

Emmett Till and Lynchings, Past and Present

An excerpt from
Revolution: Why It's Necessary, Why It's Possible, What It's All About
by Bob Avakian



Emmett Till
1941-1955

Then there's the story of Emmett Till. Emmett Till was born and grew up in Chicago. In 1955, when he had just turned 14, he went to Mississippi to visit family there. His mother warned and she schooled him about what he would find in Mississippi, what a young Black male like himself should expect, what he must do and not do in order to stay alive. And think about the fact that a mother has to school her child that way just when he goes to visit family. But Emmett Till was full of life and full of fun. One day, while in Money, Mississippi, he made the fatal mistake of whistling at a white woman as he was leaving a store owned by her husband. A few days later, the storeowner and his brother-in-law came in the middle of the night with guns and took Emmett Till away. They were seen beating him as they drove him away. His relatives began looking for his body along river banks and under bridges where Black folks always look when things like this happen, as his uncle put it. Think about that, think about what that means—where Black folks always look when this kind of thing happens. Think about what that tells you about this country. Emmett Till's body was found in a river. He was beaten and shot to death. Beaten so badly he could barely be recognized, even by his mother. A 14-year-old boy lynched. For what? For whistling at a white woman.

In an act of tremendous courage and large-mindedness, his mother, Mamie Till, displayed his body publicly in Chicago. And she refused to have it touched up so that all could see what had been done to him. His body was viewed by tens of thousands of Black people in Chicago.

The story of what happened to Emmett Till aroused deep anger among Black people all over the country. It shocked many white people in many parts of the country and it became an international news story and outrage.

But back in Mississippi, white people rallied to the defense of the men who had kidnapped and brutally murdered Emmett Till. These men were put on trial only because of the outrage around the country and around the world. Death threats and terror against Black people in the area where this lynching took place were increased to keep them from saying what they knew and how they felt about this lynching. In a court room that was segregated, with white people filling the seats, and the few Black people who were allowed in, forced to stand at the back, the jury of all white men found the murderers of Emmett Till not guilty in an hour. Their lawyers even accused Mamie Till and the NAACP of conspiring to cook up this whole story of the lynching. Actually, Emmett Till was alive in Detroit, these lawyers claimed. Not long after they were acquitted of this crime, the two men sold their story to a national magazine, telling in detail how they brutally murdered Emmett Till. But nothing was ever done to them. Despite a massive campaign calling for the federal government to indict these two men, the government refused. Sound familiar?

Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was President of the United States at the time, never even answered a telegram sent to him by Mamie Till. J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, called this brutal lynching of Emmett Till "an alleged murder," and he gave much more attention to investigating the involvement of communists in protesting this lynching than he ever did to the lynching itself. But the lynching of Emmett Till became a rallying cry for Black people. People stood up who had never stood up before, as Mamie Till put it.

In talking about these lynchings, I'm not exaggerating any of this. In fact, I've actually left out some of the most gruesome and disgusting details in talking about these

lynchings because there is only so much of this that you can stand to talk about or to hear about. And these were not the so-called isolated incidents, the way they always try to tell us, whenever they get caught in one of their brutalities or murders, the way they try to cover up the real crimes of this system and those who rule it. Thousands of Black people were lynched in those times. And all Black people lived with a constant terror of this.

Listen to the following statement by the author of a book about lynching. He said, "It is doubtful that any Black male growing up in the rural South in the period 1900 to 1940 was not traumatized by a fear of being lynched." What is he saying with this? Nothing less than this: no Black male growing up in the rural South in that period could be free of that fear. Every Black male was haunted and scarred deeply by that fear. Think about what that means and think about how this touched Black people as a whole. A sociologist who studied Black life in Mississippi in the 1930s learned how deeply the threat of lynching was in the minds of all Black people, from the very young to the very old. And in a PBS program on the system of segregation in the South, which was called the Jim Crow system, they quoted a psychologist who said that every Black person living in the South under Jim Crow was living actually under a death sentence. It might or might not actually get carried out, but it was always there. Black people could be killed for anything they did which might offend some white people and the whites who killed them would never be punished. A Black man could be lynched for looking at a white woman in a way that some white people thought was the wrong way, and the whites who killed them, again, would never be punished. Or a grown Black man could be killed for not calling a young white boy "sir," or for not stepping off the sidewalk to make way for white people or for any reason or no reason at all. And this was related to the overall outrages to which Black people were subjected. This experience of lynching and its effect on the masses of Black people can in a real sense be taken as representing and concentrating the experience of Black people as a whole, long after literal slavery with all its horrors had been ended in the 1860s.

Frederick Douglass was a slave himself who after he got his own freedom, spent his life fighting against the oppression of Black people and other injustices. Invited to speak at a July Fourth celebration [in 1852], Douglass made clear that July Fourth was nothing to celebrate and that America was guilty of great crimes. Here's what he said about it: "What, to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all of your religious parade and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages....

"There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States at this very hour." And Douglass also said, America may accuse others of savagery, but really it has no equal when it comes to this. He said, "For revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, American reigns without a rival."

As the saying goes, truer words were never spoken. Douglass spoke these words while slavery still legally existed in the United States, but his comments apply just as much even after outright slavery was ended, and all this time, while all these lynchings and other acts of incredible cruelty were being carried out, with all the oppression they embodied and enforced, all this time those who ruled this country, those who refused to do anything to stop these lynchings or other acts of terror and atrocities, those who were responsible for these and other barbaric crimes, all this time, they never stopped proclaiming, "**This is the greatest country in the world... this is the greatest country that has ever been... this is the leader of the free world... this is the homeland of freedom and democracy.**"

It is not just that many white people acted like depraved beasts. And it is not that some were actually devils, although it certainly may have seemed that way many times in the history of this country. The deeper thing is that all these horrors were shaped by, they were encouraged by, and they served to keep in effect a whole system, a system that could not have existed without first slavery, and then near-slavery. And segregation and terror centered in the South while the great majority of Black people lived there, chained in one way or another to the rural South and on white-owned plantations. White supremacy is built into the foundation of this country. It is something this system and those who rule it could not do without even if they wanted to, which they don't. And this has continued down to the present. Despite all the false claims these days about how this is now a colorblind society, segregation and discrimination continue against Black people and other people of color. Every time there is a study or a survey to determine this, it shows without fail that segregation and discrimination exist in housing, in jobs, in schools, in health care, in every part of society. And this continues to be backed up with brutality and violence.

The last time I spoke publicly in this country, in 1979, I took a detour from the speaking tour to go to Chester, South Carolina because Black people there were uprising because a young Black male, in the year 1979, had been lynched for dating a white girl. And more recently in, yes, Texas, there was the horror of what was done to James Byrd, a Black man who was taken by white thugs and good ol' boys, tied to the back of a pickup and

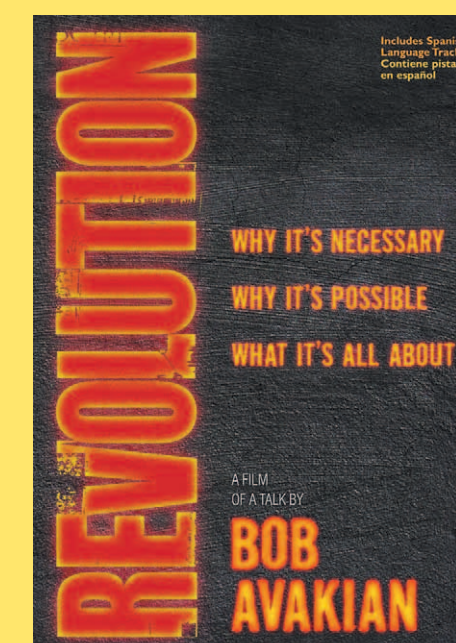
dragged until his head was separated from his body and his body was dismembered.

This is still going on in this "greatest of all countries." But today, it is mostly the police who openly, as the police, carry out brutality and terror against Black youth and Black people in general. Applying that author's statement on lynching to the present, we could put it this way. It is doubtful that there is a young Black male, growing up in the U.S. today, in the South or the North, who does not have a very real fear of being brutalized or even murdered by the police. And again, this touches all Black people. Another book on the history of lynching of Black people in the South makes this point—and think about this: Black parents learn to fear more for some sons than for others: those who were surly, who had attitude, or who were rebellious, or were careless, who had not learned the art of appearing to know their place. They were in greater danger. And tragically, parents had no choice but to try to keep their sons especially from showing those qualities—like self-confidence, curiosity, ambitiousness—that could be interpreted as insolence or arrogance by white people. However, this author goes on to say, there was only so much that could be done by the parents in trying to prevent disaster. Any unlucky circumstance could instantly put a Black man at deadly risk.

And today we see the same thing. In our Party's work in the housing projects, one of the most heart-rending things we've learned is how Black mothers in the projects start to worry early on if the boys that they've given birth to start to show that they might grow up to be large. Because then they'll have everything come down on them that comes down on a large Black male. Think of what this means, that a mother, from the time that her child is two or three years old, has to worry that he might grow up to be too big so he might be seen to be a threat by the police and then cut down and murdered brutally by them.

What kind of a society, what kind of system is this?

This excerpt is from the section of the talk titled "Emmett Till and Jim Crow: Black people lived under a death sentence." View this clip, as well as another relevant section titled "They're selling postcards of the hanging" and other clips, online at <http://www.youtube.com/revolutiontalk>.



REVOLUTION:
Why It's Necessary,
Why It's Possible,
What It's All About
A Film of A Talk by Bob Avakian

Available at revolutiontalk.net and at youtube.com

\$20 + \$3 shipping

Buy the 4-disc DVD set online at revolutiontalk.net or send check or money order to RCP Publications, PO Box 3486, Merchandise Mart, Chicago, IL 60654

In 2003 Chairman Bob Avakian delivered this historic talk.