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## The Rage: Some Closing Comments on “Open Casket”

Emmett Till is dead. I don't know why he can't just stay dead.

– Roy Bryant

This is what our dying looks like.

– Jericho Brown

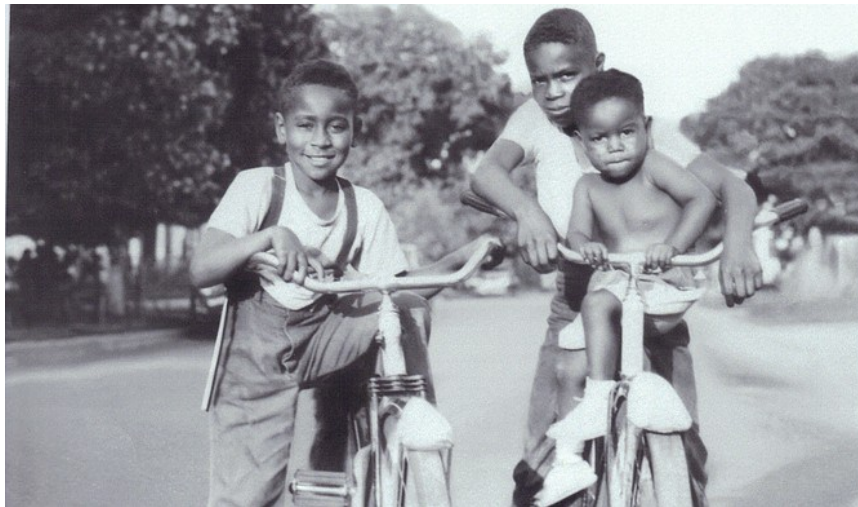
What can one say, in response to Dana Schutz's [Open Casket](#)? To say even this, out loud, would sound, without further inquiry, like a reference to a funeral service, a wake or a viewing. To say this loudly, while out and about, before the uninitiated or uninformed, would sound like a question about a eulogy for the artist. No color, no texture, no context, no points or lines or planes in the medium of the vast spacetime continuum. What was the cause? They would ask that, among other things, because they would care about all of the above. They would care even if they only overheard the opening question: How to speak well of the dead?

Emmett Till, a fourteen-year old black boy from Chicago, was abducted, tortured and killed in Money, Mississippi on August 28, 1955 by two local white men. Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam (and perhaps others) murdered and mutilated him and attempted to disappear his body in the Tallahatchie River. The violence done to him was not unique, but its meaning and significance, its symbolic and material force, may be uniquely [obscure](#). Till has been the subject of voluminous literary and artistic output among African Americans over the last half-century or so, much as an accompaniment to the black freedom movement that Till's martyrdom, as it came to be known, would help [catalyze](#).

[How She Sent Him and How She Got Him Back](#) (2012) is the title of Lisa Whittington's first depiction of Emmett Till's fate, five years prior to the present scenario. Her before-and-after, split-screen oil painting underscores the total rupture in appearance that Till suffered at the hands of his captors, the monstrously doubled image his mother would have to confront upon his return, in the moment and in her memory thereafter. The rendering is about disfiguration and torment, as the wide-eyed living half of Till's almost

flawlessly smooth face seems impossibly unaware of the half that is now crushed, mottled, and torn. And it is about a fundamental irresolution, as the bright blue skies of his youth contrast bluntly with the dark night of his demise.

The viewer is left unsettled and confused. What is on display here? Is this what uninhibited white rage looks like, a rage that white men and women somehow share, in the face of a black child? Was Emmett Till made into a grotesque canvas of the flesh for the sake of white artwork? Who was the audience of their brutal aesthetic work?



*Emmett Till (left) with cousin Wheeler Parker (back right) and family friend Joe B. Williams (front right) in Argo-Summit, Ill circa 1950.*

Careful, responsible remembrance is the leitmotif of Whittington’s painting, as it is for most black artists, critics and curators who have weighed in on the matter of representing Emmett Till and the whole range of issues that seem to condense around his image and likeness. Looking relations and the asymmetries of power they entail are strained to extremity and the most pointed ethical questions arise of necessity. In an interview about her work, Whittington remarked: “We are supposed to make sure children are protected.” And yet, she also notes: “Creating the picture was like having to watch him being brutalized and only being able to defend him with my paintbrush. It was frustrating to try to envision this nightmare in your mind and have to translate it to the canvas.”

A curious loop, wherein to protect unprotected black children – whether by means of aesthetic production or affective labor or formal schooling or moral training or practical advice – to make sure people remember them and speak well of them, we are drawn into an imagination of atrocities committed against them, compelled to watch them being brutalized. That imaginary watching seems to be part and parcel of our rituals of care and

remembrance. Such spectacles may be as inherent to our memorializations of black dying as to our commemorations of black living.

If Whittington believes that “as an African American, and a responsible artist it is [her] duty to document what they did to [Mamie Till-Mobley’s] son through [her] artwork so the world won’t forget” and, further, that this artwork involves the imaginary reproduction of Till’s suffering as the inception of the creative process itself; then are we safe to assume that Dana Schutz, though operating from a rather different sense of responsibility, was enjoined to undergo a similar imagining?

Well before debates were launched about the effects of *Open Casket* for Schutz’s career, for the Whitney Museum, for the contemporary art industry – much less its divergent impact on audiences and viewers, black white and in color – we could wonder about this troubled and troubling creative, caring response to the reverberations of Till’s murder that prompted a white woman to think of a black woman losing her son to state-sanctioned racial violence today – and to empathize. Maybe she tried to imagine that black lives matter and, given the convoluted outcome, a good many black people were left thinking, “with friends like this....”

Carolyn Bryant acted with malice in 1955 and her latter-day act of contrition is entirely beside [the point](#). She, in effect, ordered a hit on Emmett Till and, by some accounts, was prepared to stand her ground, pistol in hand, right then and there, before Till and the group of young boys accompanying him were hurried away to hide by an older black man who overheard about the commotion in the store. Schutz, some sixty years later, would like *not* to be like Bryant, implicated in the state-sanctioned racial violence against black people, and perhaps especially that violence which polices interracial sexual encounter.

*Open Casket* is framed as a sincere gesture of interracial maternal empathy with Mamie Till-Mobley, but it cannot avoid standing nonetheless as an exhibit in the opening arguments of a defense; or, as a gambit in a fated attempt to extricate the artist from a political burden that cannot be addressed in the register of any personal connection whatsoever. This is not to say that Schutz is simply making indulgent autobiographical art, but rather that she cannot, in this work, simultaneously track her pathos and her positioning. She forgets that her interracial maternal empathy for Till-Mobley does not mitigate the fact that she is a white woman depicting a black boy killed, infamously, on the initiative of a white woman. Her empathy is entangled in that initiative.

For those compelled to stake a position here, in defense or opposition or indifference, it is important to rethink the surety and clarity of any such positioning. Part of the difficulty of

addressing the history of violence that killed Emmett Till is that there seem to be no stances that aren't implicated in the same violence, in some way or another.



*Empty Casket.* In 2005, federal authorities exhumed Emmett Till's remains to perform an autopsy as part of a new investigation of Civil Rights era killings. His remains were reburied in a new casket, according to state law. The original casket is now on display at the [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) in Washington D.C. Founding Director Lonnie Bunch III called Till's casket, "[one of our most sacred objects.](#)" The casket was discovered rotting in a shed in 2009 at the predominantly black [Burr Oak Cemetery](#) near Chicago, when local sheriffs investigated workers for allegedly digging up hundreds of graves, dumping the remains, and reselling the plots.

Hannah Black's [open letter](#) to the curators and staff of the 2017 Whitney Biennial should be read closely on this score. It has been widely circulated, but it seems not to have been read for all its travels, and not only among its critics. It should neither be dismissed as simplistic and clichéd nor rejected as censorious and illiberal. Nor should it be celebrated as a righteous and self-explanatory polemic. It is none of those things. It is a provocation to thinking characterized by great economy, robust historical sensibility and abiding appreciation for political nuance, *and* it is shot through with ambivalence and contradiction. This is its peculiar strength. I am interested in affirming this intervention while pointing to complications in the nature of its highly resonant central demand.

Black opens with her request and recommendation to remove and destroy the painting, which is meant to ensure its inability to find a way into any market or museum, to be exchanged or accumulated. Three times Black declares, at the crux of the dispute: the painting must go. Indeed, but even in our most profound agreement we cannot help but

ask: Go where?

The destruction of the painting is aimed, in part, at its existence as commodity, but also as a site of pleasure – whether morbid curiosity, moral masochism or vicarious hatred and contempt. I do not see in this demand to de-commodify and de-aestheticize the image and likeness of Emmett Till a call for silence or asceticism among non-black artists. (No doubt, this demand applies with equal force to *any* artists broaching the task.) Instead, I see an attempt to restore or, better, to retain a certain reading formation, a black counter-public.

“Through his mother’s courage,” Black writes, “Till was made available to Black people as an inspiration and warning.” I would add, made available again and anew, but also awry. Whatever else may have unfolded in the disclosure of the posthumous photographs, Mamie Till-Mobley was interested in providing inspiration to a struggle that was always and already underway and warning, once more, about the mortal threats rudimentary to the everyday lives of black people wherever they may find themselves now. Black continues:

“Non-Black people must accept that they will never embody and cannot understand this gesture: the evidence of their collective lack of understanding is that Black people go on dying at the hands of white supremacists, that Black communities go on living in desperate poverty not far from the museum where this valuable painting hangs, that Black children are still denied childhood.”

Indeed, the conclusion is incontrovertible. But why qualify this lack of understanding as *collective* when protesting the work of a *solo* artist? Schutz will likely never come to embody blackness (though one could identify conditions in which white-looking people can and do), but does this also mean she cannot understand what was made available to black people in the image and likeness of Emmett Till? Does anyone, *really*?

One signal problem, of course, is that nothing is ever made available *only* to black people, no matter how hard we may try to cultivate the esoteric or mimic the proprietary. We have no sanctuary for such contemplation. I do not think black artists are saying that this is their exclusive province, but rather that they wrestle with the ethical question of representing the victims and effects of anti-black violence in ways that few non-black people (and maybe even many black people) ever come to appreciate. Meanwhile, what is taken to be black is taken for granted, openly available to all. That is a matter of virtually unrepresentable power, but it is also a structural impossibility to forestall the dissemination of signs, for better or worse. Once the black press began to report upon Till’s murder, the story quickly became international news and the imagery travelled far



and wide.

So, while the decision to release the photos was intended to mobilize a black audience, it had the unavoidable knock-on effect of posing the question of looking at, and *reading*, images of black suffering in the most general sense. Schutz’s painting therefore reactivates, if clumsily, a permanent feature of the broader civil society. A deconstruction of the terms of the present debate is thus a prerequisite for an analysis of the *Open Casket* affair that has yet to take place. We must be willing to become less secure in our understanding of *what* is wrong with *Open Casket* even as we may be certain that *something* is wrong with it. The role of analysis would be to comment on both the artist and the critics, to show how they might share at a deeper level a common problem, even and especially if they are positioned differentially in relation to it. But an analysis would not, and should not, pretend to know how to settle the matter.

There is, after all, no such thing as [unalloyed looking](#) or an image innocent of the violence it addresses. Can we tolerate, and negotiate, this sort of implication? Wedged between the publication of Black’s open letter and [Schutz’s public response](#), an [anonymous second letter](#) was penned, in Schutz’s name, that expressed what the author(s) imagined to be the latter’s proper and accountable response to trenchant criticism. That forged promissory note expressed remorse and understanding, and the artist stood corrected for all to see. Black criticism had produced the desired outcome. The painting and all it symbolizes – racist white violence, liberal white patronage, progressive white solidarity – would disappear without a trace: reparative wish-fulfillment.

But something of Emmett Till’s life and death persists in the traces inevitably left behind. It may be that *Open Casket* can no more be destroyed than Emmett Till can be delivered from evil. Perhaps this is why, even as the ersatz response feeds Schutz the preferred lines, there remains a telling prevarication: “I will also promise to make it impossible for the work to re-enter the public sphere.” Yes, but how?

There is, above all, one inescapable and impossible question, posed openly *between* the letter and the casket: What is to be the *manner* of the urgently recommended destruction? How is the image and likeness of Emmett Till, a black boy, to be destroyed by the artist, a white woman, in and as an expression of active solidarity in a larger struggle with black women (and those with whom they live and die)?

Should she work alone or with accomplices, in the light of day or under cover of night? Should she burn it? Behead it? Or should she beat it mercilessly, shoot holes in it, cut off its edges, wrap it in barbed wire, weight it with heavy metal, drive it to the nearest bridge

and throw it into the water? Should it sink to the bottom, swell up and begin to rot?

Should it rise again, surface and wash up on the banks of the river, shocking the unsuspecting passerby with the sight of some uncanny thing? Who will that be?

Not if, but when.



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