

Rising Fourth Year Award Outcome Report: *40th & State*

Micah Ariel Watson, Spring 2018

On August 28th, 1955, Chicago born fourteen-year-old Emmett Louis Till was killed in Money Mississippi while visiting relatives. As a result of allegedly whistling at a white woman, he was kidnapped, beaten, mutilated, and shot by Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam. The discovery of his body in the Tallahatchie River would spark one of the most consequential events of the Civil Rights Movement, the funeral of Emmett Till. On September 6th, 1955, thousands gathered both inside and outside of Robert's Temple Church of God in Christ to pay their respects to this slain boy. While the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) is often viewed in popular culture as an organization with little involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, the funeral of Emmett Till at Robert's Temple marks this denomination as one ripe with political discourse. This idea is seen most clearly through the sermon of Bishop Isaiah Roberts, the eulogy of Bishop Louis Henry Ford, and the funeral's atmosphere as described by first and secondhand accounts.

While Till's lynching itself was unquestionably horrific and heart wrenching, it was his funeral that separated his death from so many others. Till's Mother, Mamie Till Bradley requested that his body not be buried in Money, Mississippi at their local COGIC church, but requested that her son be sent back to Chicago for rites and burials. Here we see intentionality in the choosing of space. Between its arrival in Chicago and its burial, more than 40,000 people viewed the body, according to the Chicago Defender and Chicago Tribune. Robert's Temple was filled to capacity with over 2,000 people inside of the church and another 2,000 listening from speakers outside. Mamie Till Bradley specifically allowed magazines, including Chicago Publications Jet and The Chicago Defender to take photographs of her son's terribly disfigured face. While words in newspaper and magazine articles provide significant historical context, as well as first and secondhand accounts of the funeral, it is the publication of these photographs that enrages Civil Rights supporters and forces deniers to literally stare the effects of white supremacy and racism in the face. Here we see that images are important. As such, it only feels appropriate to approach this subject through film—a collection of images.

Therefore, I decided to shift the focus of my Rising Fourth Year Award to the exploration of Emmett Till and the funeral that changed the course of the Civil Rights Movement, birthed from spiritual origins that are so dear to my heart. This grant served as the primary funding source for my film *40th & State* which will also function as my African-American and African Studies Distinguished Majors thesis. My work at the University of Virginia has centered the ways in which Black history and the contemporary moment mirror one another through art. This felt like an appropriate ending to my undergraduate career as a Miller Arts Scholar.

The magnitude of the funeral, physical and emotional responses to the sight of Till and the impact on media, draw direct parallels to the police murders of contemporary figures such as Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice. While the primary work of this film is to

explore the implications of this funeral in the context of the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement and the Church of God in Christ, there are connections, if only loose, to be drawn. Isolating this event in 1955 and the Civil Rights era seems like an incomplete representation. While making a film about contemporary issues of brutality, childhood, and spirituality seems forced. As such, I used both contemporary and historical cinematic structures to tell this story.

In researching modern cinematic representations of Black death and boyhood, I was inspired by Kahlil Joseph's *Until The Quiet Comes* and Hiro Murai's *Never Catch Me*. Joseph uses a collage of images to tell specific stories. With this method he places particular moments in larger historical contexts. I will mirror this by incorporating collage into my piece. Such images may include a long line of faces viewing the body, an aggressive playing of a tambourine, shouting feet, and the lips of a preacher giving a remark. Murai uses dance and surrealism to paint pictures of tragedy and also otherworldly hope in death. Both films are fueled by audio, but do not rely on it wholly to tell the story; they are not music videos, but treat audio as an important element in storytelling. Many accounts of the 1955 funeral recalled auditory elements of the funeral including screaming, preaching, clapping, and crying. To reflect this, I will collaborate a student producer to create a track that incorporates historical and realistic sounds, perhaps with a musical sensibility that speaks to today. Ideally, this film will not only give audiences insight into the role of the Church of God in Christ in conversations of resistance, but also raise questions about the place of bodies of spirituality in contemporary discussions of violence against Black bodies.

The film was shot on black and white 16mm film, in order to imitate the texture of newspaper photographs of the period. The images remain grounded in 1955 through dialect and costuming, but exist in the context of a visceral and abstract interpretation of this event. As COGIC is often distinguished by its enthusiastic style of dance and instrumentation, I will draw upon the work of Joseph and Murai by making these elements a prominent part of this retelling.

The centerpiece of the film's audio track is be a recreation of the sermon of Bishop Roberts, the pastor of Robert's Temple and the eulogy of Bishop Louis H. Ford, who would eventually become the Presiding Bishop of the Church of God in Christ. Ford's message was based on Matthew 18:6: "But whosoever will offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone was hung about his neck and that he drowned in the depths of the sea." While this imagery is biblical, it is particularly violent, and perhaps unexpected from a church whose cornerstone scripture is Hebrews 12:14: "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." Ford's style and tone of speaking is often remembered as "authoritative" and "gruff," supporting the argument that this eulogy was more one of assertion than of comfort. Further, the Chicago Tribune outlines rumors of Ford supplying guns to protect those involved with Till's trial in Mississippi. I reimagined this sermon by writing an original script which is framed by a hip-hop audio track by student producer Ayodeji Bode-Oke.

40th & State is a continued exploration of themes present in my works of playwriting (*Canaan*) and spoken word (*For Black People Who Don't Swim*). In these mediums, the questioning leans more heavily into political discourse and theology. I believe that history is as much about events as it is about the ways in which people responded to such events, both external and internally. As such, I see this film as a space that focuses more heavily on the ambiguity and emotionality of these questions. In effect, this is the third movement of a collection of artistic expressions.

The Rising Fourth Year Award was used to support the purchase and processing of 16mm film and period costumes as well as travel to Chicago to interview and film three people who were present at Till's funeral. While the film is still in the stage of editing, it will premier on Grounds by mid-May. Thank you to the Miller Arts Scholars Program and a special thanks to Evie and Stephen Colbert as well as Sandy and Vinie Miller.