

‘THIS IS WHAT OUR DYING LOOKS LIKE’: *ELEGEÍA* FOR EMMETT TILL<sup>1</sup>

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

What will one have to say, in response to Dana Schutz's open casket? To ask this, out loud, would sound, without further inquiry or explanation, 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 elegy. *Elegeía*, in the ancient sense of the term – to cry, lament, mourn – for one they may not know. They may not know that this one is white or woman or mother or artist or highly educated or professionally successful. They may not know any country of origin or religious faith or languages spoken. They would have no real sense of any ethical bearing or political beliefs and affiliations. The uninitiated or uninformed would not know any of these things in detail, and none for certain. They would only know that there had been another death and that we were gathering before a body, searching about for a response. No color, no texture, no context, no points or lines or planes in the vast space-time continuum. The cause, too, would remain obscure. “What was the cause?” they would ask, 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 young black boy from Chicago, was abducted, tortured and killed by two local white men while visiting maternal relatives in the small town of Money, Mississippi on August 28, 1955. He was fourteen years old when Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam (and perhaps other accomplices) murdered him and attempted to disappear his mutilated body in the Tallahatchie River. Carolyn Bryant, a young white woman shopkeeper, accused Till of making sexual advances against her when he entered the store to buy candy. Her husband and her brother, once she relayed her version of events, imagined they were avenging a violation of her honor and upholding their solemn duty when they set out to discover and destroy Till. That they were overcome with rage and enjoyed something about the violence they inflicted along the way is beyond question. That the tight-knit white community - the police and the press, the judge and the jury - closed ranks reflexively around them is indisputable. That this was, and is, a deeply rooted dynamic in this and every other society structured in racial dominance goes without saying. The life and death of Emmett Till was singular. The forces that conspired around him, drawn most immediately from the history of postbellum anti-black terrorism, were long-standing, broad-based and overwhelming. The violence done to him was not unique, but its meaning and significance, its symbolic and material force, may be uniquely obscure. And this is

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<sup>1</sup> The title is taken from the opening line of Jericho Brown's poem, “Another Elegy.”

despite and due to the harsh light illuminating the forensic photographic evidence that announced to the world that Mamie Till-Mobley was forced, again and again, to see something terrible and terrifying in her son's remains (Till-Mobley & Benson).

Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016) is now featured at the 2017 Whitney Biennial. She painted it, according to the *Washington Post*, "in response to a slew of shootings of black men by police during the summer of 2016" (Gibson). But the reductively glossed rationale was more complex upon closer scrutiny. *ArtNet* news asked Schutz in a previous interview, "What was the genesis of the painting? How did you decide to tackle this subject in particular, and what meaning do you think you add to the subject with this work?" She replied:

I made this painting in August of 2016 after a summer that felt like a state of emergency – there were constant mass shootings, racist rallies filled with hate speech, and an escalating number of camera-phone videos of innocent black men being shot by police. The photograph of Emmett Till felt analogous to the time: what was hidden was now revealed.

The painting is very different from the photograph. I could never render the photograph ethically or emotionally.

I always had issues with making this painting, everything about it. And it is still uncertain for me (Boucher, "Dana Schutz Responds").

Several things stand out here. First, the painting marks an attempt to capture a *general* state of emergency experienced by the artist with clear temporal markers; "a season of hate," in novelist Laila Lalami's phrase. *Open Casket* is, then, not only a response to the iterations of anti-black violence that rather directly links Till's 1955 murder in Mississippi and, say, the 2016 video recorded police shootings of Alton Sterling in Louisiana or Philandro Castille in Minnesota. It is also, presumably, a response to the "racist rallies filled with hate speech" of then presidential candidate Donald Trump following his official nomination to the ballot at the Republican National Convention. We can also infer that the most prominent mass shooting of the summer was, for Schutz, the June 12 Pulse nightclub attack in Orlando, in which gunman Omar Mateen killed fifty people, including himself, and injured over fifty other patrons.<sup>2</sup> However, between Trump's ascendancy on July 19 and the deaths of Sterling and Castille on July 5 and July 6, respectively, we must recall that Micah Johnson, a black Mississippi native and military veteran

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<sup>2</sup> Mateen claimed, during the attack, to be inspired by the ideology of the so-called Islamic State and, furthermore, was retaliating against recent US military airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, including the May 2016 assassination of IS leader Abu Waheeb in Anbar Province. Other sources say Mateen may have targeted the gay, mostly Latino venue for reasons having to do with a combination of racism, sexism, homophobia, and conflicted feelings about his own intimate relationships with other men ("Orlando nightclub shooting"). For a tribute to the victims and survivors of the attack, see Andreyko.

of the ongoing US War in Afghanistan, ambushed a group of police officers following a July 7 protest organized by the progressive non-profit Next Generation Activist Network in Dallas, shooting five fatally and fourteen altogether. That mass shooting became immediate fodder for Trump's galloping "tough on crime" platform and fed powerfully into the wider conservative narrative demonizing the international Movement for Black Lives in ways distinct but related to the June massacre. The right-wing news media predictably sought in this vein, as it had since Obama's election in 2008 at least, to conflate (black) crime and (Islamic) terrorism in order to reinforce foreign and domestic US militarism and, even if one gives the benefit of an anti-war sentiment, one can speculate about whether that moral conflation holds in Schutz's litany as well.

Second, the forensic photographic evidence of Emmett Till's historic murder is analogized, in Schutz's imagination, to the forensic digital video evidence of "innocent black men being shot by police" here and now. The analogy is derived not so much from form or content as from *function*: "what was hidden was now revealed." To say that such anti-black violence was simply hidden is a strange and startling interpretation, to say the least, since there was, in fact, a surfeit of visual evidence of ritual lynching in the first half of the twentieth century, not least in the State of Mississippi, "the most southern place on earth" (Cobb).<sup>3</sup> But to say that such anti-black violence was now revealed – at a glance, once and for all – is no less problematic, since the public display of its execution and effects was less a revelation, insofar as it arguably *thwarted* understanding, than a highly visible re-concealment that preserved a "spectacular secret" (Goldsby). The distributed imagery of anti-black violence serves not only to terrorize black witnesses and viewers, but also to provide a vehicle for "a consolidation of racist community" (Marriott 6). Yes, Emmett Till's murder stands out in the history of lynching, marked as a pivot point between the turn of the century, when the lynching of blacks in the US was at its zenith, and mid-century, when the young Chicagoan was killed in that same tradition. Massive transformations economic, political, social and technological were underway across that span: a dispersal and reorganization of the black population in cities across the North, Midwest and West Coast as a result of the Great Migration (Wilkerson); the quickening of various developments in "the long civil rights movement," including the broad cultural effects of the New Negro era and the steady work of black activists like Medgar Evers and Fannie Lou Hamer in the Magnolia State specifically;<sup>4</sup> the founding of the black-owned Johnson Publishing Company (Johnson), which put out *Ebony* magazine and its sister digest *Jet* (the first two venues with significant national circulation to print the grim photographs of Till) in the context of expanding professional international print and television media with regular facsimile capabilities (thereby enhancing reproduced image quality and shortening image reproduction time);<sup>5</sup> the establishment of the US as global hegemon in the aftermath of World War II and the launch of a second phase

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<sup>3</sup> For discussions of the culture of lynching, including its imagery, past and present, see Apel & Smith, Dent, Jackson, Simien, Wells-Barnett, and Wood.

<sup>4</sup> On the long civil rights movement, Evers and Hamer, see Gwin, Mills, and Payne. On the New Negro era, see Baldwin & Makalani, Edwards, and Gates, Jr. & Jarrett.

<sup>5</sup> On the importance of visual media for the civil rights movement, see Berger, Bodroughkozy, and Raiford.

of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, involving the grand ideological “battle for hearts and minds” throughout the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America (Borstelmann, Dudziak). More to the point, there was a crucial shift in the *position of enunciation* in the visual economy seized by Mamie Till-Mobley in her decision to publicize the image of her son’s lynched body. The haunting, terrorizing image was, if you will, reclaimed and repurposed. One *could* say that something similar is at work today, in the age of digital video, as cell phone camera recordings of police shootings are offered as proof of wrongdoing in briefs for criminal proceedings, civil suits and the socially mediated court of public opinion. However, we know all too well, post-Rodney King, how the “mechanical witness” can and does provide testimony in defense of the state (Schwartz). Video testimony does not function like a reliable form of seeing, but rather is merely “deployed as a proposition to the veracity of an event of vision” (Salseda).

Third, and perhaps most striking, Schutz marks a difference between the photograph (more accurately, the photographs, *plural*) of Till and her painterly construal of that photograph. She says the two are “very different.” We don’t know if that difference is quantitative or qualitative, only that in light of that abundant difference Schutz could “never render it ethically or,” she adds, “emotionally.” The artist is moving between registers of translation, signaling the indeterminate problems of form, genre and medium while signifying the wavering self-deprecation of a desultory alliance. Though she declares she will proceed unethically without a doubt, and without the requisite emotional attunement or the most rudimentary clarity of purpose, she nonetheless goes on to make the painting, come what may. Whether the audacity of the move strikes you as bravery or hubris (or worse), probably says something about the background against which you view the figure.

Emmett Till has been the recurrent subject of elegy in the 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, helped catalyze (Anderson, *Emmett Till*). One thinks of Langston Hughes’s “Mississippi - 1955” or James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Audre Lorde’s “Afterimages” or Bebe Moore Campbell’s *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine. 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, some five years prior to the controversy at the Whitney Museum of American Art.<sup>6</sup> Whittington’s 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

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<sup>6</sup> For background on Dr. Lisa Whittington, Atlanta-based artist, researcher and arts educator, see her website: <https://www.lisalovewhittington.com/>.

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 (Anderson, *White Rage*)? 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? Whittington, in an interview with NBC, reports the following about *How She Sent Him*:

I remember creating this work and getting angry, feeling emotional, sad, crying, and throwing my paintbrush across the room because it was such an ordeal. I had to imagine pieces of his experience to birth my artwork. 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.

I thought about Emmett and spoke to him throughout the creation of my work. *What did they do to you Emmett? Why is your ear missing? Where are your clothes? Were you afraid? Were you lonely? Emmett, what did you think about while they were killing you? What did you see in their faces? In their eyes? What did they say to you? Were you already dead when they shot you? Were you numb when they gouged out your eye? Where were your clothes? Why were you naked Emmett? Did they rape you?*

I felt sad that he had to experience this. We are supposed to make sure children are protected. Creating the painting is my way of letting him know I cared about his life and what happened to him and that I would not forget him and make sure people remember him as a young bright Black boy, who was kidnapped and died a gory death as punishment for speaking to a white woman. As a teacher, I see Emmett Till in my students every day and worry about their experiences in the world.

I also believed that if Mamie Till had the strength and the stamina to show the world what hatred did to her son, then as an African American, and a responsible artist is my duty to document what they did to her son through my artwork so the world won't forget (Whittington).

Careful, responsible remembrance is the leitmotif of the work, 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, themes and topics that condense around his image and likeness, historically and contemporarily. Looking relations and the asymmetries of power they entail are strained to extremity and the most pointed ethical questions arise of necessity: Who can and should look? What can they see and not see? What do they want and not want to see? "We are supposed to make sure children are protected." And yet, in Till's defense: "Creating the picture was like having to watch him being brutalized...." 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 deaths as to our commemorations of black lives.

If Whittington understands her paintings of Till – there is another titled *Libation for Emmett Till* (2016) - to be an aspect of her responsibility as an African American and an artist, and that painting involves the imaginary reproduction of Till's suffering in and as the inception of the creative process itself; then are we to assume that Dana Schutz, though operating with a very different senses of responsibility, was enjoined to undergo a similar imagining? "I don't know what it is like to be black in America," Schutz wrote in a statement to the *New York Times*, "but I do know what it is like to be a mother. Emmett was Mamie Till's only son. The thought of anything happening to your child is beyond comprehension. Their pain is your pain. My engagement with this image was through empathy with his mother" (Kennedy). Whittington sees Emmett Till in her students and worries everyday about their experiences in the world. The poet Claudia Rankine asked a friend of hers what it is like being the mother of a black son. "'The condition of black life is one of mourning,' she said bluntly. For her, *mourning lived in real time* inside her and her son's reality: At any moment she might lose her reason for living" (Rankine 145, emphasis added). What is all too comprehensible for black women, and for black mothers of black sons in particular, is the thought of something, anything happening to a black child, theirs or another's, at any moment.<sup>7</sup> The This lived condition of real time mourning, in which death undermines life from within and surrounds it from without, produces an elegiac vernacular that suffuses the achievements of expressive culture as much as the practices of everyday life. In mourning, a lament, a cry – of pain, of joy, of outrage. This goes some way to explain how it could be that Whittington is moved by Pablo Picasso's well-known insistence that art "is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy" (Hensbergern 25), while Schutz avers: "Art can be a space for empathy, a vehicle for connection" (Kennedy). But 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 further about this inescapably 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.<sup>8</sup> Which might mean that Schutz tried to imagine caring about black children in the way that her black counterparts do, or to imagine that her black counterparts care about black children in the way that her white peers care about white children. Maybe she tried to imagine

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<sup>7</sup> The Movement for Black Lives is driven, in a profound sense, by this collective mourning (Latiff & Latiff).

<sup>8</sup> In addition to coverage by the art press, mainstream international media stories ran on CBC, CNN, *London Review of Books*, National Public Radio, and the *New York Times*, among others.

that black lives matter and, given the convoluted outcome, a good many black people were rightly left thinking, “with friends like this....”

Carolyn Bryant acted with malice in 1955 and her latter-day act of contrition, while of historical interest, is entirely beside the point (Tyson). She, in effect, ordered a hit on Emmett Till and, by some accounts, she was prepared to stand her ground, pistol in hand, right then and there, before Till and the group of young boys accompanying him were hidden away by an older black man who heard tell about the incident 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 between black boys and men and white girls and women. *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 a gambit in a failing attempt to extricate the artist from a political burden that cannot be addressed adequately 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.

Katy Siegel, senior programming and research curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art, has written about Schutz's paintings that they present “an allegory for the process of making art...rendering the process of creation as one of drawing on oneself, recycling oneself and making oneself” (Siegel). This is, in Siegel's account, “a model of creation that blurs beginnings and endings, avoiding the dramatic genesis of the modernist blank canvas, as well as the nihilistic cul-de-sac of the appropriated media image.” If this is a fair assessment of Schutz's output to date, then how do we square such insight about artistic creation with the “nightmare” that Whittington envisions and translates onto her own canvas? Does Schutz, in turn, suffer the same incubus as she “makes material the deep cuts and lacerations portrayed in the original photo [sic] by means of cardboard relief” in the process of making *Open Casket* (Viveros-Fauné); “as she tries to revivify in paint (scraping out, scooping to over an inch in places, slashing as well as madly brushing) a horrific image” (Kardon)?” *Open Casket* is, among other things, “an allegory for the process of making art” that involves a desire to join the mourning of Till's death and, at the same time, to defend him against an attack whose spectacle, or something like it, must be re-imagined as well. How might our critical reception acknowledge the *mise-en-scène* of this enduring fantasy of violence, at once racial and sexual, offensive and defensive, that black and white women - from Mamie Till-Mobley and Carolyn Bryant to Lisa Whittington and Dana Schutz - have inhabited differentially and together in relation to the violated bodies of black boys and men? For those compelled to stake a position here, in defense or opposition or indifference, it is important to rethink the surety and transparency of any such positioning. Part of the

difficulty of addressing the history of violence that killed Emmett Till, and of approaching the art of elegy as an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy, is that there seems to be no stance that is not implicated in the same violence, in some way or another.

Hannah Black's open letter to the curators and staff of the 2017 Whitney Biennial should be read closely on this score (Greenberger). 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, a robust historical sensibility and an abiding appreciation for political nuance, *and* it is shot through with ambivalence and contradiction. This is its peculiar strength.<sup>9</sup> I am interested in affirming this intervention while pointing to complications in the nature of its highly resonant central demand. Black opens with a request and recommendation to remove and destroy the painting, which move is meant to ensure its inability to find a way into any market or museum, to be exchanged or accumulated. The destruction of the painting is aimed, in part, at its existence as commodity, but also as a site of pleasure, whether the pleasure of 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, 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 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.” If this holds up as evidence of a collective lack of understanding, then the conclusion seems incontrovertible. But what if non-black people *do* accept, as Schutz seems to, that they cannot understand “what it is like to be black?” And why qualify this lack of understanding as *collective* when protesting the work of a *solo* artist? True enough, Schutz will likely never come to embody blackness (though one can identify varied conditions in which white-looking people can and do), but does this also mean

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<sup>9</sup> For a fuller sense of Black's critical theoretical orientation, see her “Fractal Freedoms.” On her recent creative work, see her *Dark Pool Party* and *Screen: Hannah Black* (2017) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles: <https://www.moca.org/program/screen-hannah-black>.



she cannot understand, in whole or in part, what was made available to black people in the image and likeness of Emmett Till? Can anyone, *really*?

One signal problem, of course, is that nothing is ever available *only* to black people, no matter how hard we may try to cultivate the esoteric or mimic the proprietary claim. We have no sanctuary for such contemplation. Black artists would hardly say that this is their exclusive province, but demonstrate, again and again, that they wrestle with the ethical question of representing the 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 a global news story and the imagery travelled far and wide. So, while the decision to release the photos was intended to mobilize a black audience (and perhaps, as Black notes, to shame a white audience), it had the 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 and Black links this vexing question to the very possibility of art as an ethical undertaking:

Although derided by many white and white-affiliated critics as trivial and naive, discussions of appropriation and representation go to the heart of the question of how we might seek to live in a reparative mode, with humility, clarity, humor and hope, given the barbaric realities of racial and gendered violence on which our lives are founded. I see no more important foundational consideration for art....

Consideration of the realities of racial and gendered violence would be as foundational to the ethics and aesthetics of art practice as it is foundational to black lives. Put differently, art would be founded in consideration of black lives, a consideration of their conditions of possibility and impossibility, a consideration that would seek reparation for the irreparable in history, culture, and politics, a consideration of an impossible inheritance that contains inspiration and warning. But whereas Black initially exhorts non-blacks to accept the limitations of their bodies and minds, she goes on, without necessarily accounting for the shift, to "choose to assume as much capacity for insight and sincerity in the biennial curators [and by extension to other non-blacks of conscience] as I do in myself. Which is to say — we all make terrible mistakes sometimes, but through effort the more important thing could be how we move to make amends for them and what we learn in the process." If the invitation for amendment strikes one as odd, following upon the denunciation that precedes it, then it may be simply that one has never been read before. And perhaps in the space thus cleared some such movement can transpire. 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?

Susan Jennings, founding director of LABspace in Hillsdale, NY, in a contribution to the *artcritical* “‘enquête’ regarding the Dana Schutz affair, the painting, the protests,” goes some way to thinking through one possible implication of Black’s “urgent recommendation that the painting be destroyed”:

I have a fantasy in which we all agree [with] Hannah Black’s letter and the protesters in the museum and all of the discussions and Dana Schutz [chooses] to heed the call to destroy her painting - all of this - becomes a new collaborative relational aesthetics work of art. In my fantasy, Black and Schutz are Judith and the painting (along with all the nuanced and historical racism it engenders) is Holofernes.

In my dream we are together in the process of beheading the oppressor by creating this new art. Dana Schutz chooses to complete the art, begun by making and exhibiting *Open Casket*, by destroying her painting. There are no victims in my dream. Dana Schutz heard the protests not as forcible demand or as coercion but as an opening to something new and she chose powerfully, for herself, to hear the bell of invitation and to collaborate with those who call for the painting’s demise. The success of this new work of art is achieved through a performance in which the painting is destroyed and Dana speaks the language of strength, humility and grace in so doing.

If Dana Schutz could chose to allow her work to be “erased” in the spirit that de Kooning allowed Rauschenberg to erase his drawing, we would all be authors in her new so far unfamiliar art. My fantasy may be horrifying to some painters and artists, art appreciators and politicos and may smack of censorship. I have been told already that I am awful and terrible for giving voice to my dream. I am not advocating for censorship. Of course no art should ever be censored. And of course no art should ever be destroyed by anyone other than the artist (Jennings).

The artist, under these circumstances, should, if anyone, destroy her own art. Not because she is forced to do so, but because she is invited. The artist and the artist alone it appears, converting the intervention of erstwhile commentators into her own will and motive. Whither the “we” of the proposed collective action and where, pray tell, did Black disappear to in this victimless dream of consensus?<sup>10</sup> First there, then gone again, an interracial alliance of black and white

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<sup>10</sup> For a differently affirmative response to criticism, see Black’s “A Kind of Grace.” There Black recounts a situation in which she was, some years ago, challenged for using transphobic language. She describes the anger of her critics in that moment as “a kind of grace,” which I read as an unwarranted gift or undeserved opportunity for “one of the most intellectually expansive experiences of [her] life,” one that granted her “a greater, sometimes scary, sense of possibility.” The theological undertones should not escape our attention, as they speak to the challenge, inherited from our many religious traditions, of distinguishing the ethics of justice and injustice from the morality of good and evil. Jennings’s cognate notion here – “the bell of invitation” – would suggest a kindred spirit, but we see that Jennings does not preserve the initiative of Schutz’s critics in her dream of the latter’s subsequent

women comes and goes, a figure of the faithful and daring widow-warrior amalgamates our contemporary antagonists fleetingly before Schutz reemerges in the foreground as agent of redemption. She offers the dreamlike basis for “a new collaborate relational aesthetics,” together vanquishing the oppressor in and as a new art and politics of performance. It is fitting that Judith acts in the defense of a persecuted people and, by most accounts, she does not act alone to that end. Her accomplice, however, in the canonical artistic treatments from Botticelli to Caravaggio to Goya, is nearly always her *servant*, portrayed as conventionally less attractive and darker in complexion, sometimes more elderly and frail, often peripheral or shadowed (Straussman-Pflanzer). Is this swerve from collaboration to subordination further evidence of a collective lack of understanding? Is it the inevitable repetition of a mistake when a lack of judgment is misunderstood as a mistake in the first place? In any case, this is hardly the unreconstructed source of inspiration we might expect as white women look to articulate a new aesthetic language that might enable them to live in a reparative mode vis-a-vis black women, and those with whom they live and die, in and beyond the art world. Maybe it is a warning.

Unfortunately, we fare no better with the turn toward Rauschenberg. When Rauschenberg made the humble entreaty to undo one of de Kooning's drawings, as Emmett Till made his way through James McCosh Elementary School in the early 1950s, it proceeded from a curiosity about the concept of an art of erasure, “an act focused on the removal of marks rather than their accumulation,” not the effacement, or the interrogation, of the place and person of the artist. Quite the contrary, Rauschenberg concluded that his project could not be realized *unless* he worked upon the creation of an already significant figure. Moreover, his deconstructive operation was a stated act of celebration of de Kooning, whom Rauschenberg admired immensely, an approach that, by analogy, would seem to depart from the very spirit of Jennings's dream of Schutz's supposed abnegation and to disavow the most critical dimension of “Black's letter and the protesters in the museum and all of the discussions.” The title of the famed Rauschenberg piece, we are reminded, is *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) and it managed paradoxically to preserve the form and force of the drawing under erasure. The political impact of destroying *Open Casket* in this way would be counteracted if, like its predecessor, its aesthetic power “derives from the allure of the unseen.” To wit: SFMOMA used advanced digital imaging in 2010 to restore the original drawing, including those marks erased by de Kooning himself while drafting it, essentially erasing Rauschenberg's erasure (Roberts).

So, if these hypotheticals do not suggest viable imaginative pathways for acceding to the demands of the current conjuncture, then how might we approach the problem otherwise?

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transformation. In turning the critical initiative into an open invitation, she displaces initiative as such from the critics to the artist. What's more, “the bell of invitation” brings to mind the famous lines from the end of Act 2, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: “I go, and it is done: the bell invites me. / Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell / That summons thee to heaven or to hell.” There is no collaboration in *this* bell of invitation, only fatal rival: the ambitious General Macbeth is called by its sound to kill King Duncan and assume thereby the throne of Scotland, only to be consumed by guilt and paranoia and further bloodshed en route to civil war.

Leaving aside the online proliferation of digital reproductions - which do not do justice, as it were, to the analog work and which would require complex data scrubbing to remedy and then with only limited effect - the focal point of the Whitney Biennial protest is, again, the original painting itself. What to do about it, now that it exists in the world, if its existence is taken to be an irreducible offense?<sup>11</sup> In an interview with *Hyperallergic* on the matter, Christina Sharpe, Tufts University Professor of English and signatory to Black's open letter, cites Claude Lanzmann as one well-known voice on the defeasibility of art, a reference meant to quiet knee-jerk reactions to the urgent recommendation to destroy Schutz's painting and to suggest, in shorthand, that there are intellectually rigorous and ethically defensible arguments to that end (Mitter). Lanzmann, of course, is, among many things, the director of the acclaimed documentary film *Shoah* (1985) and in describing the production of that monumental work he defended his refusal to use any imagery depicting the industrialized violence of the Holocaust. In fact, he "denounced visual representations of the Holocaust as sacrilegious," as Adam Shatz recounts in a review of Lanzmann's 2012 memoir, and "said that if he were to discover footage of Jews being asphyxiated in the gas chamber, he would destroy it" (Shatz). Of course, one could argue that such footage would not be art in any meaningful sense, but that only begs the question of definition.

For Lanzmann, the destruction of visual representations of the Holocaust is not censorship (for no one has a right to such depictions, based as they are on routinized killing), but rather a modern form of iconoclasm, a reaction against blasphemy against the sanctity of life. We could go the rounds about precisely how far we get with such a line of argumentation - and chastening calls for artistic freedom, no matter how famous the speaker, do not settle the matter - or whether we need Lanzmann's particular warrant in order to bolster Black's claims (Boucher, "Social Media Erupts"). But since the connection has been made, it is worth noting that at the time of his most famous work of the twentieth century, in the midst of his most fervent attempt to memorialize and commemorate, in particular, the genocide of Jews under the Nazi regime, Lanzmann also espoused "the universality of victims, as of executioners." "All victims are alike," he maintained, "all executioners are alike" (Shatz). This shuttling between the universal and the particular certainly does not guarantee that gentiles can access the means of memorialization and commemoration of Jews themselves or that the former will relate to the latter in a reparative

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<sup>11</sup> Photographer and multimedia artist Parker Bright, another of the co-signers of Black's open letter, staged a live protest of *Open Casket* in the opening week of the 2017 Whitney Biennial. After paying admission, he stood closely in front of the painting for most of its first two days wearing a gray t-shirt with the words "Black Death Spectacle" handwritten in marker on the back (Kennedy). This is a fascinating gesture because, while it might seem to shield Emmett Till's image and likeness by obscuring the painting from museumgoer sightlines, it also had the effect of drawing attention to it through his impromptu dissenting performance art. It is also notable that Schutz was criticized by some black artists, including Whittington, for the way that *Open Casket* aestheticizes Till's death, that is, renders it insufficiently spectacular as compared to the forensic photographs. Mamie Till-Mobley, in her twin decision to hold an open casket funeral without posthumous makeup or restoration and to release those photographic images to the press, actually *redoubled* the spectacle of her son's death, repetition with a difference.

mode. It only means that the Shoah, and its conditions of possibility and impossibility, is something that the whole world *must* address. How to do so is not his problem. Or is it?<sup>12</sup>

The ratiocination of a particular universal that animates Lanzmann's earlier pronouncement falters tragically as he faces the reconfigured geopolitical map of the contemporary world, a map upon which he finds a determinate and determined place for himself. Schatz observes:

But when [in his reflections] he turns to the 21st century, the wars the United States has launched in the Muslim world do not rate a mention; nor do Israel's invasions of Lebanon and Gaza. Instead, we are given a long, detailed description of a video showing a hostage being slaughtered by Islamic terrorists – one of twenty he says he has watched. He feels as if he were 'that hostage with the vacant eyes, this man waiting for the blade to fall'. He is distressed that such execution videos – 'an unprecedented qualitative leap in the history of global barbarism' – have been censored 'in the name of some dubious code of ethics'.

Black accomplishes something perpendicular to Lanzmann's formulation and thus avoids the trap of his eventual relativism. The specter of the open letter addressed to the spectacle of the open casket is adamant about the singularity of black suffering, individual and collective. And yet, for the same reason, insists that this singularity has a bearing on the *totality* of the aesthetic universe. Why? Because it is grounded in a groundless ethical orientation, rooted in the historical movement of the rootless, committed to the protection of those who are unprotected by definition, those whose lives are founded in violence, in a foundry wherein all that would be solid remains in a molten state. We have here particulars without particularity, singularity without singular being, what Black elsewhere calls "fractal freedoms." Somewhere between the waking dream of victimless inequality and the contingent generalization of victims and executioners, perhaps there is a non-place for the articulation of universal singularity under the heading of blackness, for the honor of thinking about the slave's cause as much as the slave's cause of death.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> Can we tolerate, and

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<sup>12</sup> On the ethics of speaking and not speaking about the Holocaust, see Kofman.

<sup>13</sup> I am borrowing here from Gasché, Sinha, and Badiou. On the latter, see especially Chapter 12, "Eight Theses on the Universal."

<sup>14</sup> The notion of "unalloyed looking" is from Moten's reading of the Emmett Till photographs.

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 response to trenchant criticism (Sutton). That forgery, a promissory note written by a double or *semblant*, expressed remorse and understanding, and the artist stood corrected for all to see. Black criticism, in this small epistolary space, had produced the desired outcome. It was a pleasure to read. The painting and all it symbolizes – racist white violence, liberal white patronage, progressive white solidarity – would disappear without a trace in a moment of 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 fed Schutz the preferred lines, a telling prevarication remained: "I will also promise to make it impossible for the work to re-enter the public sphere." Yes, but how?

This one unavoidable and impossible question awaits us, posed openly *between* the letter and the casket: What is to be the *manner* of the 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 dark, muddy 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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