotiation between these two conversing places and landscapes of the mind. As Barthes proposes, “by its linking power, water is also the mythic element of fecundations, i.e. the homogeneity it proposes as space-as-duration, at once substance and future.”\textsuperscript{43}

To imagine the liquidating quality of moving bodies of water as an active erasure that works on both the edges of physical land and on the unseen contours of memory is to describe the aspect of water that usurps from humankind. For as much as rivers carry,

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 166. The location of the Elysian Fields is variously described as being in the center of the earth, in the sun, or in the Isle of the Blessed.


\textsuperscript{42} Weinrich, 11.

facilitate, nourish and provide, ancient mythology tells of water’s ability to drink from
the pool of consciousness and to carry away within its translucent folds the remains of
corporeal life. The symbiotic relationship between human beings and water is a rhythmic
exchange of feeding and digestion, and the substance of memory and history ingested
into the flow of rivers reflects a universal experience. The idea of a universal language,
and thus a universal narrative told specifically through the medium of water, is suggested
by the philosopher and theoretician of physical matter Gaston Bachelard. He writes:

But our native country is less an expanse of territory than a substance; it’s a rock
or a soil or an aridity or a water or a light. It is a place where our dreams
materialize...The stream doesn’t have to be ours; the water doesn’t have to be
ours. The anonymous water knows all secrets. And the same memory issues
from every spring.44

To imagine land not as a demarcated territory with fences and boundaries but rather as a
substance of experience, of dreams and memories, furthers the perception of the
landscape as a living, feeding being — as a motherland.

In Mann’s *Motherland* and *Deep South* the land is a mother, a storyteller, a grave.
Her use of the nineteenth century wet plate collodion process distinguishes the
Mississippi images and references the method of history writing as layers of sediment
stick to the plate and liquid solution builds through a series of pourings and baths in fluid.
The layered process also parallels theories about physical matter, specifically of water as
a medium for memory through its communicative properties. As elucidated by the
nineteenth century historian and theoretician of physical matter Jules Michelet (through
Barthes), “Water can support the thousand intermediary states of matter: the clear, the
crystalline, the transparent, the fleeting, the gelatinous, the viscous, the whitish, the

Farrell (Dallas, Pegasus Foundation, 1983).
swarming, the round, the elastic—all dialects are possible between water and man."\(^{45}\) Moistness is vital in the wet-plate collodion process. The plate must be placed into the camera while still wet and the photograph taken quickly, before the mixture dries. Due to the evaporation of collodion and ether, most photographers working with the medium in the nineteenth century took photographs of or near bodies of water; the moisture from the watery mass contributed to the clarity of the produced negative glass plate and allowed for longer exposure time. After the exposure the plate is developed in a solution of acids. As detail from the light exposure surfaces, the negative is removed from the developer, washed in water, and fixed. The complex wet-plate collodion process lends itself to a series of natural metaphors; the plate is prepared through dipping and coating, a layering of fluid that recalls watery metaphors associated with memory, especially the inevitable act of forgetting.\(^{46}\)

The life of Mann’s landscape photographs, like human life, develops out of fluidity. Mythologized and memorial, rivers divide and cut while remembering the stories of injury. Can a photograph of water also embody the dualistic traits of preservation and loss through the simultaneous act of remembering and forgetting? In the portion of Tallahatchie shoreline depicted in Mann’s *Untitled (Mississippi Landscape)* (fig. 1), born out of collodion, the image seems both in process and still. It is a photograph of an old sluggish river and of a new, forming cut where one feeds the other. The history that informs the Tallahatchie shoreline runs deep and is itself still in the process of being written. Through watery evocation Mann’s photograph begs the viewer to look more

\(^{45}\) Baldwin, 33.

\(^{46}\) Ibid, 28. In an alternative, dry collodion process, other natural ingredients such as albumen, honey, gelatin, resin, raspberry syrup, or beer were added to the mixture in order to keep it slightly wet.
closely, to dive beneath the collodion surface and to listen carefully to the memory that issues from its dual water sources.
CHAPTER 4

THE PHOTOGRAPH AS A MEMORIAL

“To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.” Susan Sontag

The sluggish waters of the Tallahatchie were unable to carry the weight of Emmett Till’s body and he was found on August 31, three days after his abduction from his Uncle Moses Wright’s home. His feet were spotted breaking the river’s plane by a young man fishing on the Tallahatchie. Pulled from the water, he was naked and badly beaten to the point of being unrecognizable. His uncle was called on to identify the body and Mr. Wright knew it was his nephew only by the gold ring inscribed “L.T” still hugging the adolescent’s finger. The ring belonged to his father Louis Till who died during World War II. A treasured object, Emmett had worn the ring even when his finger was too small to fill its circumference by securing it with tape or string. The morning he left Chicago for Mississippi Emmett showed his mother that the ring finally fit; he was grown. He made a point to take the ring with him on his journey south because he wanted

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48 The specificity of place, both where Emmett’s body was discovered and where his body was first put in the water, becomes a vital aspect in the investigation and trial of the Till kidnapping and murder because of the issue of legal jurisdiction. Because Till had been taken over county lines but not state lines the Federal government and the FBI claimed that they could not legally justify becoming involved in the investigation or the trial, allowing the Federal government to politically sidestep entanglement in another difficult Civil Rights case. See Leon A. Higginbotham, Jr., Race, Values, and the Early American Legal Process (Lagos: Published for Faculty of Law, University of Lagos by Lagos University Press, 1987), 156.
to “show it off to the fellas.” The water of the Tallahatchie River held no liquidating power over the inscribed initials of Emmett’s father. Refusing to be erased, the initials left a written trace of Emmett’s identity and his familial history just as the cut earth in Mann’s photograph of the Tallahatchie shoreline refuses to be eroded away or lost beneath the constantly flowing waters.

In Chicago Mamie Till Mobley, Emmett’s mother, having been notified that he was kidnapped, was informed of her son’s death. Ms. Mobley describes the moment when she announces the tragic news to family and friends in terms of bodily sensations of physical pain, piercing sound and overwhelming weight:

Those words were like arrows sticking all over my body. My eyes were so full of tears until I couldn't see. And when I began to make the announcement that Emmett had been found and how he was found, the whole house began to scream and to cry. And that's when I realized that this was a load that I was going to have to carry. I wouldn't get any help carrying this load.

Alongside the description of a collective emotive release, the selected passage also gives a sense of Ms. Mobley’s overwhelming feeling of isolation from the group. When she states that she knew she would not “get any help carrying this load” she alludes to the heaviness of carrying the memory of her only son throughout her life time. This is a pain that will never go away. The changing environment of the house is both literal and symbolic. For Ms. Mobley her house is heavy with the knowledge that her son will never come home. The same resounding emptiness is present in Mann’s Tallahatchie landscape


where the weight of Emmett’s heartbreaking death is evoked through the heavy, muddy ground that sags into the thick, yellow river water.

Immediately after Emmett’s body was discovered in the Tallahatchie River, Clarence Strider, the sheriff of Tallahatchie County, hoped to contain the evidence of the crime and ordered the family living in Mississippi to inter the remains by nightfall. Ms. Mobley, appalled by Sheriff Strider’s audacious attempt to bury Emmett’s remains, in a second effort to submerge the evidence of this heinous crime, this time beneath the ground, demanded that her son’s body be returned to her in Chicago. Once there, Ms. Mobley opened the plain pine box, traced the remains of her young son beginning at his toes and worked her way up in an act of final identification. When she physically and methodically traced the body of her son Ms. Mobley performed an act of knowing through memory. Like the memory artist, her act of recollection and identification is spatial.51 She trusted her memory to instinctively know the way, like one knows the way home through a familiar landscape even in the dark, like only a mother knows her child.

After seeing Emmett’s body Ms. Mobley courageously decided that he would remain untouched and elected to have a public funeral with an open casket in order to “let the people see” what she had seen because “everybody needed to know what had happened to Emmett Till.”52 A documented fifty thousand people in Chicago saw

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51 Weinrich, 11. Weinrich draws on Aristotelian theories on the relationship between memory retention and physical space which argues that memory is fundamentally spatialized. Of the memory artist, Weinrich writes: “The memory artist...first seeks for his purpose a set arrangement of “places” with which he is familiar, such as his house or the forum. Then he transforms the individual memory contents into “images,” if they are not already images, and associates them with these places in sequential order. He does this by making use of his ‘imagination.’ When he makes his speech the memory artist has thus only to stroll mentally through the places in order to call up the memory images in sequence. Hence this art is always practiced in a memory-space in which everything that must be remembered has its own specific place.”

52 Beauchamp, The Untold Story of Emmett Till.
Emmett Till's corpse with their own eyes over the course of the four day viewing. The rest of the nation was held in a prolonged shudder produced by the shocking photograph of Emmett’s mutilated corpse which was initially published in the Chicago based black publication, *Jet* (fig. 11) on September 15, 1955. The photograph shows Till’s body dressed in a white button down shirt and a dark blazer. The camera “looks” down on the form, mimicking the position of the thousands who passed by the coffin. The stark central plane of the white shirt severs the photograph in half between two banks of the wide torso. This white line quickly recedes into the background, pointing to Till’s beaten and unrecognizable face. This troubling image was almost immediately circulated throughout the mass media, appearing in other black newspapers and publications. The *Chicago Defender, Amsterdam News, Pittsburgh Courier, Baltimore Afro-American* and *Ebony* magazine were among more than two hundred black publications that printed the image following *Jet’s* precedent.\(^5^4\)

In *Jet*, the photograph of Emmett’s corpse is not the only image of him included. In the two page spread a young, vivacious and smiling, Emmett, seated next to his mother in a recent photograph, is the personification of a happy, healthy and content fourteen-year-old (fig. 12). The coupling of the two images is meant to connect a face to the faceless corpse, to represent a more holistic perspective of the boy who was so brutally murdered. In many newspaper publications the image of Emmett’s body is paired with another image of him in life.\(^5^5\) However, in most accounts of remembering, individuals

\(^{53}\) The black newspaper *The Chicago Defender* also publishes photographs of Till's corpse on September 17, 1955. See Metress, 29-31.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 277.
speak only or primarily about Emmett’s body in his casket. In one instance of recollection, novelist and critic John Edgar Wideman describes a nightmare from his childhood where a face follows him, stalks him, tracks him in his sleep. He writes:

Though the nightmare is as old as anything I can remember about myself, I’ve come to believe the face in the dream I can’t bear to look upon is Emmett Till’s. The fact that the nightmare predates by many years the afternoon in Pittsburgh I came across the photography of Emmett Till in *Jet* magazine confounds me and seems to matter not at all.  

For Wideman, the only photograph and face he remembers seeing, yet not seeing, in *Jet* is the horrifying image of Till’s dead body and his destroyed face. Wideman never references the photograph of the young smiling Emmett.

The photograph of Emmett’s body enacted a collective traumatic scar across the consciousness of many American citizens living during 1955. Weinrich points out that the old masters of *ars memoriae* assert that among the contents of memory, images that arouse emotional reactions are retained longer and more surely. In manuals on the art of memory these assertive and lasting images are called image agents, “active images” or “operative images.” There is a precise counterpart to “active images” in Sigmund

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55 Whitfield, 56.


57 Many people have described the impact of Emmett Till's 1955 murder in their lives. Bob Dylan wrote a song about the crime. Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks and Audre Lorde wrote poems. James Baldwin wrote a play based on the incident. To read some well-known Americans' memories of Emmett Till's murder see Kristin Boudreau, *The Spectacle of Death: Populist Literary Responses to American Capital Punishment* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2006), 136-161.

58 Referring mainly to Simonides, Cicero and Dante. See Weinrich, 9-12, 24.
Freud’s notion of “operative forgetting-images.” Operative images of this kind, especially when they are relevant to the individual’s life history, do not allow themselves to be driven out of the psyche by even the strongest displeasure and repression but rather continue to produce effects, and they are pathogenic precisely because they are not admitted by the ego or super ego. In Wideman’s account, much like Sally Mann’s own remembrance, he associates seeing the Till photograph with a specific moment in his life. He can recall certain details about that day in Pittsburgh, holding the Jet magazine and not wanting to look but somehow knowing that he owed it to Emmett, another boy just his age.

The showing of Emmett’s body in death worked to erase from memory the image of him before his journey into the Mississippi Delta. As race scholar and critic Fred Moten writes on the visual effect of the photograph in In the Break:

Emmett Till’s face is seen, was shown, shone. His face was destroyed (by way of, among other things, its being shown: the memory of his face is thwarted, made a distant before-as-after effect of its destruction, what we would never have otherwise seen). It was turned inside out, ruptured, exploded, but deeper than that it was opened.

The photograph of Emmett’s body in death disrupts the chain of his personal history by replacing the before of his life with the public image of his death. Through the public display of Emmett’s body in death his individual case communicated to the masses in a

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60 Ibid., 240.

61 Wideman,

very powerful way specifically because his body was photographed and that photograph functioned as a form of brutal, indisputable visual evidence. Photographs particularly have the ability to provide both personal referent and evidential force, because they bear testimony on a specific moment in time.63 As Barthes articulates, what the photograph asserts is the overwhelming truth that “the thing has been there”: this was a reality which once existed, though it is “a reality that one can no longer touch.”64 Although the image evokes an extremely charged reaction it does not represent anything about the vivacious boy, Emmett Louis Till but rather only the act of violence that speaks to the injustices of the greater social system.

The photograph of Till’s body in death, and it can be argued his story specifically because of the image of his body in death, became legendary. Historian and journalist David Halberstam has called the Till case “the first great media event of the civil rights movement”65 because the response to the case was unprecedented among lynchings in the intensity of the public scrutiny it attracted and, consequently, the degree and scope of the rage it generated. The fact that Till’s individual death garnered such a maelstrom of attention, resulting in disbelief, abject horror and frustration, in the late summer of 1955 was a result of years of developing efforts against segregation. In The Evidence of Things Not Seen James Baldwin asserts that Emmett’s individual tragic event, which is not unlike a vast chain of devastatingly similar events that stretches across a long history of brutal segregationist violence, can resonate and produce unprecedented effects precisely

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63 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 88-9

64 Ibid., 76, 87.

because of the moment of its occurrence within the context of history. As Baldwin claims, Emmett’s death “bears the trace of a particular moment of panic when there was a massive reaction to the movement against segregation.” Till’s death itself has a memory that was already haunted by the decades of atrocities, deaths and injustices.

The Till case became for Mann, like many other Americans, a moment transfixed in her personal memory, representative of a public trauma devastating enough to mark a moment in her own young life. Although Mann does not directly discuss seeing the printed photograph of Till’s body in death, it is possible to deduce that the prevalence of the reproduced photograph greatly contributed to knowledge of and familiarity with the case. Taking into account the existence of *Jet* photograph and the overwhelming sustained public attention paid to the Till murder, it is understandable that the only explicit reference to a specific lynching and to the South’s turbulent racial history in Mann’s southern landscapes is to the plot of land where Emmett Till was found. Emblazed on Mann’s memory, as on the collective memory, unable to be forgotten, the spot is revisited, uncovered and the story retold through Mann’s inquisitive lens.

Looking again at the Tallahatchie image, *Untitled (Mississippi Landscape)* (fig. 1) the allusion to a *fresh* wound, a wound that will not heal, a resurrected wound, surfaces. There is an exposed rawness to the earth in the immediate foreground which ripples in desolately uneven pitches and falls. The ground itself looks beaten and disfigured as the river’s erosive power constantly works to renew the central cut and to wear away the vulnerable shoreline. The deep cut appears moist and active as if the water, and the ground’s nearness to the wide, lethargic river, works to preserve the open

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67 Ibid, 18.
split in the red clay. The cut is constantly reinforced as run-off makes its way to the larger, magnetic body of water. As water finds its way to the ditch and slowly snakes through the tapering channel, it carries with it miscellany from the surrounding landscape. Within the diminutive canal, deep in the lower crevices of the gash, dried and dead leaves, twigs and hardened debris are caught in the uneven clumps of sod. This build up of sediment references the passage of time from the moment of the initial injury, physically embodied in the remaining, still decomposing ecological matter. These bits of landscape from the surrounding space, having absorbed the climate of this particular Mississippi place through the organic life cycle of germination, growth and death, can be read as representative of the specific history stemming from Emmett Till’s murder. In this manner, the landscape symbolically represents both the inevitable passage of time and necessary desire to not forget what happened here.

When James Agee, in the dialogue with Walker Evan’s photographs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, expresses a desire for tactile evidence alongside images, he describes a new means for fashioning representations of history within landscape to evoke a sense of being there or of having been there.68 He writes:

> If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speck, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement...A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.69

For Agee words fail and fall away, but the visual object endures over time. Furthermore, the idea of a “body torn out by the roots” personifies the interchangeable metaphoric relationship between the body as land and the landscape as a body. Like tangible

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69 Ibid., 13.
elements of a place, of the land, a photographic image too has the potential to evoke a specific potent memorial experience.

Mann’s deliberate use of collodion in the Mississippi plates brings a third evidential dimension to the image which directly relates to the Tallahatchie image’s association with loss and the memorial. Requiring on-the-spot preparation that represents connectedness with a specific plot of land, the yellow, swirling collodion plate and the dark peeling edges evoke a sense of tactility and of relic similar to the objects Agee describes. As the collodion coating begins to dry the solution becomes tacky and often small particles, bits of dirt, dust and hair get stuck on the glass negative. These miniscule objects absorbed from the landscape remain in the plate during development, representative of a vestige from the actually moment of mechanical creation. Mann’s haunting Tallahatchie image transports the viewer into the silent memorial space creating a sense of being there while in the same gesture draws attention to the photographic process, conflating the time between the traumatic marking of the earth and the creation of the image. The photography is not only about the wounded earth but really the relationship between the erosive river and the clay shoreline.

The darkened corners of the Tallahatchie photograph, those cavity spaces left bare from the collodion pouring, work to focus the gaze on the cut earth and its charged intersection with the still water beyond.\(^{70}\) Pushing in on the contents of the image, creating a sense of stasis and hush, the vacant corners also allow for expansion, giving the photograph – the space of Mississippi – room to grow. Just as the landscape seems to peel itself open to the viewer, so too does Mann’s photograph open up Emmett Till’s

\(^{70}\) Often the lens or collodion solution Mann uses leaves dark edges at the corners of the print, creating a vignette effect.
story. This openness directly references the same openness or availability to Till’s actual body in 1955. His body was cut and opened through wounding, his casket was open for Chicago to see, his body was opened to the opening shutter of the camera and that photograph openly circulated. Moten describes the “phonographic” quality of the Jet photograph as an open mouth scream and the effect of the reproduction of that same image as a cut in time in the chase for truth:

As if his face were the truth’s condition of possibility it was opened and revealed. As if revealing his face would open the revelation of a fundamental truth, his casket was opened, as if revealing the destroyed face would in turn reveal, and therefore cut, the active deferral or ongoing death or unapproachable futurity of justice. As if his face would deconstruct justice or deconstruct deconstruction or deconstruct death...a death that promotes a mourning whose rehearsal is also a refusal...a face that was destroyed by its display.\(^{71}\)

The absence of a body, of Till’s body, in contrast to the Jet photograph which hinges on the open display of the body, removes any kind of fixed marker of death. Instead Mann’s photograph revisits the landscape and does not pierce the place. The photographic moment becomes a tender visitation, a quiet moment that slowly, methodically retraces the Till case through the spot of discovery. By removing the scream of the body Mann’s photograph acts more as a mourning moan: deep, haunting, sorrowful, made out of respect, allowing the power of the story to rest within the space of discovery and in the retelling.

The discussion of the function of narrative and its associations with images recalls the storytelling phenomena in relation to psychoanalytic theories of healing. Freud’s notion of pathogenic “operative forgetting-images” directly interacts with the notion of telling as a form of healing. According to the process of psychoanalysis, the act of retelling or narrating a trauma draws a forgotten memory from the repressed-

\(^{71}\) Moten, 199.
unconscious. Through the retelling of a narrative, “a conflict is supposed to be reconsidered, a case retired, proceedings carried out anew before a second tribunal, with the goal of reviewing a trial that was completed earlier.”

Perhaps in this way Freud hopes that mitigating circumstances taken into consideration will allow the formerly unpleasant events that have been forgotten to be cured in a mode of deliberate and active not-forgetting.

Like verbal narration, the photographic image too can be read as a form of renewal, revisiting and retelling. The collodion Mann uses to coat her glass plates once served a function associated with healing and renewal. Collodion is transparent, membranous and tough and the medical profession used the liquid solution for years in the nineteenth century to cover wounds, especially those of burn victims, until the afflicted area could generate new skin. The notion of regeneration and rebirth emerges in direct association with the wounded landscape when Mann describes the effect of photographing in the humid Mississippi climate. She compares the summoning of the image out of collodion as if it “breathed onto the negative.”

72 Weinrich, 135.


75 Mann, Deep South, 7.
CONCLUSION

“What can be seen belongs to everybody. When the still life’s apple has been eaten and the portrait’s subject is history, a landscape remains. It becomes memory and myth.”

Guy Davenport76

In July 1999, amidst the oppressive Southern heat and humidity, a group of fifty black and white citizens gathered beside a highway in Walton County, Georgia to commemorate history by marking the landscape. The event marked the unveiling of the first roadside historical marker to acknowledge any of the more than four hundred African Americans lynched in the state. The group responsible for the marker, which honored two black couples who were shot by a white mob in 1946, spoke about being motivated to memorialize the place because acknowledgement of the region’s tortured past was overdue and essential for improved race relations and civic harmony.77 A local newspaper agreed, editorializing that “the best way to ease a wound is to treat it, not...hope it goes away. It is time to heal the wounds.”78

The lynching of Emmett Till became infamous among formative events of the twentieth century largely because of the influence of his photographed body. The photograph shocked, angered, wounded. Many people who saw the haunting image of


Emmett’s body in death remember not being able to sleep afterward. Margaret Block, a long-time activist in Cleveland, Mississippi, was a young girl when the pictures were published. Recounting her experience she says:

Can you imagine being eleven years old and seeing something like that for the first time in your life and it being close to home? The death of Emmett Till touched us, it touched everybody. And we always said if we ever got a chance to do something, we were going to change things around here.79

Within the last decade major steps have been made to remember the true story of Emmett Till and to make changes to the way the ending of his story is written in history. In 1955 the two men who kidnapped and murdered Emmett were acquitted by an all white, all male jury.80 On May 10, 2004 the United States Justice Department reopened the Till investigation. Following leads that nearly thirteen people were originally involved in some manner in Emmett’s abduction and murder, court transcripts have been discovered and personal interviews conducted, some for the first time.81 In June 2005 Emmett’s body was exhumed from Burr Cemetery in Alsip, Illinois resurfacing once more as a form of physical evidence.82 Perhaps most significantly, the U.S. Senate passed the “Till Bill” forming a new federal unit within the Justice Department to probe old Civil Rights cases.83


80 Dittmer, 110.


82 DNA tests confirmed as fact that was long held to be true, that the remains do belong to Emmett Louis Till. See “Till’s Remains Are Unearthed for Autopsy,” The Washington Post, June 2, 2005, A7.
Like the legal re-opening of Emmett Till’s case, Sally Mann’s open photograph, *Untitled (Mississippi Landscape)*, revisits an unforgettable moment in American history. In this paper I have focused my argument in various ways, questioning the unique power of watery landscape imagery in its associations with the processes of memory, how history is remembered and how personal memory is informed by the photographic image. Mann’s photograph is powerfully evocative of the darkness, the pain, and the remaining scars that linger from the initial brutal cut. The photograph represents a wound that the landscape retains, that it will not grow over, will not give up.

Figure 1. Sally Mann, *Untitled (Mississippi Landscape)*, 1998, collodion print
Figure 2. Sally Mann, *Emmett, Jessie and Virginia*, 1992, gelatin silver print
Figure 3. Sally Mann, *Untitled (Virginia Landscape)*, 1997, gelatin silver print
Figure 4. Sally Mann, *Untitled (Georgia Landscape)*, 1997, gelatin silver print
Figure 5. Sally Mann, *Theresa*, 1988, gelatin silver print
Figure 6. Sally Mann, *Emmett and the White Boy*, 1990, gelatin silver print
Figure 7. Sally Mann, *Virginia*, 2000, ambrotype
Figure 8. Emmet Gowin, *Old Hanford City Site, Hanford Nuclear Reservation, near Richland, Washington*, 1986, gelatin silver print.
Figure 9. Sally Mann, *Untitled (Virginia Landscape)*, 1997, gelatin silver print
Figure 10. Sally Mann, *Untitled (Virginia Landscape)*, 1997, gelatin silver print
Figure 11. Photograph of Emmett Till’s corpse, Chicago Defender.
Figure 12. Emmett Louis Till and Ms. Mamie Till Mobley
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