Grief Capital, Grief Activism: The Brief Life of Mamie Till Bradley's NAACP Tour

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Abstract. In 1955, Mamie Till Bradley spoke throughout the country on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to bring justice to her recently murdered son, Emmett Till. While most scholarship focuses on Bradley's choice to publicize her son's mutilated body, I analyze her understudied NAACP-sponsored grief tour and her ensuing public fallout with the organization. Focusing on her attempts to create an infrastructure of care and compensation for herself, I forward the concept of *grief capital* to demonstrate how Black women and institutions make decisions based on the financial substrates of Black maternal grief.

Mamie Till Bradley apologized for the appearance of her coat, although it bore no wrinkles. "It's pretty hard to keep a coat presentable when you're using it for a blanket most time,"[1] she told a reporter for the *Baltimore Afro-American*. Bradley had spent the better part of October 1955 traveling on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to deliver speeches at churches and public rallies throughout Mississippi, the Mid-Atlantic, and the Midwest to bring justice to her recently murdered son. On August 20, 1955, Bradley sent her 14-year-old son, Emmett Till, on a two-week summer vacation to visit family in Money, Mississippi. Emmett would indeed return to her in Chicago two weeks later, but as a mutilated corpse, after two white brothers, J. W. Millam and Roy Bryant, beat, shot, and sank Emmett's body in the Tallahatchie River for allegedly making untoward comments to Bryant's wife Carolyn. Millam and Bryant were tried for the abduction and murder of Emmett, but despite the ensuing media maelstrom, an all-white male jury deliberated for only one hour and found the brothers not guilty on both counts on September 23, 1955.

Rhaisa Kameela Williams is an assistant professor of theater in the Lewis Center for the Arts at Princeton University. Currently, she is writing her manuscript, Mama, Don't You Weep: Black Motherhood, Performance, and the Costs of Grief *(under contract with New York UP), which traces the intimate relationship between grief and Black motherhood from the civil rights movement to the present. Her work has been supported by the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium, as well as the Mellon, Woodrow Wilson, and Ford foundations, and has appeared or is forthcoming in* College Literature, Transforming Anthropology, Callaloo, *and* Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly.

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[1] Mary Strafford, "'When I Find Time I'll Cry,' Till's Mother Tells AFRO," *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 29, 1955, 2.

Most scholars tend toward hagiography of Bradley,[2] who is celebrated for "reconfigur[ing] her personal grief as public crisis" by insisting that others bear witness to the brutal violence wrought upon her child.[3] Against common practices to keep the state of his body from public view and a mandate from the state of Mississippi to keep the casket closed, Bradley held a four-day open-casket wake and funeral at Roberts Temple on the South Side of Chicago. Estimates of mourners widely range, with accounts reporting between six thousand and one hundred thousand attendees.[4] She also allowed Black media outlets to photograph and circulate Emmett's mutilated face, most notably in an issue of *Jet* magazine. Often captioned by Bradley's insistence to "[l]et the people see what they have done to my boy,"[5] the harrowing image transformed her into one of the first icons of Black maternal grief of the civil rights movement.[6] Many cite the reverberations from the image of Emmett's body as reinvigorating the movement,[7] which reweaponized the forms of looking that lynching photography historically enacted.[8]

However, Bradley's labor and pursuit of justice after the funeral have received much less attention. Bradley's engagements, in which she spoke to thousands of people, were tied to the NAACP's larger agenda of forcing Southern states to reverse their segregationist practices and laws. Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP, agreed that Bradley's name drew crowds and helped revive the organization's reputation among Black people who were otherwise losing interest in its emphasis on desegregation.[9] Bradley's continued role in bringing attention to Emmett's murder, then, highlights the power of spectacle. By "spectacle," I mean the public objects that "ti[e] individuals into an economy of looks and looking."[10] But the economy of looking toes a porous boundary. Derived from the Latin *spectāculum* ("to look"), "spectacle" connotes public

[2] Koritha Mitchell, "Mamie Bradley's Unbearable Burden: Sexual and Aesthetic Politics in Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*," *Callaloo* 31, no. 4 (2008): 1048-67; Myisha Priest, "'The Nightmare Is Not Cured': Emmett Till and American Healing," *American Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2010): 1-24; Nicole R. Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

[3] Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 88.

[4] Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 93.

[5] Theodore Coleman, "Latest Atrocity in Mississippi Arouses Nation," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 10, 1955, 1.

[6] See Rhaisa Kameela Williams, "Toward a Theorization of Black Maternal Grief as Analytic," *Transforming Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (2016): 17-30; Jennifer C. Nash, "Unwidowing: Rachel Jeantel, Black Death, and the 'Problem' of Black Intimacy," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 4 (2016): 751-74.

[7] See Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, 24; Jesse L. Jackson Sr., foreword to *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America*, by Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson (New York: Random House, 2003), xi-xiii.

[8] Raiford, *Imprisoned*.

[9] "Mississippi Pressures-Rallies and Meetings: West Coast, 1955," January 1, 1955, 2, folder 001459-014-0442, Papers of the NAACP, Part 18: Special Subjects, 1940-1955, Series C: General Office Files: Justice Department-White Supremacy. As an older organization established in 1909, the NAACP had to compete with newer Black civil rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), led by charismatic leaders Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis, respectively. For more, see Yvonne Ryan, *Roy Wilkins: The Quiet Revolutionary and the NAACP* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018).

[10] Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 119.

display for the purposes of "either (a) of curiosity or contempt, or (b) of marvel or admiration."[11] Amy E. Hughes finds that spectacle as "a communication strategy" has been "taken less seriously" than other forms of communication "due to long-lived assumptions that its main purpose is to amuse or decorate rather than provoke."[12] These assumptions take on heightened meanings within activism, where spectacle surfaces in the tense but symbiotic relationship between fun entertainment and serious provocation that activists need to draw on to sustain people's attention and support. The role of spectacle is especially fraught in grief activism, where any signs of levity are viewed as tasteless and the only acceptable affects are those of sadness and measured anger.

This tension emerged a few weeks into the NAACP's partnership with Bradley. "Confronted with a series of rumors growing out of her nationwide speaking tour," including whispers that she used proceeds to purchase a new home and car, Bradley's relationship to money came into question. Her attempts to renegotiate her touring contract with the organization to cover unforeseen expenses exacerbated these speculations, as the public viewed this overture as her being more invested in the attention-grabbing and self-aggrandizing aspects of spectacle. In a 1955 press appearance, Bradley "spiked" the barrage of questions "one by one": "My mother bought the home that I live in in Nov. 1951. It is an old beat up building. . . . As for a car, I bought the automobile on Feb. 25, 1955. I might lose my car, but I don't think I will lose my home."[13] Bradley had to assure the public of her commitment to justice by airing her proximity to precarity, such as the threat of car repossession and the possibility of home foreclosure. The barrage of questions highlights a constant battle activists must wage to prove their sincerity by choosing either the "paycheck" or "the movement."[14] The pressures of this dichotomy are magnified for subjects at the center of spectacles, since not only their carework is questioned as labor worthy of pay, but their relationships to objects of subsistence—such as requests for housing and security—are viewed as superfluous and luxurious demands. Rumors of Bradley's capitalizing on her son's murder bloomed into a public fallout between her and the NAACP. By mid-November 1955, headlines about the organization and Bradley's partnership resembled phrases from a nasty, protracted divorce: "Till's Mother, NAACP Rift Over Money"; "Mamie Bradley Says NAACP Used Son."[15] Her attempts to renegotiate the terms of her touring contract to cover unforeseen costs associated with her ascent to a macabre celebrity status, such as hospital bills, operational costs, and wage replacement, had backfired, with Wilkins interpreting them as acts of haughtiness and vanity that derailed attention from the fight for racial justice.

In this essay, I draw on Black press articles, Bradley's autobiographical account in *The Death of Innocence* (2003), and underexamined NAACP's board meeting notes to analyze her understudied NAACP-sponsored grief tour and her ensuing public fallout with the organization. I argue that turning to the financial substrates of grief—here be-

[11] *Oxford English Dictionary*, "spectacle," https://www.oed.com/dictionary/spectacle_n1.

[12] Amy E. Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform: Theater and Activism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 7.

[13] "Mrs. Mamie Bradley Routs False Reports," *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 5, 1955, 7.

[14] Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 259.

[15] "Till's Mother, NAACP Rift over Money," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 19, 1955, 2; Clyde Reid, "Mamie Bradley Says NAACP Used Son: NAACP Criticized," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 24, 1955, 1.

ing Bradley's attempts to cover the costs of ongoing material constraints—cuts through the assumptions that tried to forcibly uphold Bradley as a *symbolic* mother of a slain child instead of an *embodied* mother who had to navigate material constraints that were augured or augmented by her child's murder. Although the period is brief, the shifts are staggering. In eight weeks, Bradley helped organize a multiday wake and funeral, watched her son's murderers walk away from all culpability, toured numerous cities advocating for the pursuit of justice, and then was maligned by the organization that had most supported her. Close attention to these quick and successive shifts reframes Bradley from being a symbolic icon whose "signature act" was publicizing Emmett's mutilated body to a standard-bearer of the ongoing processes and negotiations that account for the material afterlives of grief.[16] I analyze Bradley's demands for her personal care and the backlash those demands unleashed through the fraught intersection of spectacle and performance that make explicit how Bradley navigated the borders of frivolity and seriousness, of theatricality and authenticity. Doing so repositions her beyond the "weight of the symbolic," which, as Jennifer Nash argues, overdetermines the types of suffering that make Black mothers amenable to the public's mercy.[17]

Focusing on Bradley's fallout with the NAACP inserts her in recent turns within scholarship that resists analyzing Black mothers as symbols of grief and instead ruminates on the ongoing burdens they face in their "altered reality."[18] As Juliet Hooker insists of activists impelled by personal grief, there is an "urgent need to consider the costs of 'grieving activism'" since "making Black loss visible often comes at the expense of surviving loss."[19] Part of this cost is the inability to visualize their accumulating needs since these activists are treated as grief's products, frozen to the event of trauma.[20] This means overlooking the types of institutions Black women have easily or reluctantly aligned with,[21] not to mention the impact of grief activism on their life expectancy.[22] As a paragon of politicizing Black maternal grief, Bradley's impact has been largely uninterrogated beyond the photograph.[23] Therefore, few scholars have analyzed the material afterlives of grief that Bradley faced and how she tried to resist being treated as an uncomplicated symbol. The most notable exception is Ruth Feldstein, who was one of the first scholars to pay sustained attention to the complex relationship between Bradley and the NAACP through her trenchant discourse analysis of newspaper coverage of Bradley following Emmett's funeral.[24]

[16] Jennifer C. Nash and Samantha Pinto, "Strange Intimacies: Reading Black Maternal Memoirs," *Public Culture* 32, no. 3 (2020): 504.

[17] Jennifer C. Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 6.

[18] Erica S. Lawson, "Bereaved Black Mothers and Maternal Activism in the Racial State," *Feminist Studies* 44, no. 3 (2018): 713; Rhaisa Kameela Williams, "Choreographies of the Ongoing: Episodes of Black Life, Events of Black Lives," *Biography* 41, no. 4 (2018): 760-76; Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers*.

[19] Juliet Hooker, *Black Grief/White Grievance: The Politics of Loss* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 182.

[20] Brenda Tindal, "'Its Own Special Attraction': Meditations on Martyrdom and the Iconicity of Civil Rights Widows," in *ConFiguring America: Iconic Figures, Visuality, and the American Identity*, ed. Klaus Rieser et al. (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2013); Nash, "Unwidowing."

[21] Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers*, 28; Mali Collins, "The Purity of Scraps: Refused Memorials and Black Maternal Archival Praxis of Samaria Rice," *The Black Scholar* 52, no. 4 (2022): 16-26.

[22] Joy James, *New Bones Abolition: Captive Maternal Agency and the Afterlife of Erica Garner* (Philadelphia: Common Notions, 2023).

[23] Williams, "Toward a Theorization."

[24] Feldstein, *Motherhood*.

My reading of the arrangement and breakdown of her partnership with the NAACP through performance studies is particularly generative, as it offers a "unique 'grammar' of political resistance" that helps me analyze this understudied part of her life "as a set of artistic and everyday practices that both generate symbolic meanings and function as actions."[25] The grammar I am mining bridges theory, symbolism, and material embodiment to consider the material and financial consequences of being an icon rooted in Black maternal grief. I utilize what D. Soyini Madison calls the "fluid rubrics of performance" that "[deepen] the details of black expressivities and transgressions within . . . circulations of inequality."[26] Therefore, while Feldstein's examination of the fallout between Bradley and the NAACP is rooted in the political economy of Cold War liberalism, I ground Bradley in longer histories of Black maternal grief that have been tethered to the "as/is" dichotomy that undergirds how performance is understood "as simultaneously 'real' and 'constructed.'"[27] Doing so highlights the suspicions of self-interested motivations that permeated receptions of Bradley's public attempts to create an infrastructure of care and compensation for herself.

The remainder of the essay analyzes this brief partnership and contentious separation. The second section demonstrates how Bradley explained her work in galvanizing and sustaining the public's attention to forge an official partnership with the NAACP so that she could receive the entitlements and protections of being a contracted laborer and thus create a more equitable relationship with the organization. Through my articulation of *grief capital*, I analyze how Bradley understood and deployed her financial worth to the NAACP. Grief capital focuses on how Black women and institutions make decisions based on the financial substrates of Black maternal grief. By theorizing how Bradley understood her own grief capital, I map how she perceived her shifting financial value in the unfolding entanglements of grief and grievance, which she then used to negotiate improved conditions. In the third section, I theorize why her attempts failed. In thinking about Bradley through the porousness of spectacle, I reveal how her demands for an infrastructure of care and compensation clashed with racist and gendered expectations of Black maternal grief: that of amorphous suffering. I posit that amorphous suffering inhibits Black women from naming their specific and material challenges to preserve them as uncomplicated symbols of the traumatic event that thrust them in the spotlight. I show that Bradley insisted that her ongoing personal and financial challenges should be offset by her grief capital. In other words, she refused to be made into a symbol of amorphous suffering and was penalized and rejected as a result.

Performance, Spectacle, and Black Maternal Grief

In the weeks following Emmett's murder, reporters and the public scrutinized Bradley's personal history and her real-time appearances, illustrating how "[Black] moth-

[25] Silvija Jestrovic, "Theatricality vs. Bare Life: Performance as a Vernacular of Resistance," in *The Grammar of Politics and Performance*, ed. Shirin M. Rai and Janelle Reinelt (New York: Routledge, 2005), 80-81.

[26] D. Soyini Madison, foreword to *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), vii.

[27] For Diana Taylor, "as/is" of performance distinguishes performance as both an object of study and a method of inquiry. Taylor distinguishes the "as/is" dichotomy from Richard Schechner's in her assessment that the "is" reveals an underlying tension of performance that always "simultaneously" characterizes performance as the "'real' and 'constructed.'" Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 3.

erhood itself was a battleground on which the meaning of Till's death was fought."[28] Numerous newspaper accounts shared precise details about Bradley's physical appearance and relationship status. Reporters described Bradley as "[t]he 34-year-old attractive mother" who "has a clear complexion, ready smile, and large kindly brown eyes."[29] According to Feldstein, these descriptions attested to Bradley's appropriately feminine and nonthreatening demeanor. Her romantic relationships were also important in "assuaging doubts regarding her respectability and motherhood."[30] Bradley married Emmett's father, Louis Till, a soldier who was killed while stationed in Italy during World War II. Therefore, her first marriage ended in death and not divorce. A few years later, she and "Pink" Bradley wed, resulting in a strained union that Bradley characterized as a capitulation to marriage ideals.[31]

Establishing Bradley as a properly gendered woman also secured her as a credible witness for Emmett's innocence. As Feldstein asserts, "The degree to which Till had been successfully mothered would corroborate his innocence and his 'Americanism' as well as the legitimacy of those who opposed his murder."[32] Such corroboration was an essential component in antilynching campaigns. As Koritha Mitchell writes, since Black men were often the targets of mob violence, Black mothers and wives "routinely survived the physical attack" and thus bore "witness to what it means to live with lynching."[33] The most credible witness needed to display suffering, vulnerability, and sincerity and to be a figurehead whom others wanted to protect. Leigh Raiford writes that their images "aim to embody the loss of the male victims" and thus generate "anger for the outrageous violation of sacrosanct motherhood."[34] Evidence of Bradley's "proper mothering" came out in the ways she described preparing Emmett for his trip to Mississippi. To prove she had not raised a disrespectful child, Bradley shared with reporters from the *Baltimore Afro-American* that she had instructed her son that if he were to inadvertently offend a white man, "he should get down on his knees, take off his hat, and say, 'Please sir, spare me this time. I didn't mean to do it.'"[35] And the myriad photographs that featured Bradley in various states of collapse with Black men holding her up attest to what Feldstein views as Bradley's "weakness, even hysteria, and her need to defer to men [that] confirmed her femininity, religiosity, and her 'authenticity' as an American woman and mother."[36]

The witnessing capacity of Black mothers and wives was tethered to performance, which in turn was paramount to authenticating crisis and attracting public attention.[37] Such performances served as a "corporeal show-and-tell" through which Black

[28] Ruth Feldstein, "'I Wanted the Whole World to See': Race, Gender, and Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 265.

[29] Larry Still, "Time Out for Crying: Mrs. Bradley Tells Inside Story," *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 29, 1955, 5; Strafford, "When I Find Time," 2.

[30] Feldstein, *Motherhood*, 94.

[31] Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 57.

[32] Feldstein, *Motherhood*, 91.

[33] Koritha Mitchell, *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship; 1890-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 147.

[34] Raiford, *Imprisoned*, 53.

[35] Strafford, "When I Find Time," 2.

[36] Feldstein, *Motherhood*, 94.

[37] A similar reliance on Black people's performing grief and suffering happened in antislavery campaigns. Dwight McBride illustrates how desires for "authentic" accounts of enslavement increased

women could demonstrate violence and "other residues of racial violence that escape documentation."[38] But those performances also risked the looming threat of emotional instability. Not only is emotional instability gendered as feminine, but it is also racialized. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson observed that grief for Black people was transient, signaling their emotional immaturity. Reflection was needed to adequately express grief, a mental capability he believed Black people lacked.[39] Enslavers demonstrated similar beliefs in the affective deficiencies of Black people when they accused enslaved Black women who were grieving the loss of their children as feigning madness to get out of work or to incite social rebellion.[40] The contrived underpinnings of performance and the emotional transience that Jefferson articulated thus cast Black mothers' enactments of grief as fake or insincere.[41]

Performance, then, served as the vehicle not only to surface an interiority that evidenced authentic love and mourning but also to dispute that authenticity because it could be outwardly produced on demand.[42] The tension from this intersection becomes more pronounced when we turn to the broader history of spectacle and gendered forms of Black suffering. The porousness of spectacle, bordering between benign amusement and serious provocation, makes it useful in varied contexts, from circus and freak shows to political agendas. Racial melodrama, for instance, is one genre that highlights all potential uses of spectacle.[43] Used to condemn and promote slavery, the spectacle of the Black suffering body, particularly its "vulnerability to violence," as Saidiya Hart-

demands to have Black people publicly share their experiences with enslavement since their witnessing held more significance than that of white abolitionists. Dwight A. McBride, *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* (New York: New York University Press, 2001). Excitement for staged accounts of enslavement by formerly enslaved people also led to heightened demands for theatrical entertainment by Black people. Douglas A. Jones Jr. shows how desires for empiricism in the nineteenth century, indexed by the "'truth' and the 'authentic,'" "led to the steady inclusion of black performers in the nineteenth-century theatrical mainstream." Douglas A. Jones Jr., *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 136.

[38] Autumn Womack, "Lynching's Afterlife," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 6, no. 1 (2018): 205, 208.

[39] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. Frank Shuffelton (1785; New York: Penguin, 1999).

[40] Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 177-78.

[41] Comedian Richard Pryor created a skit that riffs on Black women's emotional transience. Set in the 1950s, the bit depicts Pryor—acting as a white Southern lawyer—defending a white woman who claims a Black man raped her despite proof the man was locked in prison at the time of the alleged rape. A Black woman makes her way out of the "negro" section of the courtroom and pleads with Pryor not to kill her son, to which he calmly responds, "Ma'am, this boy is not your son." Embarrassed, the Black woman returns promptly to her seat. *The Richard Pryor Show*, episode 2, written by David Banks et al., directed by John Moffitt, featuring Richard Pryor, Jeff Corey, and Charles Fleischer, aired September 27, 1977, on NBC, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEQe4LjZlBM.

[42] For more on uses of performance to access interiority, see Tony Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex: Race, Madness, Activism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

[43] For more on freak shows and political agendas, see Analola Santana, *Freak Performances: Dissidence in Latin American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018); Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). Racial melodrama is a genre that highlights all potential uses of spectacle. For more on racial melodrama, see Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Rebecca Wanzo, *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009); Mitchell, *Living with Lynching*; Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform*; Jones, *Captive Stage*.

man argues, has been central to the genre. As melodramas "establish[ed] a connection between racial legibility and moral legibility,"[44] Hartman avers that the enduring feature of Black people's vulnerability to violence that constituted the spectacle of Blackness ironically caused "the dissimulation of suffering through spectacle."[45] Hartman's attention to spectacle shows how it balances the promise of being immediately gripping and the danger of being quickly forgettable. If, as Peggy Phelan argues, performance "becomes itself through disappearance,"[46] then it sets a perverse loop wherein the "reality" of suffering happens only through its reiterative performance. This reflects the undergirding tension of performance as contrived and authentic.

The ways Black women managed their performances of grief illumine the razor-thin line between authenticity and dissimulation. Such management—which includes showing sadness while being composed, or "quiet restraint"[47]—signaled "vulnerable Black maternity and endangered Black male flesh" as a mixture "of tenderness and terror, of love and loss."[48] Therefore, seemingly simple mentions of Bradley's outward appearances gestured toward powerful assumptions of quiet restraint. For instance, when Bradley disembarked from her train for a speaking engagement, a reporter remarked that although her "soft blue coat" "was unwrinkled," Bradley apologized for its appearance. Bradley explained how it is "pretty hard to keep a coat presentable when you're using it for a blanket most time."[49] The mention of the color and state of the coat portrayed her as unflappable in the face of material discomforts and thus signaled her commitment to the herculean task of racial justice. In addition, Bradley's explanation that her coat doubled as a blanket indexed another assumption of quiet restraint: that of resourcefulness. Evidence of resourcefulness staved off accusations of financial recklessness that would imperil her image as a vulnerable Black mother. It was imperative, then, that Black grieving mothers not "taint" their vulnerability with financial needs.

Viviana A. Zelizer writes that financial decisions and acts that fall under carework such as mothering or activism are falsely viewed as "hostile worlds," with a neat divide between financially based decisions that are believed to be rationally calculated and carework-based acts that are believed to be driven by emotions such as love and loyalty. Therefore, explicit connections between money and carework are discouraged since it is imagined that their combination "produces double corruption [by] encouraging the exploitation of care giving by scheming opportunists."[50] Black mothers are even more susceptible to the charge of scheming due to fraught racist histories of Black suffering and maternal grief. The enduring specter of the untrustworthy, self-serving Black mother haunted Bradley. Each respectable aspect of her life lent itself to criticism.

[44] Judith Hamera, *Unfinished Business: Michael Jackson, Detroit, and the Figural Economy of American Deindustrialization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 62. Here, Hamera builds on Williams, *Playing the Race Card*.

[45] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 26, 22. Elizabeth Alexander also contends with how the repetition of bodily vulnerability constitutes Blackness in "'Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (1994): 77-94.

[46] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 2006), 146.

[47] Nash, "Unwidowing," 759.

[48] Ibid., 753.

[49] Strafford, "When I Find Time," 2.

[50] Viviana A. Zelizer, *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 161.

Largely raising Emmett as a single parent who earned her own salary marked her as "too independent" and individualistic. Her middle-class standing marked her as potentially too status-conscious and vain.[51] Thus, she was already vulnerable to being perceived as money-conscious, or even greedy. These histories of contrived performance, emotional instability, vanity, and selfishness would pervade her relationship with the NAACP.

Grief Capital

After Emmett's burial on September 6 and before the start of Millam and Bryant's trial on September 22, Bradley began giving speeches at various churches to continue raising awareness. Bradley's cousin Ray Mooty, who had close ties with labor unions throughout Chicago, arranged her public appearances. The speeches and appearances proved successful, and the money raised was donated to the NAACP to help in their efforts to bring justice to Emmett. However, the "slow, painstaking, behind-the-scenes" organizational work that comes with the business of arranging, performing, and following up with speaking engagements quickly proved overwhelming for the two.[52] They could not properly vet organizations before accepting invitations—a critical step, since speaking to organizations with potential Communist party affiliations would have proved fatal for Emmett's case given that J. Edgar Hoover suspected that Bradley "was a little 'pink'"; it also proved difficult to ensure the funds raised at the events actually reached the NAACP.[53]

Millam and Bryant's not-guilty verdict raised not only the public's ire but also demands for Bradley's appearances. Since the NAACP had staffing resources, she and Mooty reached out to Roy Wilkins. They met for the first time in New York in late September. Bradley described Wilkins as "serious and determined" and "cerebral." He "had to think about an entire organization as well as all the people in it. He had to think about an agenda. He made that clear in our meeting." Part of Wilkins's agenda, Bradley shared, was gauging how an individual's intentions may counter those of the organization. This concern underscored his apprehension of having the NAACP manage her speaking tour, since "he felt that some people in the past had used the organization, only to abandon it once they had gotten what they wanted."[54]

But Bradley was shrewd and made clear how the organization benefited from her son's murder. Under Wilkins's charge, the NAACP's national agenda was that of desegregation to force change on all three levels of government.[55] Yet that approach had its limits. Plainly put, the long, drawn-out minutiae of bureaucracy did not make for good social drama, and progress was hard to see at the ground level. With many Black people viewing the organization as out of touch, and with mounting expenses from fighting desegregation legal cases, the NAACP suffered from decreased membership and depleted funds.[56] Unlike the "complicated sorting [of] Supreme Court decisions," Bradley stated, "as people began to realize that 'all deliberate speed' meant just the

[51] Feldstein, *Motherhood*, 92.

[52] Paige A. McGinley, "'Experimenting with a New Technique': Performance and Rehearsal in the Long Civil Rights Movement," *Theatre Journal* 73, no. 1 (2021): 4.

[53] Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 193-94.

[54] Ibid., 194.

[55] Roy Wilkins, with Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 234.

[56] Ryan, *Roy Wilkins*.

opposite of what it sounded like it meant," Emmett's murder made people "energized" and "angry."[57] His murder, and specifically, the photograph of his body, is what Hughes calls a "spectacular instant," "a heightened, fleeting, and palpable moment . . . that captivates the spectator through multiple planes of engagement."[58] Bradley was keenly aware that the spectacular instant of her son's murder could inspire a movement.

However, Bradley also understood the labor involved in making others care. Writing about the power of visual instruments, Raiford explains that "technology can, for better or for worse, offer a sort of visual shorthand" that may initially incite others, but it is not enough to organize them.[59] In other words, Bradley had to extend the spectacular instant into a spectacularized ongoing. That transition—from heightened, fleeting moment to ongoing, enduring legacy—did not occur simply from Bradley's allowing Emmett's body to be photographed. It also depended on Bradley's superb speaking and social skills, which served as the oxygen to enliven and sustain engagement. It called on her emotional prowess to connect with the wide range of audiences. As Bradley explained, "I spoke about just how close Mississippi really was to Chicago and to New York" in order to invigorate Northern audiences who may have felt geographically safe from racist acts. For the people who had depersonalized Emmett's murder to its headlines, "I spoke of what it meant to have to examine every inch of a body to even recognize it as a human being, let alone your own flesh and blood. I spoke about the pain a mother feels when she learns about the suffering of her baby." To those people who felt that her story was extraordinary and could never happen to them, "I spoke from the heart about what it meant to send a boy away on vacation and bring him home in a box." To those caught up only on the emotional end, "I spoke about a murder trial that was really a farce. I spoke about Mississippi justice, where the laws seemed to be turned inside out." And at the close of it all, "I urged people to contribute money to finance the fight that we could see ahead of us. Oh, and those contributions just rolled in. Thousands and thousands of dollars, I was told."[60] Given the incessant demand for her speeches, it was clear that she knew how to translate her grief into poignant and powerful words.

Speaking on matters from a place of expertise is one thing. It's another to *speak* on them, where words activate the performative potential Nicole Fleetwood ascribes to "racial icons" who "make us want to do something" in their rallies that garner "such emotional force that we are compelled: to do, to feel, to see."[61] Bradley possessed what Joseph Roach designates as the power of "It," a "precarious balancing between . . . mutually exclusive alternatives" such as "strength and vulnerability, innocence and experience, and singularity and typicality."[62] Bradley's adjectival equipoise delicately balanced the nouns she had to navigate to be "an appropriate symbol of exemplary motherhood and womanhood."[63] But Bradley's detailed description of her forms of engagement demonstrates the labor that gets overlooked in acknowledging only titular status. She revealed an embodied knowledge and skill with a cultural repertoire that required precision to transpose the emotional force of images and words into action

[57] Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 191.
[58] Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform*, 8.
[59] Raiford, *Imprisoned*, 88.
[60] Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 192.
[61] Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, 4. While outside the scope of this essay, Bradley should be considered one of the great orators of the civil rights movement.
[62] Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 8.
[63] Feldstein, *Motherhood*, 94.

for others to take. Which is to say, she redirected affective care into embodied action—whether that encouraged people to donate money, volunteer at rallies or events, or write to state legislature. Magnetism is not all there is to "It" that makes people care. Instead, it is a magnetism that needs to be fostered and tailored, over and over, to make people care and do. And to keep caring in order to keep doing. Feelings-management, narrative-tailoring, and active-listening are all *work.*

Pointing out Bradley's shrewdness does not undermine her commitment to racial justice. Rather, it illustrates her understanding of how her performances of grief moved people emotionally to fight for an important cause and enabled the NAACP to gather the material resources required to do such work. In other words, she was aware of how her performances of grief translated into discrete political and financial assets for the organization. It was presented as part of the bargain the organization received for being associated with *her.* She plainly articulated what I term her *grief capital* as a resource for which she fought to be compensated. Bringing together "grief," thought of as unfettered, raw emotion, and "capital," the property of value assignment across time that is a legal as much as financial entity,[64] illustrates how the personal and the communal, the individual and the political, the thrust upon and the managed, exist alongside and inform each other. The tensions of sincerity and spectacle—pitted as authentic and worthy of care versus contrived and undeserving of care—emerge in considering how a Black mother in the depths of personal grief and racial justice, described as "put[ting] the struggle for emancipation and outrage above personal privacy and pride,"[65] also saw herself through transactive measures.

My concept of grief capital is informed by the work of Rebecca Wanzo and Jennifer Nash, both of whom have mapped how Black women jostle for space in a large marketplace of discourse. Wanzo's study details how Black women have mobilized "political sentimentality" to "make political claims."[66] Part of its utility and danger lies in its investment in suffering that elicits sympathy and action from others, what Nash calls "the Left 'marketplace' of narratives for Black motherhood" that tether them to particular notions of crisis. Nash, who builds on Wanzo's project, argues that progressive institutions and leaders pull on "the institutional construction of crisis" for their own needs and that Black mothers and activists also participate in the "strategic deployment of crisis rhetoric."[67] Both Wanzo and Nash find that the affects and narrative devices of suffering and crisis are "imperfect and often dangerous" and that Black women struggle with the delimiting representations either narrative allows.[68] Nonetheless, these narrative devices allow their material conditions and needs to be visible and in some way alleviated. Like Wanzo and Nash, my use of grief capital considers the parameters of narrative legibility to make one's injuries seen and thus worthy of recompense, in other words, to transform personal grief into grievance.[69]

Importantly, I treat "capital" literally, as its transactive powers that cohere around unspoken relations of time and protected assets expose the work and expertise of

[64] Katharina Pistor, *The Code of Capital: How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[65] Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence,* xii.

[66] Wanzo, *Suffering*, 13.

[67] Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers*, 15.

[68] Wanzo, *Suffering*, 13.

[69] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); Hooker, *Black Grief/White Grievance*.

carrying and managing the toil of grief that is concealed in discourse of activist and maternal sincerity. Bradley's speaking and modes of connections were virtuosic, and she translated that "virtuosity as transaction."[70] In other words, grief capital centers how Bradley's articulations of her tailored performances—which, as Jon McKenzie shows, is also tied to the efficacy of work—and of her and her son's worth and pain translated into quantities for the NAACP, whether in terms of dollars or people's time.[71] It also highlights who benefits from which profits and who acquires which debts of grief activism. If grief activists are bound to the actions of generating care and commitment for the organization but are removed from compensation, then the concept of grief capital yokes the two, advancing the labor of care that refuses to succumb to expropriation.[72] Not only does Bradley's power, then, lie in her being a symbolic mother whose choice to make her child's body public means we "can draw a straight line from Emmett Till's murder to the Freedom Rides" and other major civil rights organizations and events, but her power made plain how money was always a factor, from getting his insurance policies to bury him to traveling costs and donation collections.[73] Emmett's death and Bradley's handling of it were part of a valuation system that translated into actual capital for the organization—capital that was then used to fund the desegregation cases paramount to the NAACP's agenda.

Spectacular Breakdown

Bradley's self-advocacy convinced Wilkins to have the NAACP manage the tour and pay her for the appearances. From October 7 to November 4, Bradley gave speeches in twelve cities, spanning the East Coast and Midwest, from New Jersey to Nebraska. Travel by train made the already full tour schedule even more compacted. For instance, Bradley delivered a speech in New Brunswick, New Jersey on October 7; two days later, she spoke in St. Louis, Missouri. On October 25, she gave a speech in Wichita, Kansas, and five days later, in Baltimore, Maryland. The NAACP paid Bradley an honorarium that was roughly twenty percent of the total donations raised, minus promotional expenses.[74] For six weeks, their partnership was successful. In a November 2 correspondence, for example, Wilkins cleared a misunderstanding the Jacksonville branch president had about booking Bradley to speak at two south Florida branches. Expressing little faith that Bradley's schedule could fit both speaking engagements in Florida, Wilkins wrote: "If we should notify you [that Bradley can appear], the chances are we will not be able to give you four weeks to plan a meeting. The branches that have had Mrs. Bradley have found that by hard work they can organize a successful meeting in two weeks, inasmuch as her name alone in connection with her son's murder draws an audience very quickly."[75] Wilkins's explanation of Bradley's already

[70] Hamera, *Unfinished Business*, 31.

[71] Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[72] I am thinking here with what Joy James calls "labor-hustles" in *New Bones Abolition* and of Premilla Nadasen, *Care: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023).

[73] Glenda Dicker/sun, "Let the People See What I've Seen: In Praise of Mamie Till," *Southern Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2008): 181. In the foreword to Mamie Till-Mobley's autobiography, *The Death of Innocence*, Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr. describes the major civil rights events, such as the Montgomery bus boycotts in 1955 and the lunch counter sit-in in 1960, as the "aftershocks of the murder of Emmett Till and the genius of his mother." Jackson, foreword, xii.

[74] "Mississippi Pressures-Rallies and Meetings," 4.

[75] Ibid., 2.

packed schedule and of the precedent of NAACP branches' attracting large crowds with short notice demonstrates the power of Bradley's grief capital for the organization. Two factors measured the success of a rally: the number of audience members and the amount of money raised. In New Brunswick, New Jersey, a reported crowd of fifteen hundred came to hear Bradley speak at the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Another two thousand attended a Till protest meeting organized by the Montclair, New Jersey branch. As the press reported, "Freedom Fund contributions and new memberships for the Newark Branch NAACP came pouring into the AFRO's office by telephone, letters and personal visits." A sizable amount of these contributions were lifetime memberships priced at $500.[76]

While hectic, the public engagements, Bradley found, were also therapeutic. The crowds and the dialogue provided Bradley a sense of care and community that helped counter the isolation, danger, and overall dispassionate response she experienced during Bryant and Millam's trial in Sumner, Mississippi. The dual sides of care, where tending is tender and tedious, balanced each other at first. But as her speaking tour continued, Bradley quickly realized her financial agreement with the NAACP did not cover the hidden costs she absorbed in speaking out against her son's murder. "Behind every public exposure," Bradley revealed, "there was a flurry of telephone calls, letters. Thousands of letters. Some were very unkind, some even worse. It just brought on a whole lot of trauma, really."[77] Each public event demanded substantial carework and labor before it happened and after it occurred. The grief tour "was almost like running a little business," Bradley explained, and it began taking a toll on her physically, mentally, and financially. She hired an administrative assistant who "handled most of the discussions with the NAACP" and kept track of the new, mounting expenses, one being a skyrocketing phone bill that "had gone up a couple of hundred of dollars a month." The emotional outpour she incited and directed while on speaking engagements consumed all her energy. "I needed to be able to rely on" Mooty and her assistant, "since it was all I could do most of the time just to show up where I was told I should be."[78] Furthermore, she was physically ill and "had to be put under doctor's care." "The doctor had released me to travel," Bradley shared, "but I was still in such a state."[79] The biggest expense was supplementing her father John Carthan's wages. After Emmett's death, Bradley's "sense of time and place had gotten scrambled." As she explains: "[My father] took a leave from his job just to accompany me. . . . I had needed his help desperately then. I promised that his expenses would be covered and that I would pay him for lost work. . . . I was still getting threatening letters and I felt better knowing there would be somebody there to look out for me."[80] Bradley's paying her father to accompany her on tour indicates her prescience that even as she would care for her son's memory, she would also need substantial care in return.

After Bradley's Mid-Atlantic and Midwest tours, the NAACP scheduled an eleven-city West Coast speaking tour for November. Notes from the Board of Directors' October 10 meeting reported that Franklin Williams, regional director of the NAACP's West Coast division, "has outlined a campaign which will run from November abd [*sic*] he

[76] Samuel Haynes, "Jerseyans All out for NAACP," *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 22, 1955, 14.
[77] Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 195.
[78] Ibid., 206.
[79] Ibid., 197, 205.
[80] Ibid., 205.

plans to have a series of meetings from November 9 through 20th with Mrs. Bradley as speaker."[81] Wilkins stated that the organization "offered Mrs. Bradley $100 per meeting plus all expenses." "She wouldn't even have to buy a newspaper," he added.[82] While suspicions over money emerged the moment "Bradley helped make her son's death a public issue,"[83] Bradley's attempts to account for unexpected expenditures brought those suspicions to a head. Having agreed to the terms, Wilkins said, Bradley "at the very last minute . . . declined to make the trip unless we paid her $5,000 plus all expenses for herself and her father. We had agreed (and she had accepted) to pay an honorarium of $100 [for each speaking engagement] for herself and her father." The organization canceled "her appearances" as not to "submit to an unreasonable demand."[84] "The organization," Wilkins declared, "does not handle such matters on a commercial basis."[85] In their last phone conversation, Bradley said that Wilkins "spoke the words I can never forget. 'You're trying to capitalize on the death of your son.' I was stunned. There was nothing to do but hang up."[86]

Bradley's renegotiations to account for the unexpected and unrelenting costs from grief activism had signaled to some a haughtiness that indexed spoiled, entitled middle-class Black mothers who, according to sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, were motivated only in work that supported the "conspicuous consumption demanded by 'society.'"[87] In Frazier's estimation, Black middle-class mothers, who had become urbane, insular, and consumer-driven, had forgotten their roots and sense of political community and had become incapable of doing the tireless and arduous work of racial justice. In a November 14, 1955 correspondence, Gloster Current, director of branches for the NAACP, informed the Flint branch that "the Association is no longer sponsoring Mrs. Bradley's speaking appearances, and under no circumstances will we allow her to appear for any of our Branches."[88] The NAACP replaced Bradley with her uncle Mose Wright, who had "been appearing" at engagements "for roundtrip railroad or air fare plus $100 honorarium."[89] Wright's requests were neat, contained, and less expensive.

To be clear, such criticisms of Bradley were also a consequence of being a social activist, and Wilkins held himself and other workers to similar standards.[90] As a social

[81] "Board of Directors' Minutes. June-December 1955," June 1, 1955, Board of Directors' Minutes, June-December 1955, 38, folder 001410_001_0942_0001_From_1_to_50, Papers of the NAACP, Part 01: Supplement, 1951-1955.

[82] "'Ready For Hospital'—Says Emmett Till's Mother," *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 19, 1955, 1.

[83] Feldstein, *Motherhood*, 103. An unsigned agreement between Bradley and the NAACP notes that she would receive $100 for each West Coast tour date; however, the organization assumed "no obligation for the" expenses of "any friend, companion or associate of 'Mrs. Bradley.'" "Mississippi Pressures-Rallies," 80.

[84] "Emmett Till Case in Mississippi and NAACP Support," January 1, 1956, 21, folder 001471_001_0823_0001, Papers of the NAACP, Part 20: White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965; Group III, Series A, Administrative File: General Office File—Mississippi Pressures.

[85] "Till's Mother."

[86] Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence,* 207

[87] E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957; New York: Free Press, 1997), 223.

[88] "Mississippi Pressures-Rallies."

[89] "Emmett Till Case in Mississippi," 12.

[90] This fits A. Freya Thimsen's description of "performative activism," which "builds on the assumption that real activism cannot just be *said;* it must be *done*." Although Thimsen focuses mostly on critiques of types of activism on social media, the accusation of "performative activism" holds true pre-social media, as people accused the NAACP of using Emmett Till's name to increase its own political and financial capital. A. Freya Thimsen, "What Is Performative Activism?" *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 55, no. 1 (2022): 84. For more on accusations against the NAACP, see Feldstein, *Motherhood*.

justice nonprofit organization, the NAACP also had to constantly prove that it was not misappropriating funds for "personal use." Wilkins made it clear that the money raised at rallies "is credited to the Freedom Fund quota of the branch," which was "to be used for combatting the entire situation in Mississippi and the Southern states with respect to intimidation, denial of the votes, economic reprisal, and threats to our people for supporting desegregation."[91] He guaranteed that funds donated to the NAACP "were for the collective cause . . . rather than for personal gain,"[92] which could take the form of salary increases, funding social events, or staff vacations. Others in the organization shared this ethos. The chairman of the board praised Wilkins "for the unselfishness with which he spared not himself physically this past summer in going to Mississippi . . . when he might have been resting for three or four weeks."[93] And when Wilkins described the death of his predecessor, Walter White, he observed that White suffered "an acute coronary thrombosis not long after returning from the office. . . . Who but Walter would make a point of stopping by the office before going home to die?"[94] Praise for showing dedication by forgoing much needed rest and spending one's final moments doing the work of the organization demonstrates broader negative attitudes against prioritizing self-care as a means to continue the work of racial justice. Such attitudes reveal the macabre specter of the worked-to-death body that operates beneath the admired spectacle of the committed and loyal social activist. It is as though the collapsed (or on the verge of collapsing) body is the spectacle, the publicly seen object, that serves as a testament to the death toll "true" carework takes on the body. This figure of a collapsed, possibly dead body in the throes of overwork illustrates an appropriate (if toxic) care that counters the self-indulgent care attributed to Black middle-class mothers whom Bradley had come to signify in her renegotiations to stave off collapse.[95]

Moreover, Wilkins's suspicion illumines how a respectable spectacle depends on an amorphous suffering that becomes suspicious when made material. Writing about Black women grief activists, Nash notes that "[t]hese women perform—and are called upon to perform—affective excess, to make visible a grief that is sufficiently plentiful to supply the nation's hunger for spectacular emotional performance."[96] However, a successful affective excess must be an amorphous, heart-wrenching suffering that provides a glimpse of personal suffering without inundating others with specifics that have material consequences or resolutions. The attention to the famous photograph of Bradley crumpled over Emmett's coffin and her insistence on making the world see her son exemplify this dynamic. However, Bradley also refused to be aligned to the amorphous suffering that fueled her symbolic power. Her suffering was connected to daily acts of living, and it had a ledger. Along with the current costs of covering her father's pay and supplementing her own lost wages, hospital bills, and operating costs, Bradley had to think about her financial future. "Would I return to work anytime soon? Could I even consider it? If not, then how would I live? What about the large debt that had piled up? Shouldn't I be thinking about that, and about trying to prepare now for an uncertain future? And what about all those people who had made money

[91] Haynes, "Jerseyans," 14.
[92] Feldstein, *Motherhood*, 103.
[93] "Board of Directors' Minutes. June-December 1955," 33.
[94] Wilkins, *Standing Fast*, 232-33.
[95] "Ready for Hospital."
[96] Nash, "Unwidowing," 756.

off my name, off Emmett's?"[97] Reading her questions through an acknowledgment of grief capital means we must attend to the material needs of a future in which debt and expenses accrue alongside the symbolic and affective power that spurred further civil rights agitation and organizing. How should those financial debts be distributed equitably to sustain the organizations and the people who give import to the spectacle at the center of the agitation? How can demands beyond bare survival be resituated as necessary expenses for the work of grief activism instead of being viewed as self-centered enterprises that divest energy, attention, and care from the main agenda? How can we think of Bradley as offering a "shrewd and complicated articulation of rage . . . desperation, and aspiration" within frames of financial awareness?[98]

Keep Looking

The entire process left Bradley exhausted and confused: "It seemed like everything had caved in all at once."[99] "I have financial worries," Bradley told reporters. "I've been ripping and running and I am still in a numb state. The loss of my son has left me that way; I am ready for a hospital." In a poignant articulation of how the stress of grief activism wears down the body, Bradley lamented, "I want to maintain friendly relations with the NAACP. I am for peace at any price. The quicker I can get back to a normal way of life the longer I can live."[100] How do we expand our ideas of what Bradley "opened," to riff on Fred Moten, if we make a chorus of her insistence "the longer I can live" like we do with her insistence to make the world see, and keep seeing, what "they did to my boy"? In his meditation on Till's photograph, Moten insists that "we have to keep looking at this so we can listen to it."[101] This insistence on continuous looking intersects with Claudia Rankine's assertion that Bradley made "mourning enter our day-to-day world."[102] And she made mourning enter our mundane world in its myriad messy, unyielding, and unforgiving forms that produce financial, physical, and emotional firestorms from the tiniest spark.

I want to push us to think of Moten's and Rankine's assertions to "keep looking" and the entry of mourning in "our day-to-day world" as being not only about Emmett, but also about Bradley. That is, her appeal for a longer life requires we look beyond Bradley's actions to make her son's murder public as her being constrained to the symbolic and familial role of Emmett's "most prominent survivor."[103] This does not negate the power and stakes of that choice that demonstrated how grief is not "privatizing" or "depoliticizing."[104] But Bradley's negotiations with the NAACP and the ensuing fallout exemplify how her symbolic role pivoted on the specter of Black

[97] Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 206. Bradley's father, John Carthan, publicly condemned the NAACP for "using Emmett Till for its own use." "Mother of Till Bitter!" *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 24, 1955, 3.

[98] Daphne A. Brooks, "'All That You Can't Leave Behind': Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (2008): 184.

[99] "Ready For Hospital."

[100] Ibid., 1

[101] Fred Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 72.

[102] Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning," in *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, ed. Okwui Enwezor et al. (New York: Phaidon Press, 2020), 18.

[103] Mitchell, "Mamie Bradley's Unbearable Burden," 1048.

[104] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22.

motherhood, which in order to be deemed respectable and free from suspicions of capital gain requires constant proximity to material deprivation while remaining silent about the effect of that deprivation. Instead, we can think of Bradley's injunction for more life as her making plain her embodied reality as a Black mother who, through incredible loss, demanded a reciprocal care so that she may continue to live. Her call for reciprocal care demands strategizing around affects other than "sorrow, grief, hurt" that, Nash argues, "authorize Black maternal work."[105] True, Bradley's demands to care for herself were within the framework of sustaining her activist work born from tragic loss, but I want to venture that there is something more. Bradley's relentless pursuit to be able to live as she did the work of racial justice means paying critical attention to the ongoing, "the living-through that is often sidelined, if considered at all,"[106] in the spectacle of grief activism.

[105] Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers*, 7.
[106] Williams, "Choreographies," 766.