

## Why the Resurrection of Emmett Till's Casket Went Wrong

Dana Schutz was born in Detroit in 1976, the daughter of a junior high school art teacher. She is a graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Art, married, and the mother of two young sons. After completing her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 2000, she came to believe she had little to say through her art that was important. But after further study, she developed a voracious appetite for more and different subject matters that define her now as a notable contemporary artist. Some of her major painting sales are in the six figures and are exhibited in venues in Europe and in America.<sup>1</sup>

Today, Schutz finds herself embroiled in a protest surrounding the larger than life "Open Casket" painting. The controversy happened when Schutz experimented with iconic black subject matter in one particular painting. "Open Casket" is about the torture, castration, and death of a child in 1955, not any child, but a child barely showing promises of budding black masculinity. The child's mother mourned his death deeply and pictures of the boy's body were widely published in the black media. Dana Schutz's abstract painting of the body is said to stem from symbiotic grief between herself, Mamie Till, and other black mothers. Which raises the question: Can one painting do justice to both points of view? Is it possible to transmit both the deep sorrow and anguish of the murdered child's mother and the empathy of the artist, all in the same painting?

Like any mother, Mamie Till did not want her child to die, to leave before his time, even if her Christian religious faith led her to understand that he was not dead, but merely transitioned to eternal life in spiritual space. The current public controversy is about the artistic interpretation of the mutilated remains of this black boy and his mother's sorrow painted by a white artist in a society where no such alchemy previously existed.

Black artists alleged that "Open Casket," recently exhibited at the Whitney Museum Biennial, is a mockery, working against the best interests of black people. According to a recent article in *The New Yorker*, *Why Dana Schutz Painted Emmett Till* by Calvin Tomkins [April 3, 2017], a group of black artists led by Parker Bright and Hannah Black labeled "Open Casket" as psychologically damaging to black consciousness. Others suggested the painting be censored or even burned. The painting was labeled a "white spectacle" and a "transmutation of black pain for profit." Dana Schutz submitted the painting to the Museum presuming its content was

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<sup>1</sup> I first became aware of Dana Schutz's work around 2010, after being invited to share studio space offered by the Cleveland Artists Cooperative Project, which was started by three CIA alumni. For this article, inferences were made from a study of Dana Schutz's "Open Casket" painting and only loosely implicates her other works.

racially neutral, that it would be understood her motivation was heartfelt and even honorable, but certainly not for profit. The Museum initially exhibited the work without explanation, as if there were no racial residuals in our society. And it inferred by its silence, that the 39'x 53' oil painting, interpreted from a cryptic 1955 photograph of what appears to be a brown figure clad in a formal white dress shirt laid out in an open casket was no different than any other larger than life expressionist painting modeling human death. To mitigate charges flung at her and the painting, Dana Schutz pledged that the painting would never be sold, while the curators added an explanation next to the painting.

But the March 2017 image had already gone viral with both the artist and the Whitney benefitting. Publicity about the painting elevated Schutz and the Museum into the realm of American art royalty. Use of Emmett Till's name has driven up both attendance and the fame of Dana Schutz, which in turn drives up the value of her other works. No amount of rebuttal from her or the curators can change these facts. Almost from the onset of the trial of the two murderers, Emmett Till's legacy was awash in charges of "blood money."

The murderers were acquitted, then confessed, and later allegedly sold their story to *Life Magazine*. *Life Magazine* profited, but later decided to stop publishing pictures depicting victims of lynching. Emmett's female accuser, Carol Bryant, revealed in Timothy Tyson's 2017 book *The Blood of Emmett Till* that she had written and ordered her memoirs, but not to be published until 2036. She admitted in the book she had lied about her contact with Emmett to protect her family's livelihood, and that she now empathized with Emmett's dead mother. There appears to be no limit to the exploitation of empathy by those making money on Emmett's story and image, now and into the future.

The current controversy is made up of a number of interwoven racial, sexual, economic, psychological, historical, and imaginary factors, making it difficult to reach a clear understanding of its root causes. A basic question is whether racial sublimation allows for willful insensitivity to black pain the root problem of Dana Schutz's "Open Casket" painting. Racial sublimation is the masking of personal neuroses/dislikes while publicly acting in a socially acceptable manner. At one time or another, we African Americans have known white associates who say they can't be racist because they have black friends, or are fans of black luminaries, while we know that they harbor racial prejudices that they act upon and benefit from daily. Sublimation can be a double-edged sword used by both blacks and whites alike. For example, from fear of what white people will think of them or their work, black people sublimate their anger about racist behavior masked behind pleasant expressions. On the other hand, white people sublimate their racial prejudices out of fear of being openly branded as racists.

Another question is what did the protestors meant by transmutation. Transmutation requires experimentation. In this case, the raw materials are black grief plus white ignorance of the long visual history of images of unarmed black people, castrated, mutilated, branded, tortured, whipped, chained, choked, burned, lynched, and shot to death. Emmett Till's corpse showed evidence of all the above, including partial removal of his tongue, supposedly so that he would never whistle again at a white woman. For the sake of clarity, we are not dealing with just one, but many images of black death – past and present. Lynching castrations were public spectacles for entertainment and edification of southern whites of all ages. Cheerful participants took photographs of each other with a mutilated body swinging from a tree in the background with a few lopped off body parts for souvenirs in the foreground. Given this history, how could the artist, curators, and Museum staff assume that revisiting the image of the corpse in "Open Casket" would be neutral, or even educational!

Why were they unprepared for the ensuing moral outrage the painting generated from protestors and critics alike? What the Museum failed to realize was the significant connection between the painting of the casket and the decomposing body, plus the historic photo significance of lynched bodies. For people of color, no more potent symbol of danger or potential death exists. It was not until the 1960s, that these types of photographs and what they symbolized started to fall in disfavor. Schutz's impossible objective appears to have been to transmute a horrendous death into diamonds, some sixty-two years after Emmett Till's image was first published.

A symbol can help expand the boundaries of a culture hovering on the edges of possibility, but not quite able to bring that potential into useful focus. It can elicit in certain viewers a response which connects to the content of the symbol. It is commonly understood that the origins of the Civil Rights movement are embedded in the death image of Emmett Till. The grotesque image morphed into a symbol that awakened the latent consciousness of the black population at that time. The symbol says, "We have no more fear. Now that you have done the worse you can do to any human being, to a child, what more can you do to me? You can do no worse to me if I have to confront you, and your clubs, your bullets, and your unending cruelties to the end of my days."

If I personally find something unsettling about "Open Casket," it is because as a child in the 1950s, I hated funerals and the smell of funeral flowers as I was forced to attend them against my will. As the grandson of a Masonic grandfather and Elks Grand Daughter Ruler grandmother in Cleveland, Ohio in the 1950s, funerals were weekly events for me. Why my family was so sympathetic and invested in putting confraternity members away "the right way," I was to learn later. For me, the *Jet* and *Ebony Magazines* pictures of Emmett Till and his

grieving mother tenderly draped over his mummified esophagus was like being at his funeral. This image is forever etched in my mind and shows up from time to time in my own paintings. For some reason, I imagined his body rising up and walking back into life as if from a deep sleep. For Emmett's mother, there was finality; there was a body. Emmett's body was found and dredged up from the bottom of a lake, chained to a cotton gin's iron fan and severely mutilated. She knew there would be no reawakening from this horrible death in this life.

How is Dana Schutz to have known that all deaths are not equal? This was not a natural death, or even a typical murder. The death of a child is deeply personal for "our community," especially when there is kidnapping, torture, mutilation, and murder at the hand of whites. The child's body must be found and buried along with the shame of knowing we could not protect our child from death, and the realization that the murderers would never be held accountable by a jury of their peers.

The protest at the Whitney Museum is part of the enfranchisement of the post-civil rights era black mind, and comes amid a larger wave of protest spreading across the country as a response to injustices. NBA and NFL players are protesting violence against unarmed blacks. The protest comes at a time when it appears it is "kosher" to kill the masculine people of color, whose families are expected to bury their disbelief, and pain along with the deceased. Black Lives Matter is protesting against white jurors for failure to convict anyone white in the slaughter of black life. Eric Garner's daughter, empowered to lead her own individual protest, undoubtedly died from the incomprehensible stress of her father's choking death at the hands of white officers (pledged to protect), supposed Watchmen. Ironically, *Go Set a Watchman* is the title of Harper Lee's posthumously released book and a euphemism for the Klan. The white officer who killed Garner in the shadows of New York's museums was found not guilty of murder. Protest at the Whitney also has coincided with the protest of #METOO white women long silenced by misogynist white men, in a power exchange allowing them status just above that of blacks. Ironically, these women are mostly silent about the routine subjugation and annihilation of black masculinity.

The protest about "Open Casket" also occurred during an era when major institutions are examining their historic connections to slavery and post-slavery corporate supporters. The question is why museums have continued to operate as if we were still in a Eurocentric society, as if unaware of the black people who built this country with free labor. Is it because letting down their defense and admitting their lapses, would expose them to irreparable psychological damage and a debt that can't be paid? If so, can admission of guilt repay the debt owed for being major actors in a racist, xenophobic game of power, profit, and prestige for decades?

Before Dana Schutz attempted to explain how her casket image was connected to a historical name, the painting appeared ghost-like in the public media, incomplete, and un-hinged, as are many of her other better works. Dana's works reveals improvisational skills. Her work fuses disparate body parts into figures. To some degree and not exclusively, she appears to be influenced by abstract impressionists like Phillip Guston who used Klan and Gestapo-like imagery and Willem de Kooning who abstracted female figures.

From a personal review of a dozen of her paintings recently exhibited at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Transformer Station, I found her work even more darkly poetic and personally neurotic than I imagined. She employs a full palette of primary colors and their complements. What she attempts to express in color is emotions that words usually cannot, using insects, birds, disembodied body parts, including an array of eight or nine human soft tissue orifices. Her perspective is converging lines, from the ground up rather than frontal. She appears to be testing in a naïve manner both her personal visionary limits and the limits of painting in general. "Open Casket" is an understatement compared to her large scale, mutilated, tense works at the Cleveland Transformer exhibition. I believe, if she had chosen to use her full arsenal of body parts, bugs, and cubist techniques, "Open Casket" could have been rendered far more potent and profane.

But neither painting nor poetry nor color may be up to the task of dealing with the complexities of our American brand of racism in a 2018 fictional post racial society. As I exited the Transformer Station, a full array of well-known-to-me local, sublimating, silk-stocking art patrons were arriving. No blacks however were there to protest or disrupt Schutz's expected appearance. As I drove away, I wondered if any type of resolution is possible from those whose ancestors created the problem and whose descendants still benefit from it today. Reverend Martin Luther King has a famous quote about the damage that can be done to our cause "by well-intentioned whites." I also asked myself if it is just a matter of time before MLK's corpse is, metaphorically dug up, appropriated, and transmuted by a white artist. I also know that everything about King's life was copyrighted as intellectual property some years ago, as his image and speeches had begun to be freely appropriated for a number of events and selling of products.

"Open Casket" stepped out of the bounds of art when, whether by intention or accident, it became associated with an iconic name and a seminal event of 1950s black history. None of the abstract expressionist or cubist painters have attached historical personal names to their works. Dana Schutz linked Emmett Till's name with the unrecognizable figure in the casket, but it could have been any contemporary black boy, from Mike Brown's body left baking in the hot Missouri sun for hours, to 12-year old Tamir Rice holding a toy gun while shot by a

Cleveland police officer. All were judged dangerous and executed within seconds by union-court protected, ill-trained, white policemen or random neighborhood watchmen. In this atmosphere of racial xenophobia, is it possible for an image of a black body – child or adult - to be racially neutral? I can unequivocally say no, never as long as I stay black and American, which is during my lifetime and probably that of my children. I speak for myself and others, when I say that white America has an obsession with race. The color of one's skin, race, is still not a neutral. Race and its permutations and transmutations are ubiquitous, especially in our museums. In such space, Schutz's "Open Casket" could easily stray into the still uncharted region of racial propaganda.

Dana Schutz did not disguise her ethnicity or put on black face grease paint to make this painting. She said it was done out of empathy for the deaths of unarmed black men and the anguish of their mothers. As a mother of two sons, she identified with the pain of a mother losing a child. This is not a case of artistic minstrelsy, a person identifiably white in black face imitating our pain; rather it is a white artist being herself. After reviewing her neurotic, experimental work, as incomprehensible as it may be, I believe her empathy could be real. But, what *type* of empathy is the question? Is it the Carol Bryant type of guilt-ridden, concocted empathy? Or an authentic feeling emanating from the depth of our human connectedness?

Empathy is an ambiguous word. In a modern sense it can be used to represent a multitude of phenomena. It is a word that can get burnished by misuse in a complex environment mixed with emotion and guilt, and it can become a robotic response to public criticism. Carol Bryant said she felt empathy, as did Dana Schutz, both in complex circumstances; but neither can say that her empathy is not clouded by protection of self-interest.

I believe that a black artist making the same painting would have had a different work of art. It is well understood that while we may identify with other black victims, we do not usually paint the pain we feel and freely talk about. We have not quite figured out the visual physics of our pain, perhaps because it surrounds us, leaving most of us, that is, black visual artists, in our own purgatory. But furthermore, we highly respect and celebrate deaths, maybe as a counter balance to lives historically devalued and prematurely ended.

No visual art exists with MLK's skull being half blown off, that I know of. Dana's 2018 "Bat" damaged skull painting with tonal changes could be the exception, if she chooses. But, as a rule, we do not usually complain when white artists seek to unravel the knotted cord between our pain and art making. Norman Rockwell, along with a few other white artists during public

school desegregation, would be an example of this rule. However, as “Open Casket” proves, even when well intentioned, most attempts don’t quite measure up.

African American artist and feminist Kara Walker, a contemporary of Dana Schutz, who also recently had an exhibit at the Cleveland Museum of Art, does not have a problem with Dana Schutz's painting because she also appropriates subject matter from the opposite race. Kara’s figures are from a redacted cast of Disneyworld antebellum southern images, and Dana’s from one black historical iconic figure. However, appropriation of images and subjects, with few limitations, is pervasive in modern and contemporary American art. Borrowing from earlier art and finding new ways of presenting old material are thought to add a mental vitality in both our culture and art.

Kara Walker’s medium is black paper cutout silhouettes, situated on a white ground with coloring left up to the imagination of the viewer. Schutz’s work is an amalgamation of colorful body parts mixed up in mental froth, not typically identified with one person. The difference between Walker's and Schutz's art is specificity, with Schutz’s casket painting embodying one colorfully rendered dead child, associated with one event, only lacking in all the morbid details of the original photograph. Kara Walker’s art has been subjected to talk of censorship, because of her use of sensitive racial and sexual material.

Kara Walker’s paper cutout figures, on the other hand, have little history except as a fleeting connection to Victorian novels, pornography and stereotypes from the movie “Gone with the Wind.” I do not recall seeing one named stillborn, mutilated white baby in her work, which is populated with poorly clothed black children and toiling, mentally disengaged black men. Walker transmutes white paper figures, both male and female, into well dressed, vacant, and soulless zombies. To me, the paper slave masters of Kara’s creation come alive as sex-crazed males, programmed to lust after the female black body. The white female figures nearly always appear enfeebled in mind, prissy, fragile, and disinterested in black men, except as slaves. All of Walker’s work is not successful, but in general it attempts to tell a more complete story than Dana Schutz’s one painting. I do not know whether Walker’s silhouettes are seen by white viewers as spectacle and moral debasements or as the works of a skillful illustrator and story teller of history. The Mississippi State Museum of Art thought well enough of her works, perhaps redemptive seeking, to include them in a recent exhibition.

Today a virtual racial wall exists in the visual arts. White art is made by white artists for white people about subjects they care deeply about. This is the majority type of art populating museums and galleries since the beginning of American history. Similarly, black art is made by black artists for black people about subjects they care deeply about. But black visual art, a

recent phenomenon with a reliable start date about 1900, is rarely found in museums, and is by no means monolithic. This can be seen as a broad generalization, but little information exists to refute this claim and, unlike with music, even fewer crossover artists exist that can show evidence of a convergence of art across races. Both Kara Walker and Dana Schutz may be tearing at the wall, using visionary and expressionist art as the tools.

The American paradox is that black art is usually measured by the degree it reflects assimilated Eurocentric values and academic training, by both black and white viewers. Afro-centric, neurotic, black power, political, religious, or mystical content is usually a dead end. These are some of the difficulties black artists must overcome in creating visual art, but Dana Schutz does not have to jump these assimilation hurdles. Both she and Kara Walker are exceptions and have chosen to follow their muses down any dark rabbit hole their imagination takes, and return unscathed. For the most part, other black artists have chosen not disturbed half buried ghosts like Emmett Till. In black life and art, coffins are too numerous to name, and too real to disturb.

The Constitution is the bedrock of our democracy; speech and creative artwork, along with photographs, are considered protected by the First Amendment. But freedom of speech, censorship, and punishment have always traveled side by side down the same American avenue. Whites do not get censored for xenophobic and racist speech, while blacks do. That is the practical application of an imperfect democracy, and the first line of white response to art reflecting black self-interested visual art.

Currently, there are not enough academically trained or self-taught black artists to adequately represent a multi-segmented black culture. For the slowly growing numbers of trained artists, many concentrate on life style and social uplift art, that show racial progress, rather than that which shows a lack of racial progress or repression. The growing number of black vernacular artists can be difficult to classify, but they appear more than likely to attack unconventional subject matter in non-traditional ways, using a variety of inexpensive found objects, paints, and tools. They attack an array of subjects including, mystical, religious, and black history and have influenced many academic artists, including myself. This group would more likely and have experimented with deep memories of death. But Dana Schutz's Emmett Till's "ghoulish painting," would still be a bad fit for the most fearless of any of the black artists, regardless of academic training or vision.

Until recently, black history was not taught in schools; we had to find it where we could. When it is found, we must filter through white revisionist texts, without which, we are left with a sense of shame. For me, black history started with stories of *Little Black Sambo* and ended



with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. For some of us, this conundrum, coupled with learned passivism and our own need for survival, gives rise to various sublimation escapist strategies - usually solipsism, a form of blindness in the face of existential threats. Our omissions are palpable in the paucity and slant of our work. To attempt to do anything political means the possible loss of a livelihood, or putting the possibility of potential grants or sales in jeopardy. To mock white sacred context is nearly unheard of. For the sake of security and employment, the majority fall short on our responsibility to the next generation, by willingly submitting to a form of artistic self-censoring. But at the same time, black artists - male and female – who explore sexual and gender identity issues seem to fare quite well in the white controlled art domain.

Censorship by race, both real and imagined, has always been the third rail of artists. No one is taught that being insensitive to certain subject matter could mean the end of an education or career. What we do know is that early black artists, like writers, had to leave for other countries to develop a body of work or to be taken seriously. Early writers were under no illusions as to the reality of the role of Jim Crow publishers in shaping the products of their creativity, while most Negro visual artists were still lost in a self-delusionary fog and dependent on white collectors.

Black artists did not respond to racially charged images published to support white extremism until after the 1960s, but the response was not universal. In that respect, most were similar to the self-delusional Jews, intent on assimilating German culture, while being oblivious to the growing role of German nationalism in the 1930s. If the threats were not recognized, then maybe they did not exist and life would go on as usual. What Dana brings to the foreground is the threatening dark clouds gathering on the horizon. Today's growing threat of white nationalism can be seen as related to the German nationalism of the 1930s, which I think Schutz has the vision to recognize.

Dan Schutz's "Open Casket" gets to the very core and heart of the relationship between entertainment and history, spectator, spectacle, profit and loss, winners and losers. While Schutz's motive may have been pure, the use of the painting can certainly be tainted with the racial controls of the past - a past that is not so distant for black viewers who have not forgotten their relatives being tortured or lynched, or for that matter incarcerated. In my family, the image of L.Q. Ivy, burned to death just outside of Oxford, Mississippi in 1925 by a white mob, is etched in my psyche as if I had been there and it had occurred yesterday. Also in my memory is great uncle Elwood Higginbotham who defended himself and fought and killed his white assailant in self-defense, only to be lynched in 1935 by a white mob. Both murders occurred within a 100-mile radius of Money, Mississippi, where Emmett died. Neither body was ever recovered for a family funeral or burial.

If progress can be measured by the lack of lynching and the burning of blacks, we have moved forward. But, in reality, any black person could still suffer an Ivy Higginbotham, Emmett Till, or Tamir Rice fate with a slight shift in geography, time, or place. It does not take a glance at a white woman, a hoodie, or a few illicit cigarettes to bring about another family nightmare. In the last decade, I personally was confronted with this type of irrational, racially motivated behavior at least twice. What did my white accusers dislike? Me being in my “beachy” Florida neighborhood while black, or me as an urban black property owner defending a black family with three small children from a white SWAT team, investigating the theft of some stolen cigarettes, led to the wrong address by an electronic tracking device, without a warrant on my property? At my Florida home, the “nigger” word was screamed at me by a disturbed white male whose offer of friendship I had previously refused because I could see through his duplicity. Our neighbors who routinely display a Confederate flag stood by as dutiful witnesses. For many of us who are black and male, duplicity, denigrations, and death threats are added daily realities to be navigated.

My concern is about the current effects of images on the minds of our children. White institutions assume no differences between white and black viewers, white and black art, or white and black children. They assume no differences, not from evidence or statistics, but from the insularity of privilege. While a black viewer can be underwhelmed and abhorred by a particular artistic expression, a white viewer could experience a positive benefit. This is the difference to which institutions turn a blind eye, as well as to the counter-balancing history of the black struggles and contributions to the development of this country. Some balance is required. Children are not usually equipped with the cognitive skills to know why a murdered body of someone who looks like a child and could have been them is on display. They are not equipped to know that you do not awake and walk out of death. Death is final.

White children also suffer. Images such as Till’s and others viewed by the hour in the media, leave them with an early and profound distortion of their self-worth when comparing themselves to children of a different color. White abilities are exaggerated while blacks with the same or greater abilities are denigrated. They grow up in an unbalanced world, absent the belief of a competing black intellect. The brown image in Schutz’s casket, out of context, does not engender empathy in them; it only reinforces white racial superiority based on the debased image of another to the sub-human level. Negative images of black people teach white children to bully and inflict cruelty at an early age, often in an atmosphere of praise and reinforcement from their parents, church and community.

As adults, the process of devaluation continues and is acted upon in routine cruelties practiced against people of color. The Money, Mississippi white community approved of the behavior of the murderers of Emmett Till, and collectively invented narratives to reconcile with their beliefs of supremacy, thus allowing them to acquit the murderers.

Negative images of black people also provide support for the preponderance of barely disguised, racially distorted narratives with roots in our racial history extending back to the founders of our nation. There is a collective acceptance of racial denial and “play empathy,” to give the appearance of presenting a fair and impartial face to the rest of the world. This mental sphere/fog is one that many individuals and institutions do not recognize or navigate well.

Any image of a dead child is likely to have exaggerated effects on children. But this is especially true for black children who face exponentially more threats of death than their white counterparts. The threat of torture or death can lead to accelerated levels of stress, low educational achievement, anxiety, and paranoia, exaggerated in children already plagued with negative images of themselves. It is important for our children to see themselves as loved and valued, that they will not be tortured, and that they will live long enough to have a future. The recent 2015 “doll” test, first administered to black children in 1955, still shows that being black in a Eurocentric society negatively affects their self-esteem. Black children can be further driven toward feelings of uselessness by a multiplicity of other negative images, and mentally damaged before they develop the analytical skills to know how their minds are being conditioned. Given these conditions, it is easy to project how a black child could view “Open Casket” and come away negatively affected.

Children and artists alike need to know why Mamie Till gave permission to the black media to display her son’s remains. It was not because of ego or profit. By her calculations, the benefits to the black community outweighed the negatives. The photograph was needed to help galvanize support for the civil rights movement at a time when organized opposition to white oppression was fractured, and unity was sorely needed. At the time, black artists had not produced images reflecting the enormity of the struggle. No one knows how that photographic image of Emmett in the casket helped the unification of the black psyche. Therefore, any artist would be hard pressed to recreate the energy transmitted in that 1955 photograph. So the question the controversy raises is: what is the real purpose of Schutz’s “Open Casket” in the Whitney Museum other than it being a spectacle, or a selfish endeavor, or far worse, continuation of control of the black mind? At best, its purpose can be seen as possibly transcendental, in the creation of some post racial fantasy world in Dana Schutz’s imagination.

What is the value of the “Open Casket” painting? While the image is incomplete and poorly presented, and not sufficiently explicated by the curators, such as it was, the answer can be either that it is meaningful art or propaganda. But let us go deeper. The black body image transmuted to a less than masculine state is the bedrock upon which many of our institutions sit. It is the barely disguised message of terror meant to keep men of color in their place. It is the image still used in most media to subjugate and subordinate black aspirations of all types, especially those of a creative nature. The painting in the context in which it was displayed at the Whitney, and Dana Schutz agrees, adds to this negative value.

Whom did the curators, bright young MBA art school graduates, think to consult? The black family, the black community or black males? Any decent, fussy undertaker would have done that before straying into this racial malaise. It is a fair question to ask why they have so little respect for black history. Is it that they think they have better knowledge of our history than we do? What can a white curator, ignorant of black and African history do, but promote art that is frozen in embalmed guilt for the edification of the ages! This is one of the problems unearthed by the Dana Schutz controversy. From the few curators known to me, a burka-like veil still exists between them and black history.

Is there such a thing as collective white guilt dwelling in the hearts and minds of some or all whites? I would think Dana Schutz’s motivation for creating “Open Casket” argues that question in the affirmative. As other white artists consider black subject matter, I’m nearly certain that art for white cathartic release may not be cathartic for people of color, and will be just viewed as another spectacle for the white gaze. Collective guilt turned to debased empathy, with all its complicated psychology, is just painted colors on paper.

Did Dana mean the painting to be a touchstone lesson for the lack of empathy shown by white jurors toward blacks who, even with overwhelming evidence, cannot bring themselves to convict anyone white with the murders of unarmed black men? Is Dana Schutz’s empathy like that of Emmett’s accuser, Carol Bryant, based on her self-centered need for redemption after inflicting cruelties on the black community? It can be predicted that this type of empathy will not add one ounce of weight to the scales of justice. This type of empathy only allows for more of the same. It is a mixture of arrogance and ignorance and no better than that shown in the 1925 film *Birth of a Nation* or Burt Griffin’s black face minstrelsy, which is a low hurdle which few will overcome.

There are many other ways Dana Schutz’s painting of Emmett Till could be considered insincere. She said, as a mother herself, she identified with Mamie Till, a mother whom she did not know personally. Did she know that Mamie referred to her son Emmett by his pet name,

BoBo, probably because of his having bowed legs? Did Dana Schutz know that Emmett was fatherless because his father had been hung by the neck by the U.S. Army in 1944? Louis Till was arrested after an Italian woman said she had been raped by a black soldier, and charged with the murder of two other women killed, during World War II. Writer John Edgar Wideman suggested that the charges were false. More likely, the circumstances show that the women had been killed by white soldiers for dating black men. "Open Casket" cannot show that Mamie Till was made childless by a white woman, tutored only in the manners of hate, who in 2017 admitted to lying and is now seeking redemption from Emmett's dead mother. Importantly, neither Dana Schutz nor Carol Bryant stated that they had empathy for the many other innocent unarmed black victims.

Does Schutz know the nuances of the white female thoughts when attending spectacles of black athletes, where somehow hatred and fear are sublimated by fan worship, approaching a kind of love? Black masculinity on display is valuable property. White fans get a boost in stock prices every time they attend or watch a display of black bodies in the realm of sports. It is being employed and exploited to sell products from soup to cars. I was at an NBA game, some years ago, when a giant athletic symbol of the rebirth of Cleveland, who was first hated, then adored, and again adoration flipped back to white hate, because the object of their affection publicly announced that he was not a "million-dollar slave." He was taking his black masculine talents to Miami, Florida. Does Dana Schutz know that the opposite of black death in coffins, is black masculinity, as both an elevated money-making commodity and a devalued human being in a white society where such masculinity is still seen as an existential threat like the 1955 child Emmett?

## **Conclusion**

As black museums are created, they are hard pressed to find, afford, or collect original art. So, they have become filled with artifacts, photographs, and sterile wax-like dioramas. There are gaping voids, to be filled with works of black artists in these museums. If we don't fill them, someone else will. Artifacts and photographs do not take the place of interpretive impressionist paintings such as Dana Schutz's work. If the void is to be interpreted through the imagination of others such as Dana Schutz, expect some to be spectacle and others condescending. It is a white dominated museum world, but what the protestors bring to our attention is the understanding of the pernicious stubborn nature of racism at its highest levels and the dire need for more paid black artists, curators, and museums.

If "Open Casket" had been displayed in Haiti or in the town center of Montego Bay, Jamaica, near the obelisk with the names of those tortured and punished for the taking of their

freedom from the English overlords in 1835, the displeasure with the painting would have caused it to be pissed upon. "Open Casket" would have a better home in the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC or the in Equal Justice Institute in Montgomery, Alabama. I suspect it would not have generated the same controversy. It would have been shown among a group of like images with explanations and similar historical context. "Open Casket" is guilty of the controversy because of being in the wrong exhibition place at the wrong time as an orphan painting in need of explanation. At either museum, as a teaching aide, with similar historical content, it would be an example of the white washing of a black icon and white protective counter narratives.

In the end, Dana Schutz should not be questioned for placing her work in a public mine field where sex, race, art, and politics merge. It invigorates and adds another dimension to the racial dialectic. But she should be questioned for a form of inherited narcissism masked by ill-fitting empathy, a mental circumlocution commonly practiced. What the black protestors brought to our attention is "The empress really has no clothes."

The curators and museum alike should be accountable for a willful ignorance when displaying a troubled orphan painting, unaccompanied by historical context. However, I have no great expectation of change in the near future as regional and local museums follow the Whitney's lead in displaying images of black history in one sideshow after another. Abstract expressionist art work in paintings and sculpture, confronting negative racial imagery, symbols and icons are, sorely needed and in short supply. "Open Casket" is not about sublimation, censorship or appropriation; it is about supply, demand, and profit and the psychological wall that still divides the world of art.

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