When one examines an artifact from the past, whether it be a piece of artwork, a film, a book, a photograph, or a newspaper, it is important that we analyze the artifact not only as the physical and straightforward representation of what it appears to be, but examine it for the underlying representation of the social history of the time. Newspapers are just one media form that provides us with such social and cultural windows. The 1955 press coverage of the infamous Emmett Till murder and trial create an insightful narrative that represents the emerging civil rights movement and the battleground of racial and cultural conflict of the time. A comparison of press coverage of the Till murder and trial between *The Chicago Defender*, an African American weekly newspaper from the North, and *The Delta Democrat Times*, a progressive daily newspaper from the South, reveals the intense rivalry between the increasingly tolerant North and the traditionally intolerant South. In addition to the clear North versus South rivalry present throughout both newspapers’ coverage of the murder and trial, the rhetoric used to describe Emmett Till (the 14 year old Chicago native who was killed) and Carolyn Bryant (the southern woman who Till allegedly fraternized with), and the sources that each paper chose to utilize, demonstrates a clear social bias as well. Both the rivalry and the representations of the key figures of the case lead themselves to reflect the ultimate agendas of the newspapers. *The Delta Democrat Times* appears to be defending a Southern way of life threatened by the NAACP and African Americans calling for justice while the *Chicago Defender* used the murder of Emmett Till to promote social change.
In the hot month of August 1955, Emmett Louis Till, age fourteen, departed from his home in the South side of Chicago to spend a long vacation visiting relatives in Mississippi, where Mrs. Mamie Bradley, Emmett’s mother, grew up.¹ Little did he, or his widowed mother know, the next time Mrs. Bradley would see young Emmett, she would see the nearly unrecognizable face of her murdered son. Emmett spent his fourteen years of life growing up in Chicago. Insensitive to the cultural differences of African Americans between the North and South, Emmett Till would soon come face to face with the brutal reality of Mississippi’s rampant racism. On Wednesday August 24th, Emmett and a group of friends and cousins found themselves in Money, Mississippi at Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market.² The subsequent scene of events is highly contested and has been reported in various ways. According to an interview with Till’s cousins, Till was dared to enter the store and flirt with the pretty white woman who was working, Mrs. Carolyn Bryant.³ In Mrs. Bryant’s testimony, she claimed that Emmett had said: “How about a date, baby?” proceeded to grab her waist as she began to walk away and had said: “Don’t be afraid of me, baby. I ain’t gonna hurt you. I been with white girls before” at which point he continued to exit the store saying “Bye baby,” and “wolf whistled” at her.⁴ Others report he simply said “by baby” and left the store.⁵ Mrs. Bryant intended on keeping the incident from her husband.

The incident spread like wildfire through word of mouth in the Black community, and by Friday August 26th, Roy Bryant, Ms. Bryant’s husband, was notified about the

²Whitfield, 16  
³Whitfield, 17  
⁴Whitfield, 17  
⁵Whitfield, 17
incident by one of his African American customers. Outraged by the story, Roy Bryant, and his half brother J.W. Milam, arrived at Mr. Wright’s (Till’s uncle) country home asking for the “Chicago Boy”. After Wright and his wife tried to reason with Bryant and Milam, Bryant and Milam took Till by force. Till was found 3 days later in the Tallahatchie river, naked. His tongue was swollen many times its original size, one of his eyes was out of its socket, and he was inflicted with bullet wounds in his head. A cotton fan that weighed over one hundred pounds was tied to his neck. The body was returned to Chicago, where Mrs. Mamie Bradley insisted upon an open casket funeral in order to show the nation what had happened to her boy.

As Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca explain in their article “Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till”: “Whereas the black body in pain had traditionally served as a symbol of unmitigated white power, the corpse of Emmett Till became a visual trope illustrating the ugliness of racial violence and the aggregate power of the black community.” The brutality of the murder and the shocking photos that were available of Till’s destroyed body made the story one of national attention. Each individual newspaper presented their own interpretation of the murder.

*The Delta Democrat Times* was a widely circulated daily newspaper, considered relatively progressive in comparison to other Mississippi newspapers of the time.

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6 Whitfield, 19
7 Whitfield, 20
8 Whitfield, 20
9 Whitfield, 22
10 Whitfield, 22
Chicago Defender was an African American newspaper that had wide national circulation among Blacks due to its emphasis on civil rights issues. These two papers were strategically chosen to represent the cultural bias present in mass media at the time.

“The whole state of Mississippi is going to pay for this” — Mrs. Mamie Bradley

The Chicago Defender promoted the Till murder as something that represented the history and the state of the White/Black relationship. This is reflected in a quote from an article printed on September 10th, “Blood On Their Hands...”, which ran on the front page as an editorial, it says: “there can be no compromise this time. Your child can be the next victim of the white supremacists.” In essence, The Chicago Defender was writing the story as a universal one. Emmett Till was not just Emmett Till; Emmett Till was every African American child. Emmett Till was every lynched victim of the past. Emmett Till personified the struggle and injustice of Blacks in America. These ideas presented the readers with a sense of urgency that intensified their need for social change. Similarly, Bryant and Milam weren’t just two hot-tempered White men. Bryant and Milam were the establishment that oppressed the Black people as a whole; they personified the tyrannical South. As explained on the same front page, “The NAACP charged that Mississippi has decided to maintain white supremacy by killing children.” There is a clear attempt to transfer the individual act of what Bryant and Milam had done to a larger social issue. In

13 N/A, “Urge Eisenhower To See That ‘Justice Is Served,’” The Chicago Defender, 10 September, 1955, part one, p. 1
14 N/A, “Blood On Their Hands...” The Chicago Defender, 10 September 1955 part one p. 1
15 N/A, “Urge Eisenhower To See That ‘Justice Is Served,’” The Chicago Defender, 10 September, 1955, part one, p. 1
this case, *The Chicago Defender* defined the exigency of the situation to be that of civil rights in the South. Articles with titles like “Blood On Their Hands...”, “Protest Mississippi Shame”, “Mississippi’s Infamy”, and “Savagery, Southern Style” reflect the *Defender*’s portrayal of the “evil South”. These titles represent a clear bitterness toward the Southern culture. This projection of anger and outrage that is transferred from Bradley and Milam (the true killers) to Mississippi demonstrates the complexity of the situation. African Americans realized that Bradley and Milam were simply products of their environment, Mississippi and the South, in general. This is perfectly expressed in an opinion column titled “Savagery, Southern Style” in *The Defender* which the author states:

> The psychiatrist perhaps can offer a rational explanation for their bloody conduct. But from where we stand, the answer is an old, old story: These men were, after all, products of a southern tradition that has become the white man’s burden.

Clearly African Americans and the African American press held a great deal of hostility toward Bryant and Milam, yet they chose to focus on the larger social issue that was at hand. Calls to action for federal intervention such as “Until the lynching of negroes in Mississippi is vigorously suppressed by the Federal government, the white people of the U.S., will stand dishonored in the eyes of the civilized world,”16 and calls to action from African Americans across the globe such as “Instead of praying and preaching for peace, the black races all over the world should preach FIGHT, BLOODSHED, RETRIBUTION. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, five lives for a life”17 covered the pages of *The Chicago Defender*. Characterizing the difference between *The Defender*’s

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16 N/A, “Mississippi’s Infamy,” *The Chicago Defender*, 17 September 1955, p. n/a
17 N/A, “Blast Till Pacifists,” *The Chicago Defender*, 1 September 1955, p. n/a
social agenda, and that of *The Democrat, The Defender* promoted strong and swift civil rights action.

“*They’re in the press all the time-that gang*” Gov. White of Mississippi  
*(referring to the NAACP)*\(^{18}\)

*The Delta Democrat Times* put great effort toward defending the reputation of the state of Mississippi and discussing what the murder and trial would mean for Mississippi. *The Delta Democrat Times* reported the incident as if it were a single event, that did not have ties to any larger social issues. They also tended to blame the NAACP, and anyone who turned the murder in to a crusade for civil rights, for any unrest in Mississippi.\(^{19}\) An article that ran on September 2\(^{nd}\), shortly after the discovery of Till’s body in the Tallahatchie, explains: “We have met no Mississippian who was other than revolted by the senseless brutality of the kidnap-slaying of the 15 year-old Negro,”\(^{20}\) however, the articles goes on to address the statement given by the NAACP that “Mississippi will maintain segregation by murdering Negro children”\(^{21}\) and says, “We protest the blatant propaganda that the NAACP and other critics are trying to make of this case...To blame more than two million Mississippians for the irresponsible act of three is about as

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\(^{21}\) N/A, “A Brutal Slaying,” *The Delta Democrat Times*, 2 September 1955
The entire purpose of the article was to express the regret that Mississippians felt for the murder of Emmett Till, and to speak out against the NAACP. It is as if *The Delta Democrat Times* positioned itself in a dialogue with the NAACP and all people who viewed the Till murder as something that represented the racism present in Southern culture.

In the article “Sleepy Summer Surprised by Way World Watching Pending Till Trial Today”, the article explains, “residents of this town of 550 people said they couldn’t understand what all the fuss was about. ‘You’re making a mountain out of a mole hill’ a man shouted at early arriving reporters. ‘The NAACP is really making you work.’ The NAACP has termed the slaying a “lynching” and asking for a federal investigation.”

*The Delta Democrat Times* positioned itself to defend the southern lifestyle that was threatened by other national press coverage.

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**Bo Till, His Grieving Mother, and The Cause Of It All**

Similar to the way that each newspaper framed their reports of the murder and trial to fit their cultural and social agenda, they also used strategic rhetoric in order to create empathy and used strategic sources when describing the key figures and events of the murder to do so as well. *The Chicago Defender* painted a picture of Emmett Till as an innocent victim and devoted much more attention to the descriptions of Emmett and Mamie Bradley, focusing on the humanization of the two. *The Chicago Defender* often

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22 N/A, “A Brutal Slaying,” The Delta Democrat Times, 2 September 1955
referred to Emmett as ‘Bo’ (his nickname) Till. This use of his nickname allowed for
readers to empathize with the fact that the young innocent boy wasn’t just a name and a
face that was seen in the newspaper. The Defender made the decision to use the name
“Bo” instead of Emmett to present him as a personality. As a son and a cousin, he was
‘Bo’ Till; he could be any one of our family members with an endearing nickname. Other
attempts to humanize Emmett and Mrs. Mamie Bradley included an entire page photo
spread with headline “Grieving Mother Meets Body Of Lynched Son,”24 which featured
photographs of Mamie collapsing into a wheel chair at the sight of her son. It continued
reading, “GREIF AND SHOCK made it necessary for Mrs. Bradley to use wheel chair
after body of her son had been removed,”25 and photos of the crowds waiting for the
body with another caption reading, “‘MY BOY, MY BOY,’ sobs Mrs. Mamie E.
Bradley as body of her son rolls past her.”26

This clear attempt to emphasize the tragedy, pain, and sorrow that Mrs. Mamie
Bradley was experiencing was individual to The Defender. By emphasizing these things,
The Defender was able to emphasize the brutality of the crime, Bryant, Milam, and
Mississippi. Mrs. Bradley was victimized, and the South and its affiliates were the
villains. They focused on using quotes from Mamie herself instead of relying on the
opinion of Southern law enforcement. Obviously, the rhetoric of a mother who has just
lost her son in a brutal murder is going to be much more passionate and moving than that

24 N/A, “Grieving Mother Meets Body Of Lynched Son,” The Chicago Defender, 17
September 1955, p. n/a
25 N/A, “Grieving Mother Meets Body Of Lynched Son,” The Chicago Defender, 17
September 1955, p. n/a
26 N/A, “Grieving Mother Meets Body Of Lynched Son,” The Chicago Defender, 17
September 1955, p. n/a
of a Mississippi sheriff. This decision changed the representation of the crime greatly.

When giving a description of the body, they provided a quote from Mamie Till that said:

I stood a long time looking at the body. I recognized Emmett’s hairline, his hair, the general shape of his nose and his teeth. Especially his teeth, because I used to tell him daily to take care of his teeth, because he had the most beautiful set I have ever seen. I pointed out to him what a priceless gift he had. However some of his teeth from the front and right side were missing when the body arrived here. He had a perfect set when he left.27

Using the personal and vivid descriptions of a mother who lost her son in a brutal racially charged murder certainly promotes sympathy toward the Till family and increases anger toward Bryant and Milam and the culture that they are a product of.

Another depiction that stood in stark contrast to that of the Mississippi newspaper was the representation of Mrs. Carolyn Bryant. Featured in the top right hand corner of the front cover of the September 17th issue was a large photograph of Mrs. Carolyn Bryant and a title overhead reading “The Cause Of It All.”28 The caption under the photograph reads, “Because Emmett Till allegedly whistled at Mrs. Carolyn Bryant he was kidnapped and lynched in Money, Miss.”29 It is clear that the Black community resented Mrs. Carolyn Bryant for her “role” in the murder of Emmett Till. While it was assumed the consumers of the defender were African Americans, and they were already greatly disturbed by the murder, the use of photographs, humanizing rhetoric, and quotes from Mamie Bradley increased the apparent necessity for change.

*The Chicago Negro and Pretty Brunette Wife*

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27 Mattie Smith Colin, “Slain Boy’s Mother Lauds The Defender,” The Chicago Defender, September 17 1955, p. 2
28 N/A, “The Cause Of It All,” The Chicago Defender, September 17 1955, p. 1
29 N/A, “The Cause Of It All,” The Chicago Defender, September 17 1955, p. 1
The Delta Democrat Times portrayed a very different image of Emmett Till, Mrs. Carolyn Bryant, and relied heavily on southern officials as their sources. The simple and plain rhetoric they utilized in combination with the straightforward and detached sources they quoted resulted in a less urgent portrayal of the murder that reflected Mississippi’s “single incident” view of the killing. In The Delta Democrat Times, Till was represented as “the 15 year old Chicago Negro.” In contrast to the endearing use of “Bo” and the vivid description of the body used in The Chicago Defender, The Delta Democrat Times described Emmett and the state of his body in matter-of-fact terms that treated the Till murder as any other murder. In the first story run after the discovery of Till’s body in the Tallahatchie, the article read “A 15 year old Chicago Negro found floating in a river near here, a bullet wound in his head.”

The most descriptive quote found in my research was “the boy’s nude body in a river, shot and bludgeoned in the head.”

The contrast of a very straightforward reports of Till’s body and name with that of the emotionally charged descriptions utilized by The Defender reflect the agendas of the opposing newspapers. Similar to the socially acceptable way that the Mississippi population expected to see Till represented (the Chicago Negro, or the Wolf Whistler), they expected to see Mrs. Carolyn Bryant portrayed in a specific role as well. Contrasting the “Cause Of It All” representation of The Defender, The Delta Democrat Times painted a picture of a young, beautiful, southern beauty that had been the victim of a frightening Chicago Negro boy’s challenge to the Southern status quo. This representation often focused on her beauty, and role as a mother. Similar to the way in which The Chicago

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31 United Press, “White Demands Full Probe Into Murder; Mom Stands By Sons,” The Delta Democrat Times, 2 September 1955, p. 1
Defender humanized Mamie Bradley and her tragedy, The Delta Democrat Times attempted to victimize Mrs. Carolyn Bryant. In an article questioning whether the body found in the river did indeed belong to Emmett Till, the article explained that Mrs. Bryant was present in the car when Till was kidnapped. In response to whether she had been questioned or not, the article quotes officers saying “We aren’t going to bother the woman, she’s got two small boys to take care of.” Just as Mrs. Mamie Bradley represented the African American mom as a victim of racism and inequality, Mrs. Carolyn Bryant was the beautiful southern belle with a family whose life was interrupted by the inconvenience of a “Chicago Negro’s” “wolf whistle” and the investigation of her husband.

While the photo spread in The Defender focused on Mamie’s first encounter with the body, and featured only photos of Mamie, and Emmett in a casket, The Delta Democrat Times featured one photo spread that documented the trial. Not one photo of Mamie Bradley or any of Till’s family was printed. Two photos of the defendants and their “pretty brunette wives and their young children” who were the “darlings of the news folk” appeared on the page. The Democrat’s audience expected that their social norms and values would be reinforced by the coverage of the trial, and The Delta Democrat Times did just that.

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32 William Middlebrooks, “Sheriff Says Body Thousands Viewed May Not Be Till’s,” The Delta Democrat Times, 4 September 1955, p. 2
33 John Herbers, “Till Trial Bogs Down In Jury-Picking Job,” The Delta Democrat Times, 18 September 1955, p. 1
“Darling you have not died in vain, your life has been sacrificed for something” - Mrs. Mamie E. Bradley, on the death of her son, Emmett Louis Till

The story of the press coverage of the murder of Emmett Till reveals an intricate story about the social climate of the time. *The Chicago Defender* used the horrific nature of the lynching of Till to crusade for civil rights. The nation was their captive audience, and it was their turn to speak. The mainstream press of Mississippi was not sensitive to the civil rights undertones that seem so clearly obvious to us today. As they presented the story, a “Negro” boy from Chicago stepped out of line, and unfortunately upset the wrong person. The press saw this as a contained event that was being distorted by the NAACP and civil rights activists in order to fulfill their personal agenda and threaten Mississippi’s reputation. These two starkly contrasting representations of the same event have had effects larger than anyone could have predicted.

It could be argued that the African American press coverage of Emmett Till and the objectification of his battered body served as a tipping point for the civil rights movement. The social attachment and detachment present in *The Chicago Defender* and *The Delta Democrat Times* represents the spectrum of opinions that were available to the public. Newspapers have always served as the major opinion leaders of our nation, telling us what to think about, and how to think about it with their ability to set the news agenda and frame it in the way they please. The coverage of the death of Emmett Till, and the mass circulation of the hauntingly graphic photos of his body that African American newspapers like that of *The Chicago Defender* provided in 1955 inspired a nation of

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repressed African Americans to demand freedom. Within months, the Civil Rights
movement would be born, beginning with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the fall of
1955 and on December 1 of that same year, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a
bus in Alabama.
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