In 2017, Dana Schutz created an abstract painting to be included in the Whitney Biennial entitled *Open Casket* (2016) which depicts Emmett Till’s disfigured body from the waist up lying in his casket. Emmett Till was a 14 year-old black boy from Chicago who was beaten for hours, shot in the head and lynched in Money, Mississippi by two white men after being falsely accused of whistling at a white woman. At his funeral, the mother requested that his casket be left open for the world to see the horror of what had been done to her child, and the grotesque image circulated throughout the nation. In response to the protests and petitions following the reveal of the painting, Gorman Beauchamp wrote “Open Casket and Cultural Appropriation,” which discussed the issues of cultural appropriation and his views on the lack of permission needed in order for anyone to create art on any given subject. I argue that for permission to create art about people who are outside of yourself, it is important to have an empathetic relationship to the subject as well as the subject matter, whether that be race, class or gender—not privilege alone.

I argue that based off of Schutz’s background in painting and her specific methodology, aesthetics *do* play a role in the insensitive imagery of *Open Casket*. Beauchamp disagrees by stating:

… while *Open Casket* is so abstract that one would not recognize its specific subject absent an accompanying caption, the protest against it concerns not aesthetics but racial politics, or what I call identity aesthetics: the imposition of the ethos and dynamics of identity politics into the arts. (Beauchamp 458)
Schutz’s work tends to accentuate the pain of her subjects through her gestural brush work and colorful palette. This style is also executed in the way that Schutz painted *Open Casket.*

However, the stark difference between the subjects Schutz painted in her previous work and Emmett Till is that those subjects were either white or had European features, such as Schutz’s paintings *Happy* (2004) or *Presentation* (2005). In *Dana Schutz*, a photographic book on Dana Schutz’s work edited by Gabriella Belli, Belli states “In Dana Schutz’s paintings there is always a body, or a part of one: there are constrained bodies and partially visible bodies, as if they had been eroded away…” (Belli 39). Whether the painting fits her aesthetic or not, I still do not find that Schutz had *enough* of a shared experience with Emmett Till in order to paint this image.

“In Conversation with Kellie Jones”, Kellie Jones asks David Hammons to discuss his thought pattern behind creating art where black people could see reflections of themselves. Hammons states that “White viewers have to look at someone’s else’s culture in those pieces and see very little of themselves in it. Like looking at American Indian art or Egyptian art, you can try to fit yourself in it but it really doesn’t work” (Hammons 55). I find that this accounts for Schutz attempting to try and show her “shared pain” in her painting as well. In *Tell Me Something Good*, a book of artist interviews from The Brooklyn Rail, Schutz made the statement in a separate 2017 interview with Jarrett Earnest that “…the choice of what to paint or not is very important. It’s not random…” (Earnest 399). Despite her purposeful intentions in choosing to paint Emmett Till lying in his casket, the execution comes across as insensitive and lacks true empathy. In order to create art on a subject’s pain, it is important to have also *experienced* that pain in some way.
When thinking of access, in terms of *Open Casket*, it is important to think about whose eyes were actually meant to view this image in the first place. This not only reveals the privilege of the viewer but the artist as well. In Dana Schutz’s explanation of creating the image she states:

I don’t know what it’s like to be black in America, But I do know what it’s like to be a mother… In her sorrow and rage [Mrs. Till] wanted her son’s death not to be just her pain but America’s pain. (Beauchamp 460)

This leads me to ask: Is there a privilege in being able to ignore aspects of a subject’s life if you do not relate to those aspects? If so, does privilege still allow you permission to create art about certain subjects? I do not believe that it does. While Schutz claims that she relates to the mother of Emmett Till, she does not relate to him (the actually subject) on any level at all. As stated before, the artist must empathetically relate to the subject specifically to some capacity in order to create art about the subject. In Bridget R. Cooks’ *Exhibiting Blackness*, she questions whether white artists who create art about black subjects are “so distanced from the real-life issues of racism and violence” that they are not concerned with the message that their work will send to viewers (Cooks 113). I do believe that this is the case with Schutz. While she may have had the privilege to create the image, that does not equate to her having permission.

In Beauchamp’s view, an artist should not have to have permission in order to create art on any subject or subject matter. However, I believe that an empathetic relation to the subject has to be present along with the subject matter itself—having privilege alone does not suffice. With this in mind, Schutz’s does not have the permission to paint *Open Casket*. Not only does she lack a personal connection to the subject at hand, Emmett Till, but she also has not experienced the pain of what it is like to be a black male. Despite Beauchamp ending his argument by stating “Just obey our No Trespassing signs and all will be well” (Beauchamp 465), I must end my argument in response to his statement by simply saying I agree.
Works Cited


Due to its specific structure as an aesthetic experience and the individual aspects it contains, art may be considered as an activity ensuring personal development; this gives art a special quality, which cannot be substituted with a scientific-technological approach to the recognition and sharing of knowledge (Kroflí, 2007). In the broader sense the notion of aesthetics is not limited merely to art, but is also treated as a dimension of experience in any subject in the curriculum. Dewey (1934) and Reid (1986) claim that experience in music, fine.