

Emmett Till and Tamir Rice, Sons of the Great Migration

The New York Times by Isabel Wilkerson, February 12, 2016

In winter 1916, several hundred black families from Selma, Alabama began quietly **defecting** [escaping] from the Jim Crow South, with its KKK and lynching, some confiding to Chicago reporters that the “treatment in the South doesn’t warrant staying.” It was the start of the Great Migration, a leaderless revolution that would cause six million black **refugees** over six decades to seek **asylum** [protection from harm] within the borders of their own country.

They could not know what was in store for them or their descendants, nor the hostilities they would face wherever they went. Consider the story of two mothers whose lives bookend the migration and whose family lines would meet similar, unimaginable fates. The horrors they were fleeing would follow them in freedom and into the current day.

The first was Mamie Till, whose parents carried her from Mississippi to Illinois early in the 1920s. In Chicago, she would marry and give birth to a son, Emmett. In the summer of 1955, she would send him to visit relatives back in Mississippi. Emmett had just turned 14, had been raised in the **new world** and was unschooled in the “yes, sir, no, sir” ways of the **Southern caste system** [segregated system that treated African Americans as inferior]. That August, he was kidnapped, beaten and shot to death, supposedly for whistling at a white woman at a convenience store. His murder would become a turning point in the civil rights movement.

Around that year, another woman, Millie Wylie, left Alabama, near where the Great Migration had begun, and settled in Cleveland. There, more than half a century later, just before Thanksgiving 2014, her 12-year-old great-grandson, bundled up in the cold, was playing with a friend’s pellet gun at a park outside a recreation center. His name was Tamir Rice. A now familiar video shows a police officer shooting him seconds after arrival, and an officer tackling his sister to the ground as she ran toward her dying brother. Tamir’s became one of the most recognizable names in a metronome of unarmed black people killed by the police in the last two years, further motivating the Black Lives Matter movement.

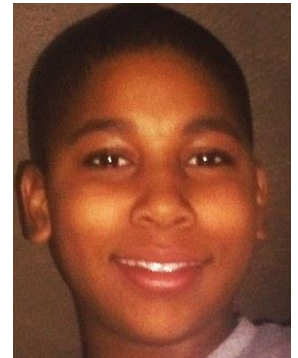
Tamir Rice would become to this young century what Emmett Till was to the last. In pictures, the boys resemble each other, the same half-smiles on their full moon faces, the most widely distributed photographs of them taken from the same angle, in similar light, their clear eyes looking into the camera with the same male-child assuredness of near adolescence. They are now tragic symbols of the search for black freedom in this country.

It has been a century since the Great Migration that produced both boys began. Our current era seems oddly similar to that moment. The brutal decades before the Great Migration — when a black person was lynched on average every four days — were given a name by the historian Rayford Logan. He called them **the Nadir** [rock bottom]. Today, in the era of the Charleston massacre, when, according to one analysis of F.B.I. statistics, an African-American is killed by a white police officer roughly every three and a half days, has the makings of a second Nadir.

Historian Eric Foner has called this era a “**second Redemption**.” The “first Redemption” is a term used by historians to describe the period of backlash against the gains made by newly freedmen after the Civil War ended that led to the establishment of segregation through Jim Crow laws.

Today, with black advancement by an elite few extending as far as the White House, we are seeing “a similar kind of retreat,” Professor Foner said. “The attack on the voting rights of African Americans, high rates of imprisonment, obviously but even more intellectually and culturally, a sort of exhaustion with black protest, an attitude of ‘What are these people really complaining about? Look at what we’ve done for you.’”

The country seems caught in a cycle. We leap forward only to slip back. “We have not made anywhere near the progress we think we have,” said Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative in Alabama. “It’s as if we’re at halftime, and we started cheering as if we won the game.”



What happened to Emmett and Tamir reflects how racial interactions have changed over time, from the *overt* [obvious] hatreds now avoided by most Americans to the unspoken, unconscious biases that are no less dangerous and may be harder to fight. For all of its changes, the country remains in a similar place, a caste system based on what people look like.

The men and women of the Great Migration were asking questions that ren Emmett Till (left) and Tamir Rice (right) role of the people whom the country has marginalized by law and custom and with state-approved violence for most of their time on this soil? How might these now 45 million people, still the most segregated of all groups in America, enjoy the full rights of citizenship? How can deeply embedded racial hierarchies be overcome?

Tamir Rice's great-grandmother, Millie Wylie, was born into a family of farm hands and sawmill workers. She married young and was left a widow when her husband died after a fall. With dreams of a new life, she packed up her belongings and left the poverty of Alabama for the smokestacks of Cleveland. Like many of the women new to the north, she found work as a housekeeper and later as a hospital janitor. She married a man who worked at a steel mill and whose family had arrived years before from Mississippi.

They found themselves hemmed into the worn-out, mostly black east side of Cleveland, with other **refugees** from the South. He worked the 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. shift; she worked from 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. He gambled to help make the rent on their apartment, in a run-down building owned by a white landlord who saw no need to keep it up.

They finally saved up for a two-story house with aluminum siding in the suburbs. The white neighbors began moving out shortly thereafter, a common response to black efforts to move up in almost all northern cities.

After lives of work and want, both she and her husband died in their 50s, she of cancer and he of a heart attack after losing a lung from asbestos exposure at the plant. Their early deaths left the family ungrounded, without the close networks that had sustained their Southern ancestors. The daughter, Darlette Pinkston, suffered for it. Her marriage did not last, and she began living with a man who beat and threatened her until, fearing for her life, she killed him. Her daughter, Samaria, was 12 when she testified at the trial to the abuse she had witnessed and then lost her mother to prison for 15 years.

Samaria moved between foster homes and then to the streets. She dropped out of school in ninth grade, worked odd jobs, cleaning and doing clerical work, and had four children, the youngest of whom was Tamir.

She got tutors for her children, managed to get the oldest through high school and the others on track to finish. Tamir had swimming and soccer lessons and "Iron Man" DVDs. He had suffered such separation anxiety that she had to send him to nursery school with a picture of herself so he would know he would see her again.

On the afternoon of Nov. 22, 2014, a Saturday, she let Tamir and his sister Tajai go to the recreation center by the park across the street before dinner. She was starting the lasagna when there was a knock at the door. Two children told her that Tamir had been shot. She didn't believe them. "No, not my kids," she told them. "My kids are in the park." A neighbor boy had let Tamir play with his pellet gun without her knowing it. "I hadn't seen the gun before," she told me. "They knew better than to let me see it."

When she arrived, the officers would not let her near her son to comfort him as he lay bleeding on the ground, she said. They told her they would put her in the squad car if she didn't stay back.

As in the majority of the 21st-century cases of police shootings in the North, no one was prosecuted in the death of Tamir Rice. Late last December, a grand jury declined to indict the officer who killed him. Decades ago, in the Jim Crow South, Emmett Till's killers were acquitted by an all-white jury, but at least they had gone to trial.

I asked Tamir's great-uncle how Millie would have borne what happened to the great-grandson she never lived to see, in the place she traveled so far to reach. It would have crushed her, he said. "My mother would have carried that hurt and felt the pain of the generations."