

# Coming to Grief: Violence, Mourning, and Interracial Intimacy

*This is the second in a three-part series on the recent controversy around Dana Schutz's "Open Casket," originally published on [Open for Debate](#), part of the multi-disciplinary project [Changing Attitudes in Public Discourse](#).*

In [my last piece](#), I defended two claims regarding the relationship of Dana Schutz to Mamie Till Mobley. The first concerned Schutz's statement that *Open Casket* was undertaken through empathy with Mobley. The response among critics has been to treat this 'claim of empathy' as a terribly naive. I think that this is a mistake and that it illuminates matters to treat Schutz's statement as an answer to the question, with all the complexity involved in the asking of it, "How can I look at this body?" Not everyone who has answered this question for themselves has thought that Mobley's being able to look upon it and inviting others to do so as well provided an opening for them to do so (many white Southerners, for example, supposed that Mobley was making a spectacle of her son's death). The second claim that I defended was that in painting *Open Casket*, Schutz wasn't attempting to reproduce Mobley's gesture, but attempting to respond to Mobley's invitation to mourn her son. It is to this second claim that I want to return now.

Why have critics have failed to take seriously—in most cases, failed even to consider—the possibility that the painting is a mournful one? Why have critics found it easier to treat Schutz as producing a work that is destructive to this legacy? In my view, the answer lies in the legacy that Emmett Till's death has come to have and, in particular, in what I take to be misunderstandings of Mobley's invitation or, as we might think of it, the work she was attempting to perform in exhibiting the body of her son in public and in ensuring the circulation of photographs of it.

To begin with, it is standard to treat the iconography surrounding Till's lynching as providing evidence and to understand the significance of Mobley's gesture along the same lines. Critics of the painting who are influenced by this tradition and talk at all about its aesthetic qualities, criticize it for falling short of providing evidence and even of compromising the evidence made available by Mobley through this visual legacy. Some draw attention to what the painting fails to show and describe it as lacking detail, as being abstract rather than concrete, as failing, in short, to be 'realistic.' At other times the emphasis is on what the painting does show and then the painting is said to be infused

with subjectivity, meaning that, for example, the artist ‘looms’ over the body, which looks as though it was dreamt or imagined. The criticism is, again, that the painting falls short of providing an objective or impersonal document.

We see these strands of criticisms combined in the following discussion in [The New Republic](#):

The streaks of paint crossing the canvas read like an aggressive rejoinder to Mamie Till Mobley’s insistence that he [viz. Till] be photographed. Mobley wanted those photographs to bear witness to the racist brutality inflicted on her son; instead Schutz has disrespected that act of dignity, by defacing them with her own creative way of seeing. Where the photographs stood for a plain and universal photographic truth, Schutz has blurred the reality of Till’s death, infusing it with subjectivity.

The authors of this piece take the legacy of Emmett Till to be, principally, a visual legacy and assume that Mobley by “controlling the way that his body looked” was able to “define its legacy.” This visual legacy and the work it is meant to do is expressly understood in terms of the preservation and circulation of evidence, translated into visual terms as photographic evidence (uncreative, impersonal, documentary). Even the use of color by the artist is remarked upon since it constitutes a departure from the archival evidence (“The colors of his coffin are bright and pretty when in reality only a black-and-white photograph of him survives”).

There is, moreover, a tendency, quite freewheeling in my view, to link the painting’s aesthetic qualities (so described) to the racist violence enacted by the three known figures in the story of Emmett Till’s murder. The authors of [The New Republic](#) piece describe Schutz as smearing Till’s face “making it unrecognizable again,” linking her to Till’s murderers. But they also link her to Carolyn Bryant, the woman whose accusation of sexual impropriety prompted the lynching of Till at the hands of her husband and brother in law, saying “Emmett Till died because a white woman lied about their brief interaction. . . For a white woman to paint Emmett Till’s mutilated face communicates not only a tone deafness toward the history of his murder, but an ignorance of the history of white women’s speech in that murder—the way it canceled out Till’s own expression with lethal effect.” It was in this spirit that [protesters](#) objecting to a solo exhibition of Schutz’s work (excluding *Open Casket*) at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston described the painting as a culturally sanctioned work of “violent iconography,” accusing Schutz of having “tampered” with “the intention of a grieving black mother to humanely show in undeniable detail the brutality endured by her 14 year old adolescent child.”

Descriptions of the perspective assumed in the painting are particularly revealing in the way that they anchor these interpretations in what is assumed to be the subject position of the artist. These descriptions almost invariably represent the perspective of the painting as that of someone who is in a position of intimacy but who is also looking down upon or looming over the body, hinting at menace. On occasion, it is suggested that the perspective is that of someone close and yet curiously detached. An author writing for [The Village Voice](#) describes the perspective, for example, as that of someone “interested and intimate.” [Christina Sharpe](#), who frames these observations with unshrinking explicitness,

asks whether this intimacy is the intimacy of one who has suffered violence or the intimacy of one who has inflicted it. Is it the intimacy of Mamie Till Mobley or the intimacy of Carolyn Bryant? These questions would appear to be rhetorical. They pit impossibilities against historically fixed alternatives. “[W]hat white people,” Sharpe asks, “looked into Emmett Till’s coffin?”

While it is important not to ignore or understate the importance of Mobley’s decision to publicly present the brutalized body of her son (rather than, say, to speak of what she had seen), one would misunderstand the significance of her gesture in thinking that she was presenting evidence in the sense in which it is understood in these criticisms. Mobley wanted others (‘all of America’) to see what she saw and, as she put it, together they might then be able to express what they had seen. As I noted in my earlier piece, Mobley tells us that she herself could describe what she had seen in forensic detail, part by part and inch by inch, but it was the impact of the body and its meaning that she couldn’t tell alone; others needed to be impacted too. To assume that what the photos of Till’s body show is undeniable is to miss the need for us collectively to say what we see in them; to assume that Mobley defined Till’s legacy by controlling the appearance of his body is to miss the wordlessness of her predicament and it is also to miss the deep ambivalence that must be present in the notion that she controlled how Till’s body looked, an ambivalence that can be felt in looking at the body.

The question raised by Mobley’s gesture seems to have been, “What is it for this loss to be an American or common loss?” Schutz’s work seems to be addressed to a version of this question but translated into visual terms, namely, “What is it for this image to be an American image?” Both questions appear to refuse the suggestion that one can approach mournfully only as one who suffers violence or as one who has inflicted violence (or to use the broader categories invoked by [Claudia Rankine](#), as one whose racial identity is a matter of being positioned against such a loss or a matter of suffering it). There is an intimacy that is assumed by those who suffer a common loss, but in this case, it is an interracial intimacy not exhausted by these others. These questions are not, then, the naive questions that they might appear to be and they are all the more difficult for that. They speak to the possibility of interracial intimacy in the last place in which it might be thought to be found.

Despite my arguments to the contrary, it will still be possible to insist on the view that Mobley was concerned first and foremost to make evidence available to the public. In “The Afterimages of Emmett Till,” Shawn Michelle Smith offers an explanation of what she describes as the ‘ultimate illegibility’ of the photographs of Till. By ‘illegibility’ she means to address the fact that Mobley invited others to view the photographs while also assuming that there would be work to be done in saying what they showed. In Smith’s view, Mobley is acknowledging that the photographs fall short of adequately representing the events they purport to record:

Some of what took place on the early morning of August 28, 1955, is known through the injuries recorded on Till’s body, but most is forever irretrievable. . . It was (and still is) impossible to perceive the photographic signifier in the instance of Emmett Till’s murder, because there was no visual record of either the moment of his exchange with Carolyn Bryant or the struggle with his attackers

that ended his life. Nor could there be. In the photographic void created by those acts, the images that do exist do so in their stead, as compensation for what cannot be rendered as visible evidence of the cause of the event.

The photographs of Till's body can only go so far, Smith suggests, because they leave out critical evidence concerning the chain of causes leading to Emmett Till's murder.

It will still be possible to insist that the matter at the heart of Till's legacy should be framed as a question of intimacy, even interracial intimacy, and to think that the record of Till's last days requires that we fill in the gaps. In "Emmett Till Ever After," Darby English suggests that the exchange between Bryant and Till at her family grocery store may, in fact, offer a promising way of taking up Till's story. In his view, the exchange reveals—if only we could confront this directly and if only we could refuse to pathologize interracial intimacy—that Emmett Till felt desire for a white woman.

But we don't need to speculate about the record either regarding Till's own feelings for a clerk in a country store or about the details of his murder. Nor is there need to speculate about these matters to understand the place of interracial intimacy in this legacy; Mobley tells us. Mobley sacrificed not her son but the loss of her son in making Till's body and the mourning of his body a public matter and she showed mercy in holding out the possibility of its becoming a common loss, inviting others to be impacted by it without any requirement that some who might respond reform themselves beforehand. Not only were they welcomed into the intimacy of loss but their response would be needed for Till's death to have meaning.

In Alabama there is now a [memorial](#) to lynching victims comprised of 800 steel monuments, one for each county in which a lynching took place of which there is some record. In the park surrounding these monuments are eight hundred identical ones to be claimed by the counties they represent. Perhaps we can think of Mamie Till Mobley's gesture as one to which some of us can return as mourners, as a pillar of memory that can be claimed today. Perhaps this gives us a way of acknowledging the force of the question, "What white people looked into Emmett Till's coffin?" without supposing that it settles matters.