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ARTICLE

Open Casket and the Art World: A Cautionary Tale

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Abstract

In 2017, the artist Dana Schutz presented her painting, *Open Casket*, at the Whitney Biennial. Both the painting and the painter were subsequently subjected to criticism from the art world. A central critique was that Schutz usurped the story of Emmett Till (the subject of *Open Casket*) and that, as a white woman, she had no right to do so. Much can—and has—been said on the appropriateness of Schutz's painting. In this article, I argue that *Open Casket* is a site of oppression, an object that both reflects and reinforces dominant racial hierarchies. Specifically, I argue that *Open Casket* is a case of what Linda Alcoff calls "the problem of speaking for others": when a member of a privileged social group speaks on the social experiences of an oppressed group, effectively silencing that group. I explore the moral and epistemic implications of *Open Casket* and related works and provide some reasons to think that socially privileged persons should not depict the experiences of socially oppressed persons—at least in many cases. I conclude by presenting some conditions under which it may be appropriate for privileged artists to speak for oppressed groups.

The Whitney Biennial

Dana Schutz's painting, *Open Casket* (2017), has been the object of no small amount of discussion and criticism. *Open Casket* represents a moment in American history. It also embodies a microcosm of social and political issues surrounding race, privilege, and oppression. The painting depicts Emmett Till, a young Black teen who was accused of whistling at a white woman in a grocery store in Mississippi in 1955. Till was later abducted by the woman's husband and half-brother, who beat Till and shot him in the head. In a story all too familiar to contemporary audiences, the men were later caught, tried for murder, and acquitted of all charges. Schutz's painting is based on a photograph taken of Till in his casket. Emmett's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, wanted an open-casket funeral for her son. Images of Emmett and Till-Mobley were circulated in journals such as *Jet* and the *Chicago Defender*. In her autobiography, Till-Mobley explains her decision to spread Emmett's image:

> [T]he feeling was strong in me and I understood clearly what had to be done. It would be important for people to look at what had happened on a late Mississippi night when nobody was looking, to consider what might happen

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> again if we didn't look out. This would not be like so many other lynching cases, the hundreds, the thousands of cases where families would be forced to walk away and quietly bury their dead and their grief and their humiliation. I was not going quietly. . . . They had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this. (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, 39)

In part because of the exposure Till-Mobley called for, Emmett's image became a rallying cry for the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s after the photo was published. Indeed, in reference to her famous bus ride, Rosa Parks declared: "I thought about Emmett Till, and I couldn't go back [to the back of the bus]" (Biography.com 2020).

Fast-forward sixty-odd years to the 2017 Whitney Biennial: an exhibition in Manhattan that features new and noteworthy American artists. Artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe, Jackson Pollock, and Jeff Koons have jump-started their careers at the Biennial (Kennedy 2014). *Open Casket* was Dana Schutz's Biennial piece. Responses to the painting were swift and critical. On March 17, 2017, the visual artist Parker Bright posted a video online featuring himself walking through the Whitney galleries to *Open Casket*. The video shows Bright taking off his coat to reveal a shirt with the statement "Lynch Mob," on one side and "Black Death Spectacle" on the other. A woman at the museum filmed Bright on his phone camera. The video then shows Bright standing in front of the painting and discussing the work with other visitors. In the video, Bright comments that "no one should be making money off a black dead body" and "She has nothing to say to the Black community about Black trauma" (Muñoz-Alonso 2017).

Other reactions from the art world are equally revealing. In an open letter to the Whitney curators, the artist Hannah Black stated: "the painting should not be acceptable to anyone who cares or pretends to care about Black people because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time" (Muñoz-Alonso 2017). Artist Devin Kenny asked on Facebook: "what action is this work purportedly, and actually, doing? does it inform? shock? build connection? help a new audience understand either emotionally or intellectually the complex set of factors all falling under the umbrella of white supremacy, sexism, and anti-blackness that led to this young person's death? if no, what element of the history is being tapped into and depicted?" (Muñoz-Alonso 2017).

Each comment emphasizes a way in which *Open Casket* arguably fails as a socially sensitive work of art. In what follows, I will analyze the controversy surrounding Schutz's painting. I argue that the great wrongness of the painting does not lie solely in its representational content or style. Rather, following work by feminist philosophers Iris Marion Young and Linda Alcoff (Alcoff 1991; Young 2005), I argue that the painting is a site of oppression that embodies a case of "the problem of speaking for others"—namely, that Emmett Till's death was not Schutz's story to tell and perpetuates harmful racial systems. On my account, artworks are a type of speech act that convey and express information for the purpose of communication. A work like *Open Casket* tells a story: the work relays a message and experience to an audience. This may not be the only or even intended purpose of an artwork. However, pieces in the art world often fulfill this social function. As such, we may treat artworks such as *Open Casket* as instances of speaking for others.

I am not the first scholar to make this point; indeed, similar conclusions were drawn immediately after the Biennial opening. My goal here is to situate *Open Casket* within

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feminist epistemological work on epistemic oppression and injustice. I argue that artists in positions of social privilege should usually refrain from representing the experiences of oppressed identity groups to which they do not belong—not only in the present case, but in all potential instances of artistic speaking for others. However, although I argue that *Open Casket* is an exemplar of the *problem* of speaking for others, not all cases of speaking for others are problematic. In the last section of this article I present conditions under which it may be appropriate for privileged artists to create artworks that speak for oppressed groups.

I want to make my own positionality and target for this article clear. I am a person in a position of social privilege. I am a college professor and I am white. I benefit from white supremacy, however unintentionally. One could argue, then, that I face a dilemma. On the one hand, the arguments I raise against Schutz may apply, mutatis mutandis, to me. Perhaps the story of what is wrong with Schutz's work is not mine to tell. On the other hand, the arguments may *not* apply to me. But this undermines my critique of Schutz's work.

I appreciate the force of this critique. However, I wish to navigate a third path. The (intended) difference between what I do in this article and what Schutz does with her painting is that I'm critiquing the actions of another supposed ally who *shares* my racial privilege. I discuss Black experience through the voices of Black scholars and do not claim ownership over Black experiences, as I think Schutz does. Also, crucially, my hope is not that privileged persons can never speak for others. Rather, we must be exceedingly careful when doing so. I do think it is important to call out injustices among privileged groups when we see it. Moreover, given my privileged position in a white-supremacist society, I want to make it clear who is the target of my discussion. The subtitle of this article is "A Cautionary Tale." My hope is that white people who occupy positions of power in systemically racist institutions take the reaction to Schutz's painting as a warning and a lesson. This includes me, and academics like me. My present goal is to make it clear, in analytic philosophical terms, why speaking for others contributes to systemic oppression, and to suggest some ways in which we may be helpful in the fight for racial justice.

What's Wrong with *Open Casket*?

One can imagine a potential response to *Open Casket* that sidesteps any controversy—namely, that this is "just" a painting or "just" an artwork and so it doesn't hold the social significance that the above artists ascribe to it. However, it's hard to square such a response with the historical background this painting inherits and the vast social backlash it received and context it embodies. *Open Casket* is one of many representations of persons of color by white artists that depict them in objectifying or stereotypical ways. Some examples include Alexandre-Marie Colin's 1829 painting, *Othello and Desdemona*, which features the Shakespearean Moor as a villain; Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) and the exoticized women in the brothel lineup; or the depictions of Mammie in the film *Gone with the Wind* (1939). And if one is tempted to think that such representations are no longer created, consider *The Help* (2011) (both the film and the book on which it was based), Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), and Jeanine Cummins's novel *American Dirt* (2020). Each of these artworks depicts racial Others by white artists in ways that have been broadly condemned by both artistic and racial groups. This is the background through which an audience should understand *Open Casket*. The painting inherits vast art-historical baggage; it

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is an object that represents, reflects, and reinforces negative social norms concerning race and objectifies or stereotypes persons of color for entertainment.

The art-historical background also helps make sense of the wrongness of the piece. I want to begin my analysis of *Open Casket* by examining several prominent critiques of the painting that I believe, ultimately, do not capture the main sense of wrongness it embodies. First, following Bright, one may argue that the painting is financially exploitative. Someone is making money from this "Black Death Spectacle," despite Schutz never intending to sell the painting (Gibson 2017). Second, one might take offense at the stylized portrayal of Till's death. Schutz based the painting on a photograph of Till in his casket, a photograph that is shockingly brutal. Schutz's work softens the graphic violence of Till's death in its abstraction. One could argue that this brutality should not be overlooked (Fried 2019). Note, however, that one could also argue in the other direction: a realist representation would treat the horror of Till's attack as an object of enjoyment. Perhaps it is better to simply not depict gruesome racialized violence at all, rather than run the risk that the manner in which it is represented adds another layer of controversy. Following this point, one could argue that depictions of Black trauma simply shouldn't be represented in a painting, ever. There is something wrong with the *content* of the painting: racialized violence is inherently exploitative, inappropriate, and insensitive.

These arguments present legitimate concerns about the painting. However, they do not quite capture its wrongness. I'll compare *Open Casket* to another work to see why: Henry Taylor's painting *The Times They Ain't A Changing, Fast Enough!* (2017). This painting depicts the death of Philando Castile, the twenty-seven-year-old Black man shot and killed by a police officer in Minnesota in 2016 after he was pulled over in his car. Like *Open Casket*, this painting is based on a photo of Castile's dead body (in this case, a film still of footage that Castile's girlfriend took on her phone). Taylor's painting was also presented at the 2017 Whitney Biennial but did not receive the same critique and backlash as Schutz's work. This may be surprising, since Taylor's piece likewise depicts a real event of racialized violence in a stylized manner. For instance, *The Times They Ain't . . .* does not illustrate the blood from the original film still, and some of Castile's features are blurred. Indeed, one critic wrote about both Schutz's and Taylor's paintings that "[these artists] stand heads above the rest of the painters in this show because they insist that the formal means of the painting —its entire structure and every visual inflection—serve the content, the message, the expression" (Samet 2017). In both cases, the stylized nature of the painting is lauded as a means of conveying a significant social message. Finally, if Schutz's work is exploitative for simply being in the Whitney exhibit, then surely Taylor's is as well.

The most significant difference between the two paintings is the racial identity of their artists. Schutz is a white woman; Taylor is a Black man. One could argue that Taylor's painting, but not hers, authentically represents Black experience. This is, fact, one aspect of Taylor's paintings that critics celebrate. Zadie Smith, writing for *The New Yorker*, describes Taylor: "It's his practice to seek people out—in the street, at an art fair, at his mama's house—and figure them in paint . . ." (Smith 2018). Many of Taylor's subjects are Black and are people who live in his neighborhood or people he grew up with. Smith continues: "there is a profound sense of recognition and familiarity in Taylor's work, not only between painter and subject but between painter and community, there being so little anthropological distance between the two" (Smith 2018). Taylor's work represents a community to which he belongs, in which he is embedded. Schutz, as a white woman, did not have the same kind of

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authentic social experience with the cultural community represented in her painting. Is the racial identity of each artist—and the social embeddedness in certain cultures and ties to certain experiences—the key to understanding the *Open Casket* controversy?

Yes and no. Consider Schutz's response to the broad public backlash against her painting, in which she tried to motivate her decision to paint Till's death: "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. I thought about the possibility of painting it only after listening to interviews with her. In her sorrow and rage she wanted her son's death not just to be her pain but America's pain" (Gibson 2017). Later, Schutz stated: "I understand the outrage. Till's photograph was a sacred image of the Civil Rights movement and I am a white woman. I did not take making this painting lightly . . . I don't object to people questioning the work or even my right to make it. There has to be an open discussion" (Ejifor, Duster, and Payne 2017). Based on these statements, we can see that Schutz meant well when she created this painting. She intended to create a work of empathy, not of oppression.

Schutz attempted to create a work from the perspective of "universal mother." In doing so, however, she failed to recognize that not all experiences of motherhood are alike and that this would be reflected in her artwork. It seems that Schutz did not adequately acknowledge how her white perspective influenced her understanding and interpretation of Till's death. We tend to think that empathy is a good thing, but empathy does not always adequately represent the thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences of the target empathized with (Goldie 2012; Spaulding 2018). This is Janine Jones's point when she writes about the empathy of "goodwill whites":

> One problem, then, goodwill whites must face if they are to empathize with blacks, or even with themselves, is the problem of articulating *what they are and what they desire*. . . . Whites' inability to form the belief that they are white skews the nature of the relationships that exist between whites and blacks. It affects their ability to empathize because they are unable to import an ingredient essential to empathy: an appreciation of their own situation. (Jones 2004, 70)

Following Jones, I contend that Schutz fits the mold of a goodwill white. Empathy is nice, but an empathizer in a position of social privilege must recognize how that privilege shapes her interpretation of a social Other and probe the motivation for empathizing in the first place (see also Young 1997; Tullmann 2020). Specifically, a white empathizer must account for the limits of her own racialized perspective and the potentially colonizing effects of the white gaze. The presumption is that a socially privileged person can and should depict the experiences of oppressed groups in good faith but need not acknowledge how dominant perspectives shape their understanding of an oppressed person's circumstances.

Other scholars have made a similar claim about whiteness and empathy specifically with respect to Schutz's painting. Recall that Till-Mobley wanted her son's image to be a rallying cry against white supremacy and racialized violence. One might think that Schutz's work simply continues Till-Mobley's cry. Christopher Benson—who co-wrote Till-Mobley's autobiography with her—wrote an opinion piece for the *New York Times* that challenges this sentiment:

> Ms. Schutz has expressed good intentions in developing the painting, inspired by the saturation TV coverage of violence against young minority men and the

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> anguish of a mother whose son is taken from her in the most horrific way. Here she is in conversation with Mrs. Till-Mobley, who wanted to develop the universal themes of family love, tragic loss and a journey to justice. Still, even while Ms. Schutz might find resonance in this commonality, she inadvertently reminds us of a traditional expression of white power through imagery. (Benson 2017)

Benson suggests that Till-Mobley would agree that Schutz's painting keeps conversations about her son, and the racial injustice her painting represents, alive and well in our cultural climate. Nevertheless, Benson continues: "Mrs. Till-Mobley recognized the dangers that exist in the framing and representation of black people by others who lack the cultural connection, the deeply felt pain of enforced marginalization" (Benson 2017). And this is exactly the danger of *Open Casket*. Schutz lacks the cultural connection to Till-Mobley's racial experience and her pain. So, too, do much of the painting's white audience. Johanna Luttrell calls works like *Open Casket* an instance of the appropriation of Black grief and suffering by white audiences. Luttrell states, "Because we—white people like myself—admire the courage, existential risk, and agency in some expressions of black grief (and joy, and all other feelings expressed in movements for racial justice), we often feel justified in representing it accurately" (Luttrell 2019, 69–70). However, such representations often simply perpetuate white, colonialist appropriation of experiences that are not our own. Even if the artist's intentions are good in creating appropriative artworks—and audiences have good intentions in engaging such works—the actual effects of these works are not so noble. White empathy for Black suffering often fails to produce meaningful discussion about white supremacy or broader social change. As Luttrell says, "In appropriating black mourning, white people un-implicate ourselves" (72).

I will return to the concept of *Open Casket* and cultural appropriation in later sections of this article. Hopefully this section makes it clear that the problem of *Open Casket* is not simply that it is exploitative or insensitive. The problem also isn't solely about Schutz's whiteness or that a white woman chose to create a painting representing Black trauma. Rather, the issue, as I see it, is that Schutz represented Black trauma without recognizing how this act was shaped by her experience as a white woman in America. She failed to appreciate the problem of representing an experience that many people do not believe was hers to share. *Open Casket* is one more instance of a white ally intending to create empathy for the plight of racial minorities. But in doing so, the ally perpetuates norms about whose voice is taken seriously in public spheres and whose story is exploited. This is the heart of the problem of speaking for others.

Oppression and the Problem of Speaking for Others

I argue that *Open Casket* embodies a specific type of social oppression. In this and the next section I will spell out specific ways in which I believe *Open Casket*, as well as some other artworks that "speak" for marginalized groups, may be oppressive. My understanding of "oppression" comes from Iris Marion Young's work, in which she describes oppression as:

> the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society. Oppression also refers to systemic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant. Oppression in this sense is

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> structural, rather than the result of a few people's choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, symbols, in the assumptions of underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of those rules. . . . Oppression [is the consequence] of ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short the normal processes of everyday life. (Young 2005, 4)

Several aspects of Young's definition are relevant to understanding *Open Casket*. First, Young makes it clear that oppression is often committed and perpetuated by well-intentioned people, like Jones's concept of "goodwill whites." Socially privileged people often have good intentions and do not wish to be oppressive or to perpetuate power imbalances. Yet our unquestioning or uninformed participation in oppressive structures undermines those good intentions.

Young also stresses that oppression is structural and institutional. Discriminatory norms govern social institutions, such as education, law enforcement, and the job market. The art world is one such oppressive institution. Nonprivileged perspectives have, historically, been left out of art practice and art spaces. Jeremy Fried's recent comments on "ally art" explains one aspect of this:

> The simple truth is there are limits to how much space exhibitions and museums have. If one piece is included, that necessarily means at some point another piece is not. This creates an unavoidable fact that the inclusion of a piece of ally aesthetics necessarily means that a possible piece by a member of the disadvantaged group is not being included. . . . By taking the place of a marginalized group member in the space, the dominant group member is arguing for equality instead of allowing the group member themselves to do so. . . . Moreover, museum spaces have traditionally been dominated by white artists, so by continuing in that tradition, the traditional inequalities are being upheld even if the message being presented argues against them. (Fried 2019, 455)

I cannot know for sure whether Schutz's piece took the place of another work from a marginalized artist. Fried's point is still relevant. These comments suggest that Schutz's presentation of *Open Casket*, though well-intentioned, reaffirms the art world's oppressive practices; it is one more instance of a white artist's work being displayed and gaining prominence, perhaps at the cost of equally qualified work by artists of color. For example, Taylor's piece, *The Times They Ain't A Changing, Fast Enough!,* has received some critical attention, but often only as a backdrop for *Open Casket*.

Young also states that oppression is context-dependent, multifaceted, and comes in degrees. A person or social group may be oppressed in one circumstance, for one aspect of their identity, but not another. For instance, a white woman may be oppressed because of her gender but privileged with respect to her race. Young identifies five "faces" of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young 2005, 5). One could argue that each of these facets of oppression is at play in *Open Casket*. Consider how art institutions exploit the suffering of Black people and profit from the work of Black artists, or how *Open Casket* depicts a horrific act of racialized violence.

I have suggested *Open Casket* as an exemplar of the problem of speaking for others. I interpret the "problem" as a form of two types of oppression Young describes: marginalization and cultural imperialism. In this section, I will show how the problem of

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speaking for others is a form of marginalization. Young states that "marginals are people the system of labor cannot or will not use. . . . A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation or even extermination" (Young 2005, 8, 9). Marginalization is the silencing of a person's voice and perspective because of their (racial, gender, sexual, or other) identity. Certain voices are not heard in our society and certain perspectives are not represented in our media. For instance, women are underrepresented in American politics, as are people with disabilities and members of the LGBTQ+ community. These people are institutionally marginalized.

Marginalization is also a form of epistemic oppression. Epistemic oppression concerns the transmission and uptake of knowledge and information. Kristie Dotson defines epistemic *injustice* as the "hindering of one's contribution to knowledge production; [the] unwarranted infringement on the epistemic agency of knowers" (Dotson 2014, 115). Some people are not treated or thought of as reliable epistemic agents. Their words are not trusted as legitimate sources of information (Fricker 2003; see also Lackey 2020). Epistemic injustice may also work in the opposite way. Some voices are taken more seriously than others because of the identity of the speaker. For instance, when a white man discusses racial privilege, those ideas may be taken more seriously by his audience than if a person of color raised the same ideas.

I claim that *Open Casket* is an exemplar of a specific kind of epistemic marginalization. It manifests *the problem of speaking for others*. We "speak for" others when we "speak in place of them" (Alcoff 1991, 9) and sometimes even when we speak about them. Alcoff states that speaking for others involves representing the other's "needs, goals, situation, and in fact, *who they are*" (9). However, in speaking about another person, I am interpreting that person's life through my own worldview. In Alcoff's terms, I construct their "subject-position." That interpretation is mediated by my own values, experiences, and social positionality. Moreover, a speaker's words are also mediated by her social location. For instance, a woman's white racial identity shapes how her words are interpreted. If we accept that context and the identity of a speaker bears on the meaning of her speech acts, then the same words may mean different things when said by different people (13). This, I think, is what Schutz failed to recognize when she painted *Open Casket*. She intended to create an empathetic object about motherhood and the death of a child. She didn't account for how her white identity influenced her portrayal or how the painting would be received.

What, exactly, is the "problem" with speaking for others? Alcoff states:

> The practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another's situation or as the one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise. The effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies. (6)

Alcoff's statement emphasizes the oppressive possibilities of speaking for others. Some cases of speaking for others are marginalizing and culturally imperialistic. In speaking for others, privileged persons may be silencing them: our own voice is heard over theirs. Speaking for others also shapes the cultural narrative of different social identities. When a white woman speaks for women of color, she presents her racial worldview. Of course, the oppressive consequences of speaking for others may be unintentional. For the present case, one might grant that Schutz didn't mean to silence anyone and didn't intend

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to privilege herself. Still, when a privileged person speaks for others, she often silences the very people she may wish to help, thereby reinforcing oppressive norms about knowledge-transmission and power.

We can think about *Open Casket* and the problem of speaking for others in terms of authority about experiences of racism (see Hanrahan and Antony 2005; Tirrell 2018). Those who have knowledge of a subject—especially firsthand experiential knowledge—are authorities on that subject. So, when speaking about or representing experiences of American racism, one may generally conclude that persons of color who experience this racism are authorities on that subject. This means that racially privileged people are typically not authorities on the *experience* of racism, even if they are authorities on the philosophy, sociology, or legal practices surrounding racism.

Some privileged people may balk at the suggestion that they do not have the authority to speak for oppressed groups. Linda Zagzebski's characterization of epistemic virtue may help us respond to this position. Zagzebski argues that recognizing another's authority requires epistemic trust and humility: I must trust that a person is a good source of knowledge, that they have something to tell me, and that I can learn from them (Zagzebski 2012). This doesn't mean that I must accept everything the authority figure says without question. However, if I grant authority based on experiential knowledge, I do have some reason to believe the information the authority relays about their experiences. In contrast, it may be epistemically hubristic to assume that one has authority on a subject matter for which one hasn't had the relevant experience.

A further question concerns whether one person, or a group of people, can have authority over a *story*—for instance, the story of racialized violence and Emmett Till's death. Consider the following case from Alcoff:

> Anne Cameron, a very gifted White Canadian author, writes several first-person accounts of the lives of Native Canadian women. At the 1988 International Feminist Book Fair in Montreal, a group of Native Canadian writers asks Cameron to, in their words, "move over" on the grounds that her writings are disempowering for indigenous authors. She agrees. (Alcoff 1991, 5)

Cameron displays epistemic humility in "moving over" for Native Canadian writers and recognizing that she is not an authority on the experiences of Native Canadian women. She acknowledged that she was not the best person to tell that story and that, in doing so, she was disempowering those who have the relevant experience. Compare to Schutz and *Open Casket*: whether intentionally or not, Schutz's painting implies that she was qualified to represent Black trauma in a public, powerful arena.

The person who tells a story need not always be the one with the most authority to do so. I may be able to discuss the economic crisis caused by recent stay-at-home orders with my young students even though I am not an authority on the subject. Contrast this example with authority on a lived experience. The difference between *Open Casket* and the economics example has to do with the type of message being communicated in each case. *Open Casket* is about a type of experience (Black trauma, familial trauma). The economics case is about readily accessible social information. The outrage over the painting implies that there is a difference between the two cases; there is something unique about telling the story of lived experience. In communicating a story about one's experience, I am, however unintentionally, claiming ownership of that experience in a way I don't when I relay information that is, in theory, accessible to anyone. It's important to think of experiences in first-person terms. When I tell a story about my

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experience at a beach one summer, I'm telling it from my perspective. My audience knows this. Something similar happens when I communicate another person's experience: I tell the story from my perspective, through my interpretation of events. And that interpretation may get things wrong, in a similar way that Jones suggests that empathy can often get things wrong.

Schutz did acknowledge her own lack of authority in her response to the *Open Casket* backlash: she stated that she doesn't know what it's like to be Black in America. She wished to create a work about familial trauma, not Black trauma, yet *Open Casket* is about both. The two types of trauma are not easily disentangled; Schutz could not create a work featuring Till's death that did not raise issues about Black experiences in America.

Cultural Imperialism and the Problem of Speaking for Others

Speaking for others is culturally imperialistic as well as marginalizing. Young writes, "to experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other. . . . [Cultural imperialism] involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm" (Young 2005, 12). In short, cultural imperialism is a way in which dominant social groups shape the cultural narrative of both themselves and subordinate groups. Cultural imperialism establishes certain groups as possessing the "normal" cultural perspective. This is often achieved through artistic practices. I've already mentioned two forms of cultural imperialism as relevant to discussions of *Open Casket*: how white artists depict persons of color in objectifying or stereotypical ways and, following Fried, how white artists dominate the art world and so shape cultural ideas about the nature of art, evaluations of art, and what perspectives are portrayed in art.

There is an assumption of whiteness in the art world (Devereaux 1990; Flory 2013). Audiences often assume that characters in a novel are white unless stated otherwise; this is why we see controversies during the casting of film and TV adaptations, where a director chooses to cast a person of color in a role that some white audiences assume to be occupied by white actors (for example, all-Black casts of *Julius Caesar*, or the casting of Amandla Stenberg as Rue in *The Hunger Games*). There is also a presumption of a white *perspective*, or *white gaze*. This phenomenon refers to the literal and metaphorical visual experience of persons of color by white folk. The gaze carries with it significant conceptual baggage. George Yancy describes the white gaze as a "site of white power, hegemony, and privilege, one that comes replete with an assemblage of "knowledge" or a racist episteme regarding the Black body" (Yancy 2017, 243). He continues:

> White *gazing* is a violent process. It is not an atomic act or an inaugural event that captures, in an unmediated fashion, the bareness, as it were, of "objects." Indeed, white gazing is an historical achievement. In other words, white gazing is a specific historical practice, socially collective and intersubjective, a process that is dutifully maintained. Whether consciously or unconsciously enacted, white gazing is an achievement that is synonymous with an accomplishment, that which is the result of actions, deeds (*pragma*), practices. (243)

The white gaze, like oppressive practices in general, carries historical baggage, current social beliefs, institutional challenges, and personal assumptions about race and,

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specifically, persons of color. The idea is that the white gaze—either literally when a white person views a person of color, or metaphorically when a white person judges or imagines a person of color—is never pure or "bare." I never just see a person of color; persons of color are experienced through a complicated lens of assumptions and beliefs about what Blackness, for instance, means in contemporary America, with all its associated characteristics (aggression, poverty, and so on). Yancy suggests that such gazes often lead to further racist judgments, feelings, and actions.

The Help is one egregious example of the white gaze. Both the novel and the film adaptation depict the lives of young white women and their Black maids in the 1960s American South. The 2012 film was exceedingly popular. A quick perusal of Rotten Tomatoes suggests that many audiences find the story about race relations to be both heartening and positive. However, Dan Flory describes how many Black women did not feel that the film provides an accurate or positive representation of the Black maids (Flory 2013). In an open letter, the Association of Black Women Historians stated that the film "distorts, ignores, and trivializes the experiences of Black domestic workers," and specifically mentions the harmful stereotypes of the Mammy figure and of Black men as absent, abusive, and drunk (Rivas 2012). Viola Davis, who played the maid Aibileen in the film, recently stated that she regrets being in the film:

> I just felt that at the end of the day that it wasn't the voices of the maids that were heard. I know Aibileen. I know Minny. They're my grandma. They're my mom. And I know that if you do a movie where the whole premise is, I want to know what it feels like to work for white people and to bring up children in 1963, I want to hear how you really feel about it. I never heard that in the course of the movie. (Desta 2018)

Davis's comments imply that *The Help* didn't tell the appropriate story; if the film's intention was to show what it was like for Black maids in the 1960s, then it failed in that goal. Moreover, the lives of the Black maids were depicted through a white lens (both the author of the novel and director of the film were white). The implication is that the story would be different if it were told by a Black artist.

Indeed, one way to resist cultural imperialism—and, in some circumstances, the problem of others speaking for a group—is the ability to tell one's own story about one's lived experience. Cultural imperialism allows a dominant group to shape the discussion about an oppressed group. It is an act of resistance to reshape the discussion about one's identity—to allow women to tell stories about their experience of womanhood, or to allow persons of color to share what it is like to experience their own racial identity, rather than have that story told by a white person. Cultural imperialism takes the form of *external* definition: when a member of a dominant social group gets to tell the story of what it means to experience life as a member of an oppressed group. In her work *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins highlights the importance of *self*-definition: "[D]efining and valuing one's consciousness of one's own self-defined standpoint in the face of images that foster a self-definition as the objectified 'other' is an important way of resisting the dehumanization essential to systems of domination" (Collins 1999, 108). Collins says that external definitions are "dehumanizing"; they deny agency, autonomy, and respect to members of the oppressed group. Lynne Tirrell makes a similar point: "The call for women to have the power to articulate our own experiences in our own terms, to develop a conceptual scheme that can

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encompass many of the experiential dissonances with which we struggle daily, is a struggle against what Audre Lorde calls 'the restrictions of externally imposed definition'" (Tirrell 1993, 16). As Alcoff states, when I speak about another, "I am engaging in the act of representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, who they are" (Alcoff 1991, 9). Important to note is that all such representations are also interpretations. I understand the needs, goals, and so forth of others through the lens of my own worldview. What I want, instead, is the power to represent *myself*, to shape the cultural narrative of my identity.

I contend that both *The Help* and *Open Casket* perpetuate external definitions through cultural objects in ways that "speak for" marginalized groups. Schutz's depiction of Till is not simply a recreation of a photo. It is her interpretation of Till's death and a commentary on race relations and racialized violence. Moreover, like *The Help*, *Open Casket* is an instance of the white gaze (both figuratively and literally, in terms of who witnesses the painting and who created it). The notion of self-definition helps explain why Taylor's painting of Philando Castile is not seen as problematic: this is a depiction of Black violence by a Black man; it is his way of making meaning of racialized violence in America. So, from the perspective of racial oppression, *who* tells the story matters to the object's power as a social tool.

One challenge concerns the scope of self-, or internal, definition. A narrowly internal definition is impossible in cases like Till's and Castile's; they are not alive to tell their individual stories. Internal definitions typically extend beyond the individual self to one's self-ascribed identity group. In Tirrell's terms, a woman or group of women may have the power to conceptualize contemporary womanhood, whereas men do not. Issues arise here with intersectionality: a white woman may not be able to conceptualize what it means to be a person of color. A woman of color may not be able to speak for all members of her racial group (consider, for instance, the critique against Beyoncé for appropriating black NOLA culture). This causes a scope problem: if I speak beyond myself, am I doing something wrong? It seems clear that *some* people should not speak for others. The worry is that any outside-of-the-self identity-definition is imperialistic. The result is that one may only ever speak for and about oneself. I will turn to this challenge presently.

When Can Artists Speak for Others?

My discussion of *Open Casket* suggests that Schutz should not have presented the painting as she did. Perhaps it also implies that no privileged artist should represent the experiences of social others because doing so is an act of oppression. This seems like an undesirable result. In the remainder of this article, I will address this challenge to the position I have taken on artworks that speak for others. I wish to address two questions: Must artists create works only about their own social identities? Is there a positive way for artists to "speak" for others?

Like all people, artists occupy unique social locations and have their own perspective on their social environment. Perhaps they shouldn't expand their work beyond this social location; they should not try to escape their individual perspective. The worry is that artists may never represent anyone other than themselves. This is obviously untenable as an artistic practice and would make for a very boring and solipsistic art world. It's also undesirable. One of the great benefits of art is that works enable audiences to encounter places, people, and circumstances of which they were previously unaware. Such opportunities often rely on artists extending their representations beyond what they directly experience.

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Alcoff raises a similar concern about speaking for others. Speaking for others is often important for social and political change: "If I don't speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my privilege? If I should not speak for others, should I restrict myself to following their lead uncritically? Is my greatest contribution to *move over and get out of the way*? If so, what is the best way to do this—to keep silent or to deconstruct my own discourse?" (Alcoff 1991, 8). Alcoff acknowledges that sometimes getting out of the way is the best option for privileged people. However, the "retreat" response is often politically irresponsible. Social change often requires speaking for others—especially for those who do not have the opportunity to speak for themselves (17). Moreover, retreating from speaking for others is a kind of discursive dominance; one must be in a position of privilege to be able to retreat from speaking. By not speaking, a privileged person avoids responsibility for the effects of her actions and permits "the continued dominance of current discourses" (20).

The answer to the present challenge, then, is not to retreat from speaking for others through artistic practices. Artists and others may speak for others in some cases. Rather, privileged persons must rethink *how* we speak for others.

Alcoff introduces four sets of discursive practices for people who desire to speak for others. Alcoff's suggestions are intended for typical speech acts, but I think they can be helpful reminders for artistic practices as well. The overall recommendation is for artists to evaluate their intentions and consider the effects their works have in the world. Works that fail to do this may be subject to condemnation and reveal a desire to imperialistically control a conversation, rather than an open-minded, well-considered goal to better social injustices.

First, Alcoff suggests that "The *impetus to speak* must be carefully analyzed and, in many cases (certainly for academics) fought against . . . the point is that the impetus to *always* be the speaker and to speak in all situations must be seen for what it is: a desire for mastery and domination" (Alcoff 1991, 24). This pronouncement may seem hard and restrictive, but that's the point. Members of privileged groups must recognize that they are not always the best people to speak on a subject. It is an act of intellectual humility to acknowledge one's discursive restrictions and keep from speaking anyway. Doing so enables others whose voices have traditionally been ignored or silenced to speak on their own behalf.

Second, one must "interrogate the *bearing of our location and context* on what we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice in which we engage" (25). This means that speakers must acknowledge their social identity and associated privilege when speaking. Does a person's whiteness affect what they say and how they say it? Will that bear on how the speaker's words are understood? It is a daunting challenge to explicitly acknowledge how one's identity bears on our speech acts. It requires introspection and honesty in the face of potentially painful realizations about one's place in the world. However, *not* acknowledging one's location could result in speech acts that are naïve (at best) and harmful (at worst) to those they intend to help—for instance, Schutz's claim that *Open Casket* was an empathetic piece about motherhood.

Third, speaking must "carry with it an accountability and responsibility for what an individual says. . . . [This] entails a serious commitment to remain open to criticism and to attempt actively, attentively, and sensitively 'hear' the criticism (i.e., understand it)" (25, 26). Because the meaning of a speech act depends on the context in which it is uttered—who is speaking, who is listening—a speaker does not have complete control

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over the effects of her speech. She may think that she's helping, but she hasn't taken the full extent of her utterances into account. Alcoff's Anne Cameron case is an important example: once it was made clear to Cameron that her actions were oppressive, she accepted that she was wrong and stopped creating works that spoke for Native Canadians.

Lastly, to evaluate speaking for others, one must "analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context. We cannot simply look at the location of the speaker or her credentials to speak; nor can we look merely at the propositional content of the speech; we must also look at where the speech goes and what it does there" (26). This point suggests that there is a way for privileged persons to speak for others; we cannot simply look at a speaker's gender or race and conclusively state that they shouldn't speak on behalf of an oppressed group.

Some of these discursive recommendations will be quite challenging for artists to incorporate. For instance, how does an artist make their social location explicit in their work? Perhaps there are creative artistic ways to do this; more likely, I think that it is the discourse surrounding a work of art where acknowledgment of privilege happens: in artist statements, author's notes, interviews, and the like. Alternatively, an artist may choose to "move over" and not create such works to begin with. I don't see such challenges as a problem for the view I have presented; upending social oppression is always difficult. This isn't artistic censorship, but it does require artists to acknowledge their social power and to think creatively about how to combat their privilege.

I believe that some white artists have been successful in confronting race and racism in their work. For example, Fried recognizes the charcoal drawing "Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014)" by Robert Longo as a praiseworthy work of ally art. The charcoal depicts Ferguson police in body armor, appearing "ominous and dangerous . . . not how we envisage the police if we are in the privileged group" (Fried 2019, 456). Fried argues that this is a successful piece of ally art in that it does not co-opt another racial group's experiences and does not rely on harmful or demeaning stereotypes of oppressed groups. In my terms, it does not speak for others and, in fact, the work challenges cultural imperialistic norms about police and policing.

In a recent article, the journalist Daniel C. Blight cites Christopher Harris of the University of Iowa, who wrote that "he wished white people would start making art about being white and stop trying to embody the stories of black people" (Blight 2019). In other words, instead of creating works about the grief and pain of oppressed groups, white artists may instead confront their own whiteness and white supremacy in their work. Blight continues: "This is what we need to learn how to do better: investigate our own whiteness. Ask ourselves *why* we are so committed to it, and *why* we become afraid and violent when we imagine someone taking it from us" (Blight 2019).

A recent collection of photography, *The Image of Whiteness*, does just this. The collection seeks to call attention to assumptions of whiteness in that medium (Roediger et al. 2019). Blight states that this collection reveals how the history of images is not racially or socially neutral; it is, rather, a history of whiteness. What, then, if we erase whiteness from these images, or call (white) audiences to cast our gaze at whiteness itself, instead of oppressed groups? For instance, the white artist Buck Ellison created a series of photographs of white families in traditional family portrait style. The photograph "The Prince Children, Holland, Michigan, 2019" shows four white, blonde youths lounging in a "traditional" American home: they wear plaid and khaki in front of a fireplace and flowered sofa in a seemingly wealthy and comfortable home complete with many books, paintings, vases, and other signifiers of wealth. This is a

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subtle critique of whiteness, to be sure, but one that openly challenges domestic white "normalcy." As Blight states:

> The subjects portrayed in Buck Ellison's part-documentary, part-staged photographs could be any number of wealthy Americans who form an elite class of expensively educated individuals, proud of their success and the history of the US. Is this a "perfect white family," or is it a picture that contains and reports a number of questionable and humorous white appearances? (Blight 2019)

Works like "Untitled: (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014)" and "The Prince Children, Holland, Michigan, 2019" are attempts by white artists to call attention to racial injustice without appropriating the suffering of Black victims of white supremacy. Instead, they emphasize whiteness itself and seek to undermine assumptions about systemic power structures that contribute to white supremacy. In contrast to these successful works of ally art, I have argued that *Open Casket* is a site of oppression; its creation was a misguided attempt at empathy by a well-intentioned but misguided privileged person who did not recognize the influence of her social power and did not take responsibility for the effects of her actions. It counts as a *problem* of speaking for others because it fails to meet the responsible discursive practices described here. I have also offered some reasons why privileged artists should be wary of speaking for others and guidelines for appropriate speech when they do. I hesitate to make any blanket pronouncements about how artists ought to act. Still, I believe that artists may be subject to the same kinds of restraints that all social allies face: to respect the autonomy of their subject and acknowledge the effects that the work will have in the world. *Open Casket* does not do this and so remains a socially problematic work of art.

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