

Fred Moten

## Black Mo'nin'

*in the sound of the photograph: childless mother.*

*I want to discover a performance by way of the ongoing production of a performance.*

In her essay, “‘Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?’ Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” Elizabeth Alexander recites a narrative:

In August 1955, in Money, Mississippi, a fourteen-year-old Chicago black boy named Emmett Till, nicknamed “Bobo,” was visiting relatives and was shot in the head and thrown in the river with a mammoth cotton gin fan tied around his neck, for allegedly whistling at a white woman. In some versions of the story, he was found with his cut-off penis stuffed in his mouth. His body was shipped to Chicago, and his mother [Mamie Till Bradley] decided he should have an open casket funeral; the whole world would see what had been done to her son. According to the Chicago-based, black newsweekly *Jet*, hundreds of thousands of mourners “in an unending procession, later viewed the body” at the funeral home. A photograph of Till in the casket—his head mottled and swollen to many times its normal size—ran in *Jet*, and largely through that medium, both the picture and Till’s story became legendary. The caption of the close-up photograph of Till’s face read: “Mutilated face of victim was left unretouched by the mortician at the mother’s request. She said she wanted ‘all the world’ to witness the atrocity.”<sup>1</sup>

And here are two passages from Nathaniel Mackey’s *Bedouin Hornbook* that invoke a sound correspondent to the massive implications of the image Alexander has brought again into view and into question:

... I’m especially impressed by its long overdue disinternment of the occult, heretofore inchoate arcana intuitively buried within the reaches—the wordless reaches—of the black singer’s voice. Would it be going too far to say that in your essay the black falsetto has in fact found its voice? (Forgive me if I

embarrass you.) In any case, the uncanny coincidence is that the draft of your essay arrived just as I'd put on a record by Al Green. I've long marveled at how all this going on about love succeeds in alchemizing a legacy of lynchings—as though singing were a rope he comes eternally close to being strangled by.

... One point I think could bear more insistent mention: What you term “the dislocated African’s pursuit of a meta-voice” bears the weight of a gnostic, transformative desire to be done with the world. By this I mean the deliberately forced, deliberately “false” voice we get from someone like Al Green creatively hallucinates a “new world,” indicts the more insidious falseness of the world as we know it. (Listen, for example, to “Love and Happiness.”) What is it in the falsetto that thins and threatens to abolish the voice but the wear of so much reaching for heaven? At some point you’ll have to follow up this excellent essay of yours with a treatment of the familial ties between the falsetto, the moan and the shout. There’s a book by a fellow named Heilbut called *The Gospel Sound* you might look into. At one point, for example, he writes: “The essence of the gospel style is a wordless moan. Always these sounds render the indescribable, implying, ‘Words can’t begin to tell you, but maybe moaning will.’” If you let “word” take the place of “world” in what I said above the bearing this has on your essay should become pretty apparent. (During his concert a few weeks back Lambert quoted an ex-slave in Louisiana as having said, “The Lawd done said you gotta shout if you want to be saved. You gotta shout and you gotta moan if you wants to be saved.” Take particular note of the end of “Love and Happiness,” where Green keeps repeating, “Moan for love.”) Like the moan or the shout, I’m suggesting, the falsetto explores a redemptive, unworded realm—a meta-word, if you will—where the implied critique of the momentary eclipse of the word curiously rescues, restores and renews it: new word, new world.<sup>2</sup>

Flaunted Fifth heard the noise of a helicopter overhead. He noticed the cops in the police car looking this way. The emotional figure he absentmindedly toyed with was given an abruptly ominous edge by the setting sun, the helicopter overhead and the police car circling the block, all of which put an inverse halo around it. A panicky rush ran thru him as the cops continued to look his way. He couldn’t help remembering that several black men had been killed by the L.A. police in recent months, victims of a chokehold whose use there were now efforts to outlaw. The V-shaped warmth in the crook of his right arm seemed to detach itself, rise up and, like an ironic boomerang, press itself against the front of his neck. He imagined himself held in the sweaty crook of a cop’s arm.

It was hard not to be overwhelmed by the lethal irony which invaded everything. Flaunted Fifth was suddenly haunted by once having written that the use of the falsetto in black music, the choked-up ascent into a problematic upper register, had a way, as he’d put it, of “alchemizing a legacy of lynchings.” He’d planned to make use of this idea again in his lecture/demonstration, but the prospect of a cop’s arm around his neck reminded him that every concept, no matter how figural or sublime, had its literal, dead-letter aspect

as well. It now seemed too easy to speak of “alchemy,” too easy not to remember how inescapably real every lynching had been. He’d always thought of himself as an advocate of spirit. He should have known the letter might someday do him in.

The ominous edge he picked up on was also, he realized, an attribute of spirit. Overtones and resonances inhabited the letter, causing it to creak like the floorboards and doors in a haunted house. That the emotional triad he absentmindedly toyed with, the triangulation he’d made a note of to himself, should creak with overtones of strangulation came as no surprise. That Name-sake Epigraph #4 should be haunted by patriarchal patrol cars and helicopters, that it should creak with patriarchal prohibitions against public speech, equally came as no surprise. It all confirmed a “creaking of the spirit” he’d heard referred to in a song from the Bahamas many years before. That the creaking might kill was the price one occasionally paid. “No blues without dues,” he reminded himself, making another mental note for his pilot radio show.<sup>3</sup>

Some attribute to Emmett Till—which is to say to his death, which is to say to the famous picturing and display, staging and performance, of his death or of him in death—the agency that set in motion this nation’s profoundest political insurrection and resurrection, the resurrection of reconstruction, a second reconstruction like a second coming of the Lord.<sup>4</sup> If this is true, how is it true? On this question Alexander subscribes to James Baldwin’s formulation, in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, that Till’s murder—which in its particularity is not unlike a vast chain of such events stretching across a long history of brutal violence—can stand out, resonate, or be said to produce effects only because of the moment of its occurrence, a moment that is possible only after the beginning of the insurrection and resurrection it is claimed to have sparked. As Alexander remarks, Baldwin’s claims regarding this matter are astute: Till’s death bears the trace of a particular moment of panic when, “under the knell of the Supreme Court’s *all deliberate speed*,” there was massive reaction to the movement against segregation. (That particular moment of panic is a point on an extended trajectory, where that panic seems almost always to have been—among other things, though this is not just one thing among others—sexual. So that the movement against segregation is seen as a movement for miscegenation and, at that point, whistling or the “crippled speech” of Till’s “Bye, baby” cannot go unheard.<sup>5</sup> This means we’ll have to listen to it along with various other sounds that will prove to be unneutralizable and irreducible.) The fact that whatever force Till’s death exerted was not ordinary does not mean, however, that that force wasn’t real. For even if his death marked panic and even if that panic had already led to the deaths of so many, so that his death was already haunted—its force only the animating spirit of a train of horrors—something happened. Something real—in that it might have been

otherwise—happened. So that we need to be interested in the complex, dissonant, polyphonic affectivity of the ghost, the agency of the fixed but multiply apparent shade, an improvisation of spectrality, another development of the negative. All these have to do with another understanding of the photograph and of a deferral of some inevitable return to the ontological that would operate in the name of a utopian vision and in the sharpest critique of those authoritarian modes of (false) differentiation and (false) universalization (ultimately, the same thing) that seem to have ontology or the ontological impulse as their condition of possibility and that seem to indicate that that impulse or activity could never have ended any other way. So I'm interested in what a photograph—what *this* photograph—does to ontology, to the politics of ontology, and to the possibility and project of a utopian politics outside ontology.

How can this photograph challenge ontological questioning? *By way of a sound* and by way of what's already there in the decision to display the body, to publish the photograph, to restage death and rehearse mo(ur)nin(g). This includes a political imperative that is never disconnected from an aesthetic one, from a necessary reconstruction of the very aesthetics of photography, of documentary, and, therefore, of truth, revelation, and enlightenment as well as of judgment, taste, and, therefore, the aesthetic itself. Mackey moves toward this, and yet what is made in such sounding, or rather the theory and theorist of such making, is haunted by a destruction she or it can never assimilate or exhaust. And this is not just about some justification, as if the blues were worth it. Rather, we have to think about the fact that an aesthetic appropriation could be said to desecrate the legacy of lynchings, precisely by way of an "alchemizing" that seems to fetishize or figure on the literal, on the absolute fact and reality of so many deaths while continually opening the possibility of redemption in out sensuality. Which is to say that the blues are not worth the dues pai(n: trace of something made me type; I had to leave it in: Payne: it'll come back later)d in order to produce them, but they are part of the condition of possibility of the end of such extortion. So this is about the cut music enacts on the image and after the fact of a set of connections between death and the visual, between looking and retribution—as arrest, abduction, and abjection. What did the hegemony of the visual have to do with the death of Emmett Till? What effect did the photograph of his body have on death? What affect did it send? How did the photograph and its reproduction and dissemination break the hegemony of the visual? "Cousins remembered him as 'the center of attention' who 'liked to be seen. He liked the spotlight,'<sup>76</sup> but he'll be heard, too, as broken speech and talking wind, a cry from outside, interior exteriority of the photograph.

In positing that this photo and photographs in general bear a phonic substance, I want to challenge not only the ocularcentrism that generally—

perhaps necessarily—shapes theories of the nature of photography and our experience of photography but also that mode of semiotic objectification and inquiry that privileges the analytic-interpretative reduction of phonic materiality and/or nonmeaning over something like a mimetic improvisation of and with that materiality that moves in excess of meaning.<sup>7</sup> This second challenge assumes that the critical-mimetic experience of the photograph takes place most properly within a field structured by theories of (black) spectatorship, audition, and performance. These challenges are also something of a preface to such theory, and they attempt to work out a couple of that theory's most crucial elements: the anti-interpretive non-reduction of nonmeaning and the breakdown of the opposition between live performance and mechanical reproduction—all this by way of an investigation of the augmentation of mourning by the sound of moaning, by a religious and political formulation of morning that animates the photograph with a powerfully *material* resistance. We have to try to understand the connection between that resistance and political movement, locating that movement's direction toward new universalities held within the difference(s) of phonic substance, within the difference of the accent that cuts and augments mourning and morning, a difference semiotics has heretofore thought either to be fatal to its desire for universality or to be proof of the foolishness and political and epistemological danger of that desire.

There is the trace of what remains to be discovered, a topic, a path I'm trying to take that moves through a shudder I can never escape when gazing, or even after the fact of an arrested and arresting glance, at the broken face of Emmett Till. Looking at Emmett Till is arrested by overtone reverberations;<sup>8</sup> looking demurs when it opens onto an unheard sound that the picture cannot secure but discovers and onto all of what it might be said to mean that I can look at this face, this photograph. This is to say not only look at it but look at it in the context of an aesthetics, look at it as if it were to be looked at, as if it were to be thought, therefore, in terms of a kind of beauty, a kind of detachment, independence, autonomy, that holds open the question of what looking might mean in general, what the aesthetics of the photograph might mean for politics, and what those aesthetics might have meant for Mamie Till Bradley in the context of her demand that her son's face be seen, be shown, that his death and her mourning be performed.

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, ex-

ploded, but deeper than that it was opened. 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, though this infinite and circular chain seems too muddled, too crazy, too twisted or clotted, as if it, too, were in need of another cut, it was shown. As if that face revealed "the beginning of death in cut time,"<sup>9</sup> as if this was a death unlike other deaths, a death that prompts a mourning whose rehearsal is also a refusal, a death to end all deaths or all other deaths but one, his face was destroyed by its display. His casket was opened, his face was shown, is seen—now in the photograph—and allowed to open a revelation that first is manifest in the shudder the shutter continues to produce,<sup>10</sup> the trembling, a general disruption of the ways in which we gaze at the face and at the dead, a disruption of the oppressive ethics and coercive law of reckless eyeballing, reckless whistling, which contains within it a call, the disruption of the disruption that would have captured, an arrest of the spirit that arrests, a repetitive close. Memory—bound to the way the photograph holds up what it proposes, stops, keeps—is given pause, because what we thought we could look at for the last time and hold holds us, captures us, and doesn't let us go. And why is the memory of this mutilated face, reconfiguration of what was embedded in some furtive and partial glance's refusal, so much more horrible, the distortion magnified even more than the already incalculable devastation of the actual body? Does the blindness held in the aversion of the eye create an insight that is manifest as a kind of magnification or intensification of the object—as if memory as affect and the affect that forges distorted or intensified memory cascade off one another, each multiplying the other's force? I think this kind of blindness makes music.

The fear of another castration is all bound up in this aversion of the eye. Emmett Till's death marks a double time, rhythm-a-ning, redoubled nothing-ing, dead and castrated. But his mother, absent, present, reopens or leaves open the wound that is redoubled, the nothing that is redoubled in her son's murder. Ms. Bradley opens, leaves open, reopens, the violent, ritual, sexual cutting of his death by the leaving open of the casket, by the unretouching of the body, by the body's photograph, by the photograph's transformation in memory and nightmare of which many speak (for instance, Roland Barthes, about whom more later). That leaving open is a performance. It is the disappearance of the disappearance of Emmett Till that emerges by way of exhibiting what Mackey calls "wounded kinship" (itself always refigured and refinished in and as and by exogamous collision). It is the ongoing destruction of the ongoing production of (a)

(black) performance, which is what I am, which is what we are or could be if we can listen while we look. If he seems to keep disappearing as we look at him, it's because we look away, which is what makes possible and impossible representation, reproduction, dream. And there is a sound that seemingly is not there in this performance, which this performance is about; but not just a sound, since also we are concerned with what that sound would invoke—immortal or utopian longings, though not the utopianism of a past made present, not the recovery of a loss, and not just a negation of the present either, in the form of an ongoing displacement of the concrete. Rather, here is an abundance—in abundance—of the present, an abundance of affirmation in abundance of the negative, in abundance of disappearance.

Such is the aesthetic cut, invasive evasion, shock of the shock, adding form and color to a verbal discourse, adding extensional cry and sound to the word's visualization. An image from which one turns is immediately caught in the production of its memorialized, re-membered reproduction. We lean into it, but we can't; the aesthetic and philosophical arrangements of the photograph—some organizations of and for light—anticipate a looking that cannot be sustained as unalloyed looking but must be accompanied by listening, and this, even though what is listened to—echo of a whistle or a phrase, moaning, mourning, desperate testimony, and flight—is also unbearable. These are the complex musics of the photograph. This is the sound before the photograph:

Scream inside and out, out from outside, of the image. Bye, baby. Whistling. Lord, take my soul. Redoubled and reanimating passion, the passion of a seeing that is involuntary and uncontrollable, a seeing that redoubles itself as sound, a passion that is the redoubling of Emmett Till's passion, of whatever passion would redeem, crucifixion, lynching, middle passion, passage. So that looking implies that one desires something for this photograph. So that mourning turns. So that the looker is in danger of slipping, not away, but into something less comfortable than horror—aesthetic judgment, denial, laughter, some out and unprecedented reflection, movement, murder, song. So that there is an inappropriable ecstasies that goes along with this aesthetics—one is taken out, as in screams, fainting, tongues, dreams. So perhaps she was counting on the aesthetic.

This aural aesthetic is not the simple reemergence of the voice of presence, the visible and graphic word. The logos that voice implies and requires has been complicated by the echo of transgressive whistle, abortive seduction, stuttered leave-taking, and by reconstructive overtones of mo'nin'. Something is remembered and repeated in such complications. Transferred. To move or work through that something, to improvise, requires thinking

about morning and how mourning sounds, how moaning sounds. What's made and destroyed. We'll have to do this while keeping in mind all that remains urgent and needful and open in the critique of phonologocentrism, which Jacques Derrida initiates. Nevertheless, we've got to cut the ongoing "reduction of the phonic substance," whose origin is untraceable but is at least as old as philosophy, at least as old as its paradoxically inanimate other, phonocentrism, and predates any call for its being set into motion, either in Descartes or Saussure or in Derrida's critical echo of them.<sup>11</sup> The refusal to neutralize the phonic substance of the photograph rewrites the time of the photograph, the time of the photograph of the dead. The time of the sound of the photograph of the dead is no longer irreversible, no longer vulgar, and, moreover, is indexed not only to rhythmic complication but to the extreme and subtle harmonics of various shrieks, hums, hollers, shouts, and moans. What these sounds and their times indicate is the way into another question concerning universality, a reopening of the issue of a universal language by way of this new music so that now it's possible to accommodate a differentiation of the universal, of its ongoing reconstruction in sound as the differential mark, divided and abundant, dividing and abounding. But how many people have really listened to this photograph? Hieroglyphics, phonetic writing, phonography—where is the photograph placed in all this?

Black mo'nin' is the phonographic content of this photograph. And the whistle is just as crucial as the moan; train whistle, maybe; his whistle carrying the echo of the train that took his particular origins north, the train that brought him home and took him home and brought him home. There's a massive itinerancy here, a fugitivity that breaking only left more broke, broken and unbroken circle of escape and return.<sup>12</sup> And the gap between them, between their modes of audibility vis-à-vis the photograph, is the difference within invagination between what cuts and what surrounds, invagination being that principle of impurity, which, for Derrida, marks the law of the law of genre where the set or ensemble or totality is constantly improvised by the rupturing and augmentative power of an always already multiply and disruptively present singularity.<sup>13</sup> So that speech is broken and expanded by writing; so that hieroglyphics is affected by phonetic script; so that a photograph exerts itself on the alphabet; so that phonographic content infuses the photo. And this movement doesn't mark some orbital decay in which signification inevitably returns to some simple vocal presence; rather, it's the itinerary of the force and movement of signification's outside. The implications of this aural aesthetic—this phonographic rewriting of/in the photograph—are crucial and powerful, then, because they mark something general about the nature of a photograph and a performance—the ongoing universality of their absolute singularity—that is itself, at least for me, most clearly and generously given in black

photography and black performance. (This is, for instance, what Mackey always brings, always knows.)

Blackness and maternity play huge roles in the analytic of photography Roland Barthes lays down in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes's extended and elegiac meditation on the essence of photography that revolves around an unreproducible, unobservable photograph of his mother as a young child (the "Winter Garden Photograph"), a woman remarkable to Barthes in part because, he says, she made no observations.<sup>14</sup> Blackness is the site or mark of the ideal object, the ideal spectator (and these are everything for Barthes's analytic, since the doing or operation of photography is bracketed and set aside early on in *Camera Lucida*). Blackness is the embodiment of a naïveté that would move Barthes, the self-styled essential phenomenologist, back before culture to some pure and unalloyed looking.<sup>15</sup> The paradox, here, is that the reduction phenomenology desires seems to require a regression to a prescientific state characterized by what Husserl, after Hegel, would call the incapability of science. Those who are incapable of science are those who are outside history, but that exteriority is precisely the desired starting point for phenomenology that would move not through philosophical tradition but directly toward and in the things themselves. And indeed, this is how empire makes phenomenology possible, figuring a simplicity structured by regression, return, and reduction refigured as refinement. Empire's mother fixation is phenomenology's obsession with blackness. Blackness is situated precisely at the site of the condition of possibility and impossibility of phenomenology, and for Barthes that's cool, because the object and the spectator of photography reside there as well. This interstitial no-space is where photography lives, this point of embarkation for the euphoric journey to the interior, to the place of the other, the dark continent, the motherland that is always coded as an imperial descent into self. This regressive return to "that-has-been" and/or to where-you-been is the staging area for the performance of that wounded kinship and violent collision that is both the life-drama-trauma of blackness and the opening of what is called modernity.<sup>16</sup> The lynching and photographing of Emmett Till, the reproductive display of his photographed body by his mother, the Barthesian theory of photography that is founded in part on a silencing invocation of that mother and of him are all part of the ongoing production of that performance. It ought not be surprising, then, that Barthes's analysis in *Camera Lucida* is structured by a set of problematic moves: a disavowal of the historical in photography that reduces it to a field of merely "human interest"; a figuring of photographic historicity as overwhelmed by that univocal intentionality of the photographer that can result only in "a kind of general enthusiastic commitment . . . with-

out special acuity,<sup>17</sup> an ontological differentiation between photography and the photograph, and a semiotic neutralization of the unorderable or unmeaningful phonic substance of photography. It is especially the first and last of these elements that emerge here:

The photograph is unary when it emphatically transforms “reality” without doubling it, without making it vacillate (emphasis is a power of cohesion): no duality, no indirection, no disturbance. The unary Photograph has every reason to be banal, “unity” of composition being the first rule of vulgar (and notably, of academic) rhetoric: “The subject,” says one handbook for amateur photographers, “must be simple, free of useless accessories; this is called the Search for Unity.”

News photographs are very often unary (the unary photograph is not necessarily tranquil). In these images, no punctum: a certain shock but no disturbance; the photograph can “shout,” not wound. These journalistic photographs are received (all at once), perceived. I glance through them, I don’t recall them; no detail (in some corner) ever interrupts my reading: I am interested in them (as I am interested in the world), I do not love them.<sup>18</sup>

Barthes’s turn from the vulgar, unary photography of the shout and toward the refined photography of the prick or wound is tied to an ontological questioning that is founded on the unreproducibility of a photograph and the theological veiling of the original in the interest of a theory of photographic signification.<sup>19</sup> Against the backdrop of Emmett Till, the silencing of a photograph in the name of that interstitial space between the Photograph and Photography is also the silencing dismissal of a performance in the name of that interstitial space between Performance and Performativity. And, again, paradoxes are here produced seemingly without end, so that Barthes’s critique of the unary photograph is based on the assumption of the unary sensuality of photography. And this is a prescriptive assumption—photography ought to be sensually unary, ought not shout so that it can prick. Wounding photography is absolutely visual; that’s the only way we can love it.

So what’s the relationship between the necessary presence of the interanimation of naïve blackness and preobservational motherhood in Barthes’s theory and the necessary absence of sound? Perhaps it is this: that the necessary repression—rather than some naturalized absence—of phonic substance in a general semiotics applies to the semiotics of photography as well; that the semiotic desire for universality, which excludes the difference of accent by excluding sound in the search for a universal language and a universal science of language, is manifest in Barthes as the exclusion of the sound/shout of the photograph; and that, in the fundamental methodological move of what-has-been-called-enlightenment, we see the invocation of a silenced difference, a silent black *materiality*, in order to justify a suppression of difference in the name of (a false) universality.

In the end, though, neither language nor photography nor performance can tolerate silence, which is to say that the universalities these names would mark exist only in the singularities of a language, a photograph, a performance, singularities that cannot live in the absence of sound. Repressed accent returns precisely in the doubling that these things require, that the theory of these things demands, so that sound and recording are fundamentally connected in their disruptive necessity to language, photography, and performance. If Barthes had really consulted her, Ms. Bradley might have said all this; this aural aesthesis is what she counts on to intensify the politics of the performance whose production she extends. The meaning of a photograph is cut and augmented by a sound or noise that surrounds it and pierces its frame. And if, as Barthes suggests, that meaning or essence or *noeme* is death, the “*that-has-been* of the photographic object,” then sound disturbs it in the interest of a resurrection. The content of the music of this photograph, like that of black music in general according to Baraka, is life, is freedom. The music and theater of a black photograph is erotic: the drama of life in the photograph of the dead.

So what's the difference between the son's inability to reproduce the photograph of his dead mother and the mother's insistence on the reproduction of the photograph of her dead son? The difference has to do with distinguishable stances toward universality, with what the discovery of a performance or a photograph has to do with universality, with the meaningful and illusory difference and relation between Performance and Performativity, the Photograph and Photography. If “the Winter Garden Photograph was indeed essential, it achieved for [Barthes], utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*.”<sup>20</sup> This impossible science, the unique and universal word or logos, is achieved only in a kind of solipsism, only in the memory that activates the unique photograph's capacity to wound. Meanwhile, Ms. Bradley sidesteps (by way of an insistent publicity wherein is carried the echo of whistling and mo'nin', in the interest of getting to some other—which is to say real—place) the utopic intersection of hermeneutics, phenomenology, and ontology that mark the origin and limit of Barthes's desire. For Barthes the inability and/or unwillingness to discover a photograph is driven by the positing of a universality and singularity that can only be mourned; for Ms. Bradley the discovery of a photograph in the fullness of its multiple sensuality moves in the drive for a universality to come, one called by what is in and around the photograph—black mo'nin'.

About twenty-five years before *Camera Lucida*, in an essay called “The Great Family of Man,”<sup>21</sup> Barthes makes some assumptions in the form of a question regarding what “the parents of Emmet [*sic*] Till, the young Negro

assassinated by the Whites”<sup>22</sup> would have thought about the Great Family of Man and the celebrated traveling photographic exhibition called *The Great Family of Man*. He uses those assumptions to argue for the necessity for progressive humanism of an ongoing historicization of nature rather than an uncritical photo-affirmation of certain universal facts such as birth and death. After all, he writes, “to reproduce death or birth tells us, literally, nothing. For these natural facts to gain access to a true language, they must be inserted into a category of knowledge which means postulating that one can transform them, and precisely subject their naturalness to our human criticism.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, for Barthes, the failure of such photography lies in its inability to show

whether or not the child is born with ease or difficulty, whether or not his birth causes suffering to his mother, whether or not he is threatened with a high mortality rate, whether or not such and such a future is open to him: this is what your exhibition should be telling people, instead of an eternal lyricism of birth. The same goes for death: must we really celebrate its essence once more, and thus risk forgetting that there is still so much we can do to fight it? It is this very young, far too young power that we must exalt, and not the sterile identity of “natural” death.<sup>24</sup>

At the end of his career, however, Barthes produced a text that requires that we ask how a critique of the suppression of the determining weight of history is left behind for a stance that is nothing if not ahistorical. Where history and that singularity that exists as a function of depth/interiority, a certain incursion into the interior of the photograph and of identity, merge in “The Great Family of Man,” history and singularity are reconfigured each in relation to the other in *Camera Lucida*. There, history exists only in relation to the sovereign ego that is given and represented by the wounding, arresting force of the photographic *punctum*, the placement of the interiority of a subject on endless trial.<sup>25</sup> Where difference was once tied to the historical injustices it both structures and is structured by, now it marks only the uniqueness of an ego, is “that time when we were not born,”<sup>26</sup> or, more particularly, “the time when my mother was alive *before me*.”<sup>27</sup> And, indeed, the representation of injustice, of historical alienation, is now configured only as banality. This configuration marks the return, paradoxically, of an empty humanism of death (and birth) that elsewhere and earlier Barthes had critiqued. *The photograph as such* is now just the universal visual fact of death, of pastness, of that-has-been, of the essence or *noeme* of photography, which, again, is the object of Barthes’s analytic desire. On the other hand, *a photograph* will remain, for him, not invisible but simply un-reproducible. The fundamental absence of depth, held now in the very form of the print, allows only the sad gesture of turning the photograph over. The appeal to the possibility of a particular identity’s historical ma-

teriality is transformed into the flat memorialization of the photograph's tain. This analytic is shaped by the recrudescence of that humanism that marks what Louis Althusser called "the international of decent feelings,"<sup>28</sup> though here feeling is numbed by a violent egocentrism; an intensely melancholic phenomenology of photography emerges from that egocentrism, one in which what might be called the loss of historical particularity or of the particularity of *a* photograph is displaced by the loss of the desire for these objects and for the object as such.

But there is already something amiss in "The Great Family of Man," an opposition between the modes of production of the human and human essence that is precisely what Ms. Bradley cuts. It is the split in which totality is (a)voided in the interest of historical particularity, and it is displaced, in *Camera Lucida*, by a reified ontological concern with *studium/punctum*, a phenomenological privileging of essence that reveals history to be fundamentally personal, fundamentally deictic, and thus still forecloses not only the totality Barthes already disavows in the earlier text but also the singularity he desires in the later one. In other words, historical particularity becomes what Bertrand Russell would have called egocentric particularity. So this is about how listening carefully to the muted sound of the photograph as it resonates in Barthes's texts on photography, through his repression and denigration of it, gives us some clues about the inevitability of a certain development in which egocentrism and ontologism, perhaps each to the other's regret, are each tied to the other in theory, which is to say, in epistemologies of unalloyed looking. And perhaps whatever speech and writing come after or over a photograph or a performance should deal with this epistemological and methodological problem: how to listen to (and touch, taste, and smell) a photograph or a performance, how to attune oneself to a moan or shout that animates the photograph with an intentionality of the outside. Barthes is interested in, but, by implication, does not love, the world. The shout that structures and ruptures the photograph of Emmett Till with a piercing historicity, that resingularizes and reconstructs his broken body, emerges from love, from a love of the world, from a specific political intention. When Barthes invokes Ms. Bradley in a critique of the naturalistic and universalizing photography of the bare fact of death but fails to recognize her own photographic contribution to that critique, he betrays a quite specific inability that will be fully activated years later in another discourse on photography that is equally dependent on black images.

Of course, Emmett Till's death (which word wrongs him and her) was not natural, and the photograph shows this. It shows this and the *death's* difficulty, the suffering of the mother, the threat of a high mortality rate, and

the seemingly absolute closure of his future. But it does so not by way of an erasure of lyricism or even of “the natural,” for these reemerge, by way of an unbearable and vicious dialectic, in the photograph’s music. Barthes’s question was only rhetorical, though. He didn’t really ask Ms. Bradley what she thought. She told us anyway. And so this photograph—or, more precisely, the natural and unnatural fact that is photographed and displayed—cannot simply be used as an inarticulate denial of an always and necessarily false universality. For it is in the name, too, of a dynamic universality (which critically moves in, among other things, grief, anger, hatred, the desire to expose and eradicate savagery) whose organization would suspend the condition of possibility of deaths like Emmett Till’s, that the photo was shown, is seen. It is in the interest of a certain defeat or at least deconstruction of death—a resurrective or (second) reconstructive improvisation through death’s pride and through a culture that death drives—that Till’s body was shown, was seen, and that the photograph of Till’s body is shown, is seen. But Barthes wasn’t trying to hear the sound of that display, the sound of the photograph’s *illumination* of facticity, which holds an affirmation not of, but *out of*, death. Black Art, which is to say Black Life, which is to say Black (Life Against) Death, which is to say Black Eros, is the ongoing production of a performance: rupture and collision, augmented toward singularity, motherless child, childless mother, heart-rending shriek, levee camp moan, grieving lean and head turn, fall, *Stabat mater*, turn a step, loose booty funk brush stroke down my cheek, yellow dog, blue trăn, black drive. The ways black mo’nin’ improvises through the opposition of mourning and melancholia disrupt the temporal framework that buttresses that opposition such that an extended, lingering look at—aesthetic response to—the photograph manifests itself as political action. Is the display of the picture melancholic? No, but it’s certainly no simple release or mourning either. Mo’nin’ improvises through that difference. We have to keep looking at this so we can listen to it.

So in the name of this bright section of winds, some variations on Alexander’s question: Can we look at this, which is to say can we look at this again (such repetition being a constitutive element of what it means and is to be BLACK)? Can you be BLACK and not look at this (again)? Can we look at this (again) and be BLACK? There is a responsibility to look every time, again, but sometimes it looks as though that looking comes before, holds, replicates, reproduces what is looked at. Nevertheless, looking keeps open the possibility of closing precisely what it is that prompts and makes necessary that opening. But such an opening is only held in looking that is attentive to the sound—and movement, feel, taste, smell (as well as sight): the sensual ensemble—of what is looked at. The sound works and moves not just through but before another movement, a movement that is before

even that affirmation that Barthes didn't hear. A photograph was seen, was shown, in a complex path, a dissonant and polyphonic drive. In the death of Emmett Till, insurrection and resurrection are each insistently *before* the other, waiting for a beginning that is possible only after the experience of all of what is held in the photograph. What is held in a photograph is not exclusive to the photograph, but this photograph moves and works, is shown, was seen, shone, says, is animated, resounds, broken, breaking song of, song for, something before, like the Music, which is, as Mingus says, not just beautiful, but *terribly beautiful*.

So here is the performance I discovered by way of this "legacy of lynchings": At my aunt Mary's funeral (she was my favorite aunt, but I was scared to look at her face in the photograph I couldn't help but look at that they made of her at the funeral home), Ms. Rosie Lee Seals rose up in church, out from the program, and said, "Sister Mary Payne told me that if she died she wanted me to give a *deep moan* at her funeral." And, at that moment, in her Las Vegas-from-Louisiana accent, condition of impossibility of a universal language, condition of possibility of a universal language, burying my auntie with music at morning time, where moaning renders mourning wordless (the augmentation and reduction of or to our releasing more than what is bound up in the presence of the word) and voice is dissonanced and multiplied by metavoice, Sister Rosie Lee Seals mo'ned. New word, new world.

#### NOTES

1. In Thelma Golden, ed., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 91–110. For a more comprehensive account of Till's murder, the events leading up to it, and its aftermath, see Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

2. Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook*, Calaloo Fiction Series (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1986), 51–52.

3. Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook*, 201–2.

4. Roland Barthes says that "photography has something to do with resurrection." In this essay I'm trying to extend this assertion by way of, against, and through some of Barthes's formulations of photography. See his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 82. More on this text later.

5. Whitfield informs us that "Bobo was self-assured despite a speech defect—a stutter—that was the consequence of nonparalytic polio that he had suffered at the age of three." See Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta*, 15, and note, also, Whitfield's documentation of Ms. Bradley's argument that the attribution to Till of an attempted transgressive, transracial seduction on the part of his murderers was in part

the function of their inability to decipher Till's broken speech. See also Mackey's "Cante Moro" (in *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*, ed. Adalaidé Morris [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997], 194–212) for more on the enabling disabilities of "crippled speech," its relation to referents unavailable to moaning's or humming's cutting augmentation of the verbal.

6. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta*, 15.

7. Julia Kristeva works fruitfully in the field determined by the opposition of mimesis and analytic-interpretive knowledge. I want to acknowledge that work here as well as the necessity for a full account of that work. That necessity is particularly pronounced in work that is, on the one hand, attuned to the encountering of maternity and phonic materiality in a way that is very much influenced by Kristeva and, on the other hand, driven by an engagement with Barthes at a moment in his career when the influence of Kristeva is especially evident in his work. I intend to provide such an account very soon. Meanwhile, Kristeva speaks very lucidly on the relation between mimesis and knowledge in "A Conversation with Julia Kristeva," in *Julia Kristeva: Interviews*, ed. Ross Mitchell Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 31.

8. I want to acknowledge, here, the work of Karen Sackman on the relation between overtone and political mobilization. The chance to discuss these matters with her was crucial to the development of my ideas in this essay. I should say, too, that our discussion was prompted in large part by Randy Martin's extraordinary book *Critical Moves* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

9. Amiri Baraka, "When Miles Split!" in *Eulogies* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996), 145–46.

10. There is more to be said elsewhere regarding the photographic apparatus, the production of a sound that allows the production of an image. Thanks to my colleague Barbara Browning for opening this up.

11. See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakrovarty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

12. Mackey speaks, with regard to Baraka and his reading and rewriting of García Lorca in the late 1950s and early 1960s, of "a well-known, resonant history of African-American fugitivity and its well-known, resonant relationship to enslavement and persecution." He adds, "The way in which fugitivity asserts itself on an aesthetic level . . . is important as well. The way in which Baraka's poems of this period move intimates fugitive spirit, as does much of the music that he was into. He writes of a solo by saxophonist John Tchicai on an Archie Shepp album, 'It slides away from the proposed.' . . . That sliding away wants out." See Mackey, "Cante Moro," 200.

13. Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 55.

14. Barthes associates the state, shall we say, of having made no observations with kindness:

In this little girl's image I saw the kindness which had formed her being immediately and forever, without her having inherited it from anyone; how could this kindness have proceeded from the imperfect parents who had loved her so badly—in short: from a family? Her kindness was specifically *out-of-play*, it belonged to no system, or at least it was located at the limits of a morality (evangelical, for instance); I could not define it

better than by this feature (among others): that during the whole of our life together, she never made a single "observation." This extreme and particular circumstance, so abstract in relation to an image, was nonetheless present in the face revealed in the photograph. (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 69)

It remains for us to think of the consequences, beyond all of what might be seen as admirable or lovable, of the placement, by and in relation to Barthes (himself figured earlier in his own text as a definite sentimental and theoretical observer), of this idealized preobservationality.

15. This is all to say that ultimately what remains constant in Barthes's thinking on photography is the use of the black example. And one must think hard about what that allows him to do; it's neither liberal acknowledgement nor petty racist invocation/dismissal, though that's the trajectory his use takes, and we could talk about that as well. Ask the North African workers of the Goutte d'Or district of Paris. Ask the parents of Emmett Till. OK.

16. On "that-has-been," see Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76–77.

17. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.

18. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 40.

19. On the photography of the prick or wound, see Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 25–28.

20. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 71; emphasis in original.

21. Roland Barthes, "The Great Family of Man," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 101–3.

22. Barthes, "The Great Family of Man," 101.

23. Barthes, "The Great Family of Man."

24. Barthes, "The Great Family of Man," 102.

25. In *The Threshold of the Visible World* (and here I thank David Eng for bringing this to my attention), Kaja Silverman looks at Barthes's distinction between the wounding effect of the *punctum* and the normative "'voice' of 'knowledge' and 'culture'" with which he associates the *studium*. Silverman cogently critiques Barthes's valorization of and failure to displace the ego, noting "the limited nature of the gains to be realized when [Barthes's] revisionary act of looking does not involve at the same time a realignment of self and other." She adds, "One is left with the disquieting sense that whereas Barthes consistently apprehends the photographs about which he writes from a viewing position which is radically divergent from that indicated by the metaphoric geometral point (associating an African American woman, for instance, with his aunt), his own sovereignty vis-à-vis the object remains unquestioned."

Ultimately, as Silverman claims, "the figures depicted in the photograph serve only to activate [Barthes's] own memories, and so are stripped of all historical specificity. Barthes's recollections might thus be said to 'devour' the images of the other." The simultaneously lost and operative singularity that Barthes grieves for is his own. And the problem, here, is not the loss of the object that was there but the never having been there of Barthes's own absolutely singular objectlessness. Again, Silverman's formulations here seem absolutely correct. I would only augment them in the following way. (1) The refusal or inability to displace the sovereign ego is not only a failure to realign self and other but also a failure to realign the individual

and the collective, so that the repression of difference is also the repression of a certain ensemblic publicity that is activated in and as sound, where sound is irreducible to voice and, thus, to the meanings that compose dominant culture and knowledge. (2) The devouring of the images of the other in which Barthes engages is, in some ways, a predictable effect of the specific theory of history that animates Barthes's ahistoricism. The discourse of slave narrative, for instance, is massively infused with examples of the submission of black bodies to a scopic regime that has, as one of its effects, the renewal, if not instantiation, of white interiority. This process is no less pronounced for the development of that white interiority that is identified as radically divergent (from the metaphoric geometral point or from the political and/or aesthetic norms that are associated with that geometral point) or avant-garde. This is not to say that it is not surprising that Barthes associates an African American woman with his aunt; it is to say that it is *also* not surprising that Barthes makes such an association.

I will try to say more about how such interiority as that of Barthes is possible only in contradistinction to that incapability of science or theory, that inability to make—or lack of concern with making—observations, that interminably looked-at failure to look, that specifically black phonic materiality that marks, if you will, the return of the repressed *studium* in the *punctum*, in short that presubjective position outside history that has been associated with the African with equal vigor in valorizations of tradition, on the one hand, and discontinuity, on the other. As I imply here and elaborate below, a fuller attempt to move past such a structure would require an attunement not only to the ways in which the aesthetics of black spectatorship and audition as black performance is tied to a general phonography of the photograph, but also to how that complex is, in turn, tied to an improvisation through the opposition of interiority and ensemblic publicity. Of course, Silverman's work—including especially *The Acoustic Mirror* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), her wary critique of the phallocratic deployment of what she understands to be a degrading reduction of feminine voice to feminine scream in classic cinema—is very useful to such a project. See Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 180–85.

26. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 64.

27. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 65.

28. Louis Althusser, "The International of Decent Feelings," in *The Spectre of Hegel*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 1997), 21–35.

Mark Sanders

## Ambiguities of Mourning

### *Law, Custom, and Testimony of Women before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*

*No justice — let us not say no law and once again we are not speaking here of laws — seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.*

JACQUES DERRIDA, *Specters of Marx*

Currently winding down its work of hearing testimony to human rights abuses of the apartheid era, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is an ambitious undertaking. A counterpart to the Reconstruction and Development Programme, a long-term scheme for the creation of housing, infrastructure, and jobs, the Truth Commission is part of a vast effort at nation-building in postapartheid South Africa. By asking South Africans to remember, the Truth Commission seeks to come to terms not only with the crimes of the apartheid era but also with a 350-year history of white domination. In the words of Justice Richard Goldstone, former United Nations chief prosecutor for war crimes tribunals in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, “One of the most important advantages of the TRC [is] that it w[ill] write the past forever into South Africa’s history.”<sup>1</sup> The Truth Commission aims at what no program of reconstruction and development could achieve by material means alone. In the minds of its proponents, it aims at nothing less than the “cleans[ing]” and “moral and cultural reconstruction” of a society.<sup>2</sup> It has as its goal the “healing of a nation” socially and psychically sundered into fragments by apartheid.<sup>3</sup>

By what means does the commission set out to realize its goals? Though its goals are ambitious, its means are seemingly modest. It builds no houses, electrifies no townships, and creates no jobs. Guided by the goal of national reconciliation, all it has done is solicit the truth from witnesses called upon

to provide information that could aid it in its goal of “establishing as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights” of the period 1960 to 1994.<sup>4</sup> The commission seeks to bring forward, as it distinguishes them, the “victims” as well as the “perpetrators.” In terms of a controversial provision designed to bring to light what court cases would be likely to obscure, “perpetrators” applying to the Amnesty Committee can exchange a “full disclosure” of rights violations for amnesty from criminal and civil prosecution.<sup>5</sup> In order to qualify for amnesty, “the act, omission or offence . . . to which the application relates [must be] an act associated with a political objective committed in the course of the conflicts of the past,” and the committee must assess “the relationship between the act, omission or offence and the political objective pursued, and in particular the directness and proximity of the relationship and the proportionality of the act, omission or offence.”<sup>6</sup> Although the amnesty hearings have at times been marred by the delaying tactics of lawyers, a great deal of information about covert security operations has come before the public eye. What has captured the hearts of observers, though, is the testimony heard at the human rights violation hearings. As Antjie Krog writes, looking back: “The last victim hearings finished five months ago, and the focus has been lost. No more the voices, like a leaking tap in the back of your mind, to remind you what this Commission is all about.”<sup>7</sup>

A nationwide publicity drive, supported by church, community, and support groups such as the Johannesburg-based Khulumani (Let us speak out!), has encouraged ordinary people to come forward to name their torturers, to seek the killers of their children, and to claim recompense. We are witnessing, as Kendall Thomas writes, “the elaboration of a new social ethics of discourse.”<sup>8</sup> The process of testifying is an open one, with public hearings broadcast live on radio (the mass medium accessible to the largest number of South Africans), and is reported regularly by South African Broadcasting Corporation television, both live and in a weekly wrap-up, *Truth Commission Special Report*. This openness distinguishes the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from most truth commissions to date.<sup>9</sup> Many victims have come forward. Some find the process helpful. Others do not: recalling and reenacting old traumas is not of benefit to all. Leaving the representations of “perpetrators” for another occasion, I concentrate here on the testimony of people who come forward as victims.

A final report has been tabled from the representations of perpetrators and victims. Its intention is to present, with the aid of prefatory material, a historical context in which to interpret these testimonies. With this report, submitted to President Nelson Mandela in October 1998, the commission has given official imprimatur to what was in many cases surmised and circulated as common knowledge. For instance, everyone knows that Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko was murdered while in police detention,

but not everyone, particularly among whites, has wanted to believe it. The same is true for a number of the other high-profile cases. But, more than this, the stories of ordinary women and men have been acknowledged for the first time. Eventually, if it succeeds in the long run, with the aid of the electronic and print media the commission will have performed a necessary and impossible feat; it will, in a future-perfect that molds a past that never was from memory scarcely shared, have formed the country's fragmented "collective memory" into a shared national history. This will not be a history of bare facts but, at a crucial level, a history judged, and thus shaped, according to norms of universal human rights.

Speaking as a witness before the commission thus implies being enjoined to frame one's testimony according to the demands of universal human rights. As a perpetrator or a victim, one testifies to a transgression of human rights: either one has violated those of another, or one's own have been violated. Soliciting testimony in this way makes apparent ambiguities in cases that do not fit, in an obvious way, into the paradigm of human rights guiding the commission's work. The cases I have in mind involve the interface between universal human rights and assertions in the name of "custom" by witnesses to human rights violations. Appeals for funeral rites, invitations to join in the work of mourning, these cases reveal at once a disjuncture and a conflation of law and custom. In British-ruled colonial Africa, custom and law were disjoined at the basis of a system of "indirect rule," which operated to exclude colonized people from legal and political universality by confining them to a sphere of rule by customary chiefs, where they were denied the rights of members of the colonial civil society. Postapartheid South Africa shares such a legacy with other African countries ruled by Britain. The disjuncture of law and custom also meant their conflation in the form of "customary law." This colonial invention holds hostage postcolonial efforts, such as Thabo Mbeki's projected "African renaissance," at reclaiming an African cultural heritage. To reclaim "custom" in sub-Saharan Africa today is thus not to counter the universal calculus of law and rights in the name of cultural difference<sup>10</sup> but rather to negotiate a split within the customary—between custom and "customary law"—which precludes any pure opposition between law and custom, because law itself generates the customary in the form of a system of customary law that contaminates any reclamatory invocation of custom. In a complication exemplary of postcolonial cultural politics in Africa and elsewhere, the "past" to be reclaimed is in part a creature of the colonial formation to be superseded.

Concentrating on one of several testimonies laying claim to funeral rites in the name of custom, I show how, exposing the disjuncture and conflation of law and custom, the testimony of black women probes the limits of the commission's machinery of advocacy. Letting someone speak can amount