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## Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till

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### Abstract

The widely disseminated image of Emmett Till's mutilated corpse rhetorically transformed the lynched black body from a symbol of unmitigated white power to one illustrating the ugliness of racial violence and the aggregate power of the black community. This reconfiguration was, in part, an effect of the black community's embracing and foregrounding Till's abject body as a collective "souvenir" rather than allowing it to be safely exiled from public life.

## BEHOLD THE CORPSE: VIOLENT IMAGES AND THE CASE OF EMMETT TILL

CHRISTINE HAROLD AND KEVIN MICHAEL DELUCA

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We do not know what the body can do.

Spinoza

Society is concerned to tame the Photograph, to temper the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it.

Roland Barthes

If the men who killed Emmett Till had known his body would free a people, they would have let him live.

Reverend Jesse Jackson Sr.

**I** had to get through this. There would be no second chance to get through this. I noticed that none of Emmett's body was scarred. It was bloated, the skin was loose, but there were no scars, no signs of violence anywhere. Until I got to his chin.

When I got to his chin, I saw his tongue resting there. It was huge. I never imagined that a human tongue could be that big. Maybe it was the effect of the water, since he had been in the river for several days, or maybe the heat. But as I gazed at the tongue, I couldn't help but think that it had been choked out of

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