



# American Art

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Commentary

## The Afterimages of Emmett Till

Shawn Michelle Smith

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### Abstract

This essay considers Jason Lazarus's photograph *Standing at the Grave of Emmett Till, Day of Exhumation, June 1st, 2005 (Alsip, Illinois)* as a meditation on photography, history, national memory, and mourning. It suggests that Lazarus's enigmatic image provides a striking metaphor for the spectacle and absence that defined the postmortem photographs of Emmett Till that circulated in 1955. Those images communicated the horror of Till's murder to a segregated viewing audience, even as they also failed to capture the trauma of the events. Lazarus's image represents the national mourning of Till's murder, which continues over fifty years later, and is marked by the perpetual repetition and return of Till's photographs.

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