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The Possibilities and Failures of the Racial Imagination

Three writers consider the controversy surrounding Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till and the Whitney Museum's public response to it.

Chloë Bass, Seph Rodney, Jillian Steinhauer |



Claudia Rankine introducing the April 9 event at the Whitney Museum (photo by Jillian Steinhauer/Hyperallergic)

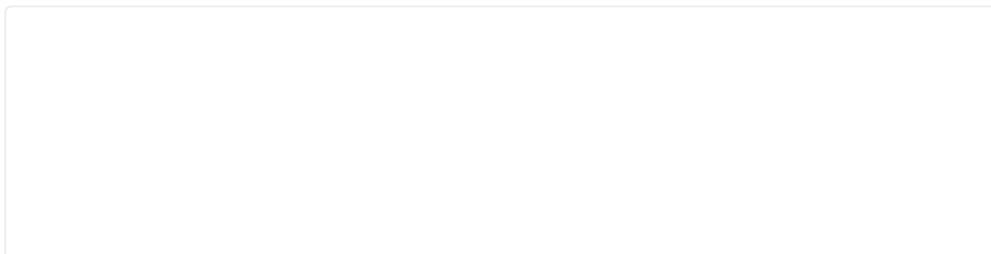
Over the past few weeks, the [conversation](#) and [controversy](#) surrounding Dana Schutz’s painting of a photograph of the lynched Emmett Till, “Open Casket” — currently on view in the [Whitney Biennial](#) — has engulfed the art world. The Whitney Museum presented a [public response](#) on Sunday night, April 9, co-hosted by the writer [Claudia Rankine’s Racial Imaginary Institute](#). For the event, 14 speakers, including the two curators of the biennial, Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks, were invited to give brief meditations on anything related to the topic at hand — Schutz’s painting, Emmett Till and his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, white supremacy, institutional responsibility. The three of us attended, and we found it, by turns, intriguing, depressing, boring, and exhilarating. We left wanting to talk more about this idea of the racial imagination and, in the case of the Schutz debacle, its failure.

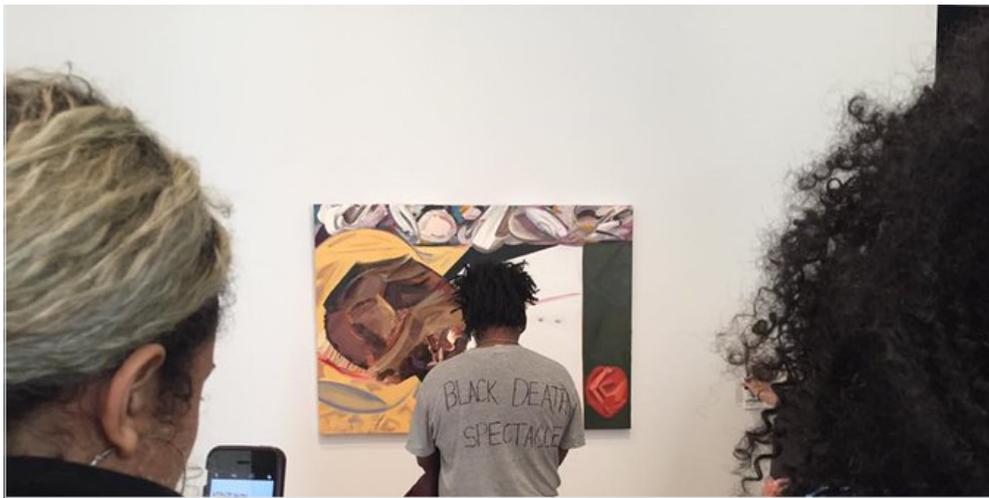
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Chloë Bass: This conversation is situated around the idea of the imaginary: The Whitney event was hosted by the Racial Imaginary Institute, which claims to operate in the service of recognizing race as a powerful construct. It addressed the imagination of an artist, Dana Schutz, which has been tagged in this case as a “failure of empathy,” and folded together the ruptures of imagination that have accompanied responses to her painting. (One clear example is the dangerous comparison of Hannah Black’s call for destruction to censorship perpetuated by the state. This is a powerful idea that we know for a fact to be false, yet it continues to circulate.)

I wanted to ask the panelists, but didn’t, what imaginaries they hope to perpetuate or produce through the execution of an exhibit. What imaginaries are perpetuated or produced through the formulation and maintenance of an institution like a museum? What are the limits or hopes of our own imaginations in response to this controversy and its outcomes?

I also want to talk about economic imaginaries: so much of the outcry around this work is, I think, a product of our ideas of value and the seemingly “neutral” value that the museum provides for a work. This neutral value is, of course, both not neutral at all — we know that museum exhibits are funded in large part by commercial galleries and private collectors so as to add a sense of intellectual worth to works already owned and up for sale — and also highly monetized. Dana Schutz stating that her painting is not for sale misses the point entirely: transactions of worth are built on imaginaries, just as the continued non-abstract violence that happens to Black bodies is built on a certain kind of imaginary. Both can be made real in a single instance (the sale of a painting, the destruction of a body) that sets a precedent for a longer-term operation of the same function (the worth of Schutz’s work going forward, the continued murder of many Black bodies). Nothing in this conversation exists in a single instance.





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At the Whitney, a protest against Dana Schutz' painting of Emmett Till: "She has nothing to say to the Black community about Black trauma."

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Seph Rodney: Having read Chloë's start to our conversation, I realized that I wasn't sure what an "imaginary" actually is. I ran to a dictionary for the intellectual comfort of leaning on an authoritative text. Apparently, an imaginary is simply the product of *the* imagination, that which is unreal. The definitive article "the" in this definition gets to me. I think it's not necessarily *my* imagination, because, as Chloë says, "Nothing in this conversation exists in a single instance"; *the* imaginary is suite of shared, circulating ideas. There are many of these: familial, religious, the tandem series of speculations and fantasies that I share with someone I love. There are the imaginaries I've inherited, of which James Baldwin recently reminded me, via director Raoul Peck's documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*. Baldwin convincingly argued that the shared, productive imagination that generated the idea of a "nigger" (in which many of us trade) is completely damning: it damns the people (and their progeny, genetic and intellectual) to never grow up or become full people; it damns the future of this nation; it damns me in ways that should be fairly obvious by now. It damned Emmett Till.

I wonder what good it does to point out the failure of the imaginaries already present when I walk into a room. I mean, I know there is an ethical and emotional catharsis when I fire up my engines of indignation and let fly. I remember, as an MFA student at UC Irvine, listening to Daniel J. Martinez on one of his magnificently polemical diatribes, asking a group of seminar students why it was that, despite sustained critique by several generations of artists, the system for production of art seemed to nevertheless be

increasingly shaped by a neoliberal worldview. It just came out of me, unexpectedly: “that’s because of the poverty of your imagination.” I think I meant his generation, or the UCI fine arts faculty and students, which at the time maintained a kind of smug criticality.

So I recall this and think of the dry, emaciated joy that I can get from pointing to a failure, especially a public one. There are so many ways our collective imaginary constructs have let us down that become more visible in this Whitney debacle. Chloë has indicated some in the above, and I agree with her that the painter paid insufficient attention to the primacy of her work’s content over her own practiced, formalist approach, and that Hannah Black failed to recognize that her call to destroy the work was far too self-serving, opposing what she structures as a weak and apologist position against one that is tyrannical and vindictive. There are other failures: On Sunday, Christopher Lew couldn’t or wouldn’t find a way to say something that sounded genuine, rather than a PR-vetted statement that served as institutional deflection in the guise of championing an open exchange of ideas and art’s willingness to be controversial. His colleague, Mia Locks, was a little better, though she offered only the meager opportunity to reach out and talk with her about the exhibition. Then, there is the failure of the Whitney to have meaningfully dealt with issues of representation in its exhibitions since, as Lyle Ashton Harris and Lorraine O’Grady pointed out, the 1994 *Black Male* show, which seemed at that bright moment to add a new paragraph to the script of crucially important museum shows.





Fred Wilson's "Guarded View" (1991) was included in the Whitney's 1994 *Black Male* exhibition. It's shown here in the museum's inaugural exhibition in its new home in 2015, *America Is Hard to See*. (photo by Jillian Steinhauer/Hyperallergic)

There is also a generational failure: those artists and teachers who believed that sustained critique allied to aesthetic production could point the way out of a racist, classist, misogynist, homophobic wilderness. They didn't imagine that destabilizing notions of authoritative history and throwing institutions and even the notion of truth into question would not prevent angry, organized conservatives from grasping power in government and civic institutions and using that power to ratify white supremacy. They didn't anticipate critique's failure to prevent aesthetic production from being colonized by the market, which conditions our relations to be competitive and instrumentalist. So many failures. My throat gets thicker as I write this, because I am truly exhausted by our collective failures, and my own failure to somehow see beyond the mountains of debris around me.

Does it help that I can still envision what success would look like: an art production system uncoupled from the need to buy and sell and from the urgency to satisfy one's ego, and a robust and genuinely respectful civic arena for public conversation, where we prioritize actually seeing and recognizing each other? It feels like a kilo of salt on my tongue as I try to articulate the term "imaginary" and wonder why we fail even in our thoughts (where we might be most free).

Jillian Steinhauer: First off, I want to say that both of you are extremely smart, and I am humbled to be having this conversation with you.

Probably because I'm white, what has struck me the most in almost every aspect of the Schutz debacle — from creation of painting to display to protest to aftermath — has been the failure of the white imagination. As Ryan Wong wrote in his brilliant [piece for Hyperallergic](#), "Why do white artists think the only way you can discuss race is through the suffering of people of color?" It's not just artists, but the vast majority of white people — we are able only to conceive of race as something that belongs or happens to people of color (I mean, look at the term "people of color"). Because we are taught, by white supremacy, that we are raceless, or post-race. So, you get someone like Schutz, but also many others before her, who think that the only way to engage with racial issues is to try to empathize with the position of a person of color — *not* to try to understand her own position as a white person. That's the failure that is so crucial to me: not recognizing that white supremacy renders whiteness invisible, and that undoing white supremacy means intervening in that quiet, nefarious process by naming whiteness — by recognizing and pointing out how it works and our own relationship to it.

Others have said this in different ways, and I agree and want to restate it here: what if, instead of painting Emmett Till, Dana Schutz had painted Carolyn Bryant, the white woman who knowingly, falsely accused Till of grabbing and threatening her? Is there some kind of constructive work a painting like that could do?



Dana Schutz's "Open Casket" (2016) (photo by Benjamin Sutton/Hyperallergic)

The other glaring failure of the white imagination that I see here — both in Schutz and in the Whitney, which is, at the end of the day, a white institution, despite having enlisted two Asian Americans to curate the biennial — is the complete inability to foresee how Black viewers might respond to that painting. This failure is so absurd, honestly, that I find myself coming to the appalling conclusion that it might never have even occurred to Schutz or the higher-ups at the Whitney that Black viewers *would see the painting*. Because the presumed art audience is white. As you said, Chloë, we need to stop operating in the myth that museums are neutral spaces. “Neutral” usually means “white,” and white is a dangerous power construct.

To borrow Lyle Ashton Harris's words from Sunday night, I have no interest in having a “kumbaya moment” here, but I'm curious if either of you sees any of the failures here as potentially productive or somehow offering a clue about how to move forward.

CB: I've said before, and am happy to say again here, that I don't think the job of the artist is to invoke realities neither we nor our intended audience can imagine, and then expect to change the world. I don't know for sure, but maybe that's what Dana Schutz was hoping to do: take something that wasn't hers (as

opposed to the Carolyn Bryant story, which was definitely up for her grabs) and give it, through curators whose story this also wasn't, to an institution that didn't get it, to viewers that the institution assumed wouldn't notice (and here I draw directly from your point about assuming there's no Black audience, Jillian). All of these failed imaginings result in the continuation of a system that we know to fall short in dramatic and ongoing ways.

So this is where I want to add something new with regards to the question of responsibility: I don't think this is about the Whitney at all. Neither do I think it's about Dana Schutz, Hannah Black, or any of the other cast of characters who have spoken on this topic. I can imagine a world without all of these institutions and individuals. If I'm really being honest, the only person I can't imagine the world without is myself (although it's an interesting thought exercise). What this indicates to me is that responsibility starts with me. I see disavowing, or somehow unseeing, my own subject position as the beginning of a chain of wild inaccuracies. I might want a world where I ask other people to position themselves in the same way. I think many people do this, but it's also an thing easy to forget when we're working at the scale of tackling an entire system.

Seph and Jillian, you both make clear that wild white imaginations result in controlled death. I guess what I want to ask, or optimistically point to, as a first condition of improving our imaginations and their results, is where we permit violence in our own lives. How can we let go of the desperation and scarcity mentality that force us to keep relying on the Whitney, or any other institution, even when they fail us time and time again? Who are we hoping to please? I'm asking for a world where we give ourselves permission to move beyond these pale beliefs. I still believe in institutional accountability, but I also think we can do more than just exhaust ourselves with constant call-outs of a system that has built up centuries of defense against active listening. (Defenses, I might add, that we now mimic as individuals.)

Here's one positive suggestion: what if white artists and institutions, instead of capitalizing on and re-creating Black pain, created space to celebrate Black joy (without capitalizing on it)? It doesn't seem so hard to do this. I think we could all really be happy there. Black joy is expansive and resilient. If you think there's no way to do this without capitalizing on it, then maybe the answers we're looking for just aren't able to exist in the places we're looking.

SR: I am truly grateful to have this conversation with two women who are woke and who I can trust. Please know I appreciate that you are rare human beings. Most people I wouldn't even broach this conversation with.

Two things come to mind in response to Chloë's suggestion of responsibility beginning with the self, and her question as to why we continue to rely on consistently disappointing institutions. The first is: I disagree. I think responsibility precedes me. I enter into a culture where a set of politics already exists that encourages most people (even those who look like me) to dehumanize each other, to mistake each other for the sign of something else. I know that I am responsible for wringing whatever joy I can from the fruits I can reach, but damned if the orchard isn't structured to make it hard to get to them.

The second is that I think we still need institutions, especially civic ones, because they allow private experience to rub up against public judgment. That's how we lead lives where we are not so alone, either ensconced in the semi-private enclaves of the family or the culture of the place of employment. Civic space is crucial to allow us to grow.

Jillian's suggestion (which was made by an audience member on Sunday as well) that the arts community think about dealing with perpetrators of violence rather than its victims is a good one. It's about time we start doing that. Chloë *might* be suggesting that we form new institutions, ones that are responsive and meaningfully accountable — which is also a worthy goal, though I find that somewhat entrepreneurial spirit to not be where I am right now.

Right now, I don't want to rush off to try to make it better. Right now I just want to sit with an acknowledgment of our failures and look at them, really look at them, and then perhaps be able to understand them.

JS: Seph, I admire your patience. Chloë, I admire your readiness to take yourself to task. I could stand to improve in both of those areas. I do agree with Seph that we need institutions, for better or for worse — and I think I see it as both: I believe in personal responsibility, but I also think holding institutions accountable is a key part of that. It's important for me to work to understand my own shortcomings, failures, whiteness, privilege, but it's equally important for me to take what I learn in that process and extend it out into the world. Sometimes I think I'm being hopelessly mainstream and naïve when I continually insist that we must work to challenge the system; other times I think it's the only real shot we have. It's interesting to note, in relation to this event, that Claudia Rankine did decide to start her own, alternative institution — the Racial Imaginary Institute — but for her first event, she chose to collaborate with a pre-existing institution, the Whitney Museum. That collaboration may have resulted in an event that was less incisive, less rigorous than it could have been without the Whitney's involvement. But one could also argue that it was important to have such an event at the Whitney, because it gave the critiques leveled there (especially those against the museum itself) added weight.



Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter at the New Museum (photo by Madeleine Hunt Ehrlich)

Chloë, when you mentioned Black joy, I immediately thought of the [Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter](#) event at the New Museum last year. Seeing a white institutional space given over to Black joy left a deep, lasting impression and really opened up a space of imagination within me. It seems relevant to note that the event came about because the artist Simone Leigh, who had her own show at the New Museum, took the initiative of proposing it — she was willing to cede some of her personal limelight to a larger cause. Maybe that's the place where personal responsibility intersects with the institutional. An artist must think about not just what they paint, but also the ethical implications of how they interact with the world. (This is perhaps why I loved [Ajay Kurian's](#) contribution on Sunday night — he's an artist in the Whitney Biennial who is not afraid to criticize the show or the institution that's hosting him.) In doing so, they may be able to think more imaginatively about the possibilities of that interaction.

I keep thinking that it feels unfair to lay all of this at the feet of individual artists (and writers, curators, etc). At the end of the day, we're all trying to make a creative living (which is next to impossible) within the confines of the system we've been given. But the problem, of course, is that the system will never imagine anything beyond itself — and the system is, ultimately, comprised of people. So maybe the ideas that this comes down to personal vs. institutional responsibility are not actually opposed — maybe they're one and the same ... or at least, they're related.

CB: One of the speakers last Sunday mentioned not confusing David with Goliath. That is essential here as well. While I think the format of institutional responsibility and personal responsibility can (or should?) be the same, the former is a greater, more aggregated, and more powerful form of the latter. The scales are not comparable.

I also just want to say, as we close out, that I appreciate very much that we're not in total agreement. That feels important to me. I want to provide and be a part of more atmospheres where nuanced non-agreement can take place. For me, that celebration of the potential of real imagination, and the resulting dialogue, is the most important step towards any true change.

JS: Agreed wholeheartedly — I think a lot of the Schutz fallout has been the product of non-nuanced non-agreement, to use a double negative. I keep finding myself unsatisfied with such an inconclusive ending to our conversation, but it probably helps to remember that we are only three of the *many* people who've had and will continue to have it. If these questions were resolved, we wouldn't need to keep asking them.

SR: Yes. I'm with both of you in spirit and in truth. We don't need to fully agree — as long as we can create collaborations of productive tension (institutions might want to consider this, if they haven't yet). In this season of real, demonstrable threat to our imaginations and lives, it feels right to end this conversation inconclusively but with the conviction that we are going to argue while still holding each other's hands.

The [2017 Whitney Biennial](#) continues at the Whitney Museum of American Art (99 Gansevoort Street, Meatpacking District, Manhattan) through June 11.