Paintings and Moving Pictures

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The 1955 murder of Emmett Till shocked a nation—as did the decision of his mother to have a public, open casket funeral. By putting his brutalized body on display, she hoped that seeing the results of a horrific hate crime would force the public to begin to confront the realities of racism in America. In 2016, white artist Dana Schutz hoped to translate this trauma into art; she never expected the angry reaction she received. Her painting Open Casket is a rendering of the portrait of Till published in many newspapers at the time of his death.

In her essay “Getting in and Out,” Zadie Smith explores the controversy over Open Casket as well as the excitement over the film Get Out directed by Jordan Peele. Peele’s film is revolutionary in the way it portrays the black experience through black eyes. By examining both of these pieces as well as her own experience, Smith asks “Who owns black pain?” Smith assumes that because she and others identify herself as a black woman, she has the right to paint Emmett Till (88). However, when she moves from herself to her children, who appear white despite having a biracial mother and a black grandmother, she asks, “Could they take black suffering as a subject of their art . . . ?” (88). This examination of who is entitled to create works of art provides an interesting opposition to conceptual artist Hannah Black’s letter attacking and calling for the destruction of Open Casket.

As a member of the white majority with the closest semblance of color in my heritage being a Cuban great-grandmother, I was forced to consider very hard whether I could enter this conversation. As I looked closer at Smith’s essay, I felt more justified about contributing my voice to this topic. She seems to feel that the color of a person’s skin should not determine whether or not they can contribute their voice to a discussion. But how far can people like me venture into a debate about race, as one who have never been oppressed because of it? Was Hannah Black right about Open Casket? What exactly are the roles of white artists in working to bring awareness to the black experience?
Each year the Whitney Biennial showcases many pieces of contemporary art by young artists. *Open Casket* was far from the only important piece showcased there; *The Times They Ain’t A Changing Fast Enough!* by Henry Taylor seeks to depict another tragic experience when America betrayed our black brothers and sisters. This piece has been referenced many times in this controversy already, but it spoke to me before I had even learned of these other instances. When I looked at Taylor’s painting of Philando Castile I felt a distinct sense of pain and anger, something I didn’t feel while looking at *Open Casket*. Taylor paints from the point of view of Castile’s girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds. The distinct shapes and unique use of color psychology impacted me deeply. The sharp definition of each shape makes the work somewhat jarring to look on: the scene clearly isn’t peaceful. Another striking stylistic feature is the lack of details in Castile’s hands and on the officer’s gun. This in and of itself doesn’t seem particularly important until it is seen juxtaposed against Castile’s eye. The sharp contrast of the small shapes that make up his eye with the brown expanse of his face show clear emotion: not shock but resignation. This indicates the fact that murders of black men by police are no longer—if they ever were—shocking or unusual. The faceless officer suggests the idea that it is not an isolated incident and that it wasn’t just that officer who killed him, but rather the institution of white police in America as a whole and the racism that is a foundational element of the whole police system.

When I returned from the museum, I did some research into Henry Taylor. Upon learning that he was a black man, I wondered if that was, in part, what allowed him to create such a powerful piece. Similar to myself, when Zadie Smith looked at *Open Casket*, she “wasn’t particularly moved” (89). Could this somehow be connected to the fact that Dana Schutz came into the work as a mother rather than a fellow black American as Taylor did? Was Schutz’s race a contributing factor in her creation of the work at all?

White Americans tend to approach Black Americans in a very specific way, likely due to the way that we were taught in school, by the media, and by many of our parents. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk *The Danger of a Single Story*, she discusses the perils of using a single narrative as the foundation for our understanding of other cultures. In order to illustrate this, she shares a story from her childhood about her Nigerian family’s houseboy. She explains that
her mother always described him and his family as poor, and the shock she experienced when she went to the boy’s village and saw how hard-working and talented he and his family were. Adichie connects this memory to her early years in the United States, saying that Americans believe that African people are an “incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, [. . . ] waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner.” Smith also notices that a large part of Get Out’s jokes operate on “reversals,” taking fears black people have about white people and putting them on screen. She examines one of the film’s first scenes, in which a black man is attacked in a white suburb by a white man, as opposed to the classic stereotype of a black mugger attacking a white businessman.

Though Adichie’s example is on a very large scale, being the perception of an entire continent, it is feasible to connect the concept to white understanding of black America. Could the difference in the emotional foundation of Open Casket and The Times . . . be, at least in part, attributed to the single story Dana Schutz was operating with while painting Open Casket? It is clear that most schools, the news media, television programs, books, and so on operate under a single story of “Black American life,” an experience usually rife with gang violence, drugs, and absent fathers, every so often sprinkled with the oh-so-lucky introduction of a white savior to show a struggling teen the “right” thing to do. And from the other side, could parts of Hannah Black’s letter be attributed to a single story she held of what it meant to be black enough? Was Dana Schutz’s painting limited by what she, and most white people, are taught about what it means to be black?

While we continue to consider these loaded queries, might we also apply the danger of a single story concept to the LGBTQ community? As I’ve mentioned, I’m a white person, and because of this I can’t truly relate to the black experience in America. However, I can relate parts to my own minority status as a gay and transgender person. Timothy McNeil’s film Anything, based on his play of the same name, stars male cisgender actor Matt Bomer as a transgender woman. This casting choice is hardly an uncommon occurrence—examples can be seen with Jared Leto in Dallas Buyer’s Club and Eddie Redmayne in The Danish Girl. There is a distinct difference between these films and Open Casket, namely the fact that transgender people are being denied roles and losing income and visibility. Transgender actress Jen Richards wrote an opinion piece for LOGO News about why selecting cisgender men to star in these roles over transgender women,
or even cisgender women, is not only highly problematic but also dangerous, citing that this pattern reinforces the idea that trans women are no more than men in wigs (2017). Close to what Adichie addresses in her TED Talk, a single story of what it means to be a transgender woman is constantly fed to the general public: not only are they perverts and sex workers, but deep down they are also just men pretending.

When I first read Zadie Smith’s essay and looked at the Open Casket controversy, I didn’t make a connection with Anything; Hannah Black and others’ rage over it was confusing to me. It’s just a work of art trying to reintroduce the reality of our horrid history. While I still believe that Dana Schutz had the right to create that work of art, I understand the uproar’s origin. To be completely honest, I didn’t understand it until very recently in the days following the Trump tweets banning transgender people from enlisting or serving in the military. Frankly, the decision itself wasn’t what opened my eyes to the emotion behind the reaction to Open Casket; it was the passionate outpouring against the ban that followed. It makes me feel like a terrible person just to finally write that out, which in and of itself is an indication of a problem, but I digress. The pain of minorities is often rivaled by the sympathy from the majority, and the use of the word “sympathy,” as opposed to empathy, is purposeful here. While I sincerely appreciate the outpouring of sympathy from the multitude of cisgender allies, after a few repetitions of the “Trans people are not a burden” post that graced so many people’s Facebook and Instagram pages, I grew annoyed above all else. It’s the feeling of people dipping a solitary toe into your experience for just a moment before moving on with their lives, never experiencing your struggle, and never truly understanding it; their main goal is seemingly to show everyone that they are “allies.” There is certainly a difference between making a social media post and creating an entire work of art, but maybe some of the uproar and controversy over Open Casket comes from a feeling of ‘where are you when we’re dying on the street at the hands of white cops?’ Perhaps it stems from the anger that a single painting is more of a check mark on a list of “What Makes Me a Good Person,” rather than truly understanding the hardships of a community.

Zadie Smith concludes her essay by claiming that Americans are a single people, no matter how little we want to be or how hard we search for the smallest
differences to separate ourselves out (89). The confinement of ourselves into distinct groups is often aided by our media telling us single stories about the groups we are trying to be distinct from, similar to the experiences Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie depicts so vividly. While it is important to consider the problems that arise when minority stories are told by members of the majority, we must also work to avoid making the perfect the enemy of the good.

WORKS CITED

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *The Danger of a Single Story*. TED Talks, TED Conferences, LLC.