Opera on the story of lynching victim Emmett Till comes under vicious attack

Fred Mazelis
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Once again, the subject of Emmett Till, the victim of the 1955 lynching in Mississippi that helped to inspire the mass civil rights movement against segregation and racist terror in the US, has provoked a reactionary racialist attack. *Emmett Till: A New American Opera*, scheduled to have its premiere performances on March 23 and 24 at the Gerald Lynch Theater of John Jay College in New York, has been denounced by the Black Opera Alliance because one of its creators is white.

The murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old from Chicago who was killed for the alleged "crime" of whistling at a white woman, was also the subject of a painting that was included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, at New York City's Whitney Museum of American Art. That work, by white artist Dana Schutz, came under similar attack, including attempts by protesters to block it from view by standing in front of the painting.

The new opera is the creation of composer Mary D. Watkins, who is African American, and librettist Clare Coss, who is white. Tania Leon, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Cuban-born composer and conductor, is leading the performances this week.

The Black Opera Alliance issued a statement last week that attempted to divide the new opera's composer from its librettist. It claimed that it "empathizes with and supports the Black artists and producers involved in the upcoming production of 'Emmett Till, The Opera,' but we denounce the telling of this historic story by a white woman and from a white vantage point. It is time for Black creators to be given opportunities to expand the operatic canon with authentic storytelling from our own perspectives."

Watkins quickly answered this racialist attack on Coss, whom she considers a friend. She called Coss "an ally, a life-long activist who has worked hard for eight long years to develop this piece and to raise the funds to produce the first two performances. She has been very respectful to me and all the other artists of color on this project. It is my opinion that she has every right as an artist to tell the story of Emmett Till."

"It is very disturbing that people are condemning this piece without having seen or heard it," Watkins added. "They have jumped on the fact that the playwright is white, and assumed all kinds of things about the content of the play. Even though there are many artists of color involved in this project, the critics are assuming that we have had no impact on the final shape of the piece and that the playwright has somehow forced all of us to tell *her* story. It is an insult to me as a Black woman and to the company members who are African-American."

In their fanatical insistence on exclusivist nationalism, the critics of the new opera have suggested that the librettist is its principal creator. They have reversed the usual practice, in which the composer's role is highlighted. As a spokesperson for the production pointed out in one interview, "in fact, it is common practice when referencing operas for the work to be attributed to the composer, for example Bizet's *Carmen*, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Puccini's *La Bohème*."

The attack on the opera has also included a petition launched by Mya Bishop, a student at John Jay College, on Change.org. The petition focuses much of its condemnation on the fact that the opera, adapted from a 2013 play by Clare Coss, includes a fictional white character, a schoolteacher who is opposed to Jim Crow but who remains silent. According to the petition, which has gathered at least 12,000 signatures, "Clare Coss has creatively centered her white guilt by using this play to make the racially motivated brutal torture and murder of a 14-year-old child about her white self and her white feelings. Telling the story from the perspective of a fictional progressive white woman shows that Clare Coss is more concerned with showing the audience that 'not all white people are bad' than she is with the ongoing fight for racial justice."

"If we are going to tell the story of Emmett Till, it should only be from a Black perspective, a Black writer, and [with] permission and approval from Till's family," the petition continues, as it demands the cancellation of the performances.

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Bishop added, “Clare Coss is out of line for taking it upon herself to turn Black trauma into entertainment and for exploiting a Black tragedy to propel her career and relieve her of her guilt about her whiteness.”

The librettist who is seeking “to propel her career” is 87 years old! Coss issued her own statement answering the ignorant charges. “Composer Mary Watkins and I have been collaborating on the creation of *Emmett Till* the opera since 2013. Mary was 15 in 1955 and I was 20, each of us deeply and differently impacted by the barbaric lynching of 14-year old Emmett Till in the Mississippi Delta, and the failure of justice. To illuminate lifelong heartfelt pain—Mary through her profound music, me through words—our dual partnership advanced and expanded with the artists who joined us along the way. To work with Mary Watkins is a privilege.”

The main character in the opera is not the white teacher, in fact, but Mamie Till, Emmett’s mother, whose courageous decision to have an open casket funeral helped to publicize the gruesome reality of Jim Crow terror.

“The courage of Mamie Till, the Wright family, young Willie Reed and his family, and others to testify in an armed Klan courtroom, under death threats, broke the Delta Code,” continued Coss. “The opera introduces to the general audience what Mary Watkins calls ‘the greatness of ordinary people,’ who stood up, suffered, and continued to struggle to bring about change in this country.

“The one invented white character, Roanne Taylor, a schoolteacher who cares but is silent, reflects Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ultimate tragedy: the silence of the good people. She represents the context of White Supremacy in which the world of violence and terror was enabled. She takes a first step forward to break the silence.

“The words of Mamie Till Mobley are a steady guidepost: ‘You must continuously tell Emmett Till’s story until everyone’s consciousness rises. Only then will there be justice for Emmett Till.’”

There is a logic to the reactionary communalism behind the denunciation of the new opera. Whatever the critics’ intentions, it must not be forgotten that the Nazis banned “Jewish” music, which they defined as music written by composers who were of Jewish ancestry. The compositions of giants like Meyerbeer, Mendelssohn and many others were banned from German concert halls.

For that matter, there is also an echo of this reactionary chauvinism in the current attempt to ban Russian performers, and even the works of long-dead Russian composers, in response to the Putin government’s invasion of Ukraine and the US-NATO war drive behind it.

The campaign to deny the right of artists to work on subjects of different backgrounds took an especially ludicrous form in a recent article in the *Washington Post*. Michael Andor Brodeur, identified as a *Post* classical music critic, includes in his report on the latest controversy a description of the various songs, plays and television programs on the subject of Emmett Till. He divides them all by the race of their creators and highlights the white artists who “place flowers upon Till’s story—and it never goes well.” He mentions Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris and Phil Ochs in particular, disdainfully remarking that their heartfelt songs of decades ago elicit “varying levels of cringe.”

The fact that these artists, who happen to be white, were genuinely moved by the death of Emmett Till, does not apparently enter the head of this cynical critic, who defines everything by race and consequently concludes that artistic comprehension across “racial lines” is impossible.

The forthright defense of their work by both Watkins and Coss is a welcome rebuke to all of these expressions of racialism, black nationalism and identity politics tribalism, which have been officially promoted and endorsed by wide sections of the ruling elite for years.

Identity politics has become an article of faith in broad layers of academia as well as in artistic circles. This also finds an echo on the extreme right, in the growth of white nationalism and open white supremacy, and their increasingly open endorsement by the Republican Party.

The politics of the racialists, who focus their anger on “white” collaborators, is antithetical to the conceptions that inspired millions to take part in the mass struggles to build industrial trade unions and to tear down the barriers of segregation in the three decades from the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s.

The statements of both Watkins and Coss are all the more timely under these circumstances. From their comments, it appears that they see racism as first and foremost a matter of morality, which ignores its class basis and how it must be fought. The proponents of identity politics sometimes seize on the limitations of the civil rights reforms, but they attack these from the right, not from the standpoint of the working class.

While we are not in a position to comment on *Emmett Till*—either its merits or its limitations—its creators’ choice of subject can only be welcomed, and their skin color or ethnicity must have no bearing on their right to tackle this theme.

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