

# Race and the Politics of Loss: Revisiting the Legacy of Emmett Till

“A painting of a dead Black boy by a white artist.” These were the words British artist Hannah Black used to describe *Open Casket*, a painting by Dana Schutz that sparked enormous controversy upon its inclusion in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, a major exhibition of contemporary American art (Greenberger 2017).<sup>1</sup> The description is a provocative one. To some it will seem reductive, describing a painting with no aesthetic qualities, necessarily missing the point. To others, the description will seem to reduce the painting to essentials, making the point.

The “dead black boy” to whom Black is referring is Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old who was lynched while visiting relatives in Mississippi in 1955, the year following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The circumstances of his life and death came to be known through the actions taken by his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, who insisted against local authority on the return of his body from Mississippi back home to Chicago and who insisted, too, upon seeing his badly decomposed body that it be seen by the public, holding what would turn out to be a four-day open-casket viewing. Photographs of Till in casket have circulated since and his legacy continues, principally, to reach people through the iconography surrounding his death.

Schutz’s stated intention in painting *Open Casket* was to engage Till’s legacy in the context of present-day racial upheavals. Schutz painted it in response, in particular, to the recent slew of highly publicized killings of young men like Emmett Till, killings that some have described as modern-day lynchings and to which the Black Lives Matter movement has emerged as a response (Boucher 2017). This, presumably, was the basis for the painting’s inclusion in the Biennial, the aim of which was to highlight artworks that speak to the ways in which our sense of self and community are affected by an atmosphere “rife with racial tensions, economic inequities, and polarizing politics” (“Whitney Biennial” 2017).

However, even with this context in place, the painting prompts questions about how it engages Till’s legacy. Though it recalls the images of Till in casket, it doesn’t do so explicitly. To begin with, there is no casket visible in the painting, raising a question about the significance of the painting’s title. Moreover, the perspective of the painting is not that which would be typical of someone looking upon a body in casket (one doesn’t stand over the body but is faced with it). There is also the fact that Schutz has employed a gestural style that doesn’t lend itself to the identification of a figure. This last point has drawn a

great deal of critical attention, as I will discuss—all of it predicated on the assumption that the painting is a painting of Till and that it should, like the photographs of Till are assumed to do, lend itself to such an identification. But while there is room to raise interpretive questions, critics of the painting have tended to take their answers for granted, assuming that these features, far from engaging Till’s legacy, threaten to undermine it.

No critic has, for example, considered the possibility that the painting is a mournful one. It is this critical gap to which my discussion of the controversy calls attention. One possible explanation for this gap is that the painting itself fails, for reasons of painterly craft, to create the appropriate conditions for mournfulness (through failing, for example, to supply appropriate context). Another is that the painting cannot for ethical and political reasons be a success (the artist, for example, cannot stand in the appropriate relation to Till’s legacy). These are important matters to address, but the criticisms that have emerged have been rather more preemptory than these proposals would suggest. My claim is that this critical gap rests on certain misunderstandings of Mobley’s gesture (both in the display of Till’s body and in the circulation of images of his body in casket) and, in particular, misunderstandings of the conditions of mourning it was intended to support. I will argue that these misunderstandings show up in the way that critics (i) locate Schutz in relation to this legacy, (ii) interpret the painting, and (iii) interpret the intimacy of the painting.

These three focal points provide a frame for the discussion that follows, but my discussion of *Open Casket* and the controversy surrounding it is principally aimed at the task of developing a more nuanced account of the significance of Mobley’s gesture. Perhaps, though, it will be thought that Mobley’s gesture is well enough understood that there isn’t need to develop an account of it. That can seem to be true in light of the fact that it is acknowledged to be historically important. It has, after all, been memorialized as an event that helped to catalyze the civil rights movement. This suggests, rightly, that her gesture played an important role in that movement, but it also invites a particular kind of misunderstanding. Though it is quite natural now to think of Mobley’s gesture as having stirred strong emotions such as anger and grief whose potency was used for other, properly political ends—providing the *catalyst* for that work—this reflects a particular understanding of the role of these emotions and their proper place, one that was being challenged by Mobley. It reflects, for example, the view of members of the NAACP, which publicly severed ties with Mobley, effectively putting an end to the political speeches she had been delivering on their behalf following the trial of her son’s killers.<sup>2</sup>

In severing ties with Mobley, it was their view that Mobley and her speeches did not fit with the political outlook and mission of that organization. The resistance on the part of leaders such as Roy Wilkins, NAACP executive secretary, and Thurgood Marshall, Chief Counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, was not predicated on the idea that Till’s death was without political significance, but on the assumption that grief had no place in a political response. They pursued a politics that was motivated, in fact, by a rejection of grief. Thurgood Marshall stated his opposition rather succinctly when he declared to members of a protest rally in New York that they should “worry about those who are alive” (Feldstein 2000: 102). Wilkins’s remarks in public and private communications in this period are similar in spirit. For him, grief is too focused on recovering what is lost to address the larger enabling circumstances that need changing; a rally wouldn’t bring Till back and the point should, in any case, be to ensure that there aren’t other Tills.

In focusing on loss, grief is too immediate (Gorn 2018: 213); it sees only “basic evils” (Gorn 2018: 214) (e.g., the individual perpetrators of a crime) and only the moment, with the consequence that it doesn’t sustain long-term struggle. An emotional outburst, he concluded, can only do good as a catalyst or, as Wilkins puts it, “ammunition” (Gorn 2018: 214).

These challenges are still felt to have force. How do we today answer the objection that grief is concern for the dead, not the living, and that political resources are wasted on the dead? What do we say to the concern that grief is futile, that there is no restoration or repair, only defense against further loss? Until we have confidence in the answers to such questions, we shouldn’t assume that we have a nuanced or perhaps even adequate understanding of Mobley’s gesture and the work that followed it. In revisiting the significance of Mobley’s gesture, I will be drawing on recent reevaluations of the connection between grief and politics. This work takes seriously the possibility that grief can take, properly speaking, a political form—that it can, in particular, play a role in sustained political struggle and in addressing long legacies of racial violence. But I will remain open to the possibility that Mobley’s gesture poses challenges even for these discussions, which can proceed rather abstractly.

I will argue that the most provocative aspect of *Open Casket*—its presumption of intimacy—is present already in Mobley’s gesture, which I understand to be an invitation into collective loss and, so too, collective mourning. The critical responses to the painting, however, raise serious doubts concerning whether the conditions of mourning that Mobley hoped to inaugurate ever have been and, in turn, serious doubts concerning whether political institutions should facilitate the collective mourning of legacies of racial violence. Defenses of this proposal have assumed too readily, I will argue, that there is collective loss, missing the significance of Mobley’s gesture. In emphasizing broad patterns of loss and in employing abstractions like ‘sociopolitical loss,’ they have overlooked the complexities stemming from the intimacy of grief, which should caution us against assuming that a mournful politics might help to build trust among citizens, some of whom are unfairly burdened by loss. Mobley’s gesture, and perhaps also *Open Casket*, can, nonetheless, be orienting—bringing us close to a mourned body, allowing us to feel its impact, compelling us to say what we have seen.

## Empathy

Critics of *Open Casket* have attempted to locate Schutz in relation to Emmett Till’s legacy. In some cases, the focus of discussion is Schutz herself, but in others it is the perspective assumed by the artist in painting *Open Casket* or the one implied by it (to be assumed by those who view it). In the first case, the possibilities for locating Schutz have tended to cluster around fellow-feeling (empathy, for instance), though most often around various *failures* of fellow-feeling; in the second, around those suggested by the white personae who figure prominently in the story of Till’s end, each implicated in the violence leading to his death; and, in the third, around broadly opposed categories for interpreting the intimacy into which different viewers enter when looking at the painting (interpreted variously as the intimacy of those suffering racial violence and the intimacy of those sheltered by that violence).

In this section, I discuss the first strand of criticism, taking the others up in turn in the sections that follow. Critics in this group take Schutz to be estranged from her subject matter. George Baker, an art historian commenting on the controversy, has described *Open Casket* as an exercise in narcissism, which, given its racially specific contours, “borders on the sinister” (Baker 2017). Hannah Black, the artist calling for its destruction, has speculated that Schutz may have intended to “present white shame” (Greenberger 2017). This is in response, Black assumes, to the act of “white violence” (Greenberger 2017) against Till for which this response is appropriate, though not being a use for which the iconography of Till’s death is. In both cases, it is assumed that the artist has failed to manifest the appropriate regard for Till, producing a self-regarding display instead. The protest of the work in exhibition by the artist Parker Bright suggests a more general criticism along these lines. In interposing the words “Black Death Spectacle” (Kennedy 2017) between the viewer and painting, he might be understood as accusing Schutz of occupying a spectatorial position. Such a position depends on social distance, the absence of fellow-feeling (Black, too, speaks of the “white gaze” as being “unmoved” even by the “disfigured corpse of a child” (Greenberger 2017)), facilitating, in this case, the projection of meaning and narrative onto the image of a dead black figure, spectatorial prerogatives that have been discussed in connection with the tradition of lynching and resonant for that reason in this context.<sup>3</sup>

In a sense, it is fair to take fellow-feeling as well as its limitations and perversions into account in locating Schutz. Schutz herself has said that she painted *Open Casket* “through empathy” with Mamie Till Mobley (Kennedy 2017). However, the only commentator to pursue this and related statements in any detail is Baker who describes this “claim of empathy” as “ridiculous” (Baker 2017). As he interprets Schutz’s remark, her aim was to produce a work of empathy, where empathy is to be understood in purely formal terms. It is supposed to consist, Baker assumes, in matching the disfiguration of a body (that of Emmett Till) to Schutz’s dis-figurative gestural style, the effect of which is meant to be a collapsing of the distance between the two. This, he says, is the work of the work, what it has to say, its “empathy.” But it is curious that Baker should interpret Schutz’s remarks on empathy as implying that her empathy is for Emmett Till and that it is made manifest in *Open Casket*. What Schutz says is rather that it was through empathy for Mobley that there came to be an (uncertain) opening into the subject matter of the work (Boucher 2017). We can, of course, ask about this opening and why it should be an opening into the subject matter of the painting, but these questions don’t arise on Baker’s account (or others that fail to take these comments seriously).

Baker dismisses Schutz’s remarks concerning empathy because he takes her understanding of empathy to be naive. But what is naive exactly? Is it the design of the painting (even as described), or Schutz’s reliance on Mobley, or is it the conception of empathy attributed to Schutz? We have seen that Baker interprets empathy in formal terms and specifically in terms of formal matching. This is not without precedent. There is, in fact, a long philosophical tradition of thinking of empathy in formal terms and, specifically, in terms of congruity or matching between self and other.

This is, roughly, the way that social and political philosophers associated with the sentimental tradition spoke of empathy, though they used the term “sympathy” (in an extended sense) for it. Where the sentiments of our fellows were concerned, the achieve-

ment of sympathy was, most basically, to match, to some degree at least, the sentiments of another by making oneself the measure of the other. “By the imagination,” Adam Smith says of our empathic response to a person undergoing torture, “we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something, which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them” (1759: 12). Theorists in the nineteenth century who spoke of empathy or *Einfühlung* in connection with our aesthetic responses to works of art (among other things) borrowed from these ideas. Vernon Lee, an amateur experimentalist testing the leading ideas of her day, makes the comparison explicit, offering that *Einfühlung* is like sympathy insofar as “our feelings enter and are absorbed into, the form we perceive; so that (very much as in the case of sympathy with human vicissitudes) we participate in the supposed life of the form while in reality lending our life to it” (1909: 239-40).<sup>4</sup>

This long tradition of thought allows us, perhaps, to begin to make sense of Baker’s claim that *Open Casket* is an attempt to achieve empathy through matching a disfigured body to the artist’s dis-figurative gestural style. But Baker’s interpretation of these formal features isn’t a very natural one (appearing, for one, to rest on a misunderstanding of Schutz’s remarks on empathy) nor do these features settle the ethical questions that we might raise concerning their significance. What, we might well ask, is the significance of our being able to slowly discern the disfigurement of the body we encounter, which makes for such a striking contrast with the photographs of Till in casket (photographs that Schutz says she could not have rendered ethically or emotionally (Boucher 2017))? That questions like this were not raised reveals the extent to which the ethical significance of empathy is itself understood purely formally. Schutz’s naivité is supposed to consist in the forms that are being matched and how they are being matched, not in the idea, which is left unquestioned, that empathy consists in a formal achievement.

One thing that the painting does is situate a body disfigured through violence within the context of an artistic work that is gestural, but if we look for ways of understanding Mobley—whom Schutz credits as making possible her entry into the ethical and emotional complexity of the work—as exercising an influence on the work, the possibility emerges that this affords us some distance from the visual logic of our world. It is against that visual logic, that we might see Till’s body as having been made into an “abstraction,” as critics often comment, or see it as disfigured beyond recognition and so beyond what can be mourned. Mobley makes us alert to this risk in her own slow-seeing of Till’s body upon its return from Mississippi, describing herself, both in her memoir reflecting on these events and in her political writing shortly following his death, as putting his body back together again, repairing its mutilation through, among other things, grafting it with memories of having nursed Emmett back to health as a child (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003; Mobley 1955). It may be, too, that the painting distances questions of identification, not leading us to doubt that the figure evokes Till or that it may be considered to be him, but leading us to ask, “Who could this be?” a question with clear political significance in the context of the exhibition in which it was featured. It is worth remembering, in this connection, that Till’s murderers were acquitted on the grounds that his body could not be identified and that while Mobley wanted the body of her son to be seen, she also wanted those who saw his body to feel greater concern for their own children (to see their children in him)

(Mobley 1955).

Schutz's body of work suggests an interest in facilitating bodily encounter, in making visceral those bodies that are normally unseen.<sup>5</sup> If we wish to evaluate *Open Casket* against this background, we might ask how it facilitates an encounter with a body whose condition makes it difficult to see. Closely related is the question of how we can grieve for people whose deaths mark them as socially abject, whose bodies bear the traces of racist violence, for example.<sup>6</sup> Till was lynched, his body found in a river weighted down by a cotton gin fan attached around his neck with barbed wire. His body was not meant to be recovered and it wasn't meant to be seen.

Mobley's decision to present his body in public was a refusal to allow the rites of lynching to stand as the rites of mourning. But the gesture is a complex one. The violence on Till's body can seem so decisive to us that one can wonder what it means to look and whether one's looking can have any other meaning than that determined by this violence (as I discuss in the next section, critics have made this violence focal to the point of distorting the significance of Mobley's gesture).<sup>7</sup> There is, too, a presumption of intimacy in looking that is particularly salient when one bears in mind that Mobley presented Till's body so that it might be mourned. My suggestion is that this is the context in which to think of Schutz's turning, through empathy, to Mobley. This is, I believe, a form of meditation that locates Schutz racially in relation to Till's legacy; there is here a sensitivity to the risk of intrusion into the intimacy of grief and an understanding that this is, for some but not others, a condition of life.<sup>8</sup> But it is the intimacy of the painting, striking in its contrast with the photographs of Till in casket that circulated, that especially provokes the question of what Schutz's connection is exactly to Till's legacy. A concern with racial justice isn't enough, it seems, to explain it and empathy seems only to presume connection where there is none and perhaps, therefore, to wrongly appropriate the experience of others.

More than the other fellow feelings, empathy is characterized by a certain expansiveness, but traditional accounts of empathy can be unhelpful in treating this expansiveness in terms of my becoming the measure of another, implying that one's response to another's situation also provides a standard. They fail to capture that empathy is often appealed to in cases where there is no basis on which one might come to a view of what an appropriate response is to the situation of another so that one doesn't judge, for example, that another person acted rightly but that one may not have done differently (in this case it might be said that one can only have empathy). They fail to capture that empathy may require that one rescind or hold back one's judgment, not so that one may better reconstruct alternative judgments but so that the concerns of others can be seen distinctly, and because we can obscure them not only through the force of our judgments but also our interest in coming to them ('Put yourself in their shoes' is often a rebuke that reminds one to hold back the force of one's own strongly held convictions, not, specifically, to activate one's imagination).<sup>9</sup> They fail to capture the way in which one may be personally at risk in this kind of encounter, not because one may draw inappropriate parallels between one's own experience and that of another, but because one may have to offer one's own experience as surety for what cannot be known about the experience of others. We can think of empathy less as a matter of "lending one's life," as if to something without a life of its own, than of linking one's life to that of another. Where transformative, one's life may be linked to another's in a way that makes it difficult, and newly ethically weighty, to say what one's

position is; it becomes less easy to demarcate one's own sphere of concern and, therefore, to assume personal responsibility only for it.

If we think of empathy in these terms, as a matter of reorienting oneself ethically, expanding one's horizon of concern through making space for others, then Schutz's remarks don't readily invite the suspicion that her understanding of empathy is naive (even ridiculous) or that it is necessarily appropriative. Elaborating on her relation to Mobley, Schutz begins with a statement that invokes her own experience as a mother, saying, "I don't know what it is like to be black in America 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" (Kennedy 2017). It might be wondered, though, what the point of invoking motherhood is if it isn't to locate commonalities that are a presumed basis for empathetic identification, a basis for claiming insight into Mobley's experience of grief. But Schutz specifically points out the difficulty of fathoming even the idea of the suffering of one's own children so that I do not think she can be read as presuming to understand Mobley's loss on this basis. Nor does she emphasize her own experience as a mother, but Mobley's own relation to her child ("Emmett was Mamie Till's only son"). The loss at the center of Mobley's grief isn't even brought to articulation, creating the impression that these remarks are rather more elliptical than knowing, as do the remarks that follow: "I don't believe that people can ever really know what it is like to be someone else (I will never know the fear that black parents may have) but neither are we all completely unknowable" (Kennedy 2017).

What I take Schutz to be doing in these statements is expressing her trust in or reliance on Mobley, *staked* on her own motherhood. It is a trust that Mobley's decision to present her son's body was undertaken as a mother, that the body of her son is not a motherless body but a mourned one. Empathy here is, I think, a kind of reliance on Mobley even if we have tended to speak of empathy as requiring that we put ourselves in someone else's shoes, not in their hands.

Still, one might wonder why there is any need for trust. What need could there be to affirm her motherhood and to stake one's own? Mobley's gesture, it might be said, was clearly a courageous one and as manifest as any could be. But its being performed in the open is part of what makes it deep and it may be that the gesture still awaits the public she attempted to call into being, as significant as it has been taken to be within black communities (a matter rightly emphasized by Black (2017), among other critics). In attempting to eulogize Mobley in these ways, we risk obscuring the nature of her predicament as well as the boldness of her gesture and its continuing power. It is difficult, I think, to have some sense of the depth of the violation to which she was responding without also allowing that we do not know that the demands of motherhood, the demands of love, extend so far as her gesture—to the display of the body of her son and to the call for it to be seen by all and to the intimations in her political speeches that mourning be an occasion to refound the American polity (rather than, say, a powerful catalyst or spark to action, to be left behind). Here it may be worth remembering that the meaning of her involvement in Till's legacy came into question not only among white Southerners but even within black communities that had earlier been moved by her pain.<sup>10</sup>

In saying that her gesture was bold (rather than courageous, requiring a certain clarity in acting in the face of danger) and in suggesting that it is in a sense unfathomable, I am

not attempting to undermine the significance of her gesture, but to suggest that we might show its significance in revisiting it again and again and by regarding it as a gesture that emerges from within the depths of the human heart, perhaps something sensed by Schutz when she remarks that she found no other way of approaching the legacy than to do so personally, that is, from within these depths.<sup>11</sup> This is not to say, as is evident from Schutz's remarks on the painting, that this legacy does not speak to the possibilities for political life, but that it speaks to this, in some sense, from outside of that life. Though it expresses a different relation to this legacy to say, as Claudia Rankine (2015) does in *The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning* that her engagement with it is rooted in absurdity—the absurdity of being American but being without a country, of living but under a condition of mourning—we might see Rankine's remarks, too, as pointing in this direction.

In pursuing these connections, we have moved some distance from the view that in empathy one becomes the measure of another. No formal achievement of the kind suggested by traditional conceptions of empathy is in evidence in Schutz's own remarks. What she works from is the fact that Emmett was Mobley's only son. It is this fact that constitutes the point of departure into her work and, as I understand it, into the matter of how his body might be seen as a mourned body. But it is less the observation that matters, an observation that might be treated as a matter of record or as a biographical detail—hardly a candidate for imaginative reconstruction—but the way in which it is treated as the vital known fact. This is already expressive of the kind of ethical reorientation that we understand empathy to be. It is the way in which, for example, it is treated as a basis from which to orient oneself, to enter into unknown depths, the way in which one might hold fast to it by treating one's own commitments (one's own love for one's own children) providing a kind of backing for it, the way in which its power can be held in reserve, undiminished, and the way in which it can be called upon to summarize so many unprecedented and nameless acts.

The picture of empathy as consisting in a formal achievement—my matching your feeling, say, though being in a different situation than you are in—seems, anyway, to be the wrong picture, ethically speaking. Empathy has no clear moral valence, in fact, when described in these terms, giving rise, quite understandably, to a host of anxieties. We are led to wonder whether what might pass for empathy isn't simply better described as pity or relief (that I am not in your situation), or narcissism (what matters are my fine feelings and the instruction or satisfaction that I can take from them), or exploitation (I may use what I know about you against you). The sentimental tradition assumes that in having empathy (or “sympathy”) for another the primary facts are these: whatever sentiment is brought home to me is another's and appropriate to the other's circumstance, seeming to confirm that I should have concern for *you* in *your* situation. But there is no guarantee that these are the primary facts. It is equally true to say and equally just to emphasize, given this characterization, that they are mine and that they are inappropriate to my circumstance. If they are my feelings, there is a question concerning the interest that their also being yours should have for me and if inappropriate to my own circumstance, a question about the use (including the enjoyment of the uselessness) of these feelings in my circumstance.<sup>12</sup>

Sometimes, those drawing on this tradition, emphasize that the situation to which I am responding is *not* my own, and the feelings that are assumed to be appropriate to it *not* mine. This is in the service of attempting to explain the apparent derangement of



self and other in empathy<sup>13</sup> (that I appear to behave, or so it is thought, as if I am you, as if your situation is mine) and, often, in the service of cautioning against confusion here (that I am you, that our situation is the same).<sup>14</sup> But an empathy that is transformative doesn't leave one's self or situation unchanged—both come to be marked by one's concern for and response to another. Smith began with a picture on which my concern for you stems from my imaginative reconstruction of my response to your situation, but shortly thereafter considers that there may be a divergence between my response to the situation and another's. I, not you, may blush at your rude remark, imagining, Smith says, the confusion I would be under in making it. In entering into the situation, I am supposed to become the vulgar person capable of making the remark, and yet I am also to remain the onlooker who stands in judgment of it. Two quite different positions. Do I switch between them (and very quickly) in order to participate in both? Do I inhabit parts of both (imagine myself rude enough to have made the remark, but without full commitment)? Smith imagines more extreme cases, those in which people can be completely "insensible of their misery," as in the case of a person who is mad. In this case, I somehow imagine the impossible, Smith ventures, that I am insensible of having lost reason and that I am aware of how terrible a thing it is that I am without it. This is an uncomfortable theoretical commitment and it is a consequence, in large part, of the commitment to the idea that our positions can be characterized as fully independent in such an ethical encounter.

If we want to understand the deep ethical import of empathy, we should be willing to take seriously the way in which it involves derangements of self and other. To love one's neighbour as oneself is another such derangement, but this isn't to be understood along the lines of Smith's perspective-shifting. I don't imagine that I am my neighbour and enter into a position from which he might, out of his own self-love, have a claim against me, recognizing in this way a reciprocal claim that moderates my own self-love. It is rather than in loving my neighbour as myself I do not have a love for myself that competes with the claims of justice. This is an ethical reconfiguration of our positions; they are no longer distinguished by this sort of self-concern. If we think of empathy, where transformative, in these terms, as involving oneself in the life of another, we will see its failures in other terms as well. The failing of narcissism may be that of remaining in place, exactly where one was. It would be a failure to be transformed through one's concern for another in such a way that there is real difficulty, an ethical weight, in saying what one's position is (a loss of a prerogative to know, immediately and with certainty, where one stands).

Schutz's remarks give us reason to understand *Open Casket* as a work that was made in the context of an ethical reorientation. This is, specifically, how I understand her claim to have painted it through empathy with Mobley. The vital known fact structuring this work was that Emmett was Mobley's only son. This is to say, among other things, that in presenting her son's lynched body, in calling upon others to see it, it is to be held in mind that these were rites of mourning. In this way, empathy for Mobley quite naturally takes Till (or those who might be mourned in him) as its focus. But empathy, as I have argued, does not require that Schutz reconstruct Mobley's grief based on her own experience or any other presumed commonalities. Her invocation of empathy is not a signal that Schutz's interest is in feeling what Mobley felt, as per the suggestion that Mobley herself should be the subject of Schutz's painting (Livingstone and Gyarkye 2017), and neither does it signal that Mobley is the hidden subject of *Open Casket*, grounding the emotional perspective of

the painting.<sup>15</sup>

Instead, empathy seems to have involved an exploration of how one might come to share in the intimacy of this grief. What we see in *Open Casket* is, I think, an attempt on Schutz's part to draw on her own body of work with its concern for revealing what is hidden from view in the context of social and political concerns of our time. The point is not to assume Mobley's grief or to reproduce her way of seeing Till (we cannot really know what it is like to be other people), but to find a way of being moved by her call to mourning (neither are we all completely unknowable). We see an intimacy in the work and the use of artistic space as a space for connection where there was perhaps none before. These, the very aspects of the work that lead critics to regard Schutz as estranged from her subject matter and to speculate about her motivations in proceeding in so intimate a way, are risks assumed, not naively, but quite deliberately, it seems to me, under the name of empathy.

### Violent Iconography

I have argued that *Open Casket* reflects an effort to see Till's body as a mourned body, an effort related to Mobley's own refusal of the rites of lynching as the rites of mourning. But it cannot be overlooked, as it has been in the critical response to the painting, that in presenting Till's body, what Mobley wanted was for all Americans to see Till's lynched body and to bear witness to it collectively (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003: 139). Photographs of Till before his lynching needed to be seen, too, and were placed inside Till's open casket so that people could see for themselves "what was taken from us all" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003: 140). I understand this as an invitation into collective mourning, a refounding of political community oriented around an understanding of racial injustices as collective losses and mourning as a practice of citizenship. I understand *Open Casket* as a response to Mobley's invitation for all Americans to mourn Till and to confront the legacy of racial violence that led to his death and that continues today. This is the spirit, I claim, in which Schutz describes Till's image as an American image (Tomkins 2017).

If that is right, why, then, have critics failed to consider the possibility that the painting is a mournful one? Why have critics found it more plausible to treat Schutz as producing a work that is destructive to this legacy? To understand this, we have to look at the meaning that Mobley's gesture has come to have. Once we do, we will see that the absence of critical attention to this possibility is supported by what I take to be misunderstandings of the work Mobley was attempting to do in presenting the body of her son for all to see and in ensuring the circulation of photographs of it.

It has become standard today to treat the iconography surrounding Till's lynching as providing evidence and to understand the significance of Mobley's gesture in terms of the preservation and dissemination of this evidence. Critics of the painting who are influenced by this tradition and address the painting's aesthetic qualities, criticize it for falling short of providing and even of compromising the evidence made available by Mobley. 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. Some have commented, for example, that the painting looks as though it

was dreamt or imagined (by the artist). The criticism is, again, that the painting falls short of providing an objective or impersonal document.

These strands of criticism are combined in the following discussion in *The New Republic*, which self-consciously weaves together many of the elements in what the authors characterize as “the case against Dana Schutz.” In this context, subjectivity is treated as a barrier to bearing witness to the significance of Till’s death. We see, moreover, that the collective dimensions of mourning that Mobley called out for and that are central to understanding her gesture go unmentioned (even where there is explicit discussion of her grief and the significance of its not being kept “private”):

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. (Livingstone and Gyarkye 2017)

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” this 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”). So thorough is this rejection of subjectivity that the photos themselves are described as bearing witness.

There is, moreover, a tendency 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” (Voon 2017).

While it is important not to ignore or understate the importance of Mobley’s decision to openly present the brutalized body of her son, 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. When Mobley first sees Till’s body, she engages in an activity

that we might describe as close examination, methodically noting the damage done to it, asking even that the body be moved so that she might inspect it further. As she says in her reflections on these events, she herself could describe what she had seen in forensic detail, part by part and inch by inch (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003: 139). However, her aim was not to enable others to see the body forensically or for photographs to be circulated as part of such a record, but for others to see the body as a whole and to be *impacted* by it so that they might collectively be able to tell what was seen (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003: 139). To assume that the photos of Till's body are meant to show in undeniable detail what happened to him is to miss the need for us collectively to say what we see in them and to miss the wordlessness of Mobley's predicament (that she could not alone say what this was).

The misunderstanding of this gesture, the reliance on the photographs of Till to do the witnessing for us, is so deep that it has been claimed that Mobley's invitation to others to look and to say what they had seen was necessitated by the incompleteness of the photographic record. In *The Afterimages of Emmett Till*, Shawn Michelle Smith offers the following as an explanation of what she describes as the "ultimate illegibility" (Smith 2015: 25) of the photographs of Till. By "illegibility" Smith aims to capture the sense in which for Mobley there was still be work to be done in saying what was seen in these photographs:

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. . . As Goldsby writes, "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." (Smith 2015: 25)

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.

There is also something troubling in the claim that Mobley defined Till's legacy and that she did so by controlling how he looked. In presenting Till's body, in inviting Americans to regard his death as a collective loss, Mobley seems to have made the meaning of Till's death a matter of *collective* definition. Though even this may be too strong. Mobley offered the loss of her son up to others, not so that it might be heralded as a catalyzing event as it's often described today, but, perhaps, so that it could like any profound loss be the matter from which (collective) life might be made again and again, so that this loss might be renewed in the face of further loss and be drawn on as a source of strength.<sup>16</sup> We might, from this perspective, see Schutz's efforts to return to Till's death as though his is another link in an unbroken chain of violent deaths as an effort of this kind, not an effort to undermine the 'definitive understanding' of Till's legacy. While it is true that Mobley made the choice to circulate photographs of Till and that she wanted others to see him in this way, Schutz's painting isn't an attempt to usurp her position or to reproduce her gesture. The question of whether Schutz's painting undermines this legacy has to be understood in terms of what an appropriate response to Mobley's gesture is, understood

as part of a living legacy. Moreover, while we continue to encounter Till's legacy through the photographs that Mobley had published and while these photographs suggest a certain framing of the body (Till is presented in casket, formally attired), we should recognize the deep ambivalence that must be present in the suggestion that Mobley controlled how he looked. We should allow that this, too, is a continual source of the difficulty of these images, however variously this difficulty comes to be negotiated.

The idea that the photographs of Till preserve evidence of violence with which we should not "tamper" is part of a highly uncritical rhetoric around this violence. This is seen most clearly in the repeated characterizations of Till's lynching as having made him unrecognizable or as having made him into an abstraction, a characterization that is then turned against Schutz, not on account of any suggestion of excessive violence in her painting, but on account of its departure from photo-realistic representation. This rhetoric reinforces the thought that all there is to be seen is violence. The degree to which theorists have focused on the violence done to Till's body, as if the task of recognition consists in seeing only this violence, is illustrated rather starkly in the following passage, which appears in the context of a discussion focusing explicitly on what the task of recognition comes to in this case. The passage, which I quote in full below, is the author's heavily edited version of Mobley's own recollection of her first contact with Till's corpse:

When I got to his chin, I saw his tongue resting there. It was huge, I never imagined that a human tongue could be that big...From the chin I moved up to his right cheek. There was an eyeball hanging down, resting on that cheek. . . Right away, I looked to the other eye. But it wasn't there. . . Dear God, there were only two [teeth] now, but they were definitely his. I looked at the bridge of his nose. . . It had been chopped. . . From there, I went to one of his ears. . . And that's when I found out that the right ear had been cut almost in half. . . And I don't know what happened to that part of his ear, but it wasn't on the back part of his skull. I did check. And when I did, I saw that someone. . . had taken a hatchet and had cut through the top of his head, from ear to ear. The back of his head was loose from the front part of his face. . . I saw a bullet hole slightly back from the temple area. . . it was that one bullet hole that finally caused me to speak. (Baker 2006: 113)

What these ellipses leave us with is forensic description. But as Mobley says she was not a forensic doctor, though she had tried, at first, to have the detachment of one in looking at the body of her son (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003: 135). Throughout, ellipsis take the place of remembrances associated with Till's body ("Emmett always had the most beautiful teeth. Even as a little baby his teeth were *very* unusual. And I recall how much I had hoped that his permanent set would be as perfect as his baby teeth were. Oh, and they were. Just beautiful" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003: 136)), and expressions of intimacy and tenderness ("I had examined every part of him I had ever loved, every part of him I had nurtured and helped to mend" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003: 136)). What the ellipses cover over is that in the course of the examination, "Step by step, as methodically as the killers had mutilated my baby, I was putting him back together again" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003: 135). The "mother's anguish" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003: 135) that would otherwise be expressed in this passage that might guide our own consideration of the body is now a matter of inference, afterthought.

This attack on subjectivity, on the one hand, and the singular focus on violence, on the other are, in my view, related. Mobley's gesture has, with reason, been understood against the background of the tradition of lynching and, specifically, as an upending of this tradition. But if the final stage of lynching—as it exists in our cultural memory—is spectacle, how is the open-casket viewing for her son's body thought to relate to this final stage? Understandably, there is resistance to treating Mobley's gesture as having produced a spectacle (though there are attempts to qualify its relation to spectacle as, for example, in the characterization of her actions as “orchestrated spectacle” (Baker 2006: 113)). White Southerners who saw it this way took this to be a condemnation of Mobley.

I suggest that the aim of exposure has taken the place of spectacle in this reception of Till's legacy. The idea is that as violence is exposed, we, too, will be exposed, not admitting of depths or layers of response. And yet, the hope, in connection with this legacy of racial violence, seems to be that this will also force an acknowledgment (or a refusal to acknowledge) this legacy. This is the hope, it seems to me, behind Daniel Allen's (2004) suggestion that once the now iconic photograph of Hazel Bryan heckling Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine, was made public—once the “citizenship of dominance,” on the one hand, and the “citizenship of acquiescence,” on the other, was exposed—citizens in the rest of the country had “no choice but to reject or affirm” these modes of citizenship (Allen 2004: 5). I think it is the hope, too, that lies behind Rankine's suggestion that those who were “exposed” (2015) to the body of Michael Brown in the street or to images of it lying in the street would be forced to make the choice either to mourn or not to mourn.

These ideas deserve attention in their own right, but within the context of the present discussion, my suggestion is simply that they do not provide an interpretation of Mobley's gesture that can plausibly be sustained. For one, these ideas diminish Mobley's role in performing the gesture. Why is her presence, her subjectivity, at all relevant in understanding this legacy of violence if the legacy continues through the exposure to the violence done to a body? It is against this background that it can be said that the police officers who allowed Michael Brown's body to remain exposed on the ground “unwittingly picked up where Mobley left off” (Rankine 2015). Only now we can go further and say that the essential work is done by the body itself—that its presentation is a matter of indifference. The body speaks for itself. Photographs of the body speak for themselves. Why, if that's true, should we have to speak for them?

There is a long tradition of treating bodies, the dead, in particular, as exposing the truth of what happened. Inquests and coroner's reports have, for example, played this role, revealing the details of bodily injury, bringing what is internal and hidden—often literally—to light and in such a way that we can piece together causal understandings that then suggest reform in the tradition of humanitarian reform. The body of a miner who suffocated in an explosion might expose the corners cut by a mining company in their design of that mine, expose the dehumanization suffered by these workers. This genre of human concern is so well developed that we might think that bodies speak for themselves. But even here, subjectivity is present, and when it is said that the body exposes the truth of what happened, when the details of bodily injury are thought to particularize the dead and to facilitate some form of acknowledgment it is because we have learned how to read and how to listen to such a body, learned what questions to ask of it.<sup>17</sup>

Matters may stand otherwise in connection with Till's legacy. There is, in the critical response to *Open Casket* not a tacit acknowledgment of the place of subjective response, but a suppression of any subjective element, a wish for bodily injury to truly speak for itself (and to speak definitively). But Mobley's place is not that of a forensic doctor and her interest is not to provide evidence of what happened as one might. She wanted Americans to see what she saw, which wasn't only violence, and to face through mourning the profound ambivalence of such a sight and its sources in American life.

### Interracial Intimacy

The reception of Till's legacy in evidence in these critical discussions isn't the only one to be found. It exists alongside another, which seems to me to be more faithful, in certain respects, to Mobley's own sense of the significance of her gesture. According to this reception, the images of Till function as an "inspiration and warning" (Greenberger 2017), communicating the "mournability (to each other, if not to everyone) of people marked as disposable" (Greenberger 2017) who have had "to witness their own murder and defilement" in order to "survive" (Alexander 1994: 90). If the aim of exposure does link the attack on subjectivity with the singular focus on violence, as I suggested above, then that would help to explain why we find in this alternative reception quite sophisticated forms of subjective response alongside an appreciation of the work of mourning that might be accomplished by the iconography surrounding Till's death. In short, it is the subjectivity of the *white* viewer that appears to be of concern. The photographs are meant to expose that viewer who has not yet confronted this violence.

We see these ideas in operation in the way that the intimacy of Schutz's painting is discussed. The perspective of the painting is described as that of someone close to the body, "looming" over it (Livingstone and Gyarkye 2017), implying that the perspective is both intimate and yet threatening (or detached—as descriptions of the perspective as that of someone "looking down into the casket—interested and intimate" (Mitter 2018) and of the painting as imagined or dreamt might also be taken to suggest). Christina Sharpe who has brought these issues into focus most explicitly asks us to consider this intimacy, to consider, in particular, whether it is that of a slave-owner who can describe his runaway slave's face in exact detail or that of Mamie Till Mobley looking at the body of her son.

The question of intimacy is at the very center of Mobley's gesture and at the center of *Open Casket*. But while it is true that intimacy isn't, invariably, a relation among intimates, the significance and even poignancy of this question has been missed if these are the alternatives that come to mind. The intimacy in question is clearly not the intimacy of a mother looking at the body of her son with the loving and anxious attention that might be given to a newborn (to borrow Mobley's own characterization of her examination of Till's body (2003: 137)). Nor is that the position, I should think, of anyone who looks on Till's body in response to Mobley's invitation to do so. Where does this leave us?

We might ask, following Sharpe, whether the intimacy assumed in the painting is the intimacy of those who have suffered violence or the intimacy of those who have committed violence (setting aside the intimacy between Mobley and her son). Though Sharpe doesn't answer the question on the artist's behalf, it is quite clear that certain possibilities are foreclosed. "What white people" Sharpe asks, rhetorically, "looked into Emmett

Till's coffin?" (Mitter 2017). From the fact that the photos of Till that circulated early on were published in newspapers and magazines with a predominantly black readership, and from the fact that they were not seen by large white audiences, Sharpe concludes that "They weren't meant to create empathy or shame or awareness from white viewers" (Mitter 2017). They were meant, she says, "to speak to and to move a Black audience" (Mitter 2017).<sup>18</sup> Whatever intimacy is assumed in *Open Casket* is thought to fall outside of the meaning of Mobley's gesture.

The problem is that this ignores entirely that Mobley's hope was for all of America to bear witness. I think that if we do not see this clearly, we will have mischaracterized Mobley's gesture. We will have failed to see the nature of Mobley's sacrifice in attempting to make the mourning of her son a public matter<sup>19</sup> and the quality of mercy she showed in holding out the possibility that her loss might become a common loss, without any requirement that some who might respond reform themselves beforehand. The gesture is a radical one. As I observed earlier, not only were others welcomed into the intimacy of loss but their response would be needed for Till's death to have meaning. The meaning of one's own life, one's relation to the legacy of violence that resulted in Till's death, was to be reckoned with through this mourning.<sup>20</sup> As we think about the significance of this gesture in our own time, we can acknowledge the force of the question, "What white people looked into Emmett Till's coffin?" without supposing that it settles matters. 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 we can return as mourners, as a pillar of memory that can be claimed today.

How, though, it will be wondered, can there be this intimacy? How can those implicated in violence mourn with those who have suffered it? How is grief compatible with culpability? The assumption that it is not compatible, though never being made fully explicit, underlies the absence of any critical assessment of the painting as a mournful one and has also shaped the way Mobley's gesture has been understood—most clearly in the bifurcation that we see in attempts to account for it. But if we wish to understand the intimacy of the painting as well as that facilitated by Mobley's gesture, we should consider that it is an intimacy that doesn't conform to the classification of oneself as having suffered violence or having committed violence (or to use the broader categories invoked by Rankine (2015), as one whose racial identity is a matter of suffering loss or being positioned against 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.

There have been other attempts to understand the legacy of Till through the lens of interracial intimacy. Darby English (2013) suggests that the exchange between Bryant and Till at her family grocery store (the event preceding Till's kidnapping and murder), may, in fact, offer a promising way of taking up Till's story. We might, he suggests, "experiment" (English 2013: 87) with the possibility that Till breached racial etiquette in the course of that exchange (perhaps making an entreating remark), but rather than take this as a lesson in the dangers of interracial social intimacy (the lesson that might be encouraged by attention to the horror that followed), we might, instead, English offers, take this as revealing racial distinctions to be purely "theoretical" in character (English 2013: 88).



However, speculation around this exchange seems to me to be an inappropriate but also unnecessary basis for understanding how this legacy might speak to the possibility of interracial intimacy; we might, instead, take Mobley as our guide. English's account attempts to locate an impulse that will take us out of ourselves without our even realizing it and without our being in a position to help it, an impulse that we might trust more fully, that might be given freer reign (since racial difference can seem, from this perspective, to be an imposition from without). This is an understandable temptation. There is a moment in Mobley's account of the events following Till's death when she describes her thought as wandering. It wandered, Mobley tells us, in the courtroom in which Till's murderers were being tried. It wandered to their children playing on their laps and it wandered from the thought of the grandchildren she would never have to the thought that she might be able to love those playing children—that thought wakening her back to attention (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003: 166). It would be tempting to say that the mournful thought that Mobley experiences is what she invites others to as well, even if it carries risk. But what we are tempted by in these suggestions is the idea of wandering away from ourselves and being able to disclaim the responsibility for it. I am inclined to think that Mobley's invitation extends to the person we waken back to (not a theoretical construct, as English would have it).

If Mobley's invitation engages us at the level at which we may take responsibility for ourselves, then there is no avoiding the concern that there is something improper in mourning losses that some of us may be implicated in, responsible for, or which have not been ours. This is, in my view, the most provocative aspect of *Open Casket* but it is also the central thread linking it to Mobley. The source of the provocation is present in her gesture, too. A question to consider, then, is whether the critical response to the painting suggests that Mobley's invitation should not be taken up today. We know that the prospect for a mournful politics was rejected by Mobley's contemporaries, but how might we think about these matters in the context of a reevaluation of the prospects for such a politics?

It isn't my aim to settle these matters, but to make them explicit and to offer that they are substantive issues, not ones that are easily decided. One feels the pull of saying, as Martha Nussbaum does, that "It would be simply hypocritical to weep over a plight that you yourself have caused" (2001: 133). And yet, this is a description that might be applied to many different cases, encouraging many different responses. We might call this hypocrisy, blindness, narcissism, but, equally, we might call this contrition, acknowledgment, regret. It would be a mistake, then, to assume that one must be blameless before one can weep for the plight of another (the conclusion drawn by Nussbaum). This is true of compassion, her focus, but it is also true of grief. By Nussbaum's own account (2001: 214), our earliest experience of grief is, in part, an experience of the loss of our sense of total goodness, a coming into a recognition of our capacity to do damage to others both in fantasy and reality. With appropriate support, this incipient recognition can be met with guilt and with a desire to make reparations so as to maintain the possibility of relationship (so as to preserve ourselves and others). This is, in part, what makes grief so difficult and so precarious to work through: we confront ourselves and the profound ambivalence that exists in our relationship to others, those for whom we have concern, those we love, those on whom we depend. A sense of guilt, anger, a sense of one's own capacity to do damage, are perhaps not alien to grief, then. If this account is to be believed, they are central to it.

Nussbaum's account draws on Melanie Klein's studies of mourning.<sup>21</sup> Klein's work has also been influential in the effort to take seriously the possibility that mourning might take a properly political form—in the setting, in particular, of democratic politics that, as Allen puts it, encourages citizens to aspire toward sovereignty while asking that they tolerate vulnerability, sacrifice, and loss that limit that sovereignty (2004: 41). David McIvor, taking inspiration from Klein as well as Allen's conception of the democratic citizen proposes that we conceive of mourning, in political settings, as a form of intersubjective reflection on sociopolitical loss. This is a rather abstract formulation and quite remote, it seems, from losses we suffer in relation to those to whom we are attached. How, if at all, did Klein's discussion of mourning prepare the way for thinking of mourning in such broad terms? How, for example, did we go from loss to sociopolitical loss?

Klein herself broadened the understanding of mourning that she inherited from Freud's (1917) early work.<sup>22</sup> Mourning is no longer the work of object renunciation, as he had originally viewed it, no longer, as we might put it, a matter of forgetting loss (Freud 1917: 244-5), the kind of view echoed in Marshall's advice to protestors to think of the living, not the dead. Mourning, in Klein's view, is a matter of living well with these losses, of using them to shape who one is in ways that enable one to bear one's dependency, one's lack of self-sufficiency; it is less a stage than a position (one she called 'the depressive position') from which one bears loss.<sup>23</sup> However, McIvor's formulation also broadens Klein's account of mourning in two significant ways, through the role that others can be understood to play in the work associated with the depressive position but also through the sorts of situations that might occasion or reawaken depressive experiences. At times, then, the defense of the claim that mourning can take a properly political form is that a Kleinian account troubles the distinction between private and public, leading McIvor to say, on occasion, that mourning is *inherently political*. At times, however, the defense is simply that mourning takes a political form because loss can be political and, in particular, because these losses can be collective.

Do these ways of broadening the notion of the work of mourning support the idea that we might collectively engage in this work? Do they support the idea, for example, that we might approach legacies of racial violence and trauma through collective efforts to mourn them? Even if we grant that experiences of mourning can be formative and can, in particular, enhance our capacity for living together with others, this does not alone suggest that we might participate in *collective* efforts to mourn. Sibling relationships might enhance one's capacity to live with others, to interact with fellow citizens, but that doesn't suggest the possibility of entering into sibling-like relationships with one's fellow citizens.

It seems that even granting a robust role to others in the work of mourning—both in their contributions to our inner world and in the provision of supportive contexts for this work, broadly conceived—doesn't itself support the contention that we might collectively engage in the work of mourning. McIvor takes this proposal to be supported by the intellectual tradition with which Klein is associated ('object-relations' psychoanalysis and the social theory informed by it). He places great weight on one of its central theoretical insights, namely, that there is no final or hard line between private and public life. This is a point that he frames in terms of the work of mourning, saying "Later in life we are just as dependent on supportive objects and contexts for the working through of our grief, and these contexts are as much public as they are private" (2010: 87). In effect,

his claim is that since mourning is and always will be a public affair, there may certainly be collective efforts to engage in the work of mourning. In this he is influenced by Gal Gerson's (2004) discussion of the political framework that, in her view, is suggested by this intellectual tradition, which aims to secure conditions for attachment (the need, that is, for relationships, which is taken as irreducible) (McIvor 2016; McIvor 2010). These attachments are thought to radiate out from infancy in ever expanding circles so that "The whole of life," to use an evocative formulation of Ian Suttie's, "comes to fill the void the mother once filled" (Suttie 1933, as cited in Gerson 2004: 778). But this is compatible, as Gerson points out, with "heuristic recognitions of privacy and property" (2004: 786). The social theory under discussion does not preclude sheltering environments such as the family and the home and other spaces of privacy; its conception of sociality includes, as a necessary component, individuality and separateness, as Gerson acknowledges, saying "A space for privacy within which individuals are left to their own discretion is also implied in the right to community" (2004: 784). We might, in this spirit, say that shelter, even if not withdrawal, serves the work of mourning and we might understand some of the critical responses to *Open Casket* as attempts to preserve precisely the 'shelter' provided by an established tradition of passing down Till's legacy (his image a sign of the "mournability (to each other, if not to everyone) of people marked as disposable").

McIvor is sensitive to the worry that there is, in fact, no collective analogue of the psyche wounded by loss, but his worries don't extend to the claim that there is collective loss. There remains, then, the possibility that the work of mourning redounds to the public at large because the racial legacies that might be mourned reflect collective losses, what McIvor calls 'sociopolitical losses.' McIvor even describes the racial traumas that are his focus as constitutive traumas (2010: 170).<sup>24</sup> These traumas constitute us as a collective even if we respond quite differently to this fact—with some being wounded by such losses and others attempting to move forward without having done the work of mourning, those losses becoming for them pathogenic. For this reason, though McIvor acknowledges that we are positioned differently with respect to legacies of racial violence and sacrifice, he rejects the suggestion that might seem to follow from this, namely, that those "directly affected" (2010: 54) or wounded by them might themselves need time and space to mourn. There is, he says, a shared history and a "shared imaginary" that is "tied to and in many ways reflective of it" (2010: 55), common objects for intersubjective reflection even if our accounts and responses to that past differ in some respects, with some, for example, seeing it as bearing less weightily on the present than others. Public processes of mourning are meant to provide a more honest accounting of this past and its bearing on the present and to help us to identify resistances to this accounting—resistances that are themselves, in McIvor's judgment, a sign of the *need* for this work.<sup>25</sup>

The discussion of Till's legacy illustrates, rather dramatically, however, that we should be careful not to assume that there is a shared history of loss wherever we find legacies of racial violence. Here we might consider again the force of Sharpe's question, "What white people looked into Emmett Till's coffin?" If we can claim the events surrounding Till's death as memory today it is in no small part because that memory was carried by those most "directly affected" by this loss. It is relevant, too, to note that the photographs of Till in casket didn't circulate early on in the white press and weren't seen by a large white audience until the thirty years later (Berger 2011). Mobley's call for all of America

to look upon his body with her was, it seems, an aspirational call that went unmet and any response to it today is, for that reason, less a way of revisiting the past than reconstructing it. It is hard to understand how, if this past was not shared, such losses can be assumed to be.

McIvor's discussion of institutions of mourning can seem, however, to underwrite the notion that there is collective loss since an essential part of their work, according to McIvor, is to reveal just how encompassing sociopolitical losses are, to show, for example, that events in which racial conflict manifests in violence and loss are not *just* events, and to reveal that there are not particular losses so much as there are broad patterns of loss. It is particularly illuminating to consider McIvor's remarks concerning a violent clash in Greensboro in 1979, between members of the KKK and a coalition consisting of members of the Communist Workers Party and the Greensboro Association for Poor People as well as his appraisal of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission unofficially opened in 2004 in connection with it. One of the key functions of the Commission was, as he puts it, 'implicature,' that is, *to implicate*. As McIvor describes it, implicature captures the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's ability to "reveal broader social patterns and contexts that made traumatic events possible in the first place, and the ability to demonstrate the lingering effects of past violence and discrimination in the present" (2010: 35-6). In places, McIvor describes implicature not only as revealing those social patterns and contexts that made traumatic events possible, but those even that made them *intelligible*, casting a very wide net, indeed.

The idea that institutions, whether taking the form of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission or not, should perform the work of implicature is a political claim, but one that is supposed to find support in the social theory suggested by Klein's work and, in particular, to be supported by the Kleinian work of mourning that McIvor defends. Implicature is valuable within this framework because it undermines splitting, one of the primary defenses or forms of resistance that arises in the paranoid-schizoid position (the descendant of Freud's concept of melancholia, mourning's pathological twin). This defense was seen in the reaction to the violence in Greensboro in the tendency of members of that community to regard the parties to violence as strangers or outsiders and to see the episode as an aberration.

How, then, does the work of implicature suggest, if at all, that there are collective losses? The work of implicature, for McIvor, is just the work that uncovers that there is no final line between private and public, as much as we might want to deny it. We are, as a matter of the sort of creatures we are, implicated in the lives of others. "[O]ur reluctance to admit" this, according to McIvor, "is a byproduct of paranoid schizoid fears" (2010: 98). McIvor traces this insight to Klein saying that her turn away from Freud, particularly, in her attention to our first and irreducible need for attachment or relationship with others "serves to implicate the individual in their surroundings far more than they and perhaps we—would care to admit" (2010: 44). This is exactly the point that McIvor attempted to make in connection with attachment earlier when we considered the idea that the world comes to take the place of the mother. There the claim was that the work of mourning is as much public as it is private, involving others as it does. In the present case, the idea is that there is no final line between our early formative losses and sociopolitical losses and so they, too, can be brought home, as it were. In this case, we might say, sociopolitical loss

takes the place of the empty mouth.

In this way, or so the thought goes, sociopolitical losses come to be not only common losses, but losses that engage us intimately. Our involvement, however attenuated, in these losses—our being implicated in them (and given the scope of implicature, it is difficult to imagine anyone failing to be implicated in such losses) qualifies them as ours to mourn. But, as before, we should be wary to conclude, from the supposition that there is no fixed or final line between the private and public, that there is no cause to draw up boundaries. From the conclusion that there is no fixed division between the private and public, it is as open to us to draw the conclusion that this work is intimate as that it is political. These boundaries may impose unfair burdens on some, resulting in losses that cannot be properly mourned or only with difficulty and they may obscure patterns of loss that are unjust, but these boundaries may also be needed. Just as earlier we considered that the work of mourning might call not for withdrawal, but for shelter, so too, we might now consider the possibility that the work of mourning racial traumas requires that we grapple with matters of intimacy. Some of us who must bring ourselves to grief have further to travel than others in confronting legacies of racial trauma. What does it mean for us to join in this intimate work with others?

## Conclusion

In the course of responding to the criticism of *Open Casket*, I have defended a certain interpretation of Mamie Till Mobley's gesture as well as Dana Schutz's relationship to it. My suggestion has been that we think of this gesture as an invitation into collective loss and that we think of the empathetic engagement of which Schutz speaks as a kind of ethical reorientation, an opening up to and involvement in the concerns of those from whom one might otherwise be estranged. This is not a substitute for the work of mourning, but a way of bringing oneself into the intimacy of loss—one way and, I expect, one that is vital for those encountering this legacy at some distance. If this is right, what is felt to be most provocative about the painting—the intimacy it presumes—is present already in this gesture.

The critical responses to the painting and the split-reception of Mobley's gesture—one strand emphasizing the work of exposure (or implicature) and the other the work of mourning—suggest that it may not be possible to take up this invitation today in a time when mourning is a *condition* of black life, not necessarily a chosen political orientation. This raises serious questions regarding the prospects for a mournful politics that facilitates collective mourning. We should be especially careful, I have argued, not to assume that racial legacies of loss are collective. This would be to overlook, among other things, the significance of Mobley's gesture.

This leaves us with a number of questions. If Mobley's gesture is understood as a sacrifice, as I think it should be, how do we understand what the consequences of accepting this invitation to mourn are? How do we understand the significance of the gesture when Mobley says that she can offer it because the worst event of her life has already happened? The invitation to mourn, which seems so crucial in our having the sense that it is possible to do so, can seem to be too uncertain or unstable a basis for rethinking political life. How can political life be rooted in unfathomed depths? How can it rest or be set to rest against

these intimacies? It may be that we will need to return to this gesture again and again.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Black’s petition (“The Painting Must Go”) calls for the destruction of *Open Casket* and includes a list of signatories endorsing this call.

<sup>2</sup> See (Feldstein 2000) and, most recently, (Gorn 2018) for detailed accounts of these events.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jacqueline Goldsby’s (2006) discussion of the ways in which these prerogatives were executed across various genres of late nineteenth century news writing and for an argument that Ida B. Wells “repeats but remodels” the conventions of these genres “to recuperate news writing’s value as an ethically motivated source of public power” (2006: 49). See also Elizabeth Hale’s (1998) discussion of the role of newspapers in producing standardized narratives that were “central to the power” of “spectacle lynchings” (1998: 206).

<sup>4</sup> See (Guyer 2014) and (Lanzoni 2018) for details concerning the historical context of Lee’s work.

<sup>5</sup> This is the clearest link that I have found between Schutz’s body of work and Mobley’s gesture, comporting with her remarks about Mobley’s gesture as well. Critics, Baker among them, have pointed to Schutz’s body of work as evidence that there is in it something less than serious—a naive logic—which extends to *Open Casket*. Lisa Whittington (2017) claims, for example, that Schutz’s work “downplays the truth” and in the case of *Open Casket* the “horrible truth of Emmett’s death.” Lisa Larson-Walker (2017) similarly claims that her work has long “used politics and current events as abstracted points of departure” (also described as “spectacle”), characterizing Schutz’s style as “fanciful,” adding that *Open Casket* is “consistent with her recipe for fictional dismemberment.” Josephine Livingstone and Lovia Gyarkye (2017) claim that “In her body of work, Schutz does not demonstrate a rigorous sensibility” a prerequisite, for them, for approaching Till’s legacy.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Alexander (1994) poses this question in the context of thinking about group self-identification (meditating, in part, on a variety of responses to the images of Till in casket within black communities), asking, “What do black people say to each other to describe their relationship to their racial group, when

that relationship is crucially forged by incidents of physical and psychic violence which boil down to the “fact” of abject blackness?” (1994: 78). Darby English (2013) is interested in this question, but is critical of the way in which Till has become an archetype of “the black-white relation” specifically in the way this archetype “fixes black subjects as objects of a loathing white regard” (2013: 85), offering that Jason Lazarus’s photograph *Standing at the Grave of Emmett Till, Day of Exhumation, June 1st, 2005*, which is included among Lazarus’s (a white man’s) conceptual self-portraits suggests an alternative.

<sup>7</sup> In a profile touching on the process of approaching *Open Casket* Schutz asks, “How do you make a painting about this and not have it just be about the grotesque?” (Tomkins 2017). Earlier her concern had been, specifically, to make space for the possibility of tenderness in painting the image, suggesting the influence of Mamie Till Mobley in her thinking about how to craft the image.

<sup>8</sup> While I don’t think there is any particular basis for claiming that Schutz’s relation to Emmett Till’s legacy is mediated through shame, this has, historically, served as a form of mediation for white liberals in connection with civil rights iconography (available, in part, through the splintered-off figure of the white Southerner). See Chapter 2 (“White Shame, White Empathy”) of (Berger 2011) for a lucid discussion of these issues.

<sup>9</sup> Martha Nussbaum (2001) follows Smith in assuming that it is ultimately the “onlooker’s” (2001: 309) judgment concerning the seriousness of some misfortune that plays a role in generating compassion for the person it befalls. There are, however, instances, where it may appear, according to Nussbaum, that the other’s judgment is what matters. “Often love takes up the viewpoint of the loved person” Nussbaum offers, “refusing to judge a calamity in a way different from the way in which the beloved has appraised it” (2001: 311). But even in this case, the onlooker remains, she claims, the one whose judgment counts; “in effect” I judge from my position that “the other person’s estimate of “size” [seriousness] is the one I shall go by” (2001: 311). Cases in which my judgment guides my response and yet differs from that of another (someone who is incapacitated, as in the central example of Smith’s cited by Nussbaum) don’t immediately suggest that it is always my judgment that matters or that I am engaged in the making of judgments at all. If we consider what it is to trust another, this can be seen more clearly. Perhaps in some cases, difficult and contentious, one wants to say that one “decides” to trust another person, but this would be an indication that one cannot proceed wholeheartedly or naturally (without forethought or the attitude of making a trial) and it would be strange to conclude that one only ever (“in effect” or otherwise) *decides* to trust. That would undermine the impression that one was capable of trust. Similarly, empathy for others sometimes requires that we cede some of the prerogatives, as we might think of them, of the first person, including positioning oneself through one’s judgments.

<sup>10</sup> Elliot Gorn reports that Wilkins “worried that there might be some truth” in Southerners’s characterization of Mobley’s participation in rallies at which she spoke as ‘Mamie’s Circus’” (Gorn 2018: 215). Ruth Feldstein describes Mobley as becoming, in this period, a “scapegoat of sorts, a receptacle for anger over the trial’s outcome and for overlapping anxieties about gender relations and the future of civil rights activism (Feldstein 2000: 104).

<sup>11</sup> “I don’t know if there would be a way to address the subject without some way of approaching it on a personal level” (Boucher 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Does it change matters to suppose that one doesn’t merely enter into the circumstance of the other person but into their very person, too? Smith himself defends his account of empathy against the charge that it is selfish in this way: “When I condole with you for the loss of your only son, in order to enter into your grief. . . I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters. My grief, therefore, is entirely upon your account, and not in the least upon my own” (1759: 374). Johanna Luttrell (2019), who locates the ethical and political importance of empathy in this idea, concurs with Smith. “The relevant experience in Smith’s example is not his own lack of grief” she claims “but the grief of the father, the person who is suffering” (2019: 53). But though we may suppose that the act of imagination that Smith is describing—if possible (see (Goldie 2011) for an argument that it is not)—may generate responses that don’t reflect one’s own situation or one’s own person that very observation cuts both ways.

<sup>13</sup> This phrase adapted from Jonathan Lear (2017: 273) who applies it to Christian ethics: “Does not Christianity demand precisely that: a derangement of mine and thine?”

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Spelman (1997) emphasizes these matters in the context of thinking about the place of compassion in political life, criticizing the identification of white abolitionist women with slaves (in claiming to be slaves themselves) and the shift in the focus of their concern from the suffering of slaves to their own.

<sup>15</sup> This is another way in which empathy might be thought to be manifested in painting. See Jenefer Robinson (2017) for a development of this idea.

<sup>16</sup> Mobley tells us that her mother collapsed upon hearing of Till's death, but also that she refused to touch her mother then, asking others to give her space, too, concerned that her mother's strength might be sapped and drawn into her in that moment (Mobley 1955: 127). We might glean from this observation a lesson about grief as a source of strength and resilience but also about the boundaries that we know to mark in allowing others to grieve. The tradition of psychoanalytic thought discussed in Section 3 develops upon the insight that grief can be a source of resilience and, specifically, that what helps with grief is grief—early experiences of loss that, if we have others to care for us and to facilitate our development through these losses, can be of aid in meeting future ones (for discussion in the philosophical tradition, see 'Emotions and Infancy' in (Nussbaum 2001) and 'Mourning and Moral Psychology' in (Lear 2017)). Much of my discussion there focuses on the question of whether we should mark boundaries out of respect for the grief of others in political settings as well.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed discussion of this history and its bearing on the humanitarian tradition, see (Laqueur 1989).

<sup>18</sup> See Chapter 4 ('The Lost Images of Civil Rights') of (Berger 2011) for a discussion of the absence of images of Till in the white press coverage of his death and for arguments in support of the claim that "white periodicals had every opportunity to publish Till's picture" (Berger 2011: 130).

<sup>19</sup> Mobley describes herself in a letter to Roy Wilkins—after her estrangement from the NAACP and in an appeal to continue doing her work with that organization—as having "set out to trade the blood of my child for the betterment of my race" (as quoted in Feldstein 2000: 107).

<sup>20</sup> "People had to face my son and realize just how twisted, how distorted how terrifying, race hatred could be. How it had menaced my son during his last, tortured hours on earth. How it continued to stalk us all. Which is why people also had to face themselves. They would have to see their own responsibility in pushing for an end to this evil" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003: 142).

<sup>21</sup> Of particular significance are (Klein 1984) and (Klein 1985).

<sup>22</sup> See (Segal 1979) for a discussion of Klein's departures from Freud and also Karl Abraham.

<sup>23</sup> See (Klein 1935), (Klein 1940), and (Klein 1946) for the development of these views. For an excellent overview of Klein's thought, see (Segal 1964).

<sup>24</sup> This language echoes the idea that the subject is inaugurated by loss, a point of contact between McIvor's and Judith Butler's views, though see Chapter 3 ('Bringing Ourselves to Grief: Judith Butler and the Democratic Superego') of (McIvor 2010) for points of disagreement.

<sup>25</sup> This line of thought is developed, though in a slightly different way, in connection with the observation that some losses are not mournable for political reasons. As McIvor puts it, "Some traumas register strongly at the level of public consciousness, while others remain fugitive or are neglected" (2010: 55) (a theme pursued in Judith Butler's influential work (Butler 2004; Butler 2009)). We cannot, knowing this, he urges, restrict the work of mourning to private acts (or one might say, allow these losses to go unmourned). What seems to underlie the suggestion that the public work of mourning is called for is the thought that these are indeed collective losses that we are failing to mourn, to our detriment (as failures to mourn always are).