

CHRISTOPHER METRESS  
Samford University

# Submitted for Their Approval: Rod Serling and the Lynching of Emmett Till

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—  
Emily Dickinson

YOU ARE WATCHING TELEVISION, AND A MAN IS ABOUT TO BE LYNCHED.

The year is 2215. The earth is parched and abandoned, inhabited by only two groups of people: the Dwellers and the Drivers. The Dwellers, who are white, work the Drivers, who are Native American, in pursuit of the one last profitable enterprise on Earth: the reclamation of scrap metal for the planet's colony on the New Angeles asteroid. In the town of Carbon, a scrap-depot and smelting-center located on the high desert plains west of the radioactive ruins of Los Angeles, a Driver (Tommy Tallbear) has been accused of attempting to rape the wife of Carbon's head Dweller (Jerry Paul) and Paul is now seeking his own brand of vigilante justice. Witness to all this is Hannify, a reporter for Interstellar Television who is sent to Carbon to cover another story only to find himself in the middle of a lynch mob. Just moments before the violence begins, a member of the mob confiscates the miniature DVD Hannify is using to record the event; he is unaware, however, that Hannify's digital imager has a backup camera that allows him to capture everything that is going on.

Here is what the camera captures. A mob drags Tommy Tallbear out of the town jail and into an abandoned industrial site. With the desert sun cutting through the roofless frame of the building, the air is red with dust and hate. Jerry Paul grabs Tallbear from out of the mob and forces him to face his vengeful accusers. "This coppertone wronged me," Paul shouts, alluding to the attempted rape of his wife. Appealing to solidarity, he proclaims, "It could have been your wife, Howie. Or your daughters, Pete. This time you came together for me. Next time, I'll be there for you." Paul then orders Howie to lower the industrial crane, and the noose around Tommy Tallbear's neck is attached to the crane's rusted metal hook. When Tallbear begins to chant a death song, the

crowd's call for vengeance is momentarily silenced, but Paul, sensing that the moment is getting away from him, commands Howie to hoist the hook. When Howie does so, Tallbear's song gives way to choking gasps and, after a half-minute of defiant struggle, his legs and shoulders go limp, his body turning slowly in the windless red dust. As the crowd disperses, Howie walks up to the reporter and jokes, "Didn't blink, did you Hannify?" Howie then shows Hannify the DVD he confiscated before the lynching began, believing that he was preventing the reporter from filming the scene. Before Hannify can get the empty DVD in his hand, Howie pulls it back and teases, "They'd have censored it anyway."

Although the year is 2215, the location is post-apocalyptic California, the victim is a twenty-year-old Native American, the crime is rape, and the tool of choice is a rope hoisted by a crane in what amounts to a spectacle murder, you have just witnessed the lynching of Emmett Till. If you failed to make the connection between Tommy Tallbear and Emmett Till, you are likely not alone, and it is certainly not your fault. The lynching you just watched on your television screen first aired on June 26, 1998, as a Sci-Fi Channel original movie entitled *A Town Has Turned to Dust*, and in its details the lynching bears little resemblance to the events that occurred in Money, Mississippi, in 1955. However, those events inspired the original story upon which *A Town Has Turned to Dust* was based, and the author of that original story, Rod Serling, desperately wanted his audience to witness the lynching of Emmett Till. In late summer 1955, Serling, aghast at the acquittal of Till's murderers, conceived of a story that would focus on the aftermath of a white-on-black lynching in a small Southern town. Understanding the climate of television at the time, Serling first tried to write his story for the stage. When it was rejected, Serling returned to his more familiar medium, reworking his stage drama into a teleplay for the *U.S. Steel Hour*. However, television executives and advertisers, fearful of a boycott by viewers in Southern states, demanded that Serling revise this teleplay: although he could still write about the aftermath of a lynching, any references that might recall the Till episode had to be excised from the script. Faced with the option of scrapping his idea altogether or changing his script to meet the demands of his medium, Serling chose the latter. The result was *Noon on Doomsday*, which, after much vetting and revising, aired on April 25, 1956. A comparison of the revisions of this teleplay with the script for the original stage production shows how

Serling attempted, at various stages, to retain some of the Emmett Till story by slanting it into his revisions via oblique references and subplots. A year later, Serling, still smarting from his run-in with the sponsors of *Noon on Doomsday*, was offered a second chance to retell the story of Emmett Till, this time for another network. Once again, however, the medium trumped the message as nervous executives reneged on their promises, demanding that Serling remove all explicit or implicit references to the Till lynching. The result of this second effort, entitled *A Town Has Turned to Dust* (the basis for the 1998 Sci-Fi Channel movie), aired on June 17, 1958.

As we shall see, both *Noon on Doomsday* and *A Town Has Turned to Dust* were driven by Serling's desire to tell Emmett Till's story to a live national television audience, a desire that was met with resistance at every turn by executives and sponsors who, in the midst of a burgeoning Civil Rights Movement that was bringing race to the forefront of political and social discourse, were intent on appeasing Southern audiences by sanitizing the particular racial dimensions of Till's story. Serling's response to that resistance, and his attempt—albeit unsuccessful—to work his way around the restrictions of his medium, give us a more complete understanding of how, in its early and formative years, television positioned itself in relation to race and civil rights. Serling's tale of frustration, of course, does not represent the complete picture. As several recent studies have shown, television played an important role in promoting the cause of the Civil Rights Movement, in particular through sympathetic network news coverage and revealing documentary specials. As Julian Bond notes, "For the early Movement, newspaper, radio, and television coverage brought the legitimate but previously unheard demands of southern blacks into the homes of Americans far removed from the petty indignities and large cruelties of southern segregation" (17). Discussing in particular the coverage of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Bond reminds us that after the story of this boycott first hit the front pages of the *New York Times* and *New York Herald Tribune* on February 22, 1956, television networks responded by featuring regular boycott stories on the nightly news. Although different media responded with "varying degrees of alacrity and enthusiasm," it was clear that television news executives "ultimately endorsed this carefully orchestrated confrontation between the forces of justice, respectability, decency and progress and those of bigotry, violence,

lawlessness, and ignorance" (23). Against this brighter vision of television's role in the movement, we must, of course, cast some shadows. As Shasha Torres has recently noted, television and the Civil Rights Movement, "through perhaps an unlikely coincidence of interests, formed powerful allies with each other during this period" (6). However, "to claim that televisual representation in information genres was dominated by [positive] images of the civil rights movement in the late 50s and early 60s is not to claim that stereotypical representations in other genres were eradicated or even came temporarily to a screeching halt during the period" (7). According to Torres, we must acknowledge the persistence of stereotypes and read them "alongside representations of many of the most forceful and articulate African Americans that the nation has known" (7). The key, then, is to situate these two sets of representations "*in relation to one another*," for it is in "the generic interplay between 'information' and 'entertainment' that something like *Amos n' Andy*" (7) can be best understood. The story of Rod Serling's unsuccessful attempt to represent on television the lynching of Emmett Till introduces another set of images that we must acknowledge if we are to understand the medium's relation to the Civil Rights Movement and the cause of racial justice. Into the diptych of positive and negative images, we must also introduce the prohibited image, the representation that failed to make it to the screen. In the end, I would argue, our appreciation of the medium's relation to the movement must be informed by absences as well as by presences. In order to see both, we must engage in our own act of resistance against the medium: we must learn to see what it did not want us to see.

On September 24, 1955, an all-white Mississippi jury, after a mere sixty-seven minutes of deliberation, acquitted J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant of the murder of Emmett Till. Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy from Chicago, had been visiting his extended family in the Mississippi Delta. One afternoon, barely a week into his visit, Till and several other youths were standing outside a white-owned grocery in the small hamlet of Money. In some accounts, Till had been boasting of his friendships with white people up North—in particular his friendships with white girls—and the local kids, apparently to call his bluff, dared him to enter the store and flirt with Carolyn Bryant, the white woman working the cash register. Other accounts of that day simply state that Till entered

the store in order to buy some bubble gum. If his reasons for entering the store are unclear, what he did next is even more so. Some claim that young Till said "Bye, baby" as he was leaving the store; others claim that upon leaving he let out a wolf-whistle; still others say that he did nothing more than purchase his gum. Whatever he may have done, it soon became apparent to all involved that he said or did something that Carolyn Bryant found inappropriate, and Till's friends rushed him from the store.<sup>1</sup>

For three days, nothing else happened, and then Roy Bryant—Carolyn's husband—and J. W. Milam—Roy Bryant's step-brother—struck out in the dead of night in search of young Till, whom they found asleep in the cabin of Moses Wright, his great-uncle. The two men kidnapped Till, tortured him for several hours, shot him in the head, and tossed his body—weighted down by a seventy-pound gin fan—into the Tallahatchie River.<sup>2</sup> When his bloated and disfigured corpse surfaced downstream three days later, Milam and Bryant were quickly arrested for murder. In the weeks leading up to the trial, media coverage was enormous. More than seventy newspapers and magazines sent reporters to cover the "wolf-whistle" trial, and when, against all reasonable evidence, the jury failed to convict Milam and Bryant, the denunciations were swift and strong. While apologist papers in the South argued that despite outside agitation justice had had its day in court, African

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<sup>1</sup>For many years, Till's mother insisted that her son did not wolf-whistle at Carolyn Bryant; rather, Till had grown up with a stuttering problem, and he was taught to whistle as a means of calming his nerves and correcting his speech. However, in Keith Beauchamp's 2005 documentary *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*, two of Till's cousins (both of whom were at the store that day) confirmed that the young boy did indeed whistle at Bryant. For discrepancies about why Till went into the grocery that day, see Huie ("The Shocking Story"), Hampton, Metress, Beauchamp, and Anderson.

<sup>2</sup>There is, of course, an ongoing debate concerning the number of people who were involved in Till's kidnapping and murder. Although it has been largely discredited on many accounts, the basis for believing that Milam and Bryant acted alone is their confession to William Bradford Huie ("The Shocking Story"). For accounts that contest Milam and Bryant's version of events, see Hicks, Whitfield, Metress, and Beauchamp. On May 10, 2004, the Justice Department reopened the case but a year later announced they could find no grounds for federal prosecution. The case was then turned over to officials in Leflore County, Mississippi, who focused their investigation on the role Carolyn Bryant (now Carolyn Bryant Donham) may have played in the murder. However, on February 23, 2007, a Leflore County grand jury issued a "no bill," claiming lack of evidence to prosecute.

American newspapers and magazines, joined by a chorus of support from the Northern white press and liberal political organizations, called for national protests and boycotts. According to many scholars of the Civil Rights Movement, the lynching of Emmett Till—coupled with the brazen acquittal of his murderers—was the spark that ignited the black freedom struggle of the 50s and 60s.<sup>3</sup>

As these events were unfolding, Rod Serling was sitting atop his profession. After graduating from high school in Binghamton, New York, Serling volunteered for duty in the Second World War and served as a paratrooper in the Pacific Theatre. After the war, he attended Antioch College, where, as manager of the campus radio station, he directed a weekly dramatic anthology show (based upon stories he either wrote or adapted). This experience garnered him his first job, writing scripts and producing documentaries for a radio station in Cincinnati. During those years, he began to freelance for television and his success encouraged him in 1951 to quit his radio job and devote himself full time to writing teleplays. As David Cochran suggests, Serling “picked the right medium at the right time” because, unlike film or drama, “television was desperate for scripts and short of experienced writers” (199). In his first six years as a television playwright, Serling sold more than one hundred scripts; by the mid-1950s, Serling, along with Paddy Chayefsky, Robert Alan Aurthur, Reginald Rose, and Gore Vidal, was considered one of the medium’s brightest new stars. That star never shone brighter than at the beginning of 1955. In January, his teleplay *Patterns* aired to rave reviews. This tale of brutal office politics was so well received that it became the first live television drama to be produced twice (another performance aired in February) and it was quickly optioned for the movies by Paramount Pictures. A few months later, *Patterns* won both an Emmy for best teleplay and a Sylvania Award for best drama. Between February 1955 (when *Patterns* aired for a second time) and October (when another equally famous and well-received teleplay, “Requiem for Heavyweight,” was produced), thirteen of Serling’s original

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<sup>3</sup>For instance, following the claims made by many other sources, a brief Civil Rights history issued by the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, characterizes the lynching as “the spark that set the civil rights movement on fire” (“Emmett” 40). Similarly, Mamie Till-Mobley entitled her 2003 memoir *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America*. For other sources that have contributed to this understanding of the lynching’s significance, see Williams, Hudson-Weems, and Hampton.

plays or adaptations were televised, and in a remarkable one-week run in November, three of his teleplays aired on network television. Although only thirty-one years old, Serling was considered by some to be, in 1955, "the standard of the television dramatist" (Millstein 57).

When he turned to television writing full time in 1951, Serling may have indeed picked the right medium at the right time, but when he attempted to dramatize the Till case for television in 1955, it was the wrong medium at the wrong time. He should have known, and did know, better. Recalling the episode, Serling claimed, "After the production of *Patterns*, when my things were considerably easier to sell, in a mad and impetuous moment I had the temerity to tackle a theme [the Till lynching] that was definitely two-sided in its implications" ("About Writing" 20). He knew that such "two-sided" themes—particularly those dealing with race and Civil Rights in the mid-50s—were not welcome on dramatic television. While it is true, as Cochran notes, that because "television was in its infancy, many producers [of live television dramas] encouraged their staffs to experiment and test the boundaries of their medium" (200), the window for experimentation was brief and when it came to racial issues all but non-existent. Certainly, early network television did experiment with controversial themes. For instance, Worthington Miner's modern-dress adaptation of "Julius Caesar" (1949) explored Cold War anxieties about political revolution and totalitarianism; Reginald Rose's "Remarkable Incident at Carson Corners" (1953) exposed a small town's complicity in the death of a young schoolboy; another Rose teleplay, "The Gathering" (1953), examined Atomic Age guilt by portraying a Moscow family's terrified reaction to an air raid of undisclosed magnitude; and, finally, "Trial at Nuremberg" (1956) brought the horror of the gas chambers into the American living room. Such forays into controversy were tightly controlled, however, and the boundaries of race were rarely, if ever, breached.

Although we should be wary of waxing nostalgic about a golden era when television was fully open to progressive views on racial representation, several television programs in the late 1940s did attempt to test the boundaries. In *Primetime Blues*, Donald Bogle reminds us that, in the years leading up to 1950,

as this loose and free-flowing new medium struggled to work its way into the American home, not yet bowing to any particular social or political pressure, still

hungry for material, and, most important not yet driven by the concerns of big advertisers, postwar television sometimes took a chance on the offbeat and opened its doors to African American performers. (13)

While the lion's share of those performers "made their way into American homes through song and dance"(13) on variety programs hosted by whites, the medium did offer lead roles to some African Americans. In 1948, *The Bob Howard Show*, a fifteen-minute, weekday variety program, aired on the New York CBS affiliate. As Bogle notes, to future generations Bob Howard might seem to represent nothing more than "one more colored song-and-dance man," but in his day the performer "helped to transform the American living room. For the first time, audiences could sit in their homes and see a Black man hosting the proceedings, calling the shots and literally running the show" (14). Other programs in the late forties, such as *The Laytons* and *Sugar Hill Times*, while not fully breaking free of racial stereotyping, did prove that this new medium, in search of a new audience, did not fear that "color might stunt its growth" (14). Even into the next decade, networks could find a place for *The Hazel Scott Show*, a musical program—hosted by a high-profile, politically active black woman—that aired for three months in 1950. Unfortunately, at the same time that television was experimenting with *The Hazel Scott Show*, it was also reverting to the derogatory racial formulas of radio sitcoms and, in several notable cases, it simply recast shows from the old medium. *Beulah*, for instance, premiered in October 1950, and *Amos n' Andy* first hit the airwaves in June 1951. In the early 1950s, though still hungry for material (making it attractive to artists such as Serling, Chayefksy, and Vidal), the new medium was beginning to put its loose and free-flowing ways behind it. Although the dramatic anthology series (such as those hosted by *Studio One*, *Philco Television Playhouse*, and *General Electric Theatre*) continued to offer up starring roles for black actors like Ossie Davis and Sidney Poitier, television executives were growing increasingly wary of exploring racial issues on the small screen.

According to television historians, this turn was the result of two major forces: the nationalization of television in 1953 and the growing power of the sponsor within the industry. In its early years, television was spread unevenly across the country, the greatest number of stations and sets in the Northeast, the least in the Deep South. In 1949, for instance, the South represented only 4.5 percent of all television



receivers (MacDonald, *One Nation* 98). Because of technical issues that had to be worked out before the medium could expand across the country, the FCC prohibited the licensing of new stations between 1948 and 1953, the very years when the medium was first testing the waters and grabbing its new audience. As J. Fred MacDonald notes, until this freeze was lifted, the imbalance in national viewership could not be corrected. As a result, the growing television audience of the late 1940s and 1950s was decidedly non-Southern and, as late as 1953, "there were no operative TV transmitters in Mississippi, Arkansas, or South Carolina" (MacDonald, *Black and White* 74). With the licensing of new stations, however, the Southern market represented the fastest growing demographic for the new medium, raising problems about racial representation that up till then could be ignored. According to Torres,

it was in the networks' interests to strengthen ties to their southern affiliates during this period, but the percolating race trouble in the South threatened those ties. More specifically, disparate sectional assumptions about what counted as acceptable racial representation on television produced conflicts between networks—northern both in location and temperament—and their southern affiliates. (21)

While these differences "had been submerged during television's early years," when "audiences were concentrated in the Northeast [and] programmers could afford to be somewhat experimental in the deployment of black performance" (21), the nationalization of television forced network concessions.

These concessions were driven more by dollars than by sectional good will. The networks wanted Southern affiliates to air their programs because these programs generated advertising revenue, and the larger the audience the more the revenue. However, if the movement of television into the South meant tighter control of potentially controversial programs on race, the growing influence of advertising revenue led to tighter control of "controversy" on scales both large and small. As 1950s television playwright Robert Alan Aurthur recalled, script control was

sometimes ludicrous . . . [Most demands could] be handled . . . by word changes or line changes, because, for the most part, they refer to such things as "Don't say 'I hate living in hotels,' because we have a hotel account." Or, "Don't say 'I want to fly rather than take a train,' because we handle the Pennsylvania Railroad." Objections like these [were] annoying, but they [didn't] really cause too much trouble. (*Relation* 10)

Other demands, of course, were more troublesome. In a 1960 "occasional paper" on the role of mass media in a free society, Marya Mannes bemoaned "the power of the sponsor over the word," the "domination of the medium by commercial interests whose concern is necessarily with a quantitative audience rather than a qualitative one" (Aurthur, *Relation 2*). Mannes saw the domination as beginning in the mid-fifties, and while movies and the theatre also had their commercial pressures, there was a "determining difference." In the movies and the theatre

the product to be sold, as widely as possible, is the picture or play itself. . . . in television, the program, in this case, the play, is only a means toward the selling of a product wholly unrelated to it. In other words, television entertainment exists not only for itself, to be judged on its own merits, but as an inducement to buy. (2)

In *The Image Empire: A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, Eric Barnouw marked 1955 as the year that "sponsors and their agencies began to demand drastic revisions and take control of script problems." In addition to a "revulsion against 'down' settings and people"—which sponsors believed did not induce viewers to buy products—"advertisers were beginning to feel uneasy about political implications . . . [because] some writers kept edging into dangerous areas" (34). Most television writers understood this, and although excited about the possibilities of the new medium, they were realistic about its limits. Some writers, such as Gore Vidal, felt that "in spite of the many idiot restrictions imposed by those nervous sponsors who pay for plays, it was possible to do a certain amount of satisfactory work. . . . A writer can tackle anything if he learns to how to dodge around forbidden subjects" ("They Never" 15). Others, such as Paddy Chayefsky, were less confident in their abilities to work around the "idiot restrictions":

Everyone of us . . . before we sit down and write a television show[,] makes that initial compromise of what we're going to write. We don't. . . . conceive a television idea that we know is going to be thrown out the window. That's the compromise. I have never, never written down in television, but I have never aimed very high. (*Relation 3*)

When writers did aim high—particularly on matters of race—their scripts were either rejected or, when accepted, drastically revised. In 1953, for instance, Reginald Rose submitted a teleplay to *Studio One*

based upon the real-life conflicts arising from integration in Cicero, Illinois. According to Rose, "Everybody knew [you could not do a story about blacks moving into a white neighborhood], except me. Oh, I knew it, but I thought I could maybe get it by" (Stempel 42). But he did not get it by: when *Thunder on Sycamore Street* aired on March 15, 1954, just two months before the *Brown v. Board* decision, Rose's integrationist black hero was changed to an ex-convict. According to the networks, a drama about a black family besieged by white racists would not play well in the South, where, Rose said, "viewers might be appalled at the sight of a Negro as the beleaguered hero of a television drama" (Barnouw 86). While Rose felt that this compromise weakened the play, he decided to go along with it, "hoping that the principle under observation would be strong enough to rouse an audience" (Stempel 52). When, a few years later, a program dealing with race did manage to make it past a sponsor and onto the small screen, the sponsor's worst fears were realized: a large portion of its audience was roused *against* its product. When Robert Alan Aurthur first pitched the idea for *A Man is Ten Feet Tall* to the Philco agency, he neglected to tell them that he wanted to hire Sidney Poitier to play the lead character (in part because the story had no racial element to it—except that one character would be black). Philco accepted the script—a story of friendship between a troubled army deserter and a hardworking longshoreman (Poitier)—and only afterwards learned of Aurthur's intent. After much internal vetting, they decided to go with Poitier in the lead role. When the show aired in October 1955, just one month after the Till trial, Southern audiences reacted strongly against it. A petition with more than ten thousand signatures was sent from Jackson, Mississippi, each of the signatories promising that they would never buy a Philco product; several distributors in the region also refused to carry Philco products. As Donald Bogle argues, "Such reactions merely reinforced the networks' fear of experimenting with any new or distinctive material about African Americans. And advertisers, noting audience reactions, also hesitated to sponsor racial material" (66-67).

This was the climate of television in 1955 when Rod Serling had his "mad and impetuous moment."<sup>4</sup> Exactly when he became interested in

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<sup>4</sup>This essay was completed in April of 2005, when the most detailed account of Serling's struggle to dramatize the Till lynching was Bob Pondillo's 2002 essay "Rod Serling: Caught in the 'Censorship Zone.'" In 2006, another essay on the subject was

dramatizing the Emmett Till case is difficult to discern, but from the number and dates of the existing drafts, it appears that Serling had a first version of *Noon on Doomsday* completed very soon after the events in Mississippi.<sup>5</sup> As a veteran who understood sponsorship pressures, Serling at first tried to dramatize the case for the stage, not the small screen. According to television historian Bob Pondillo, "Serling knew he had an explosive play, but because of the racial taboos of the time didn't think it would work on television" (38).<sup>6</sup> In a 1957 essay, Serling remembered

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published: John Kraszewski's "Adapting Scripts in the 1950s: The Economic and Political Incentives for Television Anthology Writers." I have tried, where possible, to incorporate Kraszewski's findings into the footnotes of this essay.

<sup>5</sup>One challenge in trying to understand how Serling developed his drafts comes from the writer's often faulty memory. For instance, in a 1960 roundtable discussion, he claimed that he first hit upon the idea for his drama after reading William Bradford Huie's *Look* article on how the town rejected Till's murderers upon their acquittal: "The concept excited me and gave vent to a dramatic treatment on the idea of a small town where a member of a minority is murdered and the town reacts with a general feeling of guilt" (*Relation* 11). The problem with this, however, is that Huie's article about the town's rejection of Till's murderers first appeared in January 1957, a full eight months after the *Noon on Doomsday* aired (see Huie "What's Happened"). Even if Serling is misspeaking here and intends to recall Huie's earlier *Look* article in which the journalist published the murderers' confessions, that article appeared in January 1956 (publication date, January 24; newsstand appearance, January 11). It is highly unlikely that Huie's article sparked Serling's interest in the case because the earliest *dated* draft of the teleplay is January 26, 1956, and this is marked as "second revise," suggesting that Serling had been at work on the concept for a least a few weeks. Serling's memory is equally shaky on other matters as well, making it difficult to sift out the exact chronology of drafts, revisions, and sponsors' objections.

<sup>6</sup>Pondillo is working from an undated manuscript housed at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (Rod Serling Papers, US Manuscript Collection, 43 AN, Serling Television Scripts, Box 71). The undated nature of this manuscript raises a few problems. Pondillo is assuming—and I will follow his lead here—that this manuscript represents Serling's original vision for the story. However, in a series of letters written during the teleplay revisions of *Noon on Doomsday*, Serling tells several correspondents that he is working on—and finally completes—a stage play version of the story. The question that remains is this: does the undated manuscript in Box 71 represent what Serling set down *before* he started revising the story for television, or is this undated manuscript the one he produced *while* he was revising his teleplay? Either way, the stage version of the play represents the story that Serling *wished* to tell, a distinctly Southern story that explores how a community defends a bigoted white man for the brutal and senseless slaying of a young black man. In his essay, Kraszewski works from a different, undated original draft (Box 79). This draft also has a distinctly Southern focus, contains a white-on-black murder, and has other powerful scenes that echo the regional and racial dynamics of the

that "The play, in its original form, followed very closely the Till case in Mississippi. . . . It struck me at the time that the entire trial and its aftermath was simply 'They're bastards, but they're *our* bastards.' So I wrote the play in which my antagonist was not just a killer but a regional idea. It was the story of a little town banding together to protect its own against outside condemnation" ("About Writing" 20-21).<sup>7</sup> A study of Serling's original draft of *Noon on Doomsday* proves how carefully he wanted his depiction of the Till case to be cast as a Southern drama of racial bigotry and community-sanctioned injustice.

The play is set in Demerest, Georgia, a place where, "the Daughters of the Confederacy. . . mourn [their Civil War dead] as if they fell last Monday" (I-1, I-2). The opening scene focuses on the murder of a nineteen-year-old black man, Henry Clemson, by a twenty-year-old white man, John Kattell. Kattell, a drunken bigot and bully, asks Henry Clemson for money to buy liquor, but Clemson doesn't have any. When Kattell implies that he lent Clemson four dollars the day before and

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Till case. Again, the archival record does not allow us to know with certainty the original draft, but I will follow Pondillo's decision to use the draft in Box 71. This decision is confirmed by a 2008 Ithaca College conference on "The Life and Legacy of Rod Serling," which sponsored a reading of Serling's original stage play. According to one conference participant, "This will be the first time the story will be told as Rod intended" (Kates). The story told that day was based on the script in Box 71. I wish to thank Professor Pondillo for providing access to his files as well as a valuable timeline of script changes.

<sup>7</sup>I must confess that I am omitting the next lines, which read, "At no point in the conception of my story was there a black-white issue. The victim was an old Jew who ran a pawnshop. . ." (21). I omit these statements because, I believe, Serling is misspeaking. In his 1959 interview with Mike Wallace, for instance, Serling remembered things differently. Responding to a question about the difficulty of addressing social controversies on television, Serling recalled,

My case in point, I think, was a show I did for the *Steel Hour*, some years ago—three years ago, called *Noon on Doomsday*, which was a story which purported to tell what was the aftermath, the alleged kidnapping in Mississippi of the Till boy, the young Chicago Negro. And I wrote the script using black and white, initially, then it was changed to suggest an unnamed foreigner. Then the locale was moved from the South to New England, and I'm convinced they'd have gone to Alaska or the North Pole if, and using Eskimos as a possible minority, except I suppose the costume problem was a sufficient severity not to attempt it, but it became a lukewarm, eviscerated, emasculated kind of show.

I realize that I am here trusting the 1959 interview over the 1957 essay, but Serling's comments in 1957 do not fit the archival record.

Clemson respectfully reminds him that the four dollars was payment for work and not a loan, one of the other white men in the crowd asks Kattell if he's "going to let this boy talk to you like that?" (I-7). Kattell is easily goaded into bullying Clemson, whom he tries to tease into a sparring match. At first, Clemson allows himself to be struck by Kattell, but after Kattell "plants the hardest blow yet across the side of Clemson's cheek," Clemson, "in one moment of rage . . . swipes out to push Kattell's arms away" (I-10). Infuriated by this defiance, Kattell pulls out a knife and touches it to Clemson's stomach, demanding that Clemson "beg loud and clear" for his life. But when Clemson refuses to beg and plead (reminiscent of William Bradford Huie's controversial account of Emmett Till's defiance in the face of his murderers), Kattell is so frustrated that he thrusts the knife into Clemson's stomach.

Despite the evidence, the local police concur with Kattell's claim of self-defense and hope to sweep things under the rug. However, the Atlanta papers have picked up the story, and so too have the national wire services. As a result, the town lawyer, Bob Grinstead, tells his client that, under the national spotlight, local law enforcement will have to charge him with murder or manslaughter. After the grand jury hands down an indictment for murder and the national media prepare to cover the trial, the town rallies around Kattell. As one of Kattell's champions tells a crowd at the end of Act I, "We all know John Kattell. He's our neighbor. . . . And if some Yankee Commies feel like trying to come down here and mix in our affairs—I think they're going to be in for a surprise" (I-52). Chester Lanier, a Northern newspaperman sent to cover the trial, directly challenges this siege mentality, highlighting one of the early draft's most important themes:

If the outsiders hadn't come running down here—there wouldn't have been a trial. . . . We throw a few pointed questions at you as to why is it that if a black man kills a white man down here, you people want to take up arms. But when it's the reverse—when the color order is reversed—murder comes under the heading of a misdemeanor. When we throw these simple questions at you—suddenly up goes the stars and bars, somebody toots "Dixie," the old States' rights crap comes out of the mothballs—and the Southern half of the United States is suddenly the embattled Confederacy! (II-3)

After Lanier befriends Frank Grinstead, the town drunk, whose son Bob is Kattell's defense attorney, we learn that Demerest has deep secrets to hide. Thirty-three years ago, Frank Grinstead was "the hottest lawyer

in the county. Maybe the state" (II-7), but since then he has been "hiding [his] face in the shadows and wishing to God that [he] could look innocently up to the sun" (II-8). The reason is simple. According to Frank, "This town . . . this town has a skeleton to hide" (II-9). In 1923, a black man named Carradine was lynched for allegedly raping a white woman who was found dead a mile from his farm. As Frank struggles to recount the lynching, Serling's teleplay makes clear the kind of guilt that Frank, and by extension the South, is carrying:<sup>8</sup>

Frank

There were ten men and they wore hoods and sheets. They picked Carradine up at his farm and they brought him to the square. This square. First they tied him to that pillar.

(He points)

And they abused him. And then . . . then . . .

His head goes down and for a moment no voice can come out and finally he can speak again.

Frank

They they . . . they tied him in a gunny sack, very much alive. And they tied the gunnysack to an old model A Ford and they drove up and down the main street. Up and down, for over three hours. Up and down.

(Then his voice breaks and this comes out in a convulsive sob)

Up and down!

His head is down now and his shoulders quake and he stands there sobbing.  
(II-10)

After the town acquits Kattell, Frank berates his son for defending a guilty man in order to advance his political career. "What a victory you've won," Frank proclaims. "And do you know what it is you really have to show for all this? A ghost, Bob. A ghost named Henry Clemson is going to walk around inside your head until you take your last breath" (II-24). When later that night Bob finds a drunken Kattell celebrating in

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<sup>8</sup>This scene of a remembered lynching that haunts the town recurs throughout many of Serling's revisions (and even reappears in his first two drafts of *A Town Has Turned to Dust*, where a sixty-two-year-old black man named Clemson is lynched for an unknown crime). In the draft that Kraszewski selects as the original version on *Noon on Doomsday*, "Carradine" (called "Claridge") actually appears on stage as part of a dream sequence (13). Note also that Claridge is the name Serling uses when the story resurfaces in the first teleplay draft of *Noon on Doomsday*. The varying ways that Serling staged this lynching tale within a lynching tale—and the different names that he gave to the lynching victim—are further examples of how difficult it is to establish the sequence of the stage and television drafts.

the local bar, the lawyer tries to distance himself from his client. Kattell, however, will have none of this. He publicly confesses to his crime and warns his lawyer not to think that he is better than his white-trash client. "I know something nobody knows except my nutty old man," Kattell says, referring to his mentally ill father, who was clearly one of the ten hooded men who killed Carradine thirty-three years ago. "When I kill a nigger I go out and do it and eat a big breakfast. When he did—he goes nutty in the head. He cracks up. He winds up in a loony house" (II-29). Earlier that afternoon, Kattell had visited his father to tell him of the jury's not-guilty verdict, whereupon his father told him about one of the other Carradine lynchers who, after the killing, started to drink, "Drink heavy, drink hard" (II-3). Bob Grinstead makes the connection, and later confronts his father, who confesses that he was "out there that night wearing a sheet." "I didn't help out at all," he continues. "I couldn't. I couldn't lift my arms. But while they were doing it—I didn't stop them. I just sat on the curb and listened to him scream as they drove him back and forth, and I got sick, but I didn't try to stop them." "I've got a ghost, too," he concludes. "His name is Carradine. I'll never forget his face. I'll never forget the way he looked. I'll never forget the sound of his screams" (II-31). Through both Clemson and Carradine—the first one killed for his refusal to beg a white man for his life, the other for his alleged connection to a violated white woman—Serling has slanted Emmett Till's presence into the story; although never directly mentioned, Till is the ghost that haunts *Noon on Doomsday*, just as Carradine haunts Frank and Clemson will haunt Bob.

From here, the play moves inexorably toward its Sophoclean conclusion. At a victory celebration for Kattell the next day in the town square, Frank accuses the murderer of ignorance and bigotry, which the once-again drunk Kattell finds amusing in light of Frank's past sins. Quickly, however, Kattell's amusement turns to anger, and he stabs Frank with the same knife he used to kill Henry Clemson. When Kattell tries to escape through the stunned crowd, the sheriff warns him to stop but finally is forced to shoot him down. The town that had for so long turned its rage against blacks now ends up turning that rage against itself, and the stage darkens upon a town frozen in despair and wracked with guilt.

This stage play was warmly received by Lawrence Langner, Director of the Theater Guild and occasional producer for the *United States Steel*



*Hour.* According to Pondillo, however, Langner decided against developing the play for the stage. Instead, he suggested to Serling that he had “the bone structure of a very effective teleplay” (38). All Serling needed to do was rid the play of its racial elements. At first, Serling resisted, protesting that to remove the racial elements from the play would be to “eliminate a great deal of the [story’s] built-in emotional appeal” (38). Soon, however, he worked on the necessary revisions and submitted a teleplay to the Theater Guild and Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn, the advertising agency that represented United States Steel (38).

The earliest extant draft of this teleplay shows clear revisions of Serling’s original intent. The story still takes place in Demerest. Although it names no Southern state, the teleplay makes many references to places and institutions—and has characters speak in ways—that are distinctly Southern. As the play opens, the town awaits the jury verdict in the case of John Kattell, an angry white man in his early twenties who has murdered Moses Chinik, a seventy-seven-year-old arthritic Jewish grocer, after a scuffle in Chinik’s store. Kattell, still a loud bully of a bigot whose language is spiced with racial epithets, is clearly guilty, but the national press coverage of the trial makes the town defensive in the face of outside agitation. A Northern newspaper man, Lanier, who this time has come South accompanied by his Jewish photographer, bears the brunt of the town’s animosity toward the press and its bigotry toward Jews. Kattell is defended by Bob Grinstead, whose only care is to obtain an acquittal for his popular defendant. However, Grinstead’s father, Frank, objects to his son’s callous opportunism. In this revision, Frank is no longer the town drunk. Instead, he is a respected lawyer and power-broker with a state-wide reputation for integrity. Ostensibly, he left Demerest more than thirty years ago to pursue his political interests, but he has now returned to see that his son does not capitulate to racism and bigotry in order to advance his own career. In a dream sequence set in the middle of the teleplay, however, we learn why Frank left town thirty years ago and has now come back to steer his son away from defending Kattell. In this sequence, Frank recalls witnessing the lynching of a young black man named Robert Claridge (not Carradine), who, after being accused of raping a white woman, is beaten by a mob of men in white hoods, stuffed into a sack, tied to a car bumper, and driven through the town

square until he is dead. In this version, Frank is not one of the hooded ten, but he is still indirectly involved in those terrible events, events which drive him away from Demerest and toward a career devoted to higher service. More important, of course, is that this dream sequence becomes the lone space in the revision in which Serling maintains the presence of white-on-black violence that dominated his original drama.

When the jury acquits Kattell after one hour and seventeen minutes of deliberation (only ten minutes more than the notoriously brief Till verdict), Bob Grinstead and Frank have an angry confrontation in the town square, and Frank accuses his son of acquiescing to prejudice after knowingly defending a guilty bigot. Kattell, who overhears this accusation, attacks and injures Frank; then Lanier, who is himself disabled and can no longer abide Kattell's cowardice in attacking the weak and defenseless, tosses Kattell a knife and challenges him to "slice him up" in the town square. Kattell, however, begins to sense that the town is turning on him and, knife in hand, he falls to his knees and begs the town for forgiveness. Serling's final camera direction captures the teleplay's explicit moral: "The camera starts a slow dolly away from Kattell until he remains a tiny dot in the middle of a loneliness. What we are looking at is John Kattell's desert, the one he's going to live in for the rest of his life" (III-42).

According to Pondillo, Serling "was pleased with the draft. He thought his message had been couched well enough to appease Batten, Barton, Durstin & Osborne and its client while allowing a large majority of the viewing audience to comprehend the ramifications of a larger tragedy—humankind's need to find a scapegoat for its own fear and nescience" (39).<sup>9</sup> Serling's instinct—at first—proved sound, and the script was slated for production as the *U.S. Steel Hour's* next drama. Unwisely, however, Serling described his teleplay-in-progress to a reporter for *Daily Variety* in the late 1955; when the reporter observed that the story reminded him of the Till case, Serling did not object to the comparison. The *Daily Variety* article made national news, and Serling's

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<sup>9</sup>One way of couching the message—changing from a black to a Jewish victim—was perhaps driven by Serling's childhood in upstate New York. Raised in a reformed Jewish family, Serling did experience occasional anti-Semitism. In high school, for instance, he was not allowed to join a non-Jewish fraternity (Cochran 198-99). Although his family did not attend synagogue frequently, they did so during High Holy days, and Serling's father was vice president of the Reform Temple.

nervous producers at U.S. Steel called the dramatist in for a series of rewrites. As Serling was to later recall,

In news stories, the play had been erroneously described as "the story of the Till case." At one point earlier, during an interview on the Coast, I told a reporter from one of the news services the story of *Noon on Doomsday*. He said, "Sounds like the Till case." I shrugged it off, answering, "If the shoe fits . . ." That is all it took. From that moment on *Noon on Doomsday* was the dramatization of the Till case. ("About Writing" 21)

In the next extant draft of *Noon on Doomsday*—this one dated January 26, 1956, and labeled "Second Revise"—we see everywhere the work of U.S. Steel's anxious sponsors. According to Serling, his "script was gone over with a fine-tooth comb by thirty different people, and I attended at least two meetings a day for over a week. . . . My victim could no longer be anyone specific as an old Jew. He was to be called an unnamed foreigner, and even this was a concession to me, since the agency felt that there should not really be a suggestion of a minority at all; this was too close to the Till case" ("About Writing" 21). While the drama is still set in "Demerest," the script deletes all explicit references to the town's Southern location. In addition, it no longer refers to the seventy-seven-year-old Moses Chinik as a "Jew." Instead, he is recast as "a foreigner from the old country," a "homely old man who couldn't even speak English" (I-29). Even his daughter Esther is given the less-Jewish name Felicia, and the Jewish photographer in the earlier draft is struck from the cast. In the most dramatic change, however, Serling drops completely Frank Grinstead's dream sequence and thus all references in the teleplay to a community-sanctioned lynching of a young black man for an alleged sex crime against a white woman. Serling's original intent, in the play's first draft, had been to cast his drama as a black-white lynching in the South, and when he had been forced to slant this truth and retell the story with a Jewish rather than a black victim, he still managed to implant echoes of Till's lynching in the dream sequence about Robert Claridge. Now, in this latest draft, he removed all traces of race: no Jews, no blacks, and, most important, no echo of Emmett Till.

In a late January letter, Serling told his agent, Ira Stein, that "I have compromised as much as I need to compromise as of this moment." But he was wrong. Compromises continue in the next draft, this one dated February 10<sup>th</sup>. As Serling remembered, even his revisions were

dissected and combed so that every word of dialogue that might be remotely "Southern" in context could be deleted or altered. At no point in the script could the word "lynch" be used. No social event, institution, way of life or simple diet could be indicated that might be "Southern" in origin. Later, on the set, bottles of Coca-Cola were taken away because of this, according to the agency, had "Southern" connotations. ("About Writing" 21)

Thus, in the February 10<sup>th</sup> revision, Demerest has now clearly become a county in New England rather than a town in the South. Although nothing much in the plot changes, Serling, true to what the sponsors wanted, had finally stricken all references to Jews, blacks, lynching, and the South. Although the play would go through two more minor revisions, it was now essentially in its final form.

Not surprisingly, when *Noon on Doomsday* finally aired on April 25, it was panned. The *New York Times* called it "inconsequential" (Pondillo 34), a review that Serling later confessed left him "feeling like a truck had run over me and then gone back to finish the job" (Letter to Verne Jay). Although after watching the show with his wife in New York and thinking that it was "fine," a drama that "showed its honesty and told its story" (Letter to Verne Jay), Serling later concluded that it was, "in the final analysis, an overwritten play":

What destroyed it as a piece of writing was the fact that when it was ultimately produced, its thesis had been diluted and my characters had mounted a soap box to shout something that had become too vague to warrant any shouting. The incident of violence that the play talked about should have been representative and symbolic of a social evil. It should have been treated as if a specific incident was symptomatic of a more general problem. But by the time *Noon on Doomsday* went in front of a camera, the only problem recognizable was that of a TV writer having to succumb to the ritual of track covering so characteristic of the medium he wrote for. It was the impossible task of allegorically striking out at a social evil with a feather duster. ("About Writing" 23)

After being accused by one viewer of caving in to sponsorship pressure—"may I congratulate you on your unimpeachable writer's integrity," wrote the viewer, "I'm sure your script fee will be a soothing balm for your conscience" (Kroll)—Serling fired back a spirited reply. He insisted that "All of us in television eventually reach that crossroad of conscience where we have to pause and ask ourselves whether or not it [is] best to give in and let at least *something* be said, or uphold a principle to the last with the result that nothing is said." "Oh Christ,"

Serling concluded, "I know what motivated your card and all I have to say is that we're on the same side. . . . Only how in the hell would you have guys like me beat a system, a medium, a whole Goddamned Steel Company. If you've got any idea—shoot it out collect" (Letter to M. Kroll).

But Serling didn't have to wait for an idea from his angry viewer. Just over a year after *Noon on Doomsday* aired, Martin Manulis approached Serling to write a lynching drama for his newly conceived hour-and-a-half live television series, *Playhouse 90*. In a 1960 *Saturday Evening Post* profile, Serling remembered, "I told Manulis I had tried to do the identical story for the *United States Steel Hour* two years earlier . . . and I didn't want to be put through the wringer again." However, Manulis promised, in Serling's words, to "buck my play through the opposition that could be expected from the six sponsors . . . but they ganged up on him. We never had a chance to carry about the original concept" (Frank 59). While some television historians (Pondillo 41) believe that this time out Serling attempted to tell directly the story of Emmett Till in a teleplay entitled *Aftermath* (of which there are no existing drafts), manuscript records and interviews suggest that Serling once again knew that in order to tell the truth, he had to tell it slant.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>There is some evidence that Serling and Manulis may have indeed tried to produce a script that more closely resembled the Till case than does the "Untitled Original Teleplay" of June 1957. According to a *Time* magazine notice that appeared the week after *A Town Has Turned to Dust* aired, a "précis of Serling's first effort was rejected by all but one of the sponsors; they would not lend their brand names or money to a treatment of racism that might prejudice Southern customers against their products" ("Tale of a Script" 36). In addition, Joel Engel claimed that Manulis "asked Serling to reattempt a dramatization of the Emmett Till kidnapping and murder that wary sponsors butchered so badly in 1956 on 'U.S. Steel Hour'" (167). However, the précis referred to by *Time* does not exist in any of Serling's papers. Against this claim that Serling first produced a Southern lynching script is a November 1957 article in *Television Age*, which claims that "an untitled script about Mexicans living in the southwest . . . was allegedly accepted by *Playhouse 90* and then subsequently thumbed down by sponsors of the program. According to impartial observers at CBS, this play is loaded with far more dynamite than even the original version of *Noon on Doomsday*" ("Billion-Dollar Whipping Boy" 30). In a 1960 discussion, Serling offered a version of events implying that both a first draft and a précis were presented to CBS: "I submitted it in first-draft form and was paid for it. . . . All but one [of the sponsors] rejected it summarily on the basis of a page-and-a-half outline" (*Relation* 23). I am inclined to believe that both Serling's "Untitled Original Teleplay" and his précis were rejected by *Playhouse 90*'s sponsors and conclude that he did not originally submit a script depicting a white-on-black lynching.

On June 19, 1957, he submitted an "Untitled Original Teleplay" about the lynching of young Mexican American boy in the Southwest; however, despite Manulis's support and that of eventual director John Frankenheimer, production of this teleplay, which was scheduled to open *Playhouse 90's* premiere season in 1957, had to be delayed a year. As with *Noon on Doomsday*, Serling's indirections were apparently not indirect enough, for he had once again run afoul of his sponsors.

This "Untitled Original Teleplay" tells the story of the trial and acquittal of Jerry Paul, a burly, twenty-three-year-old, white ex-combat soldier and merchant accused of killing a one-hundred-eighteen-pound Mexican American teenager named Pancho Cristo, who was supposedly trying to rob Paul's store. Harry Denton, the prosecuting attorney of "the little southwestern town of Dempseyville" (5), knows that Jerry Paul killed Cristo because the boy and Jerry Paul's young wife were having an affair. In a barstool discussion with Hannify, a reporter for a national news service, Denton suggests that the whole town knows this: "[Sure] there was a killing—and it had to be tried—and I had to try him. Circus trial—joke jury—clown prosecutor" (29). Immediately after this confession, and against the wishes of those who overhear him, Denton tells Hannify the story of another lynching that took place in town fifteen years before. "Colored man that time," Denton tells Hannify. "He was 62 years old. His name was Clemson. . . . I don't quite remember now exactly what his crime was. I think he whistled at a girl or something like that. But it was a pretty sickening crime. Very bad. Very very bad." So, six men "dressed up in sheets . . . put the old man in a gunnysack, and they tied that gunnysack to the back of a car. And they rode that car up and down the street for about three hours. For the first hour . . . you could hear his screams for ten miles away" (30-31).

In a fate similar to John Kattell's in the final draft of *Noon on Doomsday*, Jerry Paul watches as the town turns on him in the wake of his acquittal. In a final public confrontation with Harry Denton, who now confesses to everyone in town that he was one of the six "sheeted" men who lynched Clemson fifteen years ago, Jerry Paul strikes Denton dead in a bar fight and, trying to flee, is shot in the back by the local sheriff. In a fade-out voice over, the reporter Hannify concludes,

A town has turned to dust tonight. It took a look at itself and crumbled and disintegrated. Because what it saw was the ugly picture of prejudice and violence; two men died within five minutes of each other only because human beings have

that perverse and strange way of not knowing how to live side by side. And until they do—this story that I'm writing now will have no ending, but must go on and on. (114)

According to Serling, this June 1957 concept was rejected by the sponsors. "Manulis promised he would buck my play through the opposition that could be expected from the six sponsors *Playhouse 90* had at the time," Serling remembered in 1960, "but they ganged up on him. We never had a chance to carry out the original concept" (Frank 59). However, after a summer hiatus, CBS executives asked Serling to resubmit the play with one major change: set the story back one hundred years. Surprisingly, the way that Serling had slanted the facts of the Till case into the teleplay (keeping the lynching's racial and sexual overtones, but upping the age of the "culprit" to sixty-two) did not disturb the executives, who most certainly would not have missed the historical resonance of Clemson's alleged whistle. On April 21, 1958, Serling submitted a first draft of a teleplay now entitled *A Town Has Turned to Dust*. With telephones changed to telegraphs, this teleplay follows exactly the plot of Serling's untitled draft from 1957.<sup>11</sup> Even the story of the lynched black man remains, except that this time the victim is tied for three hours to a horse-drawn wagon rather than to the back of a pickup truck.

Although he was led to believe that he had made all the changes he needed, Serling soon discovered that the network had changed its mind again. On May 1, CBS executive Guy della-Cioppa sent Serling the following memo:

- 1) Act I [:] completely eliminate fact earlier killing was a colored man. He will have name like "Diego" without specifically labeling him Mexican.

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<sup>11</sup>There is, however, one interesting cast change. The untitled teleplay has a character named Resnick, a Jewish journalist from New York who is so disgusted by the goings-on in Dempseyville that he leaves town before the jury verdict. He does not appear in the April 21 draft. This change recalls one of the differences between the first and second teleplay drafts of *Noon on Doomsday*. The first teleplay draft included a Jewish photographer who accompanied Chester Lanier to the South. The second draft did not. The Resnick character also appeared in the original stage version of *Noon on Doomsday* (identified as a "Jewish Yankee from Northern Newspaper"), but he appears late in the play, not as someone who has traveled with Lanier. In a puzzling note in the cast list, Serling writes, "This character will not appear in the revised script." Similarly, Resnick appears in the original stage draft identified by Krazsewski.

- 2) Modify reason why attack occurred to eliminate whistling at girl connotation. Use simple explanatory line indicating boy had gotten out of line and didn't know his place rather than making a pass at a woman of a different class.
- 3) Entire script to be carefully examined to soften implication Anna and Mexican kid enjoyed jumping in the hay together. (Engel 168)

Although Serling has not left any record of how he reacted to these demands, he produced a new draft within three weeks. Some of the revisions in his May 26 draft dramatically alter the teleplay's storyline; other revisions merely address della-Cioppa's demands. For instance, in this latest version, Pancho Cristo (renamed Pancho Rivera) is not yet dead. Instead, he has been arrested for robbing Jerry Paul's store and is awaiting trial in the town jail. Paul, however, makes it clear that Pancho will not have his day in court. He leads a lynch mob that strings up the young boy from the town flagpole. In addition, Harry Denton—who has been recast as the town's sheriff—is not killed by Jerry Paul. Rather, the reverse holds true and, after killing Paul, Denton tosses his badge into the dusty street and seeks out a priest in the crowd. Asking the priest if he “takes confessions from infidels?” (113), Denton offers a more general confession to the whole crowd when he admits that he was one of the twenty men in sheets who killed Clemson sixteen years ago. When Denton walks away from the crowd toward the jailhouse door, one of the townspeople asks him what he is going to do now that he has given up his badge. Responding, “The right thing . . . I'm going to do the right thing now” (115), Denton closes the door behind him. Soon thereafter, the quiet of the stage is broken by the sound of a single gunshot from within the jail.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>There has been a lot of confusion about this suicide scene and exactly when Serling introduced it into his script. According to Stanley Frank, the sponsors demanded three revisions of Serling's original script. First, set the play in the Southwest in the 1870s. Next, change the victim from “a Negro to a Mexican boy.” Finally, revise the ending so that the tormented sheriff does not commit suicide. On this last issue, Frank writes, “One sponsor, Allstate Insurance Company, vetoed that ending—suicide often leads to complications in settling policy claims—so that the sheriff was dispatched in a gun fight” (59). However, no surviving early draft has the teleplay set in the 1950s with a black victim and a sheriff who commits suicide. In fact, Denton's suicide was not introduced until at least after the April 21 “first draft.” As an example of the confusion surrounding Denton's suicide that permeates discussions of this teleplay, see Robert Quinn's 1966 dissertation on Serling. Quinn claims that “In the original script, set in the Southwest in the 1870's, a sheriff betrays his office and permits a crowd to remove a Mexican boy from his cell for lynching. The guilt-ridden lawman commits suicide in the original version” (158-59).



Other revisions specifically address della-Coippa's concerns. While the lynching of a man named Clemson remains, the victim is no longer identified as a black man; rather, he is characterized as a sixty-eight year-old "migrant worker" (41). Moreover, when telling the story of Clemson's lynching to Hannify this time, Denton must now confess, "I don't remember even what his crime was" (42), effectively eliminating the offensive (and allusive) wolf whistle. Finally, although Serling does keep the suggestion that Pancho and Jerry Paul's wife, Annamay, are very much in love, he does, per instruction, soften the sexual implications of that relationship by dropping Pancho's age to sixteen and having him share with Annamay a mutual love of music—"This boy never touched me," she tells him. "All he did was strum a guitar and look at me" (78). These script changes were, on the surface, less dramatic than the ones that altered the play's larger storyline; however, they were more essential to the executives and sponsors, who wanted no white-black racial dynamics, no lurid whistle, and no suggestions of interracial sex: that is, no Emmett Till.

Last-minute revisions were still needed before *A Town Has Turned to Dust* aired on June 17, 1958. As director John Frankenheimer recalled,

Four days before [the play] was to go on the air, the insurance company let it be known that the ending was totally unacceptable. Nobody on a show sponsored by the Prudential Insurance Company of America was going to commit suicide. Well, you can imagine: we yelled, we screamed, but all to no avail. CBS said, "Either you change it . . ." But there was no "either," so we changed it. (Champlin 32)

In addition, Serling was forced to drop the name "Clemson" from the final draft because South Carolina had an all-white college by that name and, although sponsors allowed the Pancho character to remain a Mexican, Serling had to omit all potentially offensive epithets such as "Mex," "enchilada-eater," "bean-eater," and "greasy" from Jerry Paul's tirades—in other words, dilute the bigotry that motivated the crime. Finally, in what was perhaps the oddest last-minute change, sponsors demanded that the phrase "twenty men in hoods" be changed to "twenty men in homemade masks" (in all likelihood to eliminate what could be read as a veiled reference to the Klan, even though the play was taking place in the 1870s, and in the Southwest). It should be noted, however, that Rod Steiger, who had spoken the line "twenty men in hoods" during

many, many rehearsals, said the line anyway on live television that evening (Engel 168).

Fortunately, all the last-minute changes did not have the same disastrous effect on this teleplay as they did upon the performance of *Noon on Doomsday*. Much to Serling's surprise, *A Town Has Turned to Dust* was met with general enthusiasm. Jack Gould of the *New York Times*—the same critic who found *Noon on Doomsday* "inconsequential"—called this new production a "night of powerful drama," a "raw, tough and at the same time deeply moving outcry against prejudice" (32). The Writers Guild of America agreed, recognizing *A Town Has Turned to Dust* as the year's best script. For Serling, however, the award must have been bittersweet. While he may have produced the year's best script, it was most certainly not the best script he could have written, and while the drama may have indeed been "a deeply moving outcry against prejudice," the real prejudice that he wanted to cry out against was never allowed to make it to the small screen. As he told a reporter, "By the time the censors had gotten to it, my *script* had turned to dust" (Brandt).

When Emmett Till's body arrived in Chicago for burial, his mother opted to have a four-day, open-casket viewing. When asked why, she proclaimed, "I want the whole world to see what they did to my boy." Rod Serling also had the same desire, but whereas Mamie Till Bradley could have the last word about how her son was to be remembered, Serling could not. Yes, he wielded more power than almost any other television writer of his generation, and, yes, he sold more than one hundred screenplays, many of which offered forceful critiques of American institutions. But when it came to racial prejudice, even the most powerful and most passionate writers in the medium found themselves unable to fight the system. According to Serling, realism was necessary for the examination of racial prejudice because "when you invite prejudice out to joust with, you display it in its honest trappings. If it is the deliberate withholding of homes from Negroes by virtue of color—this is the nature of the opponent and this is what you attack and this is the language you use and this is the identification that you very clearly and overtly display." And this is, of course, exactly what Serling's sponsors would not let him do. The television writer, Serling bemoaned,

must walk on tiptoe and in agony lest he offend some cereal buyers in Mississippi. Hence, we find in this mass medium a kind of ritual track-covering in which we

attack, quite obliquely, the business of minority problems. The television writer turns his literary guns on certain minority hangups that are allowed. So instead of a Negro, he gives battle against that prejudice visited upon American Indians or Alaskan Eskimos or Armenian peasants under the Czar. (Venuti 357)

When the updated version of *A Town Has Turned to Dust* aired on the Sci-Fi Channel in 1998, the ritual track-covering was so complete that few viewers fully understood what they were seeing. Certainly, they knew they were witnessing a lynching; what they did not, and could not, know was that they were watching not the future but the past; not 2215 but 1955. The story that 1955 has to tell us is not a pleasant one, for it not only reminds us of our nation's shameful record of racial violence but also reminds us how a new medium, full of new possibilities, failed to embrace a new vision for America.

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