BLACK PRESS COVERAGE OF THE EMMETT TILL LYNCHING
AS A CATALYST TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

by

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Under the Direction of Leonard Teel

ABSTRACT

The movement for civil rights in America gathered momentum throughout the 1950s. In the wake of the *U.S. Supreme Court's Brown vs. The Board of Education* ruling, declaring unconstitutional permissive or mandatory school segregation, the white South responded with both passive and active resistance. In the midst of this ferment, an African-American boy from Chicago was lynched in Mississippi.

Subsequent stories in the black press reported not only Emmett Till's murder and the trial, but also a widening mobilization within the race, notably the creation of associations in defense of civil rights. The coverage of news and views in the black press provide substantial evidence that this mobilization ignited the civil rights movement of the mid-1950s, just months before the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott led by Martin Luther King Jr. This research supports the view that the black community's mobilization during the months after Till's murder served as a catalyst for the civil rights movement.

INDEX WORDS: Emmett Till, Civil Rights movement, lynching, Black Press, African-American Press

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2007

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Georgia State University

May 2007

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SIGNIFICANCE

Historians have given inadequate attention to the lynching of Emmett Till and its relationship to subsequent events in the civil rights movement. Preliminary research has shown that these events have been under-researched, especially with respect to the black press and that press' impact in the subsequent agenda of the civil rights movement. In a 1988 interview, Till's mother, Mrs. Mamie Bradley, expressed her dissatisfaction with the way her son's importance to the movement had been overlooked historically. At the same time, she expressed her appreciation to the *Chicago Defender*, a prominent black newspaper, for its extensive coverage of her son's murder and the trial that followed. Other black publications including the *Amsterdam News* and *The Pittsburgh Courier* also extensively covered the case.

The main goal of this project is to add to the body of research on Emmett Till. Another goal is to analyze the similarities and differences of the coverage within the black press. Research has revealed fascinating differences in the coverage that various newspapers gave the case. Interviews and mainstream press coverage will also be utilized.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions for this thesis are:

1. Was the lynching of Emmett Till a catalyst for the civil rights movement?
2. Did the black press and activists frame the issue in a way that amplified public discourse? How did the mainstream press frame the issue?
3. Did the associations that developed in the aftermath of the lynching contribute to the initiation of the civil rights movement?

METHODOLOGY

Overview

Historiography is the set of approaches to study history that involve research in primary sources, analysis for patterns and associations and conclusions that extract meaning from admissible evidence. These approaches include testing for accuracy and bias. Admissible primary source evidence can include newspaper and magazine articles of the time, interviews, diaries, autobiographies and public and private documents.[1] Historical research and content analysis will be utilized in this project.

The methodology will include (1) seeking original/ primary sources including newspapers, magazines, diaries, letters and interviews, (2) analyzing various sources for validity and bias, (3) cross-referencing different accounts of the same events and (4) application of framing theory. It will also analyze remarks by black leaders and participants in the case as quoted within the black press.

Framing Analysis

Framing theory will be applied to this thesis project. According to William Gamson and Andre Modigliani, a frame is "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them… The frame suggests what the controversy is, about the essence of the issue." Framing is thus a process by which media and political elites define and construct issues or events.[2]

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[1] Leonard Teel, Interview by author, Atlanta, GA, November, 2004.
[2] Fuyuan Shen, *Effects of News Frames and Schemas on Individuals' Issue Interpretations and Attitudes*, Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly, Vol. 81, 2, 2004,406.

In Erving Goffman's words, frames allow individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" events within their life space or the world at large.[3] Framing analysis also provides us with considerable insight into the ideological dynamics of structuring opposition, mobilizing actors, and sustaining cohesion necessary for successful collective action. As Mayer, McAdam, and Zald have observed, "much of the recent work on framing has focused on strategic aspects of framing, on how social movement activists construct messages of injustice and grievances."[4]

According to Snow and Bender, master frames can be construed as functioning in a manner analogous to linguistic codes in that they provide a grammar that punctuates and syntactically connects patterns or happenings in the world.[5]

Activists employ collective action frames to punctuate or single out some existing social condition or aspect of life and define it as unjust, intolerable, and deserving of corrective action. The punctuating function of collective action frames serves as an accenting devices that either underscores and embellishes the seriousness and injustice of a social condition or redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable.[6]

Snow and Bender also note that collective action frames not only perform this focusing and punctuating role; they also function simultaneously as modes of attribution and articulation. They function as modes of attribution by making diagnostic and prognostic attributions. In the case of the former, movement activists attribute blame for

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[3] Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, 21.
[4] Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspective on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Frames* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 339.
[5] Ibid. 139.
[6] Ibid. 137.

some problematic condition by identifying culpable agents, be they individuals or collective processes or structures.[7] By suggesting both a line of action for ameliorating the problem and assignment of responsibility for carrying out that action. Thus diagnostic attribution is concerned with problem identification, whereas prognostic attribution addresses problem resolution. In addition to their punctuational and attributional functions, collective action frames enable activists to articulate and align a vast array of events and experiences so that they hang together in a relatively unified and meaningful fashion. They are signaling and collating devices that decode and "package," in Gamson's terms (1988), slices of observed and experienced reality so that subsequent experiences or events need not be interpreted anew. The punctuated and encoded threads of information may be diverse and even incongruous, but what was woven together in such a way that was previously inconceivable, or at least not clearly articulated, is now meaningfully interconnected. Thus what gives a collective action frame its novelty is not so much its innovative ideational elements as the manner in which activists articulate or tie them together. [8]

Data

The historical African-American press is a rich source of history that is pertinent to blacks in America. In the segregated United States of the 1950s, the period of this study, many stories relevant to African-Americans were not covered in the mainstream press. But the Emmett Till story was covered extensively not only in the historically African-American press, but also in the mainstream press. This has special significance

[7] Ibid. 137.
[8] Ibid. 138.

for historians because differences can be observed in the coverage. This study will look extensively at the Emmett Till case, using the black press as the main primary source. Mainstream papers will also be observed.

HISTORY OF THE EMMETT TILL CASE

Civil Rights Before Till

The 1950s were an important time for African-American civil rights, especially in the American South. Despite the fact that black participation in World War II had led to President Truman's signing Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948, which mandated the desegregation of the U.S. armed forces,[9] blacks were still often the targets of racism and violence. Ambassador Andrew Young recalled that, "before Till's death, violence against blacks was not unusual in the South, especially in Mississippi. There was always a lynching or something going on." Young remembered that in Birmingham, Alabama, the homes of African-Americans were regularly bombed during this time. He attributes this period of violence and the Till incident to the fact that after World War II, black soldiers were coming home to America and no longer feeling intimidated by racist whites.[10] Young believed that southern violence was a direct response to this lack of intimidation.

Young remembered that he, Dr. Martin Luther King and other leaders accepted the many lynchings that occurred in the south in the 1950s. He said, "Lynchings were not unusual. We used to make jokes about 'reckless eyeballing,' which meant if you looked at a white woman you might get lynched. We dealt with it with humor. We had to be comical about it so we would not be consumed by the danger of the situation. We had work to do." [11] Young's comments show that lynchings in the south were seen as unfortunate, but were tolerated before the world came to know Emmett Till.

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[9] C. Dryden, *A-Train Memoirs of a Tuskegee Airman*, Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1997, 231.
[10] Andrew Young, interview by author, Atlanta, 17 October, 2004.
[11] Ibid.

The Till History

In mid-August 1955, Moses Wright, a sixty-five-year-old cotton sharecropper from Money, Mississippi, went to Chicago, Illinois for a family funeral. He took Simeon, his twelve-year-old son with him. While there, Simeon visited with two of his Chicago cousins, sixteen-year-old Wheeler Parker, Jr. and fourteen-year-old Emmett Louis Till. The boys had enjoyed their time together in Chicago and wanted to extend it in Mississippi.[12]

Emmett had to persuade his mother to allow him to make the journey down south. "Bobo," as family members affectionately called him, was an only child and had suffered health problems as a baby. This fact probably caused his mother and grandmother, his only immediate family, to be a bit overly protective of him. His father Louis Till had been killed during World War II.

Emmett was accustomed to living in Chicago where blacks enjoyed a more liberated way of life than blacks in the Southern United States. Considering the time, young Emmett was probably a bit spoiled and privileged. It is no wonder his mother was hesitant to allow him to go. But after the boys pleaded with Mrs. Bradley, she agreed to let him make the trip.

In preparation for Emmett's Mississippi vacation, Mrs. Bradley advised him that he was to conduct himself properly, both as a child and as a black man. Born in Mississippi herself, she knew all too well about the appropriate conduct expected of the

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[12] Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of The Civil Rights Movement*, (Troy, MI: Bedford Publishers, Inc., 1994),28.

black male, man or child. She reminded him that he would be in a different environment saying,

> "I did warn him that he had a place down there, that it was a little bit different from Chicago. I told him that if anything happened, even though you think you're perfectly within your right, for goodness sake, take low, if necessary get on your knees and beg apology. Don't cross anybody down there because Mississippi is not like Chicago. What you can get away with here you might not be able to do it there. No matter how much it seems that you have the right, just forget your rights while you're in Mississippi . . .But I didn't really think all of those things. . . If I exaggerated a little bit, maybe I would make Emmett conscious that he was going to a different place and to be reasonably careful."[13]

Surely Mrs. Bradley did not see her words as prophetic when she said them. She allowed young Emmett to go, purchasing a round-trip train ticket for him. He and his cousins arrived in Mississippi on August 20, 1955.

The first few days were uneventful for the boys, but on August 24, they and some friends went to the community grocery store owned by a white man named Roy Bryant to buy candy. Bryant's twenty-one-year-old wife, Carolyn, was minding the store at the time. Her husband was out of town, not due back until two days later.

The accounts of what happened during the encounter Emmett had with Mrs. Bryant differ in various press sources but according to witnesses, the boy "wolf whistled" at the white woman. Till's cousin, Wheeler Parker remembered, "We'd gone into town Wednesday and were watching some boys playing checkers in front of the store. Somebody said there was 'a pretty lady' in the store and Bobo said he was going inside to buy some bubblegum. After a while, we went in and got Bobo but he stopped in the doorway and whistled at the lady. She got angry and followed us out, then ran toward a

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[13] Mamie Bradley Interview in Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till*, 34-35.

car. Someone hollered, 'She's getting a gun' and we ran."[14] Apparently all of the youngsters became frightened and abruptly left the store, knowing the possible implications of Emmett's actions.

Wheeler continued to say that the boys told their grandmother what happened but not their grandfather. "Grandma knew about the 'incident' because we'd told her and not Grandpa, who would have gotten angry at us,"[15] Wheeler recalled.

Young Till's grandfather, Rev. Moses Wright recalled the night the boy was kidnapped from his home. "When the men came, swearing and all, Grandma tried to awaken Bobo and hide him outside. But the men stormed in and told her to get back in bed and shut up before they beat 'hell' out of her."[16] The men took Emmett Till from his grandfather's house and his family would never again see him alive.

The perpetrators of Till's murder brutally beat him, shot him, weighted his body down with a 90-pound cotton gin fan tied around his neck with barbed wire, and then threw his body into the Tallahatchie River. They weighted Till's body in vain. After three days, a teenager who was fishing in the river spotted the boy's foot rising from the depths of the water. The beating, gunshot wound and elements of the hot weather and the Tallahatchie left the young lad's once handsome face unrecognizable.

The black press transformed Emmett Till into a symbol of martyrdom for civil rights very soon after his corpse was returned from Mississippi to his mother in Chicago. The September 10, 1955 issue of the *Chicago Defender* carried an article entitled, "Mother's Tears Greet Son Who Died Martyr."[17] The story, by Mattie Smith Colin, gave

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[14] "Nation Horrified by Murder of Kidnapped Chicago Youth." *Jet*, September 15, 1955, 8.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] "Mother's Tears Greet Son Who Died a Martyr," *The Chicago Defender*, Sept. 10, 1955,1

a detailed account of Mrs. Bradley accepting her son's body at the Illinois Central Station.

Colin used Mamie Bradley's eloquent quotes to contribute to Emmett's martyrdom. Mrs. Bradley was quoted as saying, "Lord you gave your only son to remedy a condition, but who knows what the death of my son might bring an end to lynching!!"[18] The story resonated with Mrs. Bradley's grief over her son's "sacrifice." Colin noted, "Mrs. Bradley hysterically shouted, about the untimely death of little Emmett, 'Darling you have not died in vain your life has been sacrificed for something.'[19] This reporter brought the emotion of Till's mother's loss to Chicago readers.

Although Till's death could have been considered just another murder or lynching, his mother made conscious decisions that greatly impacted the civil rights movement. The first important decision she made was to obtain a court order so that her son's body would be returned to Chicago. Mississippi officials attempted to prevent outsiders from seeing Till's mutilated body. According to the *Defender,* Mrs. Bradley intervened just in time to stop the authorities from burying him in Mississippi. The body had already been taken to a cemetery there when Chicago funeral director A.A. Rayner phoned to make arrangements for shipment to Chicago.[20] They were about to carry out a speedy funeral when Crosby Smith, Emmett's great-uncle, and the local sheriff arrived with the court order to return the body to Chicago. Till would certainly have been buried in Mississippi without the court order.

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

[20]"Grieving Mother Meets Body Of Martyr Son," *The Chicago Defender,* Sept. 10, 1955, 12.

When Emmett Till was returned to Illinois, the black press reported the emotional scene at Chicago's Twelfth Street Station. *The Chicago Defender* and *The Atlanta Daily World* published stories about Till's mother receiving the dead child. The *World's* article stated, "The boy's mother, Mrs. Mamie R. Bradley, 33, wept hysterically as her son's coffin was removed from the train."[21] Both papers featured photographs of Mrs. Bradley with their stories.

The Defender featured a full page of pictures from the scene at the railway station with the headline, "Grieving Mother Meets Body Of Martyr Son."[22] One photograph shows an inconsolable Mrs. Bradley as she viewed the plain pine coffin. Another showed the body being removed from the train. Others showed Mrs. Bradley at different times during the week of Emmett's funeral. In all the photographs chosen, Mrs. Bradley appeared grief-stricken.

The *Atlanta Daily World* also showed photographs of Till's mother in its coverage of the scene at the station. One article with the headline, "Mother Receives The Body of Her Slain Son," shows a distraught Mrs. Bradley being physically supported by two unidentified men as she views the box, which held her son's remains.[23] She appeared to be weeping uncontrollably in the photograph.

Another important decision that Mrs. Bradley made was to overrule the orders to keep the pine coffin of her son closed when it was returned to Chicago. It had been shipped there with the understanding that it would remain unopened. But Bradley insisted on inspecting her son's body. According to *The Atlanta Daily World,* she cried:

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[21]"Body Of Mississippi Slay Victim Returns Home." *Atlanta Daily World,* 1.
[22]"Grieving Mother . . .," 12.
[23]"Mother Receives The Body of Her Slain Son," *Atlanta Daily World,* Sept. 7, 1955, 1.

"Let the people see. Open it up. Let the people see what happened to my boy."[24] Defying the orders of the Mississippi authorities, the coffin was indeed opened.

Mrs. Bradley inspected the body "from head to toe" and confirmed it was her son. She said," I just had this compulsion that I had to know it was Emmett. And for no other reason than I had to know."[25] She didn't realize at the time that the boy's identity would be questioned at the trial as a part of the defense strategy. According to *Jet Magazine*, two Mississippi sheriffs questioned whether the body shipped to Chicago was actually that of Emmett Till.[26] Even though some newspapers gave accounts that the corpse was "unrecognizable," Mrs. Bradley emphatically stated that it was indeed Emmett. After she inspected the body, she insisted that the coffin be open to the press and spectators at her son's funeral.

Till's funeral was widely covered on the front pages of several black newspapers in the Northeast, the Midwest and the South. As historian Hudson-Weems later wrote, "The display of the body and the funeral during the three-day Labor Day weekend were strategically planned by Mrs. Bradley, who recognized the need to let the public witness this atrocity."[27] Mrs. Bradley's decision to allow her son's corpse to be publicly viewed is one that certainly had historical implications.

Although black press accounts of Till's injuries vary, by all accounts they were severe. In a front-page *Atlanta Daily World* article, Deputy Sheriff A.W. McCool was quoted as saying "the post-mortem examination disclosed the youth's head was badly battered." He said, "It had not been determined which came first, the beating or the

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[24] "Body Of Mississippi Slay Victim…" *Atlanta Daily World*, 1.
[25] Mamie Bradley, Interview, in Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till*, 222.
[26] "Sheriff hints Mother Doesn't Know Her Child," *Jet*, Sept. 22, 1955, 10.
[27] Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till, The Sacrificial Lamb* of the Civil Rights Movement, 46.

shooting. Some of the head wounds could have been caused by objects in the water. But the boy had been struck 'much more' than might have been necessary to knock him unconscious."[28] Mrs. Bradley's decision to show her son's mutilated corpse to the black press had far reaching implications.

Other articles also described Till's injuries in graphic detail. *Jet Magazine* described the boy as having "a bullet hole one inch above his right ear." The writer added, "The left side of his face was crushed to the bone."[29] *The Atlanta Daily World* noted that, "Almost all of his teeth were knocked out and the right side of his face was caved in." The reporter continued, "There was a small bullet hole through the temple."[30] *The Crisis* described his body as "water-swollen with one side of his face beaten to a pulp and a bullet hole in his head."[31] The *New York Amsterdam News* description was also quite graphic. The paper stated that "Long gashes were on his head and a heavy-calibre bullet had been fired through his brain. The flesh had been torn by the barbed wire that had been used to tie a 90-pound cotton gin pulley around his neck, and there were impressions on the upper forehead left by the heavy blows of a blunt instrument."[32] Because of Mrs. Bradley's decision to allow Emmett's body to be seen, detailed descriptions of Till's injuries were read in black publications throughout the nation.

The New York Amsterdam News and other publications quoted Mrs. Bradley as saying she "wanted the people to see what they did to my boy."[33] The implications of Mrs. Bradley's decision to open Emmett's casket to the public were great. Estimates of

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[28] "Two Held in Connection With Chicago Lad's Death." *Atlanta Daily World,* Sept. 1, 1955, 1.
[29] "Nation Horrified by Murder of Kidnapped Chicago Youth." *Jet Magazine*, Sept. 15, 1955, 7.
[30] "Body Of Mississippi Slay Victim Returns Home." *Atlanta Daily World*, 1.
[31] "Mississippi Barbarism," *The Crisis* (Oct., 1955), 480.
[32] "50,000 Line Chicago Streets For Look at Lynch Victim." *New York Amsterdam News*, Sept. 10, 1955, 1.
[33] Ibid.

up to 50,000 people viewed the mutilated corpse.[34] Black press photographers captured the image allowing countless persons to see the gruesome photographs of Emmett Till in his coffin.

At the time, the photographs were probably the most widely publicized of any lynch victim. As black publications including *The Chicago Defender, The Pittsburgh Courier, The Crisis* and *Jet Magazine* featured the shocking pictures of Emmett Till in their coverage, the black community was enormously affected. *The New York Amsterdam News* printed the photograph on its front page with the headline of "Mississippi Fury." The caption below the picture stated, "His mother insisted that the body be displayed."[35] Other publications also published the photographs.

Jet had a very important role in the coverage of Till's lynching. In 1955, *Jet* was the most prominent nationwide African-American magazine with weekly publication. Whereas black newspapers reached local and regional audiences, *Jet* was a nationwide publication based out of Chicago, Till's hometown. Till was a child of Chicago and *Jet* treated the story as such. Its reporters covered every aspect of the case.

Jet's initial coverage of the Till case appeared in its September 8th issue. The piece was entitled, "Chicago Boy Kidnapped by Miss. Whites." This article presented the background of the case. It described Emmett as "a 14-year-old Chicago junior high student who was kidnapped by three gun-toting whites while visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi." It also stated that the boy was "feared a lynch victim because he 'whistled at a white girl."[36] Till's body had not been found at the time of its publication.

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[34] Ibid.
[35] "Mississippi Fury," *The New York Amsterdam News,* Sept. 17, 1955, 1.
[36] "Chicago Boy, 14 Kidnapped by Miss. Whites," *Jet,* Sep. 8, 1955, 2.

When the September 15th issue of *Jet* was released, Emmett had been found. The piece covering the discovery of his body was entitled, "Nation Horrified by Murder of Kidnapped Chicago Youth." One photograph showed a handsome and dapper Emmett, months before his lynching. The article also featured the grotesque image of Till in his coffin.

The emotional effect of this image was intense then as it is now. Ambassador Young noted, "The photograph of Emmett Till in his coffin in *Jet Magazine* became mythic within the African-American community."[37] Like many other African-Americans, Young was deeply affected by the gruesome image.

The impact of the photograph was powerful and inspired a public outcry of support. When the *New York Amsterdam News* published the picture on its front page, one reader wrote a letter to the editor stating her feelings about the featured image of Till. The reader said, "Congratulations to your paper for putting the picture of the Till boy on the front page so the whole world can see what goes on inside Mississippi."[38] Other readers shared similar sentiments.

Audrey Weaver, a writer for *The Chicago Defender,* summarized the responses of the paper's readers to Emmett's murder by stating, "Chicagoans reacting to the killing in Mississippi of little Emmett Louis Till unanimously expressed their opinion that the guilty persons must be punished to the maximum degree: that Negro leaders unite in their protest of the crime and that Negroes in general begin donating more money to pay for

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[37] Andrew Young, Interview by Author, Atlanta, Georgia, 17 October 2004.
[38] L.McLean, "A.N. Front Page Pic Of Till Showed The World." [letter to the editor] *New York Amsterdam News,* Oct. 8, 1955, 10.

legal procedures which will insure civil rights for all citizens.[39] Many organizations received increased donations as blacks reacted to Till's lynching.

Black newspapers also published responses of black leaders to the lynching. A. Phillip Randolph, the president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was quoted in *The Amsterdam News* as saying, "The barbaric lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till has so outraged not only Americans but people through out the world." He went on to say that The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, New York Division, had a responsibility to keep the public informed continually so that justice would be done and that "an 'outraged' and an 'aroused' public opinion was the only means of bringing to speedy justice the killers of polio-afflicted Emmett Till."[40] Leaders of other organizations also responded to the killing in the pages of the black press.

The Negro press printed the reactions from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) headquarters in New York. The *Amsterdam News* reported that the organization called the slaying "a modern lynching."[41] A debate focused on whether Till's death was actually a lynching as maintained by the NAACP. *The Chicago Defender* reported the exchange on both sides of the issue. The paper noted when "Gov. White [of Mississippi] disagreed with the NAACP, which charged that the boy's slaying was an outright lynching. Gov. White termed it a straight out murder."[42] The murder verses lynching debate also appeared in other papers.

Leaders within the NAACP, in speaking about the case sometimes referred to it as a "murder" rather than a lynching. Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the organization,

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[39] Audrey Weaver, "Demand Justice in Lynching," *Chicago Defender,* Sept. 10, 1955, 1.
[40] "Public Meet to Protest Miss. Killing," *The New York Amsterdam News,* Sept. 24, 1955, 1.
[41] "Mass Meet on Till Murder," *New York Amsterdam News,* Sept. 10, 1955, 14.
[42] "'Murder' White Says promises Prosecution," *The Chicago Defender* Sept. 10, 1955, 3.

referred to the Till case in an *Atlanta Daily World* article as "The case that shows Mississippi has decided to maintain white supremacy by murdering children."[43] In other cases, the terms killing and slaying were also used.

Southern black leaders also made efforts to mobilize their communities after the Till lynching. Rev. H.T. Primm, Presiding Negro Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Mississippi and Louisiana called for two days of mourning the week of September 10th. According to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, "The bishop asked that all those under his jurisdiction wear a strip of black ribbon three inches long and to answer if anyone asked about the ribbon that it meant, 'heaven and earth set themselves against such ruthless crimes and lawlessness.'"[44] This is also evidence of the black church's reaction to Till's lynching.

Black leaders and their organizations used the black press as a means to contact President Eisenhower about the Till case. *The Pittsburgh Courier* noted when Camille Carter, President of the Chicago NAACP Youth Council protested to Eisenhower stating, "The lynching of a child is one of the most barbaric crimes ever committed by racists and bigots . . . to perpetuate white supremacy."[45] This contact as well as others seemed to fall upon deaf ears.

The Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers of Chicago also used the pages of *The Courier* to call for action from the President and the Attorney General. Their statement read, "You as President and Attorney General Brownell should exercise all power and influences to end the inflammatory activities of racists. . . like Governor Byrnes of South

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[43] "Investigation Of Boy's Death Ordered By Mississippi Gov.," *Atlanta Daily World*, Sept. 2, 1955, 1.
[44] "Mourning Called for Slain Lad," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Sept. 17, 1955, 5.
[45] "Protest Mount Over Emmett Till's Death," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Sept. 5, 1955, 5.

Carolina, Gov. Hugh White of Mississippi and Eugene Talmadge of Georgia, whose violent support of segregation and discrimination make them responsible for the lynching of Emmett Till."[46] This call for action also went unanswered.

The *Atlanta Daily World* noted when William Henry Huff, attorney for the NAACP called for direct action from Mr. Eisenhower. Huff stated "the dastardly act on the part of these criminal minded persons is so outrageous that it opens the door for condemnation even from the President of the United States."[47] The research has revealed no record of condemnation or any other reaction from President Eisenhower to the murder of Emmett Till.

Emmett's lynching had a galvanizing effect on the local community of Chicago. One *Chicago Defender* editorial said, "The lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Louis "Bo" Till of Chicago in Mississippi last week is an outrage to citizens, white, and colored, and dramatically point out to the world the ugliest aspects of life in our democracy."[48] The thousands of persons who attended his funeral further evidence that galvanization.

Audrey Weaver, a reporter for the *Defender* used the reactions of readers in one front-page story. *Defender* reader William Kendrick called Till's lynching, "The worst thing he had ever heard of." Another reader said," It was a terrible thing and such a thing would not have happened in Chicago."[49] Other reporters wrote similar accounts of outrage among the citizens of Chicago.

Not only was outrage expressed in the Chicago paper, but also in papers in other parts of the nation. Earl Brown, a reporter for *The New York Amsterdam News*, wrote

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[46] Ibid.
[47] "Investigation Of Boy's Death. . .," *Atlanta Daily World*, Sept. 2, 1955, 1.
[48] "Blood on Their Hands…." [editorial] *The Chicago Defender*, Sept. 10, 1955, 1.
[49] Audrey Weaver, "Demand Justice in Lynching." *The Chicago Defender*, September 10, 1955, 1.

several articles about the incident. In one piece, he called the lynching, "among the most heinous crimes ever committed in the land of bestiality, hate and abject ignorance." He went on to call it a "wanton and bold attack upon their [blacks] citizenship rights.[50]

The *Atlanta Daily World*, *The Chicago Defender* and *Jet Magazine* reported the arrest of the murder suspects soon after it happened. According to the *Defender*, "Sheriff Smith revealed that Roy Bryant, a storekeeper of Money, Mississippi and his half brother, J.W. Milam would be charged with murder in the killing."[51] In its reporting of the arrest of the suspected kidnappers, The *Chicago Defender* noted that Bryant had possibly been involved in the death of another black man in Mississippi. The article states, "Bryant was implicated in the death of a Negro who was beaten and left in a ditch last year [1954]."[52] Bryant had once escaped punishment in the murder of a black person, and would certainly do the same in the lynching of Emmett Till.

It was clear that some reporters doubted that justice would be realized in the case. One *Jet* reporter wrote about his lack of faith in the justice system even before the trial began.

> As the horribly mutilated body of 14-year-old Emmett Louis Till was lowered into the cold ground of a Chicago cemetery many days and many miles away from the watery Mississippi grave his kidnappers intended for him, his distraught mother screamed to the world that his death be avenged. But as time wore on and southern justice began to bear its strange fruit, national leaders, the heartsick mother and thousands of other Americans began to wonder if Mississippi will whitewash its latest and most fiendish atrocity when the accused kidnapers go on trial September 19.[53]

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[50] Earl Brown, "Time For Action." *The Amsterdam News*, Sept. 10, 1955, 14.
[51] "Two held In Connection with Chicago Lad's Death." *The Atlanta Daily World*, Sept. 1, 1955**,** 1.
[52] Mattie S. Colin & Robert Elliott, "Mother Waits in Van For her 'Bo,'" *Chicago Defender* Sept. 3, 1955, 1.
[53]"Will Mississippi Whitewash the Emmett Till Slaying?" *Jet Magazine* Sept. 22, 1955, 8.

The *Atlanta Daily World* printed the skepticism Roy Wilkins felt about the upcoming trial. In one piece, the paper stated that, "Although two white men, Roy Bryant 24, and J.W. Milam, 35, his half-brother, have been indicted for the kidnap-murder' of the Till boy, Mr. Wilkins said, "It is necessary to take some steps to prevent a whitewash of them in some farcical trial."[54] Wilkins knew that despite the efforts of the community, the possibility of a fair trial was questionable.

Black publications covered details of the trial from the time the date was set. The *Atlanta Daily World* headlined the story. The article written by E.J. Mays noted that the "two white men accused of murdering a 14-year-old Chicago boy in the Mississippi Delta would go to trial for their lives on Monday, September 19th." Mays also noted when "Roy Bryant, 24, of Money and his half-brother J.W. Milam, 38, of Glendors, were indicted on charges of murder and kidnapping."[55] This coverage continued through out the trial and after the acquittal of the accused murderers.

The *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that Emmett's identity was questioned even before the trial began. James Edmond Boyack, staff correspondent for the paper stated, "Tallahatchie County Sheriff H. C. Strider was said to be among those who doubted the identity of the corpus delieti." Boyack also noted "no other colored youth had been reported missing."[56] This fact did not stop the defense team from questioning the identity of the body before the trial.

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[54] "Officials Cautious On Lynch-Murder Commitment," *The Atlanta Daily World,* Sept. 9, 1955, 1.
[55] "Lynch Murder Suspects To Stand Trial For Murder Sept. 19-Accused of Kidnap-Death Of 14-Year-Old Chicago Boy," *The Chicago Defender*, Sept. 10 1955, 1.
[56] "Tension Mounts As Till Trial Begins-Men's Souls Are Torn by Hatred, Violence, Fear," *The Pittsburgh Courier,* Sept. 24, 1955, 1.

When the trial began, the question of the boy's identity was indeed the main argument of the defense. When Mrs. Bradley was chosen as the star witness for the prosecution, the *Pittsburgh Courier* printed her testimony. She stated, "I positively identified my son the first time I saw him." Boyack wrote that she made careful examination of the body, noted the hairline, the ears and the lips and made a careful study of his features. "He was my boy beyond any shadow of a doubt," she affirmed. When handed a photograph of the body that was pulled from the river, "Mrs. Bradley swore it was Emmett."[57] She stated that, "he [Emmett] looked even worse than he did when she had seen him, which was worse than he did when the rest of the world finally saw him."[58] Till's appearance had actually been improved by the undertakers before the world saw him. Despite the shock of seeing the photograph, Mrs. Bradley maintained her composure in the courtroom.

A key piece of evidence in the trial was a gold ring that Emmett wore. The ring was engraved with the letters L.T., the initials of his father Louis Till. Emmett's father had left him the ring when he died. According to Mrs. Bradley, "Emmett was definitely wearing it when he left Chicago."[59] In one interview, Mrs. Bradley stated that she was accused of placing the ring on the body of an unknown corpse to cause unrest in Mississippi.

When the trial ended with the acquittal of Bryant and Milam, *The Pittsburgh Courier* dedicated seven of eight consecutive front-page articles to the Till Case. James

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[57] James Boyack, "Till's Mom Is Star Witness!" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 1, 1955, 8.
[58] Mamie Till-Mobley & Christopher Benson, Death of Innocence, Random House: New York, 2003, 179.
[59] Ibid.

Boyack, the *Courier* reporter, declared the day, September 23rd, "Black Friday."[60] Boyack expressed his feelings of disappointment after the trial.

> I'm sick .. . in heart. . . in soul. . . in body!
> This is "Black Friday" in Mississippi . . . in America . . . throughout the civilized world!
> I've just witnessed the most revolting, the most disgusting, the most callous miscarriage of justice that has been my lot . . . in more than twenty years of crime reporting.
> I'm a hardened newspaperman . . . a white reporter sent down here by my newspaper to cover the trial. . .and tonight (Black Friday) I'm hanging my head in shame. [61]

After the acquittal of Bryant and Milam, Boyack interviewed three trial jurors for the *Defender*. They stated that the reason for the acquittal was because the state failed to prove that the corpse found was that of Emmett Till. J. W. Shaw, the foreman was quoted in the *Pittsburgh Courier* as saying, "I feel that the state failed to prove the identity of the boy. Gus Ramsey said, "The question of identification was the main point, I think." Finally, George Hollani said, "They [meaning the prosecution] couldn't identify the boy."[62] Boyack could not have had access to these jurors if he had not been a white reporter.

Civil Rights After Till

As the justice system failed Emmett Till and his family, others decided to take action in response to the boy's killing. According to *The Atlanta Daily World*, "an unidentified 'NAACP Lawyer' stated that he would definitely file a $100,000 damage

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[60] "Lynch Trial Disgusting," *The Pittsburgh Courier,* Oct. 1, 1955, 1.
[61] James Boyack, "Courier's James Boyack Hangs Head in Shame.' *The Pittsburgh Courier,* Oct. 1, 1955, 1.
[62] "3 Jurors Air Views," *The Pittsburgh Courier* Oct. 1, 1955, 9.

suit against Bryant and Milam if the men escape 'death in the gas chamber.'"[63] Research has revealed that the suit was never filed.

As the black community watched the justice system fail them in the Till case, they resorted to other methods, particularly massive protest meetings. One such meeting in New York was well publicized in the *Amsterdam News*, possibly because A. Phillip Randolph organized it. He called for "a vigorous public demonstration that was held on Sunday, September 25, 1955 in Harlem."[64] Reporter Earl Brown encouraged readers of *The Amsterdam News* to attend the meeting by printing this excerpt from a letter to the editor.

> Maybe one way for us in New York to get going would be to attend the mass meeting called for next Sunday, September 25, at 2:30 p.m. at Williams Institutional Church, 132nd St. and Seventh Avenue, by A. Phillip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Let's all attend and let us decide then our next move. Not another talkfest but action.[65]

The meeting was advertised in the *Amsterdam News* to "Protest Mississippi Lynch Law Justice." The advertisement stated, "But by the GRACE OF GOD fourteen-year-old EMMETT LOUIS TILL of Chicago—lynched August 28, 1955 in Mississippi—might have been your son! your brother! or you!" The ad continued by asking readers to "Join your voice and presence with thousands of your fellow citizens in protest!—protest!—protest!—against this OUTRAGE—SHAME—HORROR AND CRIME against

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[63] "Possibility of Early Trial Looms for Miss. Lynch-Murder Suspects," *The Atlanta Daily World*, Sept. 8, 1955, 1.
[64] "Public Meet To Protest Miss. Killing," Headline, *New York Amsterdam News*, Sept. 24, 1955, 1.
[65] Earl Brown, "Let's Act" *The New York Amsterdam News*, Sept. 24, 1955, 10.

humanity."[66] The meeting's advertisement was very prominent, utilizing a full page in the newspaper.

Another mobilization meeting in New York featured Till's mother as the main featured speaker. The headline advertising the meeting read, "Hear The Mississippi Story!! From the Lips and Heart Of Emmett Till's Mother (Mrs. Mamie Bradley) and Mrs. Ruby Hurley, NAACP Southern Director who comes direct from the Trial." [67] Money for the full-page ad was paid by fifty-six New York area businesses whose names were listed on the page.

A varied group of business interests paid for advertising the meeting. They ranged from jewelry stores like Busch's, Lincoln's, and Herbert's to supermarkets like Mardell and Spend-Less. Harlem nightspots like the 125 Club and the Palm Café also contributed. Clothing stores such as Brown's Children's Clothes, Town's Hats and Stacy Adams Shoes were represented. Two optometrists and several pharmacists represented the medical profession. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and *The New York Amsterdam News* were also listed sponsors. F.W. Woolworth Co., a well known nationwide company also contributed to the ad.[68] Many of the business addresses listed in the advertisement were 125th Street in Harlem, a New York community with a history of black activism.

Black New Yorkers were motivated to register to vote by one advertisement in the *Amsterdam News* that linked Till to other black murder victims in Mississippi. The ad

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[66] "Protest Mississippi Lynch Law Justice!!" [advertisement], *New York Amsterdam News*, Sept 24, 1955, 3.
[67] "Hear The Mississippi Story," [advertisement], *New York Amsterdam News*, Oct. 1, 1955, 9.
[68] Ibid.

encouraged readers to "vote your way to civil rights."[69] The half-page advertisement asks readers to not only remember Emmett Till, but also Rev. George Lee and Lamar Smith, two black men who were also murdered in Mississippi. According to the *Atlanta Daily World*, Rev. Lee was "murdered in Belzoni, Mississippi May 7 [1955] because he refused to remove his name from the registered voters' list when local whites ordered him to do so. Lamar Smith, a registered voter, was called from his home to the courthouse in Lincoln County and shot on the steps on August 13," just weeks before Emmett's lynching.[70] The three Mississippi murder victims were linked together to mobilize the citizens of New York.

When mobilization meetings were held in other cities, The *Amsterdam News* reported them. One of its editorials dated October 1, 1955 noted "in addition to 25,000 attending a mass monster meeting in New York, 15,000 met in Cleveland and 20,000 met in Detroit, protesting the brutal injustice which the Till lynching symbolized." The writer referred to the incident as "a grim and graphic reminder to America and the entire world that 16,000,000 Negroes will no longer stand for the inhuman treatment of American citizens."[71] These meetings are evidence of the intense reaction and mobilization of African-Americans in varied American cities.

In the weeks and months following the acquittal, witnesses in the trial played a special role, in many cases with the support of the NAACP. *Jet* documented the widespread interest in one witness, Emmett Till's cousin. It noted that "More than 10,000 persons jammed an NAACP mass meeting at Chicago's Metropolitan Community

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[69] "The Time is Now!" [advertisement], *New York Amsterdam News,* Oct. 8, 1955, 9.
[70] "Official Is Cautious on Lynch-Murder Commitment" *The Atlanta Daily World,* Sept. 9, 1955,2.
[71] "Mississippi Justice" [editorial] *The New York Amsterdam News,* Oct. 1, 1955, 1.

Church where lanky Willie Reed, 18-year-old cotton picker who became the trial's star witness, urged northern Negroes to quit shouting and begin working to help their people in the South."[72] This is also a demonstration of the trial becoming a call to action by members of the black press to the black community at large.

Other articles linked the murder and acquittal to school desegregation. *The Pittsburgh Courier* noted when R.R. Harris of the Durham City Council made such a connection. Harris was quoted as saying, "Unfortunately for the country, the brutal murder of Emmett Till occurred at a time when the world can easily believe that it was a part of Mississippi's violent reaction to the Supreme Court's school decisions and so believing will look upon the trial of Bryant and Milam as a mockery and their acquittal as an expected conclusion of the case. Unless the kidnappers and killers of this boy are brought to punishment the nation remains indicted."[73] Other articles also connected the Till lynching to school desegregation.

The black press notably reported on the Till kidnapping, murder, trial and the acquittal of his accusers. But when Bryant and Milam confessed to the murder, it was reported in *Look* Magazine, a mainstream publication. Several months after the trial, *Look* featured the confessions of Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam along with descriptive details of the boy's last hours alive. According to the murderous pair, Emmett Till's last words were, "Yeah" his answer to two questions they asked him. The first question was "You still as good as I am?" and the second question was "You still 'had' white women?" They were paid a fee of $4,000 for their story.[74] This confession led to unsuccessful

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[72] *Jet Magazine*, Oct. 6, 1955, 4.
[73] "Leaders Rap Till Verdict," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 1, 1955, 8.
[74] William Bradford Huie, "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," *Look*, Jan. 1956, 50.

attempts by members of the black community to have them retried in the federal court system.

After observing the failure of the American court system in the Emmett Till case, blacks employed new methods for fighting injustice. The Montgomery bus boycott, which began a brief three months after the trial, illustrates the execution of an alternative strategy.

In the months that followed Till's brutal lynching and before the Rosa Parks incident, the black papers printed numerous articles which not only expressed the outrage of the black community but also preserved the history of the incident. The stream of articles insisted on action and tied the boy's death to the need for greater liberty for blacks in America. The black newspaper coverage of the Emmett Till lynching and trial was a great part of the galvanization that took place within the black community months before Rosa Parks ignited the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

THE MAINSTREAM PRESS COVERAGE

Just as the story of Emmett Till was big news in the black press, it was also widely covered in the mainstream press. The story was covered extensively in papers including the *New York Times*, The *Times Picayune* of New Orleans, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* and the *Jackson Daily News* and *Clarion-Ledger* of Mississippi.

The investigation of mainstream publications has been invaluable to this research. It has revealed much about the writers and newspaper editors of mainstream papers in varied regions of the United States. Studying the mainstream press also revealed much about the mindset of white citizens as they wrote letters to these newspapers.

New York Times

From the end of August until the end of December of 1955, forty-six articles about the Emmett Till case appeared in *The New York Times*. It is worthy to note that only one of those articles appeared on the front-page of the paper. It reported the acquittal of the accused killers of Till. Interestingly, the story garnered front-page coverage in many other white or mainstream publications.

The initial *New York Times* coverage of the Till case appeared in the September 4th issue. This piece, titled "Slain Youth's Body Seen by Thousands," covered young Till's funeral and highlighted the fact that his coffin was open. It stated, "The casket was opened to public view at the insistence of the boy's mother, Mrs. Mamie Bradley," [75] but did not include pictures of Till's corpse as many black publications did.

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[75] "Slain Youth's Body Seen by Thousands," *New York Times*, September 4, 1955, S-9.

The piece also reported, "a Negro minister in the pulpit urged the viewers to contribute to a fund set up by the NAACP." The *Times* story also stated "the funds would be used so that this would not happen again."

An interesting parallel is observed as *The New York Times* encouraged its readers to political action by printing the minister's request for NAACP donations at Emmett's funeral. *The New York Amsterdam News* often printed requests for funds by ministers and political leaders, many benefiting the NAACP. The article also noted when the minister remarked that Communists passed pamphlets in front of the funeral parlor the night before the funeral, "telling us [blacks] what to do." The minister went on to say, "Pay no heed. We don't need Communists." [76] Interestingly, no mention of a communist presence at the funeral was located in the black papers that were investigated.

When Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam were indicted for the murder, *The New York Times* also covered it. The article stated, "The fact remains that the Tallahatchie County grand jury, made up of white men, took this step against other white men for a crime against a Negro."[77] The piece also noted that "The prompt action of the grand jury in the Till case also indicates that the people of contemporary Mississippi are against this form of murder as against other forms of murder."[78] The indictment of the accused perpetrators of the crime was indeed a milestone in 1950's Mississippi.

The *New York Times* continued to highlight black political action as it reported when the NAACP called on the Justice Department to halt what it labeled a "state of jungle fury" in Mississippi. The writer of the piece reported that the NAACP had drafted a formal petition because "the Mississippi White Citizens Council had created an

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[76] Ibid.
[77] "Indictment in Mississippi" The *New York Times*, September 7, 1955, 30.
[78] Ibid.

atmosphere of violence that had led to the murder of three Negroes, hundreds of threats, a drastic reduction in Negro voting and countless instances of intimidation."[79] This is evidence not only of political action for black civil rights, but also of three lynching being tied to black voter rights.

According to the article, "the statement was handed to Warren Olney 3d., Assistant Attorney General and head of the department's Criminal Division by Roy Wilkins of the NAACP."[80] The petition charged that the White Citizens Council's open reign of terror in Mississippi had led to the wanton killing of Emmett Till, Rev. George Lee and Lamar Smith.[81] Lee and Smith were murdered in 1955 for activities connected to Mississippi black voting rights.

When Bryant and Milam were acquitted, *The New York Times* featured the story. The reporter, John Popham, noted "a jury of twelve white neighbors of the defendants reached the verdict after one hour and five minutes of deliberations."[82] Again this coverage was quite different from the black coverage, as none of the black papers referred to the jurors as "neighbors" of the defendants.

The *Times* followed its story about the verdict with coverage of the Harlem protest. The feature stated that "Ten thousand persons at a Harlem Rally were urged yesterday to go to the ballot boxes, to exhort their political precinct captains and, if need be, to march on Washington to bring an end to racism and lynching in the United States."[83] Many black papers also reported this massive protest.

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[79] U.S. Urged To Halt 'Fury' In Mississippi, *New York Times*, September 8th 1955, 10.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Popham, J., "Mississippi Jury Acquits 2 Accused in Youth's Killing," *The New York Times*, September 24, 1955, 1.
[83] "10,000 In Harlem Protest Verdict," *New York Times*, September 26, 1955, 10.

The *Times* piece stated that although the crowd was orderly, it surged against police lines, once breaking them, in an effort to see Mrs. Mamie Bradley, Emmett Till's mother, who attended the meeting."[84] None of the black articles that were investigated made reference to misconduct by the attendees of this protest rally.

The article also noted that a resolution was adopted urging Negroes not to vote for any Republican candidates for President or Vice President in 1956 unless "positive action is taken by the present administration."[85] President Eisenhower was a member of the Republican Party at the time.

The paper also reported one Chicago area protest. The piece stated that a group from the NAACP "demonstrated against the conduct of the Till murder trial in Mississippi."[86] The writer of the piece referenced a pamphlet distributed by the protesters that urged the subcommittee to investigate "The reign of terror now going on in Mississippi: the lynch-murder of 14 year-old, Chicago-born Emmett Louis Till in Mississippi and the subsequent acquittal of those charged with his death."[87] The *Times* coverage was indeed extensive.

Another article in the paper noted, "There was at first wide evidence of outraged indignation over the crime and Mississippi officials were outspoken in demanding swift retributive justice."[88] It also noted that a special prosecutor was assigned to handle the case. The piece highlighted the lynching/murder debate that was prominently observed in several black newspapers, referring to it as a "controversy."[89] The paper reported that

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[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] "Till Trial Protested," *New York Times,* October 8, 1955, p.7.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Popham, J.,"Kidnapping Case Revived in the South," *New York Times*, October 30, 1955, 87.
[89] Ibid.

outside organizations, including spokesmen for the NAACP termed the crime a 'lynching'.

The same piece also reported on the details of the death of Emmett Till's father. The *Jackson Daily News* had disclosed that Louis Till, "serving in World War II, was hanged for the murder of one woman and the rape of two others."[90] Some southern papers inferred that Louis Till's alleged crimes against women made his son predisposed to the same alleged behavior.

The New York Times coverage focused more on the political implications of the case than any of the other mainstream publications that were observed. This fact could possibly be attributed to the northern location or because of the political nature of blacks in New York. It is a fact that is certainly worthy of further investigation.

Times Picayune

Unlike *The New York Times*, *The Times Picayune* of New Orleans printed many front-page stories about the Emmett Till case. The initial story told of the discovery of Till's body. The story appeared in the September 1st issue with the headline of "Kidnapped Boy's Body Found."[91] According to the story, Till had been kidnapped because he made "ugly remarks" to a white woman. The paper also reported inaccurate information that the boy had been abducted the morning after the incident with the woman.

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[90] Ibid.
[91] "Kidnapped Boy's Body Found," *Times Picayune*, September 1, 1955, P.1

Like many of the black papers, the New Orleans publication used quotes from Till's mother in its coverage. The paper said of the woman, "Mrs. Bradley of Chicago sobbed: Someone is going to pay for this. The entire state of Mississippi is going to pay for this. I can't think; I just can't think. I'm frozen. He didn't do anything to deserve that."[92] By printing this quote, the paper humanized Mrs. Bradley, a trend observed in many black papers.

The story also quoted Roy Wilkins of the NAACP. Wilkins said, "The killers of the boy felt free to lynch him because there is in the entire state [Mississippi] no restraining influence of decency, not in the state capital, among the daily newspapers, the clergy nor any segment of the so-called better, citizens."[93] Wilkins communicated the outrage felt by the masses of blacks to mainstream America.

The *Times Picayune* description of Emmett's injuries was mild in comparison to the accounts found in some black publications. According to the paper, Sheriff Strider of Tallahatchie County said, "We found a bullet hole one inch above his right ear. The left side of his face had been cut up or beat up—plumb to the skull."[94] There was no mention of other details like the cotton gin fan that was tied around Till's neck to weigh his body in the river.

The next issue of the paper quoted the governor of Mississippi extensively. It reported that Governor Hugh White "called for a complete investigation of the kidnap-killing of a bubble-gum chewing Negro youth who allegedly wolf-whistled at a white woman."[95] White went on to say "Mississippi deplores such conduct on the part of any

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[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.
[95] "Probe is Asked in Boy's Killing," *Times Picayune*, September 2, 1955, p.1.

of its citizens and can not condone it."[96] The paper went even further in its reporting and stated, "In a telegram to the National Association for The Advancement of Colored People in New York, the governor said: Parties charged with the murder are in jail. I have every reason to believe that the court will do their duty in prosecution."[97] White also went on record calling the incident a murder. He said, "This is not a lynching, it is a straight out murder."[98] Like many black publications, the *New York Times* noted the lynch/murder debate between White and the NAACP.

The next issue of the paper also used a quote from Mrs. Bradley. The reporter stated, "The train bearing the boy's body was met by his mother, Mrs. Mamie Bradley, who has said that President Eisenhower should see that justice is done."[99]

Politicians in Illinois spoke of their outrage in the *New York Times*. The paper noted when Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago sent a telegram to President Eisenhower urging "all the facilities of the federal government be immediately utilized so that the ends of justice may be served."[100] The same article noted that the governor of Illinois advocated a thorough investigation in the case. These quotes by Chicago's Mayor and the governor of Illinois are important because they are evidence of support for blacks came from white leaders on the local and state level.

Worthy of note is the fact that this article featured a picture of young Till. It was a handsome photo of the boy that was taken a few months before his death. This fact is noted because pictures of Emmett appeared in the mainstream coverage quite infrequently.

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[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] "Slain Negro Youth's Body is in Chicago for Funeral," *Times Picayune* September 3, 1955. 2.
[100] Ibid.

When the paper covered the viewing of Emmett's body the following day, there was no picture included, but the description of the condition of his body was more detailed. The writer stated, "Viewers filing past the youth's casket looked down on the disfigured face which a Mississippi sheriff said earlier appeared to have been struck with an ax because " 'it went too deep to be anything else.'"[101] These simple details still left the true extent of Emmett's injuries to the imagination of New Orleans readers.

In the next issue of the paper, Sheriff Strider, the lead investigator in the case, called into question whether the body was actually Emmett Till. He was quoted as saying, "The whole thing looks like a deal made up by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People[s]." [102] The paper also printed, Roy Wilkins' response as he said, "The sheriff evidently knows nothing about the NAACP."[103] Till's cousin Ray F. Mooty was also quoted in the article saying, "The family is convinced that the body is Emmett,"[104] calling the sheriff's comment an attempt to 'cover up.' This comment led to a debate between Strider and Wilkins that was featured in many articles about the case.

Although the *Times Picayune* printed one picture of Emmett Till, it featured several of the accused murderers and their families. The first one appeared in the September 6th issue. It was a picture of Mrs. Roy Bryant, the woman whom Emmett was alleged to have whistled at.[105] Another piece featured a photograph of Bryant sharing a deep kiss with his wife as their two young sons looked on.[106] Still another showed both

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[101] "Body of Chicago Youth Is Viewed," *Times Picayune,* September 4, 1955, 9.
[102] "Sheriff Says Body May Not Be Till's", *Times Picayune,* September 4, 1955, 9.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid.
[105] "Report on Till Probe Expected," *Times Picayune,* September 6, 1955.
[106] "Till Case Trial To Open," *Times Picayune,* September 18, 1955.

of the defendants with their toddler children in tow.[107] All of these photographs seemed to humanize the accusers and their families, therefore evoking sympathy for them.

One article in particular seemed to create sympathy for the accused perpetrators of the crime. Sheriff Strider said that he had received threats against Bryant and Milam. He continued, "One of the letters had threatened the life of James H. Bryant, brother of the jailed men, who was stationed in the Navy in New York."[108] Strider described the letters as "filthy and vicious" and asked the FBI to investigate.

Strider's quotes continued to evoke compassion for the accusers' families as he stated "Automobiles bearing Illinois license plates forced cars driven by the Bryant family and other persons off nearby roads."[109] Strider continued, referring to the traffic incidents, "Those folks seem to think they are coming down here and take over—I don't think they are."[110] Proof of whether or not these allegations were true has not been revealed in this research process, but Strider closed by saying, "he still thought that Emmett Till was alive."[111] The overwhelming evidence showed that this remark was certainly false.

One particular article with the headline, "Slain Boy's Mother Is Still In Chicago," seemed more sympathetic to the Bryant family than to Mrs. Bradley. It referred to her as "the witness: Mrs. Mamie Bradley, mother of Emmett Till, a 14-year–old Chicago Negro slain after whistling and allegedly making "ugly remarks" to a white storekeeper's pretty wife." [112] Mrs. Bradley had sent a telegram to the District Attorney asking if provisions

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[107] "Till Trial Jury Selection Held," *Times Picayune,* September 20, 1955.
[108]Ibid.
[109]Ibid.
[110]Ibid.
[111]Ibid.
[112] "Slain Boy's Mother Is Still in Chicago," *Times Picayune,* September 20, 1955, 22.

for her protection would be provided upon her arrival in Mississippi. The D.A. responded by requesting that "Mrs. Bradley leave immediately for Sumner."[113] He also said "he thought her already in the Sumner vicinity ready to testify and that her failure to make herself available was 'not understandable.'"[114] The District Attorney's harsh response to Mrs. Bradley's request for protection was quite unsympathetic. Her concern for her own safety was certainly not unjustified, considering the volatile atmosphere in Mississippi, which surrounded the trial.

When Milam and Bryant were found not guilty of murdering Emmett Till, it appeared on the front-page of the *Times Picayune.* The unknown reporter used quotes from the jury foreman, J.A. Shaw. According to the paper, "Shaw said that the jury had reached a unanimous verdict on the third ballot. On the first ballot, three of the jurors had abstained from voting. On the second ballot, two had abstained."[115] These quotes from the jury foreman could not have been obtained by the black reporters of the time.

There is certainly evidence that much of the coverage in the *Times Picayune* was sympathetic to the accused killers and their families. As their pictures were printed with their wives and children in many articles, they were almost celebrated.

While the *Times Picayune* coverage of members of Milam and Bryant's families could be viewed as sympathetic, Till's mother was covered without sensitivity. A great example is the previously mentioned article titled, "Mother of the Slain boy still in Chicago," which publicly scolded Mrs. Bradley for her absence from Mississippi as she delayed her departure from Chicago until she found out if security would be provided for her upon her arrival. The tone of article could be described as harsh and certainly

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[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.
[115] "Two not Guilty of Till Murder Jury Declares, *The Times Picayune*," September 24, 1955 P.1.

unsympathetic. These observations give great insight into the *Times Picayune* coverage of the Emmett Till case.

The Atlanta Constitution

Intriguing qualities can be observed in the *Atlanta Constitution* coverage of the Emmett Till case. The initial *Constitution* coverage of the case appeared on the first day of September in 1955. The article had the title, "Negro, 14, Called Insulter, Is Pulled From River Dead." [116] The wording of this title actually seems to call more attention to Emmett Till as an 'insulter' before it pronounces his death. The fact that he is dead almost reads like an afterthought. This is important because it can be argued that much of the coverage placed more importance on Till's alleged wolf-whistle than to his death.

The same article reported the inaccurate information that the boy was buried in Mississippi. It stated, "Till was buried this afternoon at Money [Mississippi]. His body was in 'such bad shape, it couldn't be shipped" to Chicago for burial, a funeral home attendant said."[117] The body was actually shipped back to Chicago for burial on the same train that the boy had taken to Mississippi. The writer of the article did not effectively verify the source of his information.

The next issue of the *Constitution* reported that Governor White had ordered a trial in the case. The governor "ordered local officials to 'fully prosecute' two white men for the abduction-slaying of a Chicago Negro teen-ager who allegedly leered and

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[116]"Negro, 14, Called Insulter, Is Pulled From River Dead," Atlanta *Constitution*, September 1, 1955, 1.
[117] Ibid.

whistled at the wife of one of the suspects."[118] To leer is "To look with a sidelong glance, indicative especially of sexual desire or sly and malicious intent."[119] As the *Constitution* reporter chose this term, he provides evidence that southern whites were threatened by black males in 1955, even 14-year old black boys.

The headline of the next piece is very telling. It was entitled, "Miss. Jury Is Still Studying 'Wolf Whistle' Slaying of Boy."[120] This is the first of many *Constitution* articles that referred to the Emmett whistling at Mrs. Bryant. A wolf is known as a predator. As the reference is made, Emmett Till is linked to the predatory animal.

The next article went even further in its predatory reference of Emmett Till. It was entitled, "Half-Brothers Indicted in Death of Kidnapped Wolf Whistle Boy, 14."[121] The writer of this article chose not to use Emmett's name, choosing instead to call him 'wolf whistle boy." The story went further and stated "Young Till reportedly whistled or made 'ugly remarks' to Mrs. Bryant, wife of the Money, Mississippi store keeper." [122] In this front-page article, the reporter has renamed Emmett 'Wolf Whistle Boy' again associating him with the predatory animal. Though the reporter states that Till made ugly remarks to Mrs. Bryant, he does not say what those remarks were.

The next article entitled, "Whistle Case Suspects To Be Tried September 19"[123] continues demonizing Till. The reporter has renamed Emmett Till's murder case the whistle case. This particular article noted that the accused killers, Bryant and Milam,

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[118] "Gov. White Orders Trial In Boy's Kidnap-Slaying," *Atlanta Constitution,* September 2, 1955 2.
[119] http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=leer
[120]"Miss. Jury Is Still Studying 'Wolf Whistle' Slaying of Boy," The Atlanta Constitution, September 6, 1955, 2.
[121] "Half Brothers Indicted in Death of Kidnapped Wolf Whistle Boy, 14." *Atlanta Constitution,* September 7, 1955, 1.
[122] Ibid
[123] "Whistle Case Suspects To Be Tried" Sept. 19" *Atlanta Constitution,* September 10, 1955, p.2.

"admitted to taking Till from the home of his uncle near Greenwood, August 28, but told Leflore County Sheriff George Smith they let him go unharmed after finding he was not 'the one' who whistled at Bryant's pretty young wife."[124] As Mrs. Bryant is referred to as 'pretty and young,' the readers see her as being an irresistible victim of this Negro wolf whistle boy predator.

The next article, which announced the beginning of the trial, continued with the 'wolf whistle' reference. "Brothers on Trial Today In 'Wolf-Whistle' Slaying" headed the piece. This article also quoted the suspects as saying they released Till when they found he wasn't the one who whistled at Mrs. Bryant.[125] The article also quoted two unnamed persons stating, "Two of Till's companions said the young Negro, a former polio victim who hardly could be understood because of a stammer, had whistled at Mrs. Bryant."[126] As the *Constitution* writer calls the case the wolf whistle slaying, the murdered Till has even less importance.

The wolf whistle headings continued in a subsequent piece called "Prosecution in 'Wolf-Whistle' Trial Wins Recess for 'New Witnesses.' The *Atlanta Constitution* writer's repeated use of the wolf-whistle description of Emmett Till is telling. Clearly the writer/s of these articles placed more importance on the alleged whistle that Till was accused of committing than on his murder. News article titles are telling. They provide readers with an idea of what stories are about. As these writers renamed Emmett Till and his case "Wolf Whistle Boy" and the "Wolf Whistle case, they placed more focus on his whistle than on the fact that he was brutally murdered.

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[124] Ibid.
[125] "Brothers on Trial Today In 'Wolf Whistle' Slaying," *Atlanta Constitution* September 19, 1955, 2.
[126] Ibid.

The Clarion-Ledger, Jackson Daily News

The Clarion Ledger—Jackson Daily News coverage of the Emmett Till incident is vital to this research. It not only reveals how the Mississippi paper covered Till's murder and trial, but also how some of the citizenry felt in letters to the editor. These letters and articles uncover much about the attitudes of whites in the state where Till was murdered.

Not only did the paper quote whites but, like many mainstream and black publications, it also printed the remarks of black leaders. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP said, "The killers of the boy felt free to lynch him because there is in the entire state no restraining influence of decency, not in the state capital, among the daily newspapers, the clergy nor any segment of the so-called better citizens." [127] Wilkins left out no one in his attack on the people of Mississippi.

His condemnation of the people of the southern state was not without response. One retort of note came from Dr. John W. Landrum, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Grenada. The pastor countered, "the vicious charges by the executive secretary of NAACP, an organization purported to be for the advancement of an entire race, show to what ends the warped malignancy of hatred will lead a person who generalized on one tragic situation and saddles venomous vituperations on more than 2,000,000 people—the citizens of an entire state."[128] Landrum, being a minister, seemed to take Wilkins remarks very personally, not only defending himself but also other ministers.

Landrum continued, "God has made no man the judge and the jury of the taking of human life, be it in the 'backwoods' of Mississippi or by hoodlums in a midnight

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[127]"NAACP Officials Launch Bitter Attack on State," *Clarion Ledger*, September 1, 1955, 1.
[128] "Clergyman Speaks 'Mind' on NAACP," *Clarion Ledger*, September 3, 1955,6.

mugging in the 'jungles' of Harlem."[129] Landrum's statement was racist even if, as he inferred, the general population of Mississippi may not have been.

Another article from the *Clarion Ledger* quoted Wheeler Parker, "a friend of Till's" as saying, "three white men and a white woman roused his friend 14-year-old Emmett Till from his bed, dragged him in to an auto and drove away."[130] This report is contrary to other accounts which stated that Till was taken by the two white men, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam.

Though the writer said that Wheeler Parker was "a friend of Till's", he was Till's cousin. The article also quoted Parker as saying "I guess Emmett was killed because of the "wolf" call he whistled at a pretty 27-year-old white lady in a store last Wednesday."[131] Parker was raised in rural Mississippi so the dialectal tone of the quote is questionable. It is unlikely that Parker would have said that Till was "roused from his bed and dragged into an auto" and "killed because of the wolf call he whistled at a pretty 27-year old white lady in a store."[132] These facts raise suspicion as to the validity of the quote.

Photographs of Bryant and Milam, the accused murderers, dressed in formal military uniforms appeared above this particular article. Considering the fact that the piece described Wheeler Parker's account of what happened on the night of Emmett's abduction, the photographs had no relevance to the newspaper piece. This is evidence of another southern paper humanizing and seeking to garner sympathy for Bryant and Milam.

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[129] Ibid.
[130]"Negro Describes Boy's Abduction, Implicates 3 Men, One White Woman" Clarion Ledger, September 2, 1955, p.1.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.

The *Clarion-Ledger* compared Till's death to the murder of a black youth in New York in its reporting of the Mississippi-NAACP lynch-murder debate. The reporter stated, "Adding a blast at the NAACP, the *Daily News* cited the case of a New York Negro, Willard Menter, who was killed by four teenagers. The four also confessed to killing another man. No one called the killings anything other than useless, senseless acts of savagery. No one believed they were lynchings."[133] This is important evidence of the paper using the "murder" classification of another young black man to bolster Till's death being classified as a murder and not a lynching.

The writer went further and wrote, "The kidnap-murder was not a lynching and when the NAACP says so, it proves its cynical purpose of inflaming the Negro people of this state against the Whites. Its reckless allegations must not go unchallenged." [134] The Mississippi paper certainly went on the offensive against the NAACP in the debate.

An editorial written in *The Clarion-Ledger* presents more evidence of the Mississippi offensive. It states, "One minor sideline many may not have considered is that it is by reason of incidents of this kind that such radical groups as the NAACP are able to raise large sums of money for expansion of its strife-breeding business."[135] The writer provided no source or proof that the NAACP was using the incident to raise money.

The *Jackson Daily News* contributed to the debate as to whether the body was actually Emmett Till. It quoted Sheriff H.C. Strider when he said, "The whole thing looks like a deal made up by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored

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[133] "State Papers Hit Slaying of Negro," Clarion *Ledger*, September 3, 1955, 1.
[134] Ibid.
[135]"'Cannot Condone' Killing," *Clarion Ledger*, September 3, 1955.9.

People."[136] The writer balanced the piece by quoting Till's cousin Ray Mooty when he said, "the family is convinced that the body is Emmett."[137] Mooty went on to call the sheriff's comment an attempt to "cover up." This quote by Mooty was observed in many other publications.

The article went further and quoted Mooty as saying, "If a doubt as to identity [of Till] arose, the family will turn the body over to authorities for positive identification."[138] The *Clarion-Ledger* is the only paper that the reported the family's willingness to turn over Emmett's body to Mississippi authorities. None of the sources, both primary and secondary, report that Mrs. Bradley was willing to turn her son's body over to Mississippi authorities. Considering the difficulty she had is obtaining the body, it is unlikely that she would be willing to release Emmett to anyone.

The Mississippi paper noted when Mrs. Bradley was coming to the trial. It stated, "The mother of a slain Chicago Negro boy will be invited here for the trial of two men charged with murdering him for acting 'fresh' toward a white woman."[139] Like many of the articles, this one contained "scolding" references directed at Emmett.

Another article with such references appeared in the same issue. The article, which reported when the trial date would be set, stated that Emmett had "allegedly whistled and made 'off color' remarks to pretty Mrs. Bryant while purchasing bubblegum at her store. "[140]

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[136] "Sheriff Believes Body Not Till'; Family Disagrees-Mother 'Positive' It Was Her Son," *Clarion Ledger,* September 4, 1955, 1.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid.
[139] "Slain Boy's Mother Will Get Invitation to Trial of Deltans," Clarion-Ledger, September 8, 1955,1.
[140] "Deltans' Trial Date To be Set Friday," *Clarion Ledger,* September 8, 1955, 1.

One letter to the editor of the *Clarion-Ledger* reveals the mindset of a Mississippi leader. Rev. Bryan Simmons of Ellisville, Mississippi had very strong feelings as to why Emmett was murdered. He expressed them quite eloquently in a letter to the *Clarion-Ledger's* editor. In his letter he attributes blame to various parties for Emmett Till's death. He begins by placing the blame on who ever taught him to 'wolf-whistle:'

> First, we have taught little children, and many a child has suffered from this at home and in other places when they have grown older. Somebody thought it was smart for him to whistle the "Wolf Call" as a little fellow and thereby made of him a smart-alex. Moral-avoid putting into the minds of little children these expressions that are ugly and cutting in the speech of older people. The person or persons who taught this boy the wolf call and laughed at the achievement helped make this tragedy possible. [141]

The Reverend continues by exalting the value of "womanhood" and the danger of disregarding it:

> Second, we have failed to teach children of both races respect for grown-ups and especially for womanhood. Casual observance will reveal such disregard and lack of respect. Womanhood should cherish her position of honor and respect and lay claim to such consideration by her manner and habits. Evidently somebody failed so to train this boy and thereby became party to this gruesome happening.
>
> I deplore the step taken and the extremes to which they led; but I see in it the respect for our sisters, wives, and mothers, entrenched in the minds and hearts of Southern men and I believe resentment would have arisen without regard to race or locality. Had this boy been trained to respect womankind this tragedy would never have occurred.[142]

Simmons continues by blaming Emmett's murder on his mother:

> Third, if (as my brother minister describes him) "he was only a stuttering child," it behooved his mother to have kept him close to her and in familiar surroundings until he was old enough to better understand the environment into which he was going. Evidently the mother knew his limitations and she should have limited his movements. Failure here to made her partially liable for the awful results.[143]

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[141] Rev. B. Simmons, Letter to the Editor, *Clarion Ledger*, September 14, 1955, 9.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.

"He continues by assigning blame to Emmett's Mississippi family members:

> Forth, the reports show that the boy's people realized the gravity of the situation and the danger ahead and "his uncle missed his chance to avoid the tragedy by a failure to immediately dispatch him back to his home. "A stitch in time saves nine.[144]

Finally, he blames Emmett:

> Let us teach our children (both white and black) clean speech, respectable habits, and honor for God and such terrible tragedies will not mar the peacefulness of our relationship.[145]

In the previous statement, Reverend Simmons does not state whom the "our" is in this relationship, but the inference is that relationship is between the blacks and whites in Mississippi. He argues that the race of the parties involved is not an issue. He places more importance in the lack of respect that Emmett Till shows to Mrs. Bryant as a "woman." But his exaltation of the virtues of womanhood is really a thinly disguised exaltation of white womanhood.

In his eloquently written editorial, Simmons thoughtfully blamed many persons for Till's murder. But interestingly he does not assign any blame to whomever committed the murder. Conversely, elements of his letter seem to justify the event.

The Mississippi papers give great insight not only to the southern coverage of the Till case but also the mindset of Mississippians during the trial. This coverage contributes greatly to understanding of the history of Emmett Till's murder and trial and how these events unfolded.

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[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.

Differences in the coverage were also observed within the mainstream papers. For example, similarities in the coverage the *New York Times* and the New York *Amsterdam News*, a black paper were observed. Both of these papers wrote stories that encouraged blacks to take political action. Both quoted black civil rights leaders like A. Phillip Randolph and Roy Wilkins, evidence that these leaders' opinions were not only important to black publications but also to white publications. Political action for blacks in New York was a regional issue.

Southern mainstream papers also revealed a great deal about the time and history of the Emmett Till case in their coverage. One great example is the coverage in the *Atlanta Constitution* with its series of stories that referred to Emmett Till as "Wolf Whistle Boy. He was called this name in many headlines in the *Constitution*.

The Emmett Till case reveals a divide that existed in elements of the press in America in 1950s. On one side was the black press. This element of the press communicated the outrage of blacks in the country towards the lynching of Emmett Till. On the other side was the mainstream press who spoke for whites in America, particular southern whites. Examining the mainstream press gives a greater understanding and perspective to the investigation of the black press.

The white press has great importance in researching Emmett Till. Emmett Till was not an African-American story but an American story. As Mrs. Bradley and other blacks involved in the trial were celebrated in the black press, members of the accusers families were celebrated in the Southern white press.

Coding Sheet Summary

A coding sheet was designed in order to provide a closer reading of some of the articles used in the study. Twenty-two articles were randomly chosen from black sources and fourteen articles were chosen from the mainstream press. This section provides a summary of the findings of each of the questions from the coding sheet.

Does the article refer to Emmett Till as a martyr?

In the design of this coding sheet, this question was chosen to determine if Emmett Till was referred to as a martyr in the press. If it could be shown that Till had been called a martyr in the black press, it would prove that he was symbol in the struggle for black civil rights in 1955, before the Rosa Parks incident. If this could be proven, the incident of his death would in fact be the catalyst that started the civil rights movement. Initial observation did show that many writers in the black press referred to Emmett Till as a martyr.

A martyr is "one who makes a great sacrifice or suffers much in order to further a belief, cause, or principle." When Emmett Till was murdered, many members of the black press attached his death to the cause of civil rights. Of fourteen articles investigated in the mainstream publications, none referred to Emmett Till as a martyr. But of twenty-two articles investigated in black publications, six did refer to Till as a martyr. Another article called his death a "sacrifice."

The findings demonstrate the geographical diversity of the black papers that referred to Till as a martyr. A Three of the six articles that referred to Till as a martyr were located in the *Chicago Defender*, Till's hometown paper. Two appeared in the

Pittsburgh Courier, as did the article that referred to his death as a sacrifice. One of the articles that referred to him as a martyr appeared in the *Amsterdam News*. The fact that three of the seven articles noted appeared in the Chicago paper is strong evidence that his hometown certainly saw his death as a sacrifice with implications for the entire race.

As Till was identified as a martyr in the black press, these writers inferred that his death was a sacrifice for the black race. This is strong evidence that Emmett Till was transformed into an icon for African-American civil rights almost immediately after his death, evidence that his lynching was a catalyst to the civil rights movement.

Does the article refer to Emmett Till negatively?

This question was created for the coding sheet because in the examination of mainstream press sources there were many instances of coverage that included negative descriptions, references, and labels applied to Emmett Till. The researcher felt that it was important to see if these terms were also used in the black press. In choosing to answer the question with "yes" or "no," the researcher answered, "yes" to any negative reference, description or label.

Of the twenty-two articles investigated in black press sources, only one *Pittsburgh Courier* article used negative terms to describe Emmett Till. It said that Till was referred to by relatives as "a half-crazed kid." In this description, a family member made this reference about Till to justify any wrongdoing on his part, as if he, the half-crazed, child was not completely responsible for his actions. All of the other articles in the black publications that were examined referred to him in positive and sympathetic terms.

By contrast, seven of the fourteen mainstream press articles investigated referred to Till negatively. In the *Atlanta Journal and Constitutio*n, one article noted that Till had "leered" at Mrs. Bryant, the wife of one of his killers. Another example was the *Constitution's* series of articles that repeatedly called Till "wolf-whistle boy." This reference appeared in the headlines of many of these articles. In some cases the writers did not use his given name, Emmett Till, instead seemingly renaming him "wolf-whistle boy."

These findings are very important as they prove that not only did the black press frame their coverage in ways to benefit the plight of African-Americans, but some members of the mainstream press, particularly Southern newspapers, used their coverage in ways which could have influenced the image of the murdered youth.

Does the article describe Mrs. Bryant, the woman Till allegedly whistled at?

This question was added to the coding sheet because, in the observation of the mainstream press articles, the descriptions of Mrs. Bryant, the woman Emmett Till alleged whistled at were relevant. In comparing those descriptions to ones written in the black press, the black publications' descriptions, in the few cases that were observed, were quite basic. The mainstream publications, again particularly those in the South, wrote about the woman in far more descriptive detail than did the black press sources. Any description at all would require a 'yes' response on the coding sheet.

Of the twenty-two articles in the black press that were investigated, four gave minimum descriptions of the woman Emmett Till allegedly whistled at. In those articles, two called her "Bryant's wife." One called her "the wife of a storekeeper," and another

called her "the woman." These descriptions were seemingly used to tell who she was, without positively or negatively effecting public opinion about her. Most of the articles that were observed in black press sources did not give any descriptions of Mrs. Bryant.

On the contrary, the mainstream press sources printed articles that described Mrs. Bryant in seven of fourteen articles investigated. Of those seven articles, five described her as "a white woman." Of the five articles, which called her a white woman, all of them were found in Southern newspapers, three in the *Times Picayune* of New Orleans and two in the Mississippi papers. These findings are significant.

Many articles in the mainstream papers described Mrs. Bryant as pretty, brunette and white. One called her blonde even though she had very dark colored hair. The mainstream papers, particularly the Southern papers, often called attention to Mrs. Bryant's physical appearance. As she was described as pretty, brunette and even blonde, this suggests that she was the perfectly beautiful and fragile Southern belle. This southern belle must be protected at all cost, even if the cost was the life of a 14-year-old black boy who dared to disrespect her. She was a "white woman," irresistible to any black male, even the adolescent Emmett Till.

Does the article refer to the case as a lynching or a murder?

This question was created because of the publicized debate between Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and Governor Hugh White of Mississippi. Wilkins was quoted in several newspapers emphatically stating that Emmett Till's death was the result of a "lynching."

Governor White retorted that he believed the crime was just a "murder." This lynching/murder debate was widely printed not only in the black press but also in the mainstream press. As the question is applied to the news articles, both in the black and mainstream publications, it reveals how the black press and white press referred to the incident. Articles specifically about the debate were not counted on the coding sheets.

Of fourteen articles that were read from the mainstream press, only one article referred to the incident as a lynching. It was a *New York Times* article titled, "10,000 In Harlem Protest Verdict-Mississippi Acquittal Brings Demand For End to Racism." The title is revealing: It does not refer to an end to lynching but to racism. This is evidence that this Harlem meeting was in fact a "civil rights" meeting. This supports the hypothesis that the Till incident was a catalyst for the civil rights movement.

None of the other mainstream articles that were applied to the coding sheet called the case a lynching. Five articles in mainstream papers called it a "murder" and two articles used neither term. Of those five articles, two of the writers used the term "killing" and three called the death a "slaying."

By contrast, the black publications called the incident a lynching more often than not. Of twenty-two articles investigated, thirteen called Emmett Till's death a lynching whereas only three referred to it as a murder. Two of the five articles from the "neither" category called Till's death a killing and another two referred to it as a slaying. There was a range of black papers that called the crime a lynching but *The Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* called the crime a lynching in most of their coverage of the story. There were also cases of the incident being referred to as a murder in both of these

papers. *Jet* magazine also referred to the occurrence as a lynching. *The Atlanta Daily World* used the term "slaying" in the one article.

The observation that black publications referred to the case as a lynching and mainstream papers referred to it as a murder, supports the hypothesis that the black press supported the NAACP's side in the lynch/murder debate. This is further evidence of the divide that existed between black and white elements of the press in the coverage of the Till incident.

Emmett Till's death was described differently in black and white press sources. Members of the white press called the case a murder, a slaying or a killing and almost never referred to it as a lynching. But the case was called a lynching in many instances within the black press. To beat and shoot a young boy to death, then weigh his body in a river with a 90-pound piece of equipment was surely a brutal method of killing some one. But was it a murder or a lynching? The editors from the mainstream and black press made very different judgments in deciding which term to use.

Does the article link Emmett Till to other African-American lynch victims?

This question was created to establish whether or not the black press connected Emmett Till to other lynch victims. According to Snow and Bender, master frames can be construed as functioning in a manner analogous to linguistic codes in that they provide a grammar that punctuates and syntactically connects patterns or happenings in the world.[146] In the initial observation of the articles about Emmett Till's lynching, other black murder victims were sometimes mentioned. As the writers of these articles

[146] Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspective on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Frames* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 139.

connected Emmett Till to other lynch victims, they created a master frame. The frame made Till a part of a cause and not just an isolated victim of a lynching. Framing the case this way gave the incident more gravity.

There were certainly other black males who were murdered in Mississippi in 1955, but two were frequently mentioned in black press articles about Emmett Till. They were Rev. George Lee and Lamar Smith, two Mississippians who were murdered because of their work for voter rights. Lee was murdered on May 7, 1955 and Smith was murdered on August 13, 1955. As members of the black press linked Till to other lynch victims, particularly persons who were killed because of African-American civil rights, he became linked to their causes.

Of the twenty-two articles investigated in the black press, five linked Emmett Till to other lynch victims. Two articles linked him to Smith and Lee. One linked Till only to Smith, another mentioned a murdered young man named Tim Hudson and another referred to a nameless victim. Of the articles investigated in the mainstream press, none linked Till to Smith and Lee or any other lynching victims. This evidence is important because it shows that as black publications associated Emmett Till with other civil rights martyrs, they created a master frame in their coverage of the case.

Lamar Smith was murdered because he refused to remove his name from a voter registration list in Belzoni, Mississippi. He was actually called to the courthouse and shot because of his refusal. This public murder, on the steps of the Belzoni courthouse, was certainly a lynching as it was probably done to discourage others from trying to vote in this Mississippi town.

Reverend Lee was a local NAACP official and urged his congregation to register and vote. Lee had reported to federal authorities that the county sheriff had refused to accept his poll tax payment and subsequently refused to allow him to vote. He was allowed to vote, but was later murdered by a shotgun blast to his face as he drove his car. The public nature of this murder could also classify it as a "lynching." Lee, like Smith had been warned to have his name removed from a voter registration list.

The murders of Lee and Smith were mentioned in many articles in black publications about Emmett Till. As blacks nationwide read about the Till case, they came to know these men and how they died because of their work in African-American voter rights. Lee and Smith were certainly martyrs early in the modern era of civil rights. As the writers of these articles linked Emmett Till's lynching to these two martyrs, they not only linked him to black civil rights, but he too became a martyr for the movement. As these three black males were connected in the black press, they created a master frame.

Do photographs accompany the article?

Both the mainstream press and the black press used photographs in their coverage of the Emmett Till case. But interesting differences can be observed in the way different papers used photographs. Black publications like *Jet, The Pittsburgh Courier* and especially the *Chicago Defender* regularly featured photographs of Emmett Till that were taken before his death. Many of these photographs showed him in his middle class surroundings. In all of the photographs, he was smiling, and nattily dressed. One photo showed Emmett as a beautiful baby. These photos introduced readers to him and showed

them images of his life before his death. These publications humanized Emmett Till to readers of black publications.

Other photos showed his mother, Mamie Bradley, during various periods of the funeral and trial. These images of Mrs. Bradley not only showed readers her grief as she lost her only child but also cultivated an image of her trying to achieve justice as the accused murderers were brought to trial.

Of the fourteen mainstream articles that were observed, two articles used photographs related to Emmett Till. One article in the New Orleans *Times Picayune* featured a very handsome picture of Emmett Till. Another located in the *Clarion Ledger*, showed Till's mother collapsing at his coffin.

An interesting discovery was made in the observation of the mainstream papers. Many of the Southern newspaper articles featured photographs of Bryant and Milam, Till's accused murderers in their coverage. One article in particular showed the brothers in their military uniforms, evoking patriotic sympathy. Some of these same papers featured pictures of the men's wives and toddler children regularly in their coverage. These photos humanized Bryant and Milam and their families to mainstream newspaper readers in 1955.

The infamous photo of Emmett Till in his coffin was used in three of the articles observed that were applied to the coding sheet. Two were located in the *Chicago Defender*. The third was found in *The New York Amsterdam News.* These gruesome photographs were also observed in other articles that were not selected in the coding process. The infamous photograph of Emmett Till in his coffin was not observed in any of the mainstream press sources that were investigated.

Other photos in the black press showed pictures of Till's mother, Mamie Bradley. Second to Emmett, she was the main character in this case. One photograph in the *Chicago Defender* showed her obviously grief stricken. Others showed her at various times during the funeral and trial. One *Jet* article showed a photograph of Mrs. Till posed with Emmett before his death.

Much of the black press coverage of Emmett Till featured photographs of his funeral. For example, one photograph showed an unknown minister who served as a pallbearer collapsing after seeing Till's mutilated body. Another article from the *Pittsburgh Courier* showed a panoramic photograph of the throngs of persons outside the church where the funeral was held. Others showed Mrs. Bradley at different times during the funeral. These publications brought photographs of varied aspects of Emmett Till's funeral to the black community.

Not only did the coverage in the black press use photos of Till and his family, but one also showed pictures of the accused murderer's families. *Jet* magazine showed a photograph of Bryant and Milam and another of Bryant's wife in its coverage of the case. This is evidence that the magazine showed photographs all of the players in the case to its readers. Some black papers, particularly the *Pittsburgh Courier*, frequently used full pages of photographs of Till, his family and others involved in the case. But the mainstream papers showed pictures of Till and his mother much less frequently.

Does the article link the case to African-American voter rights?

Of the twenty-two articles in the black press, six linked the case to black voter rights. Of those six articles, one located in the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported on the famous

Harlem protest that occurred shortly after the acquittal of Bryant and Milam, Emmett Till's accused murderers. The fact that the article linked Till's death to African-American voter rights is evidence of black mobilization resulting from the case.

One article in the mainstream press, featured in the *New York Times*, linked the case to African-American voter rights. This article dated September 26, 1955 is further evidence of African-American mobilization in the days after Emmett Till's death and before Rosa Parks' refusal to relinquish her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus.

As these writers attached the Till case to black voter rights, they provide evidence that the modern civil rights movement was launching during the case. The dates of these two articles are important because they were written almost three months before the Rosa Parks incident, the event widely thought to be the catalyst of the Civil Rights Movement.

Does the article link the case to American desegregation?

None of the mainstream articles linked the case to American desegregation, but three of the twenty-two articles in the black press did so. All three of those articles appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The title of one of these articles, "Leaders Rap Till Verdict," is important to note. These "leaders" were black leaders who discussed the implications of the verdict on blacks as a race. During this meeting, they also discussed American desegregation and black voter rights. This is further evidence that the Emmett Till incident was a catalyst to the civil rights movement.

Does the article quote black "civil rights" leaders?

In the initial investigation of articles, from both mainstream and black press sources, civil rights leaders were often quoted in the coverage of the Emmett Till case. As press sources sought these men's opinions, they became the voices of blacks about the case. Interestingly, there were only a few persons who were quoted repeatedly about the case and its relevance to African-American civil and voter rights.

Of the fourteen mainstream press articles that were applied to the coding sheet, four quoted black civil rights leaders. They appeared in the *New York Times*, *The Times-Picayune*, *The Jackson Daily News* and the *Clarion-Ledger*. All four of these articles quoted Roy Wilkins, National Secretary of the NAACP.

Wilkins was quoted as he spoke on behalf his organization. The NAACP was the most prevalent organization advocating rights for blacks in America in 1955. As the leader of the organization, Wilkins' opinions about the Emmett Till case were important to mainstream press sources. As the mainstream press quoted the leader of the civil rights organization in regards to the case, it created another master frame. They linked Emmett Till to the NAACP and to Roy Wilkins, an outspoken civil rights leader. This is further evidence of the case being framed in a way to benefit the cause of civil rights.

Of the twenty-two articles that were applied to the coding sheet from the black publications, five quoted black leaders. As in the mainstream publications Roy Wilkins was quoted, but other leaders were also referred to. A. Phillip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was one leader whose opinion was important.

Dr. T.R.M Howard, president of the Regional Councils of Negro Leadership, a noted civil rights leader in Mississippi, was quoted in two articles, both in the *Chicago*

Defender. He was also mentioned in articles that were not applied to the coding sheets. Mamie Till Bradley, Emmett's mother spoke of Howard's importance in her autobiography. Though widely unknown, Howard was very important to the civil rights movement in Mississippi during the Till case. Howard founded the Mississippi Regional Council for Negro Leadership, which promoted leadership development in the African-American community of Mississippi. [147] His life was often threatened because of this position. He was an important and unsung hero of the civil rights movement during the Till case whose opinions were important to black press sources.

This observation is important because it proves that regional leaders had more importance in the black press than they did in the mainstream press. T.R.M. Howard was a well-known and well-respected civil rights leader who lived in Mississippi during the Till incident, but was not quoted in the mainstream Mississippi papers. But he was quoted in the black press in varied regions of the country. As the black press quoted various leaders and citizens, they demonstrated leaders advocating civil rights were emerging regionally as well as nationally.

Does the article refer to other kinds of organization/activism/fundraising?

Of the mainstream press articles, three of the fourteen articles referred to other kinds of organization/activism/fundraising. Two articles referred to fundraising, one from the *Times Picayune* and another from the *New York Times.* Both quoted a black minister who "urged viewers of Till's body to donate to a fund set up by the NAACP so that this [lynching] would not happen again." The third article, also located in the *New*

[147] Mamie Till-Mobley & Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence*, Random House: New York, 2003, 155.

York Times referred to African-American activism. It mentioned the possibility of an anti-lynching bill, local political action and a march on Washington.

Five of twenty-four articles in the black press referred to other kinds of organization/activism/fundraising. Worthy of note is that two of the articles appeared in the *Chicago Defender* and another two appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier,* evidence of activism in their coverage. The fifth article was located in the *New York Amsterdam News.* All of these articles suggested increased fundraising for the NAACP. These articles are evidence that the case being linked to NAACP fundraising was multi-regional.

FRAMING ANALYSIS

Does the article fulfill the punctuating function of framing analysis?

Of the fourteen mainstream press articles that were investigated, none fulfilled any part of the punctuating function of framing analysis, but one fulfilled a segment of the attribution function. One article attributed blame to individuals. Interestingly it was located in the *Clarion Ledger,* a Mississippi paper. The writer of this editorial blamed the situation in Mississippi on "politicians who run on a platform of hatred." None of the other segments of the attribution function were fulfilled in the mainstream sources that were investigated.

Punctuating Function

Does the writer call the problem unjust?

This question was created to discover if the press sources called the incident unjust. If they did, a segment of the punctuating function of the collective action frame would be fulfilled. Of the twenty-two articles that were investigated in the black press, nine called the problem unjust. Five of the articles were from the *Chicago Defender*. Four of those nine articles were from the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Members of the black press defined the Till murder and the acquittal of his accused murderers as unjust.

Does the writer call the problem intolerable?

Of the twenty-two articles that were investigated in the black press, five called the problem intolerable. Of these five articles, three were located in the *Pittsburgh Courier* and two were found in the *Chicago Defender*. One piece that serves as a great example was an editorial that stated, "No country that ***tolerates*** the barbarous hate-killing of a child within its midst deserved nor can it expect the respect of the civilized world. There can be no compromise this time." Clearly the writer saw the problem of a 14-year-old child being lynched as intolerable with implications to the entire nation. This editorial is important because it provides evidence of a member of the general public being outraged because of this crime. The writer went on to say, "Tears and indignation must be translated into money and put at the disposal of the NAACP,"[148] further evidence that the public believed that the case should motivate blacks to donate to the civil rights organization.

Is corrective action suggested?

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[148] Blood on Their Hands….., *Chicago Defender*, September 10, 1955, 1.

According to Snow and Bender, activists employ collective action frames to punctuate or single out some existing social condition or aspect of life and define it as unjust, intolerable, and deserving of corrective action. Of the twenty-two articles that were investigated in the black press, three suggested corrective action. All three of the articles were found in the *Chicago Defender*.

One article suggested that corrective action should come from black leaders. The piece suggested, "Negro Leaders must unite in their protest of the crime and begin donating more money to pay for legal procedures which will ensure civil rights for all citizens." Another *Defender* article stated that corrective action come from the federal level. It suggested, "A federal anti-lynching law must be passed." The final article proposed that corrective action should come from black individuals. It said, "Those who could should volunteer from two to three hours a day to aid in the fight for freedom." This statement is certainly evidence of the case being the first catalyst of the civil rights movement.

These articles serve as evidence that black press sources advocated corrective action on three levels. The advocacy of these actions could be seen as strategies that spanned from the general population, to local leaders, to the federal government. This serves as further evidence that these news sources framed this issue in ways to benefit the plight of blacks in America.

Does the article fulfill the attribution function of framing analysis?

Diagnostic

Does it attribute blame to individuals? Does it attribute blame to processes? Does it attribute blame to institutions?

Snow and Bender note that corrective action frames serve as modes of attribution. They also note that collective action frames function as modes of attribution by making diagnostic and prognostic attributions. The attribution function of the corrective action frames attributes blame to individuals, process or institutions.

Four of the twenty-two articles in the black press attributed blame to individuals. Two of these articles appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier.* Two others were located in the *Chicago Defender*. One of these articles blamed the death of Emmett Till on Governor Hugh White of Mississippi. The other blamed the incident on five candidates for the Governor of Mississippi "who campaigned on an anti-Negro platform in the elections."[149] Both of the *Pittsburgh Courier* articles attributed blame for the occurrence to the officials and leading citizens of the state of Mississippi.

These articles are important as they demonstrate that the black press sources blamed Mississippi governmental officials for Emmett Till's lynching because of their racist platforms. As these articles placed blame on these individuals they fulfilled a segment of the attribution function of corrective action frames.

Of the fourteen articles investigated in the mainstream press, none attributed blame in the Till case to processes. Only one of twenty-two of the articles investigated in the black press placed blame on a process. The article, located in the *Pittsburgh Courier,* placed the blame on "the racist political system in Mississippi." The same article was the

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[149] Blood on Their Hands…*Chicago Defender*, September 10, 1955, 1.

only article which attributed blame to institutions in the Till case. It blamed "racist organizations in the state of Mississippi." Of the fourteen mainstream press articles applied to the coding sheet, none attributed blame to institutions.

Prognostic

Does it identify individuals who could solve the problem? Does it identify processes that could solve the problem?

Of the twenty-two articles investigated in the black press, three identified individuals who could solve the problems brought to light in the Till case. Two were found in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Both articles noted that African-Americans were the ones who could solve the problems in the case by their own actions. Another article found in the *New York Amsterdam News* noted that Thurgood Marshall could solve the problem of the lynching by "gathering facts and beginning prosecution." None of the mainstream press publications identified individuals who could solve the problems of the case.

Of the twenty-two articles investigated in the black press, two identified processes that could solve the problem. One found in the *Pittsburgh Courier* stated, "It is necessary for us to put up the money for our [own] protection. Other groups are quick to act, with money, where there rights are concerned." Like other *Courier* articles this article advocated blacks taking action to change their own destinies. Another article, also found in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, stated that the African-American vote was the process that could solve the problems. None of the mainstream press identified processes that could solve the problem.

Does it identify institutions that could solve the problem?

Only one article in the black press identified institutions that could solve the problem. The *Chicago Defender* article identified the administration in Washington D.C. as the institution that could solve the problem stating, "It is up to the administration in Washington to begin action once and for all to end the crime of lynching that had degraded our nation."[150] No articles in the mainstream press identified institutions that could solve the problem.

[150] "Blood on Their Hands, 1.

Conclusion

The press framed its coverage of the Emmett Till case in very different ways. The mainstream press, particularly the Southern newspapers, framed the case in ways that certainly benefited or seemed to humanize Emmett Till's accused murderers. Whether this was intentional or not, it was certainly done.

There is evidence that the black characters in the Till case were written about unsympathetically in the Southern mainstream press. In some instances, Mrs. Bradley was written about in ways that could be described as patronizing. Roy Wilkins was demonized in some instances. One *Clarion Ledger* editorial blamed Emmett Till for causing his own death by disrespecting "womankind."

The *New York Times* was the exception in the mainstream newspapers that were investigated. Its coverage was overall very balanced. It did not seem to frame the issue in ways that were beneficial to blacks or to the accused murderers, it simply told the facts.

The black papers framed the story in ways that were beneficial to blacks and to the early civil rights movement. Immediately after his death, Emmett Till was called a martyr in some publications. He was linked to other lynch victims and to the civil rights movement. When Mrs. Bradley made the decision to open Emmett's casket and display his mutilated corpse, black newspapers and *Jet* magazine printed the images to show the country and the world what happened to Emmett Till. They also linked him to other lynch victims like Lamar Smith and Rev. George Lee and showed that his death was not isolated, but a part of a much larger problem. Mrs. Bradley was quoted not only after

Till's murder and trial, but as she attended speaking engagements in the months following. These publications brought this unsung heroine to the attention of the black masses. As black newspapers quoted leaders such as T.R.M Howard and A. Phillip Randolph, they brought varied opinions about the Emmett Till case to their readers, proving that blacks are not a monolithic people. These publications also highlighted Roy Wilkins and the NAACP and encouraged that funds be donated to this organization to benefit the cause of black civil rights.

The importance of the black press' coverage of the Emmett Till case cannot be denied. As they covered the case and linked it to the plight of African-Americans in 1955 a national civil rights movement began to take form. This movement was already in place by the time of the Rosa Parks incident, an occurrence that is widely believed to have ignited the Civil Rights movement.

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