

History, Lyrics, Text:

A New Historicist Analysis of Bob Dylan's "The Death of Emmett Till"

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Bob Dylan; "The Death of Emmett Till" ; racial oppression; Civil Rights Movement	Bob Dylan's song "The Death of Emmett Till" is not only an artistic portrayal of the 1955 Emmett Till tragedy but also an important work for analyzing racial issues in America from a new historicist view. Through its lyrics and melody, the song vividly tells the story of the Till case, highlighting the oppression of African Americans under Southern white supremacy and Jim Crow laws. Its widespread interpretation has played a key role in advancing the Civil Rights Movement, raising public awareness and prompting reflection on racial inequality. It highlights the song's dual role as both a historical record and an active part in shaping history. In the context of the "Black Lives Matter" movement, "The Death of Emmett Till" has been shared, reinterpreted, and reproduced, becoming a key cultural symbol for addressing racial injustice. Its influence goes beyond time and continues to impact ongoing discussions about racial issues.
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In February 1962, at a conference advocating racial equality held at the Finjan Club in Montreal, Canada, a young Bob Dylan performed the song "The Death of Emmett Till" for the first time. He subsequently performed the song at numerous public events and included it in the 2010 album "The Witmark Demos: 1962-1964 (The Bootleg Series Vol. 9)," reigniting public interest in the Emmett Till case. Since the Black Lives Matter movement received a Nobel Peace Prize nomination in January 2021, racial issues in the United States have once again become a focal point of international discourse. In 2018, Crowe drew parallels between Trayvon Martin, the Black teenager shot by police in Florida in 2012, and Emmett Till, the youth lynched by two white men in 1955, offering a fresh examination of the Till case. He views the 21st-century "Black Lives Matter" shootings as a contemporary reenactment of the 1950s Till incident, demonstrating that while racism has waned, it remains latent within the so-called post-racial era. Research indicates that existing studies on the song "The Death of Emmett Till" predominantly adopt sociological approaches, focusing on its broad societal impact, while few scholars have interpreted it through a new historicist lens. Given that African Americans remain in a relatively disadvantaged social position today, and existing research has failed to fully reveal the dynamic connection between the social realities of racial conflict in the United States and media works through

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historical texts, the profound impact of the Tire lynching continues to remind people to pay attention to racial relations in the United States. Therefore, analysis from a new historicist theoretical perspective is particularly necessary.

Emerging in American academia during the 1980s, New Historicism transcended the limitations of Formalism and Old Historicism. While Formalism tended to view literary works as isolated aesthetic objects, Old Historicism often treated history as mere background for literary study or regarded literature as a passive reflection of history (Shi & Wang, 2008). New Historicism shifted emphasis toward interpreting texts through the lenses of power relations, ideology, and political hegemony (Wang, 1999). Louis Montrose, a leading figure in New Historicism, proposed that the relationship between literary texts and historical contexts can be understood through two dimensions: the historicity of texts and the textuality of history. The textuality of history implies that our entire knowledge and understanding of the past can only be obtained through the exploration of surviving social texts (Shi & Wang, 2008). The historicity of texts manifests in how individual experiential texts reflect the contradictory relationship between society and materiality (Wang, 1999). Inspired by this, this paper utilizes Bob Dylan's lyrics and other relevant literature to explore the racial conflicts and oppression that preceded the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the historical narrativity and textual historicity these phenomena reveal.

1. The Historical Till Lynching Case

In 2003, to fulfill Mamie Till's dying wish, the PBS documentary series *American Experience* aired "The Murder of Emmett Till," reigniting public interest in the case. On August 17, 2005, the documentary *The Untold Story of Emmett Till*, directed by Keith Beauchamp, prompted the U.S. Department of Justice to reopen the Till case. That same year, the FBI conducted an exhumation autopsy to confirm the remains were Till's, revealing previously unknown details through the condition of the body while upholding principles of fairness and justice. In 2010, witness and Till's cousin Simon provided new testimony about Till's presence in the retail store in his book, *Simon's Story: An Eyewitness Account of the Kidnapping of Emmett Till*. In 2017, *The Blood of Emmett Till* exposed Caroline's false allegations of sexual harassment against Till through interviews with her. In 2018, the book *Escaping Murder: The True Story of the Till Lynching* revisited the case and linked it to the Black Lives Matter movement. Although Till had been educated in Chicago's black schools since childhood, the northern city was not as deeply affected by Jim Crow laws as the South. Thus, when Till vacationed in Mississippi, a state plagued by severe racial tensions, he disregarded his mother's warning to show humility around white people. On the evening of Wednesday, August 24, 1955, egged on by friends, Till entered a local retail store to buy candy and whistled as he left¹. At 4 a.m. on Friday, after store owner Roy returned to Muncie County and learned of the *whistle* incident, he abducted Till at 2:30 a.m. on Sunday. The next day, the news devastated Till's mother, Mamie. She immediately

¹ Although Carolyn testified during the subsequent trial that Till had grabbed her hand, tried to ask her out on a date, grabbed her around the waist to hug her, and whistled at her, which infuriated her to the point of grabbing a gun in anger, in the book *The Blood of Emmett Till*, Carolyn admitted to having lied about the incident. According to eyewitness accounts, Till actually whistled after leaving the store and merely handed her some candy. It is suggested that Till whistled to alleviate his stuttering caused by polio, while others believe he did so as a sign of approval of his friends' admiration for the beauty of the store owner, Carolyn.

contacted the Chicago police and newspapers. By Wednesday, a fisherman discovered Till's body. Heartbroken, Mamie used the media to expose the perpetrator's atrocities nationwide, pleading for justice (Tyson, 2017). Yet on September 6, 1955, the day of Till's funeral, a large crowd of Black people gathered, hoping to witness the conviction of the white man who had lynched an innocent Black man. The outcome proved devastating: the suspect was ultimately acquitted. Following the case's conclusion, numerous Black media outlets voiced discontent and protest against the verdict. Some publications, such as the *New York Post*, even predicted that this case marked only the beginning of a nationwide upheaval in racial relations within the struggle for equality and justice. Leveraging the Till case, civil rights leaders like Medgar Evers and Mamie delivered public speeches to raise funds for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Nobel laureate William Faulkner once remarked that this event existed to test humanity's worthiness of survival. If American culture had degenerated to the point of murdering children regardless of skin color, then humanity was unworthy of existence, indeed, incapable of enduring.

Through textual narration, history vividly reveals its authentic visage and the vulnerable position of Black people under white supremacist oppression. In her memoir *Growing Up in Mississippi*, African American writer Anna Moody recalled losing her childhood innocence in Mississippi after seeing Till's photograph in the newspaper. Before Till's murder, she feared only famine, hell, and the devil; afterward, she began dreading assassination simply because of her skin color (Teasley & Ikard, 2010). This case spurred numerous Black women, including civil rights activists and writers like Joyce Ladner, to join civil rights organizations. Simultaneously, many Black women, fearing the Till tragedy might befall them, courageously joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. According to Douglas, biographer of Rosa Parks, when Rosa saw the gruesome image of Till's body in a magazine, she felt profound grief and revulsion, an experience that directly precipitated her refusal to give up her seat (Crowe, 2018). Moreover, print media, as a vehicle for historical events, profoundly influenced the course of history. The Till case spurred his mother, Mamie, to become a civil rights activist and dedicate herself to the activities of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This incident also exposed white supremacist ideology in the American South to public scrutiny, making it a target of widespread condemnation and indirectly winning the support of some white citizens for the civil rights movement (Mace, 2014). After the trial, Mamie traveled north with the NAACP, conducting public speeches and fundraising campaigns led by Congressman Charles Diggs. This ignited a movement involving labor unions, progressive religious groups, old-left activists, and ordinary citizens, transforming the Southern civil rights struggle into a nationwide coalition effort (Tyson, 2017). Overall, Till's death catalyzed the civil rights movement. It not only exposed white supremacists' protection of lynchings and KKK activities but also fueled greater outrage among Black civil rights activists (Mace, 2014). The Till case was unique as the first major civil rights event where media intervention altered the course of events, igniting regionalist sentiments across the North and South (Crowe, 2018). White and Black media across the North and South jointly condemned the South's nominal justice system. Simultaneously, Black journalists from the North, through their involvement in Till's trial and experiences in Mississippi, personally witnessed severe racial discrimination and segregation. These experiences fostered deep empathy for the plight of Southern Blacks whose lives were deemed worthless, leading to more critical reporting. Unlike their white counterparts, they viewed the Till case as an extension of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision at the national level, striving to build popular

support for racial equality and disseminate progressive ideas. Following the verdict, over a thousand people gathered in Paris to protest the outcome, and spontaneous demonstrations erupted in four cities, including Paris. Despite Mississippi's mainstream media attempts to downplay public attention on the incident, the case not only ignited domestic resistance but also severely damaged America's international image across Asia, Africa, Europe, and communist nations. Public memory of this unjust verdict prevailed over attempts to forget it (Mace, 2014). History is preserved through records in newspapers and other media, enabling future generations to reconstruct the past. Simultaneously, public opinion profoundly influenced historical processes, propelling the civil rights movement forward and gradually eradicating the ideology of racial segregation and inequality.²

The death of Emmett Till has acquired new significance in the modern era. In terms of racial power oppression, related songs symbolize the covert oppression of Black people by racism in the new era. In January 2009, Barack Obama's election as America's first Black president led many to believe the nation had entered a post-racial era. However, the 2013 "Black Lives Matter" movement sparked widespread debate about the myth of post-racialism. To this day, many Black Americans continue to debate whether affirmative action has genuinely achieved racial equality or instead created disguised discrimination. While some scholars argue that Obama's election brought hope and optimism to African Americans, symbolizing the possibility of racial reconciliation and equality (Teasley & Ikard, 2010), his presidency, to some extent, obscured the realities of racial inequality and wealth disparity in the United States, while also masking the truth of the deteriorating economic conditions. He not only perpetuated the existing unequal economic system but also excluded racial factors from policy analysis (Teasley & Ikard, 2010). Dylan's song can be seen as a prophecy of the "Black Lives Matter" movement, reflecting his skepticism toward the myth of a post-racial era. The "Black Lives Matter" movement not only shattered the illusion of a post-racial society but also harnessed the power of new media to unite African Americans, writing a new chapter in history and issuing a powerful protest against the oppressive power imposed by white society.

2. The Till Lynching Case in Bob Dylan's Lyrics

"The Death of Emmett Till" is an underrated work by Bob Dylan, less well-known than *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*, which depicts racial incidents. less civil rights-focused or rebellious than *Oxford Town*, which reflects racial tensions during the enrollment of Mississippi's first black college student; less socially significant than *Hurricane*, the theme song for the national "Rolling Thunder Revue" tour organized to

² Spurred by Mamie and the media, the Mayor of Chicago declared July 25th as Emmett Till Day in 1992. Additionally, Beauchamp's 2005 documentary *The Untold Story of Emmett Till* attempted to push for a retrial of the case by exhuming the body and using DNA technology, which once again sparked widespread public interest in the case and ignited a new wave of learning about the Emmett Till case through local and national media. It was due to the continued public attention that the victims of lynching finally received a national apology and a promise to establish a dedicated department (Justice Department office) to review lynching cases. In memory of Till's sacrifice, in 1984 Chicago, Mamie, and Rosa Parks jointly built Emmett Till Road, and in 1995 renamed a bridge in Chicago the Emmett Till Memorial Bridge. On July 2, 2005, a section of Mississippi State Route 49, east of the highway, was renamed the Emmett Till Memorial Highway.

secure bail for a black boxer; and less poetic than *Just a Pawn in Their Game*, commemorating civil rights leader Medgar Evers. Yet this song marked Dylan's first musical engagement with the civil rights movement and his initial challenge to Jim Crow laws and racism. Notably, the song was written as early as 1962 and performed by Joan Baez in 1963, but it wasn't officially included on an album until 1972 and again in 2010.³ Dylan's 2010 re-inclusion of the song signaled his rejection of the myth of America's so-called "post-racial era."

The "historicity of the text" emphasized by New Historicism encompasses three dimensions: First, all texts possess socio-historical roots, being products of specific cultures; second, textual interpretation is not objective but evolves dynamically over time; Finally, texts themselves possess the agency to shape history (Zhang, 2004). "The Death of Emmett Till" not only documented history but also functioned as an active participant in it, driving public attention to the Till case and laying the groundwork for Bob Dylan's establishment as a spokesperson for the civil rights movement. According to New Historicism and Historical Poetics, the "textuality of history" carries dual significance: on one hand, only historical texts preserved through active selection enable people to approach and deeply understand history; on the other, when texts become the basis for historians' interpretations, they once again demonstrate agency and creativity (Zhang, 2004). When songs become historical materials for study in the new era, their blank spaces fully mobilize people's interpretive agency. This not only helps people decipher Dylan's values through his songs but also deepens their understanding of the historical context of the 1950s. Therefore, supplementing relevant historical backgrounds and contexts is indispensable when interpreting texts. This not only helps reveal the agency of the text but also highlights the dynamism of historical narratives.

Despite the Till case drawing widespread public attention, it remains merely one emblematic tragedy among countless unresolved injustices against Black Americans. As public fervor waned, Bob Dylan, adopting the folk-rooted stance of a left-leaning intellectual, paid tribute to all victims of Jim Crow laws and white supremacy. Written in 1962, "The Death of Emmett Till" marked Dylan's first song addressing racial issues and his inaugural protest song (Williamson, 2015). Infused with fierce anger and compassion, Dylan meticulously recounts the entire incident in the lyrics from the death of an innocent Black teenager to the perpetrator's sentencing. The song's first verse provides an overview of the incident, portraying a young boy murdered because of his skin color. Dylan contrasts the boy's origins in *Chicago* with the crime's location in *Mississippi*, alluding to differing levels of racism between the North and South. By emphasizing the boy's youth, he implicitly contextualizes the historical backdrop. Following the Civil War, regional perspectives on this tragedy were shaped by newspaper coverage, creating distinct geographical imprints. Till's mother was a Black woman who migrated north during the Great Migration, so Till grew up in the North. His Northern identity and adolescent age amplified regionalism and territorial conflicts within the United States. The most pronounced regional characteristic emerged as the incident unfolded: the American South, including Mississippi, came to be seen as a microcosm of the nation's broader Black issues. With its large Black population and frequent lynchings, Mississippi was widely perceived as a threat to American democracy. White Mississippians believed their state's laws should remain free from

³ "The Death of Emmett Till" was released in 1972 on the album *Broadside Ballads, Vol. 6: Broadside Reunion*, and again in September 2010 on *The Bootleg Series Vol. 9 – The Witmark Demos: 1962–1964*.

outside interference and that any challenge to white supremacy deserved punishment. Till's flirtation with a white woman was interpreted as a black man's desire for a white woman, violating the taboos of white supremacy. It was perceived as an alleged assault on the purity of white women and a threat to white racial integrity (Mace, 2014). Following the Great Migration, many Chicago blacks had relatives in Mississippi whom they visited regularly. Till's tragedy sounded an alarm: lynching and murder could strike any black child, a realization that pierced their hearts. Thus, during Till's three-day funeral, over 100,000 people, regardless of gender or age, were shocked, terrified, and enraged by the gruesome state of the body (Tyson, 2017).

Moreover, Till precisely belonged to the student group that needed protection in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case. His personal background was unblemished, lacking any prior involvement in the civil rights movement. This fact undoubtedly dealt a heavy blow to the Black community, which had rejoiced at the declared end of public school segregation. Till's influence even surpassed that of civil rights leader Medgar Evers, assassinated in 1963, largely due to his identity as a Northern student and teenager. However, it is noteworthy that Till was not as young and inexperienced as portrayed.

In fact, following the racial conflicts of 1919, Chicago's South Side gradually became predominantly Black, while the North Side remained almost entirely white. By the 1940s, Chicago's real estate market was strictly segregated by race, barring Black residents from living in predominantly white neighborhoods. At that time, Chicago was one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States, with its Black enclaves earning the grim nickname "Mississippi of the North." Till grew up in a strictly segregated Black neighborhood and attended racially segregated Black schools. Yet before the Black children of Mississippi, Till's greatest boast was the voting rights enjoyed by Chicago's Black community (Tyson, 2017).

The second and third verses vividly depict the prevalence of white lynchings in Mississippi, where whites unjustifiably believed they had the right to torment children. This mindset, deeply rooted in the white supremacist traditions of the South, reflects indifference toward lynchings and prejudice against Black people. Till's abduction and murder were ostensibly justified by the criminals' claims that he had whistled at a white woman and made physical advances. In reality, Till had merely broken an unwritten rule by placing candy into the female shopkeeper's hand and whistling as he departed. Perhaps, at this moment, the truth no longer mattered. Only the tragedy born of layers of discrimination remains profoundly thought-provoking. Particularly in the era when multimedia was just emerging, newspaper depictions of Till's horrifyingly mutilated body shocked and enraged many. His skull was crushed, one eye brutally gouged out, and a wound stretching from ear to mouth required stitches to prevent his brain from being exposed. Moreover, the body had lost its youthful features after being submerged in water. Since the 1880s, Mississippi had recorded over five hundred documented lynchings of Black individuals, yet not a single perpetrator had faced trial. Had it not been for the widespread media coverage of Till's horrifying remains and the profound sympathy expressed by tens of thousands at his funeral, the court might not have announced charges against the perpetrators on September 7th (Tyson, 2017). This marked Mississippi's first prosecution of whites for lynching. Before the verdict, all Black people hoped the victim's wrongs would be redressed, drawing widespread attention to the case at the time (Crowe, 2018). Mississippi, where this atrocity occurred, was viewed by other states as a microcosm of Black issues and a barometer of racial tensions. This perception stemmed from its tolerance of lynchings against Black people in the 1920s, the rise to power of white supremacists like Hildo Billbo,

and officials' embrace of communist conspiracy theories regarding the Brown v. Board of Education case (Mace, 2014). Other states, particularly those in the North, viewed Mississippi as a backward backwater of the South due to its high number of lynchings and the mass migration of African Americans northward between 1910 and 1930. This migration not only supplied labor to the Midwest but also provided African Americans with avenues for voice. Following the Great Migration, black newspapers and magazines proliferated, relaying protests against discrimination and housing/employment inequality to the North. These regional publications championed Northern regionalism, becoming pivotal forces in shaping public attention around the Till case. They not only intensified North-South regionalism but also fueled public outrage over lynchings. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, this event was seen as a symbol propelling the development of American democracy. At the time, the internet was still in its infancy, with a history of only a decade or so and not yet widely adopted. Consequently, the perspectives expressed in newspapers and magazines carried distinct regional and fixed characteristics, a trait that positively amplified the voice of the Till case.

The fourth verse of the lyrics likens the absurd spectacle of a defendant confessing in court only to be coerced into denying guilt to a *joke*, whose root cause lies in the regionalism and racism entrenched among white Southerners. On August 28, 1955, exactly one year and three months after the landmark Brown v. Board of Education ruling, as the nation celebrated progress toward racial equality in education, Till's death cast a shadow over the country, reminding Black Americans that the fight for equal rights was far from over. More than a Northern figure, Till represented, in the eyes of the trial judge and jury, a powerful force opposing racial segregation. He symbolized the growing Northern Black influence sparked by Brown v. Board of Education, gradually eroding Southern white supremacy. To assert white sovereignty in Mississippi and defend racial superiority, the trial devolved into a farce, disregarding truth and justice, its outcome predetermined from the outset.

As Section Five noted, the verdict declared Till *drowned* in the *ocean* of Southern Jim Crow laws, and equally drowned in the unjust judicial system of the South. Mississippi, with the largest Black population, had the lowest Black voter turnout, a stark illustration of the region's deep-seated racial discrimination. Consequently, NAACP leader Megra believed the key to advancing the civil rights movement lay in increasing Black voter turnout to amplify Black voices within judicial, legislative, and administrative systems. At that time, the Mississippi chapter of the NAACP was thriving, having successfully pushed for the elimination of segregation in public facilities like gas stations, while its membership continued to grow. Beginning in 1950, the organization initiated petitions to abolish racial segregation in education. However, the Citizens' Council, backed by state funding, employed warnings, threats, and violence to coerce petitioners and NAACP leaders into compromise, even causing unemployment among those involved, severely hindering the petition process. Furthermore, the Council assassinated two key Mississippi leaders, forcing other major figures to flee north. Following Till's murder, these racists used the killings as a warning against school integration and the integration of racial facilities (Tyson, 2017).

Sections Six and Seven warn the world that history must not be ignored and is highly likely to repeat itself, strongly urging unity against the Ku Klux Klan and racist ideology. Dylan's perspective carries distinct contemporary resonance, reflecting the mindset of many white Northerners. Following the Brown v. Board of Education decision, the nation basked in the euphoria of dismantling segregation, and the civil rights movement gained momentum. By the early 1950s, membership in the NAACP

and other civil rights organizations grew steadily, and protests against segregation in public spaces achieved significant results. Building on this foundation, civil rights leaders began organizing black communities to petition for legislation facilitating black voter registration. The Till case highlighted the conflict between whites and blacks. During the active 1950s for civil rights organizations, such cases became focal points for media attention. This stemmed not only from the rise of the domestic civil rights movement but also from international influences. On the global stage, eager to compete with the Soviet Union, the U.S. federal government sought to project an image of national unity. Racial conflicts undeniably undermined the principles of equal rights America championed in the international media. Thus, in 1947, President Truman's Commission on Civil Rights responded to the NAACP's call by elevating domestic racial issues to the international political level, making them a global concern (Tyson, 2017). Against this backdrop, the Till case drew nearly a hundred journalists and over thirty photographers from different states and countries even before the trial began. However, Sheriff Steed's deployment of armed soldiers to patrol and disperse Black citizens and journalists made the tense racial relations in Mississippi starkly evident to onlookers. Simultaneously, a sympathetic female reporter from the United Packing Workers union discovered that speaking with Black men endangered her life and even barred her from attending the trial. Furthermore, the incident where Michigan's African American Congressman Charles was stopped at the courthouse entrance due to his skin color, only granted entry after identification, shocked Mississippi's white community (Tyson, 2017). Facing such formidable obstacles, many media outlets pinned their hopes on the federal government to fairly address domestic racial inequality, thereby curbing the spread of communist ideology and advancing the progress of American democracy. In 1947, the NAACP declared that Mississippi, not the Soviet Union, threatened American democracy. Precisely because of the Cold War context, white Mississippians also viewed the Till tragedy as a conspiracy orchestrated by communists and the NAACP to intensify racial conflict within the state (Mace, 2014).

3. The Contemporary Till Lynching Case

By transforming history into textual form, the song transcends the boundaries between music and society, exerting influence on history through its textuality and thereby shaping historical processes. Yet when "The Death of Emmett Till" was released, critics argued that music should adhere to the principles of entertainment and dramatization, rather than replicating history as Dylan did (Tony). Yet Dylan's meticulous recounting of historical details unquestionably upheld the grassroots stance of left-wing intellectuals, leaving critics who sought to rationalize the racist actions of lynchers like Roy powerless to refute the truth. Whether in the 1960s or today, Bob Dylan's lyricism has consistently been grounded in respect for facts and the transmission of values promoting racial equality. This has led his songs to be regarded as crucial components of the civil rights protest movement after his rise to fame. Particularly following the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the renewed attention on the Till case, these songs have been interpreted as historical documents and have stood the test of time. However, Dylan's songs are not a complete factual record; they contain artistic embellishments. For instance, the criminal mentioned in the lyrics did not publicly confess to killing Till during interrogation, nor were the two related as brothers as described in the lyrics (Carlson, 2010). This text prompts readers to deeply contemplate the relationship between facts and artistic expression. In discourse-driven historical writing, truth is often distorted by factors such as ideology, political hegemony, and mainstream public opinion, leading to

discrepancies between textual narratives and historical facts. However, leftist intellectuals like Dylan and participants in the civil rights movement tended to embrace such discourse-driven historical narratives. Dylan's approach not only reveals the textual nature of history but also offers readers a fresh perspective on the relationship between justice and truth (Carlson, 2010).

Hayden White, a leading figure of New Historicism, was profoundly influenced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. White introduced Foucault's ideas into the study of the relationship between history and text, developing a "historical poetics" aimed at decoding, correcting, and undermining dominant discourses (Wang, 1997). Foucault hoped that the conquered masses subjected to power could possess their own history. Yet, while some among these masses exercised their legitimate rights through violent mobilization and resistance, they lacked a distinct language to articulate their history (Brossat, 2014). Against the backdrop of highly developed mass media and increasingly diverse individuality, the struggles of oppressed groups against power have become multifaceted and fragmented. Yet the legitimacy of such resistance is often suppressed by political figures, journalists, juries, and similar groups, even erased from subsequent historical narratives. (Brossat, 2014) The victims of Jim Crow laws, symbolized by lynchings, require new chroniclers to defend the legitimacy of their rediscovery and vindication. Much like Bob Dylan's reflection on the falseness of songwriting motives in interviews, historical texts face a choice under discursive constraints: selectively accept facts to uphold justice, or respect facts while accepting injustice? To "make things clear" or to "tell the truth" (Brossat, 2014)? Dylan chose the former. Influenced by his values, growing numbers of people were inspired to join the civil rights struggle, thereby propelling the course of history.

Unlike Dylan's meticulous recounting of historical details, Nina repeatedly emphasizes her profound hatred for Mississippi after being enlightened in Alabama and Tennessee, the birthplaces of the civil rights movement, cursing the land that claimed the lives of black men like Till and Megra. Both Nina and Dylan were courageous voices in the civil rights struggle, making personal choices amid the acute racial tensions of the 1960s. Thus, as the Black Lives Matter movement intensified in the 21st century, their lyrics were reinterpreted as historical documents, revealing new contemporary significance. In contrast, Dylan's lyrics carry greater didactic significance, while Nina's lyrics express more of the protest sentiment of Black people, revealing certain limitations. "The Death of Emmett Till" not only reflects the creator's values as a musical work, but its catchy melody also amplifies its impact. It powerfully challenged the entrenched racial views of white supremacists, exposed the injustices of the Southern justice system, and laid bare the pernicious effects of Jim Crow laws. As a text, the lyrics document history while simultaneously shaping historical processes, embodying the interplay between textual expression and historical reality. Together with related literature, the song constructs the image of Till's victimhood and the profound racial discrimination it reflects, elements that have gradually become symbols of history. They warn people to recognize and resist the lingering, hidden racial discrimination within American society, compelling a reexamination of the so-called post-racial era myth against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Announcement

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