

# Lyrical Politics: Reflections on the Role of Grief in Political Life

*This is the third in a three-part series on the recent controversy around Dana Schutz's "Open Casket," originally published on [Open for Debate](#), part of the multi-disciplinary project [Changing Attitudes in Public Discourse](#).*

It's said that Mamie Till Mobley helped to catalyze the civil rights movement. When people say this what they have in mind, principally, is her decision to present her son's lynched body in public. Sometimes though her influence is tacit and the catalyst becomes the verdict to acquit the two men accused of Till's murder. (A few weeks after the verdict, Rosa Parks, [thinking of Emmett Till](#), refuses to move to the back of a bus in Alabama.)

It is Mobley's gesture and its aftereffects that are remembered in this way, not the public speeches that she gave following the acquittal. These speeches were, at first, made with the support of the NAACP, which had offered crucial support throughout the trial but which publicly withdrew support on the eve of a west coast speaking tour in which Mobley was scheduled to take part. Elliott Gorn, who's written a [recent history](#) of these events, offers the following explanation for the withdrawal: fundamentally, Mobley and her speeches "fit uneasily with the NAACP's style and mission."

The mission of the NAACP was to promote desegregation, voting rights, and to press for legal reforms that would address deep racial inequalities in America. How did Mobley's speeches—how did her "style"—fit uneasily with that? I would like to examine the suggestion that the political leaders at the helm of the NAACP, as Gorn puts it, "carefully distinguished between atrocities like Emmett Till's murder and the larger context that enabled them," whereas Mobley didn't, resulting in the perception that she not only failed to advance those political objectives, but actually set them back. To examine this is, in my view, to examine how it is that Mamie Till Mobley's grief became a political problem and to examine some of the reasons why grief continues to be seen as a dangerous force in political life (often gestured at today in references to the 'politicization of grief').

If we look closely at Mobley's speeches, we can see that her style is really a political vision, one that did, indeed, conflict with that of the NAACP (and that comes into conflict with many aspects of our own political culture today). I want to focus in what follows on two aspects of this political vision, what I'll call its 'realism' and its 'lyricism.'

In a speech delivered in Baltimore on Oct. 29, 1955, Mobley describes first seeing the body of her son upon its arrival in Chicago. What she says is that it hits her from the head

and feet at the same time, making her own body so rigid that she looks to see whether she'd undergone a physical transformation. She describes her examination of the body, commenting on its familiar features and their new condition (e.g., Till's light-colored eyes, one out of socket). She asks the undertaker to remove the body from the casket so that she can inspect its sides more carefully. The description is steady and thorough and like the other careful descriptions of these events it has an almost mundane quality; it gives one time to ask, what is being examined here? There isn't an identification underway so much as there is an attempt to make sense of racial hatred, to decode it using a familiar language (her son's ears, teeth, remembrances of his body)—the events and their import are beginning to be discerned.

The body, Mobley says, "didn't look like anything that we could dream, imagine in a funny book or any place else. It just didn't look like it was for real." This is a category of experience that we don't have adequate words to describe. I want to say that the 'unreality' of the body is a mark, in a certain sense, of its reality. What this registers, in my view, is something's being outside of what one would have thought possible, a way of saying what one would *have* be true. What is unusual here is, of course, the idea that we have any involvement in things seeming real at all. When Laci Peterson's mother describes lifting the lids of garbage cans looking for her missing daughter's body, she does so as a warning to those who might think that they could imagine being in her position. Why is this unimaginable? It isn't a matter of lacking experience as we might normally think of this; people don't decide to search for their missing children in this way because they have experience that others lack, but because they have to (because it has happened to them). It exacts a cost to know these things and, even if one might come to know these things by other means than by hearing them told, it is hard to fathom the motivation and the discipline that could produce this knowledge and that could match the compulsion of circumstance. These things are beyond what one would have be true and it is a characteristic of grief that it brings to light a whole series of agreements that one didn't realize one had made before their being nullified. If I were to characterize this aspect of Mobley's political vision, I would describe it as a kind of realism.

There's another aspect of Mobley's "style" that strikes me, particularly against the standard of carefully distinguishing between the atrocity and the larger circumstances that enabled it. If we look at Mobley's speech with this contrast in mind, we might observe that it begins with her mother's collapse under the burden of waiting for information about Till's whereabouts. We might also observe that she spends a great deal of time talking about getting a call through to Mississippi (she describes this as an 'ordeal'). Of the trial, she mentions, among other things, a witness who couldn't tell the difference between 5000 and 5 ft. These are, in a sense, details some intimate and some mundane. But they push up against atrocity, which is anything but mundane, in a way that raises questions about this standard.

Each of these remarks is a kind of meditation on political themes, often bringing the small circumstance that enables an atrocity into contact with it. When Mobley describes the ordeal of getting a call through to Mississippi she is talking about white helplessness, among other things:

We called the home of the man on whose plantation my uncle has worked for

forty years. The man said he was too old to hear. He didn't have a pencil. He didn't know where the paper was. He was just in a helpless condition. He couldn't even call anybody to the phone who could take the message.

This same man, she says, suddenly loses all his helplessness when his crops come in. He's able to use the telephone again and "He's able to go over and tell a poor sharecropper that he only cleared ten dollars this year, that his bills ran rather high." The witness who couldn't tell the difference between 5000 ft. and 5ft. was judging the distance between himself and the barn where he saw Till being transported after his kidnapping. Her remarks here are a meditation on the need for desegregation and for access to education. What can happen if you find the small circumstances that enable or make contact with an atrocity is that they begin to crack and shift under its weight. I would describe this aspect of Mobley's political vision as lyrical.

The resistance on the part of leaders such as Roy Wilkins (NAACP executive secretary) and Thurgood Marshall to these aspects of Mobley's political vision was not predicated on the idea that Till's death was without political significance, but on the assumption that grief shouldn't play a role in a political response; they pursued a politics that was motivated, in fact, by a *rejection* of grief. Thurgood Marshall stated the position succinctly when he declared that it was time to start worrying about the living, not the dead. According to Wilkins, grief is too focused on loss to allow us to address the larger enabling circumstances that need changing; a rally wouldn't bring Till back and the point should, in any case, be to ensure that there aren't other Tills. In focusing on loss, grief is too local, casting light only on "basic evils" (e.g., the individual perpetrators of a crime) and only on the moment, with the consequence that it doesn't sustain long-term struggle. An emotional outburst, he concludes, can only do good as a catalyst. When particular losses are clearly distinguished from enabling circumstances, grief will be contained within its proper place.

But what if an enabling circumstance is to be found in one's response to loss (in the thought that it didn't happen—a speculation indulged in the course of the trial in Mississippi, or in the thought that there's nothing to be done, or that there's no tie between the living and the dead)? I suspect that the need to carefully distinguish between an atrocity and a larger enabling circumstance is connected to the desire to isolate something that is untouched by atrocity—though one imagines that its significance can still be fully retained—a desire, perhaps, to gird oneself in the face of atrocity. I see Mamie Till Mobley as presenting an alternative: what if the sight of the body is what girds us instead? What if like her, we look and allow the shock of looking to fix us in place with a new strength?

When people talk about the politicization of grief, often what they mean is that grief is used as a catalyst for political action; its potency is used for other ends. This is commonly accompanied by a declaration of the end of grief (a declaration made by Bush, for example, shortly after the events of 9/11 and before war). I don't think that Mobley's wish was for her grief to be a catalyst and for grief to be declared to be at an end before politics could begin. Wilkins says a rally won't bring Till back. Mobley says, the more people walk by Till's body, the more people will be interested in what happens to their children.

Realism, construed as a deep understanding of what has happened, and lyricism, construed as a capacity to view atrocity together with its many connections to the 'small circumstance,' are features of a political vision that can be informed and sustained, in part,

by grief. It begins with loss and in the past, but it is a history, as C. S. Lewis puts it, for which there are always new events to chronicle.