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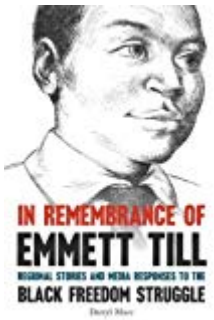
**Darryl Mace.** *In Remembrance of Emmett Till: Regional Stories and Media Responses to the Black Freedom Struggle.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014. 228 pp. $40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-4536-5.

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The ghastly murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till offered a case study of southern intransigence on the issue of white supremacy and, through its incitement of national and international interest, forever altered the conversation about African American civil rights. Coming in late summer 1955, as the nation anticipated southern reaction to the *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation rulings (1954 and 1955), the details of the murder and the racialized scene in segregated Mississippi, in both the courthouse in Sumner and the surrounding towns and countryside, so defied standards of human decency that the national and regional news media camped out during the trial. This was not coverage of a local murder but a national story about Mississippi's sharp deviance even from the segregationist norm of the mid-1950s. After an all-white Mississippi jury failed to convict Till's killers, news coverage raised questions about the region's ability to participate in a modern system of justice, much less implement court-ordered school desegregation. Conversely, the story of the Till killing and the murderers' exoneration also galvanized a civil rights movement that would enter a new chapter with the arrest of Rosa Parks a few months later.

Print-news coverage of the Till murder and trial is the primary focus of Darryl Mace's *In Remembrance of Emmett Till: Regional Stories and Media Responses to the Black Freedom Struggle*. Through a detailed textual analysis of newspaper and magazine content, Mace compares and contrasts the Till coverage in publications across the country. In the process he makes a case for the "saliency" of the story in addressing larger themes related not only to southern race relations but also to national attitudes and norms in other regions.

At the center of this discussion is Emmett Till, the Chicago teenager murdered while visiting relatives in Mississippi. In describing Till's personal history, contextualized for the 1950s, and his mother's decision to open his casket and show the world what racists had done to her son, Mace con-

structs Till as an icon of racial innocence and vulnerability: "He was too young, too northern, too innocent, and too representative of the population *Brown* was supposed to protect" (p. 19). As such, the case becomes what Mace describes as "a clarion call" (p. 12) for the civil rights movement.

Mace argues as well that the depravity of the Till murder and the state's inability or unwillingness to intervene produced a second response. The national gaze directed toward Mississippi splintered according to regional self-interest and bias. Mace's analysis is convincing on this point, particularly in his argument that interpretations of the coverage according to regional filters produced distinctive memories of the Till murder that have informed the national conversation about race ever since. The tolerance of extreme racial violence in Mississippi also allowed Americans in other regions to dodge racism by framing it as a Mississippi problem.

Through the process of mining the print-news archive, Mace offers a history of what is known about the Till murder and the record of the trial. The book's strongest historical contribution is a detailed accounting of the decision by Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, to open her son's casket and to allow *Jet* magazine to photograph his remains. Mace's third chapter, "Home Going," on the funeral in Chicago, which reportedly was attended by 5,000 people, is a strong moment in the book's narrative. In addition to its focus on coverage produced by the black press, the book traces coverage for white audiences by local and national newspapers, including the evident concerns by the *Chicago Tribune* and other publications that the Communist Party would capitalize on the murder. Later, in his sixth chapter, Mace also provides a detailed accounting of Till-Mobley's initial alliance with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which had scheduled her for a West Coast speaking tour a few months after the trial, and its decision to drop her from the program. The *Chicago Defender* took up her cause and Mace provides strong analysis of news coverage of that often neglected chapter of the Till story.

Despite its obvious strengths and contributions, Mace's work will frustrate historians on a couple of counts. First, the book constructs broad categories that group publications in counterintuitive ways. For example, at one point the book refers to "such mainstream publications as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, the *Daily Worker*, and the *Nation* " (p. 6). Scholars will immediately recognize this as an unlikely cohort.

Second, the argument sometimes draws unsupported conclusions about the positions and motives of publications that covered the Till case and civil rights generally. Among several examples, the book at one point charges that "the *New York Times* refused even to consider race or region as a mitigating factor" (p. 32). Elsewhere, in discussing the revelation that Till's father had been executed for rape and murder while serving in the military, the book concludes, "The mainstream northeastern press did not print anything about this incident, evidently content to allow the public to see the senior Till as a war hero" (p. 107). Several cause-and-effect claims also are problematic. The book overreaches in a conclusion related to letters to the editor published in the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*: "These responses did have an effect. The *Post-Gazette* made no further effort to defend the Deep South or minimize the impact of the Till lynching" (p. 105). Similarly, in criticism of the *San Francisco Examiner*, the book asserts, "Because it failed to communicate the salience of the event to their readers, those readers in turn failed to demand more incisive coverage. Emmett Till proved to be of little or no importance to them" (p. 121). In all such cases, alternative explanations are not explored and evidence for claims is missing.

Third, historians will be perplexed by the conflation of editorials, letters to the editor, and news coverage, both by wire services and a paper's own

staff, and the treatment of all content as if it were the same. Certainly editors assign and edit stories and select wire copy and letters to the editor. However, if we want to treat all categories of content as a single window into ideology, we need to make a concretely defined theoretical move in doing so. This raises a related issue, namely that it is often unclear whether newspapers under discussion sent their own reporters to cover the trial and whether content being discussed was generated in-house or by the wire services. This is an important point to consider when analyzing newspaper content.

Finally, the analysis is steeped in presentism. The book assesses media conventions and racial attitudes, sometimes polemically, against present-day standards of journalism and morality. The analysis of coverage often fails to take account of the conventions of 1950s newspapering. For example, in discussing the testimony of Carolyn Bryant, the white woman who claimed young Till accosted her in her general store, the book states, "No popular northeastern publication made any effort to verify Bryant's testimony" (p. 88). Of course not. And had the newspaper trial coverage of the 1950s deviated from the strictures of the inverted pyramid, what steps could a reporter have taken to verify her claim? The book also blasts William Bradford Huie for quoting confessed killers Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam in his article for ***Look*** magazine: "Apparently, Bryan and Milam, following the racist traditions of the patriarchy, felt justified in determining whether a black male was beyond hope, and Huie, a fellow southerner, did not question this logic. Instead, he allowed Bryant and Milam to put words in Till's mouth" (p. 138).

For historical scholarship, this presents a range of concerns. Historians do not abandon their personal ethical standards when they step back in time—in fact, our intellectual curiosities often are motivated by our ethical beliefs, particularly when it comes to topics related to civil rights. But we also need to work within the historical context of the period under inquiry. Although we embrace the moral absolute of racial equality, we do so because historical actors in the 1950s grappled with racial tensions. As we explore the struggles of that period, it is important that we allow the story of the Till murder and its media coverage to belong to that period, not to ours.

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