MAKE AMERICA EMPATHETIC AGAIN

Natalie Abele

As I stepped through the elevator doors onto the fifth floor of the Whitney Museum, my eyes were immediately drawn to the large black flag billowing above me: “A MAN WAS LYNCHED BY POLICE YESTERDAY.” This simple piece by artist Dread Scott was created in 2015 in response to the shooting of Walter Scott in North Carolina after he was killed for a simple brake light violation. It refers to the flag that the NAACP flew in the 1930s, as part of their anti-lynching campaign. This flag flew every time there was news that another person had been lynched.

The flag pointed me in the direction of a photograph hanging just inside the exhibit of a group of men sitting around a card table. The room they’re in seems cluttered but homey, with taped posters on the wall and a mess visible on the tables behind. They are dressed in various styles, ranging from a suit and tie to a leather jacket, but they are all wearing black. None are smiling; they instead look suspicious and desperate. They stare directly into the camera, interacting with me and making me feel as if I were in the photograph with them. This is one of the most striking images of the 1960s and ’70s grassroots black power organization, the Black Panther Party. I was struck by the difference between the Black Panther superhero of today and Black Panther members in the 1960s, and I found myself drawn to the image again and again. The Black Panther Party of the past was made to protect African-American citizens from police brutality but eventually deteriorated into a violent Marxist organization. The Black Panther of today is a resurgence of the 1960s superhero that predated the Black Panther Party and was created by two white men, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.

The image resounded profoundly with me, but I know I will never feel the particular pain captured by this picture and the hundreds of others in the History of Protest exhibit. Namwali Serpell’s essay, “Black Panther: Choose Your Weapons,” focuses on the prevalence and influence of weapons in the 2018 film Black Panther and how they serve as metaphors for masculinity, violence, and
power. However, she also comments on *Black Panther’s* influence, namely, how it is helping to challenge white expectations about black people by posing the “what if” question of a nation of free Black people. Serpell notes that *Black Panther* is representative of “black matter—infinite potential [and] infinite power” (Serpell). While Serpell’s essay is centered largely on weapons, the larger message focuses on this infinite potential and how it might be used to understand the problems of the larger African diaspora today.

In the movie *Black Panther*, the protagonist is T’Challa, the king of Wakanda, an African country that presents itself as poor to the outside world, when in actuality it is one of the most technologically advanced countries on the planet. Erik Killmonger is the antagonist, a man who was radicalized by the suffering he saw in America and who worked to take over Wakanda so that he could liberate and arm Africans around the world. I recognized that Killmonger and T’Challa represent two sides of the same coin: an African who grew up in a wealthy country, safe from poverty and war, and an African American who grew up watching his people oppressed and killed for no reason besides the fact that they were black. The film’s ability to combine these two worldviews was revelatory for me. By watching it, I felt as if I had acquired some knowledge that made me just a bit more aware of the world around me. I began to wonder: how can art create empathy and understanding between different cultures?

Serpell’s idea of black power’s ability to “inhabit others” reverberates throughout her essay (1). In most movies, black characters are generally deflated to “two-dimensional imagery” that makes it hard to connect and empathize with the character, such as Ice-T in *Law and Order: SVU* or Token Black on *South Park*. As a white viewer, I never noticed the lack of complex black characters until it was pointed out to me. Watching *Black Panther* with its entirely black cast was odd, in a good way. I had been so used to seeing a representation of myself on screen, and to have it suddenly disappear really opened my eyes to how comfortable I had been with just having the single token black character among a sea of white ones. *Black Panther* “complicated” these characters and tropes and made them available to me as a bridge into the understanding I had been missing.

I found myself shedding a few tears at the end of *Black Panther*, when Killmonger died, surprised by the empathy I felt for the supposed villain of the movie. This empathy is key to understanding the realistic feelings of many African Americans who might agree with Killmonger. Dylan Marron discusses
empathy in his TED Talk “How I turn negative online comments into positive offline conversations.” He uses his podcast, titled “Conversations with People Who Hate Me,” as a way to break down the barriers between himself and others, whom he “profusely disagree[s] with.” Marron’s unique way of engaging with those who have fundamental ideologies different from his suggests that finding common ground humanizes people and paves the way for empathy.

Despite the fact that I did not personally agree with Killmonger’s methods, I found myself empathetic to the pain he felt and his passion for his cause. What he wanted was compelling and righteous, but his willingness to kill innocents for it was not. Marron emphasizes that this empathy “is not endorsement,” but acknowledgment. While people might not agree with ideologies being displayed by any artwork, they can understand the emotion that inspired it. This is what makes art so effective at creating empathy and evoking emotion. Art can take ideologies once thought of as radical and adverse and present them in a way that humanizes them and makes them more accessible to those who may scorn or reject them. Looking at the portraits of the Black Panther Party members, you can begin to feel the exhaustion in their bones from fighting the same fight for so long.

However, if we simply observe the art without actively supporting the artists, are we really participating in an act of understanding? If people choose to consume black art without supporting black artists, the idle listener becomes the “token good white guy,” as Serpell notes in her essay. Eric Fershtman, Editor-in-Chief of Sinkhole Magazine, addresses this issue of “watching-while-white” in his essay “The Problem with White Praise of Black Art.” Fershtman addresses how many white people do not seek to understand the intentions behind a work of art, but instead consume black art as an “attempt at buying forgiveness.” They are content to be white allies who offer support when asked but refuse to speak up on their own. It is common for these white allies to be afraid to speak up about racism in America, rather choosing to watch from a distance as black artists do all the hard work of pouring out their intimate feelings about racism in America, amid almost certain backlash.

Growing up in the South, where the Confederate flag is nearly as common as the American one, I find myself guilty of being the quiet white ally among some of my peers. Rap music, a black-dominated genre, is extremely popular in the South and is the most listened to genre among teenagers (Time). When lis-
tening to this music, I like to sing the lyrics just as loudly as I can, with the exception of one word. In the South, you will often find groups of teenagers screaming the n-word along to songs without a second thought about the word’s long and tragic history. When I try and explain that it is not their word to say, even in a song, I’m met with rolling eyes and a sharp “mind your own business.” After a while, I stopped trying to change minds. Instead, I sit in uneasy silence as I see white teenagers in the hallway throw the word around casually to each other. But does sitting in silence really make me any better than them? Many currently popular rap songs, such as “DNA” by Kendrick Lamar and “This Is America” by Childish Gambino, focus on the struggles of being black in America. Yet I see people around me passively listening to such songs without acknowledging the message behind the lyrics at all, and I do nothing to teach them, in part due to my own fear of being rebuffed. In the South, the culture of rap has eclipsed the meaning of the rap lyrics, and this leaves me marveling at how such direct and forward art dehumanizes its consumers, instead of inspiring empathy in them.

Simply listening in this disconnected state does nothing to help dismantle racism. But can acknowledging the “original and ongoing sin” of white Americans against African Americans, and actively working to understand black art, begin to deepen understanding and create empathy?

A similar question is posed by biracial essayist Zadie Smith in her essay “Getting In and Out,” in which she explores who is and who is not able to create art about black suffering. Smith points out that there are many in the United States whose families “become black, then white, then black again,” generation after generation. Smith, who has daughters who are “quadroons” (the daughters of a white man and a biracial woman), wonders if her children are “too white” to engage with black suffering, despite the fact that their grandmother “knew black suffering intimately.” Smith insists that if her children or anyone else are to attempt to interact with black art, you must either “go deeper” or “get out.” White viewers felt the “queer but illuminating” feeling of having themselves exposed on a movie screen in the movie Get Out, and Smith expects them to bring this feeling of otherness to art that they view. In Get Out, the white family tries to obtain the black experience by literally transferring into black bodies. However, Smith insists we must look at the art as people on the outside, and that the black experience cannot be commodified. Art can only help sow these seeds of empathy if the consumer is actively interested in piecing together the meaning embedded in
the art. Instead of arguing about who is able to consume art about black suffering, we instead should be asking what we can do to help those who wish to consume it to understand what that means.

As I look through my camera roll at the pictures I took at the Whitney protest exhibit, I stop at the picture hanging next to the Black Panther Party. This one is a single man, his head bent, his shoulders hunched, his hands bandaged. This picture, like all the others, depicts nearly two centuries of suffering. When I look at this picture, I feel some of his pain. The woman next to me shares a tentative smile as she observes the same image, and we both let the history and power behind the image wash over us. The man to our right merely glances at it before moving on to a different part of the exhibit, clearly uninterested. Understanding clearly cannot be forced upon those who do not want it, and certainly not upon those who do not actively seek it. I move on from the image, but when I meet the same woman again later in the exhibit, she smiles at me, and I smile back at the bond that was forged between us, all through the shared understanding of a single image.

WORKS CITED

Marron, Dylan. “How I turn negative online comments into positive offline conversations.” TED, 2018.