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DILEMMAS OF “GOOD WHITE WOMEN”

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# EXPLORING SOUL OF A NATION: DISORIENTING DILEMMAS OF “GOOD WHITE WOMEN”

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## Abstract

*Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power is an exhibition of American Black artists from the 1960s through 1980s. Originally developed by the Tate Modern in London, the exhibition travelled to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, in early 2018. When we visited the exhibition, we intended to study how women were represented. Instead, we found the experience disturbing and disorienting. We were taken aback by the way the artists incorporated and owned images that we associated with racism, slavery, and segregation. As White, middle-class women from the American South, we felt ill-equipped to formulate an opinion or even to identify the emotions we experienced. The mutual cognitive dissonance we experienced caused us to re-evaluate our ideas and biases related to race. This essay describes our transformative learning in facing and confronting our White privilege and rethinking our attitudes and perceptions of race.*

## Résumé

*L'Âme d'une nation: l'art à l'ère du «Black Power» est une exposition d'artistes noirs américains des années 1960 aux années 1980. Développée initialement par la Tate Modern de Londres, l'exposition était présentée au début de 2018 au musée d'art américain Crystal Bridges de Bentonville, dans l'Arkansas, aux États-Unis. Lorsque nous avons visité l'exposition, nous avions l'intention d'examiner la manière dont les femmes étaient représentées. Au lieu de cela, nous avons trouvé l'expérience perturbante et désorientante. Nous étions surprises par la manière dont les artistes ont incorporé et propagé des images que nous avons associées au racisme, à l'esclavage et à la ségrégation. En tant que femmes blanches de la classe moyenne originaires du sud des États-Unis, nous nous sentions mal équipées de formuler une opinion ou même d'identifier les émotions que nous ressentions. Nous avons connu une dissonance cognitive mutuelle, nous obligeant à réévaluer nos idées et nos partis pris*

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*liés à la race. Cet essai décrit notre apprentissage transformateur pour faire face à notre privilège blanc et repenser nos attitudes et nos perceptions de la race.*

*Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* is an exhibition of American Black artists from the 1960s through 1980s. Originally developed by the Tate Modern in London, the exhibition travelled to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, in early 2018. When we visited the exhibition, we intended to study how women were represented.

Instead, we found the experience disturbing and disorienting. In particular, we were taken aback by the way the artists incorporated and owned images that we associated with racism, slavery, segregation, and civil rights violations. As White, middle-class women from the American South, we felt ill-equipped to formulate an opinion or even to identify the emotions we experienced. The mutual cognitive dissonance we experienced caused us to re-evaluate our ideas and biases related to race. Our experience reflects Sullivan (2014): "The quest for middle-class white people for their moral redemption tends to be especially, though not uniquely attractive to white middle-class women" (p. 6). In other words, White women fixate on their own perceived "goodness" rather than on the realities of racial injustice. This essay will address our own transformative learning in facing and confronting our White privilege and rethinking our attitudes and perceptions of race.

As researchers, we focus on informal learning in cultural institutions, such as museums and heritage tourism sites, using a feminist lens. Museums "render visible" the injustices of the past (Alston, 2016, p. 230). Additionally, museums and other cultural institutions may be viewed as pedagogic contact zones that "can be spaces of critique, possibility and potential for mutual learning, co-creation of knowledge and meaning, and re-radicalisation through feminist analysis" (Clover & Sanford, 2016, p. 6). Through viewing the exhibition, we experienced transformative learning; informal learning in cultural institutions "highlights adults engaging in transformational learning through interaction with/in these sites (often without the direct intervention of a critical adult educator) and explores how this learning often is enacted through noncognitive ways of knowing" (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011, p. 14). Transformative learning, according to Mezirow and Associates (1990), begins when an adult learner experiences a "disorienting dilemma" that sparks a reconsideration of assumptions and belief systems.

### **Our Experience at the Exhibition**

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art is located in Bentonville, Arkansas. The museum, founded in 2005 by the Walton Family Foundation, features a permanent collection of American artists from colonial times through the present. In early 2018, Crystal Bridges hosted *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*. The exhibition showcased more than 200 works of art, including paintings, sculpture, photography, and performance art, created between 1963 and 1983 by more than 60 African American artists (Godfrey & Whitley, 2018). The time span chosen represents the works of African American artists during the American civil rights movement. Many of the images depict major events, such as the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, the formation of the Black Panthers, the march on Washington for jobs and freedom, and the Attica Prison uprising (Godfrey & Whitley, 2018).

Shelli Henehan is a Caucasian middle-aged female raised in the recently desegregated South and is a descendant of a Southern sheriff who was indicted for civil rights violations in the 1930s and died prior to his trial in 1942. As she toured the exhibition, knowledge of her paternal grandfather's actions jaded her perceptions, making her extremely uncomfortable. She saw a young African American female in the same section of the exhibition, and longed to reach out and ask her opinion, but failed to do so, because she felt it would be intrusive. This experience caused a disorienting dilemma, as Shelli felt as if she had no right to an opinion at all. Cognitively, she knew that she should not own her grandfather's actions, but emotionally, she felt the shame that he failed to show; the experience helped her acknowledge to herself that as a participant in a biased system, she is complicit in that bias. For example, she perceived Norman Lewis's *America the Beautiful* (1960), a painting that portrays Ku Klux Klan (KKK) men hiding behind crosses representing their very White faith, with flames below, as absolute chaos. The painting reminded her strongly of her grandfather's sins, which he justified with his belief that the White race was genetically superior. Shelli saw the same rationalization in other family members, who would still refer to the American Civil War as the "War of Northern Aggression" and say that biracial couples depicted the "Browning of America." Her perception was that this painting represented the same anger and hostility toward non-Whites. Many of the other works elicited similar feelings.

Micki Voelkel is a Caucasian female in her 50s who was also raised in the South. While initially she went into the exhibition with a plan to analyze gender representation, she was caught off guard by the emotional impact of the artwork. While she shared Shelli's feelings of shame, she reacted strongly to images that she considered to be typically racist. In other words, images that featured stereotypically African features, such as large lips, broad noses, and afros, caused her to react viscerally, as if offended by the "racism" of those depictions. However, intellectually she understood that the works were by African American artists reclaiming and owning those images. She reacted strongly to Faith Ringgold's *Design for Poster 'All Power to the People,'* (1970), which features what appears to be an African American family holding rifles. The figures in the work are stark Black with exaggerated facial features. She felt both that the images were racist and that she had no right to think that they were racist. This ambivalence created Micki's disorienting dilemma.

### **The Disorienting Dilemmas of "Good White People"**

Through reflection on our combined experience, we have identified four themes/dilemmas that spurred us to question our assumptions.

#### ***Discomfort with Personal Perceptions***

We instinctively labelled images that we had been taught were racist as "wrong," even though we knew that the works were created by African American artists who were critically examining those stereotypes. For example, *Three Spades* (Hammons, 1971) depicts a dark-skinned man against a black background, holding a large spade-shaped object under his arm and a smaller spade-shaped object in his hand. The man is the "third spade" in the image. The pun embarrassed us and made us uncomfortable for understanding it. We were embarrassed by the racism of it and yet that was clearly what the painter was embracing and owning. Conversely, we responded positively to those works that we considered "beautiful" or "dignified," such as the painting *Wives of Sango* (Donaldson, 1971), which depicts three

regal women posing together, wearing gun belts and armed with knives and firearms. We responded visually to the materials of acrylic paint embellished with silver and gold foil, and emotionally to what we perceived as a powerful image of sisterhood. Micki questioned, "Why am I okay with one way of being Black and not with the other? As a White woman, who am I to approve or disapprove?" This dilemma revealed biases that we did not even know we had.

### *Longing and Reluctance to Engage*

While touring the exhibition, we both felt the desire to reach out to the many Black patrons. We longed to connect to inquire about personal perceptions, but an overwhelming fear of intrusiveness prevented the contact. We also felt the need to apologize for the sin of being White. Shelli, feeling the need to atone for the sins of the segregated South, specifically her grandfather's crimes, expressed her dissonance by saying, "I feel that I am not prejudiced, but what is preventing me from connecting with the African American visitors? I would love to hear their thoughts about the works, but I am so afraid of being seen as insensitive and intrusive!" This feeling continued for us both, and we have since reached out to Black colleagues to discuss the experience. We have also continued to educate ourselves on the concept of White privilege. We are still grappling with the revelation that we expect African Americans to educate us on racism. Clearly, this is another example of our privilege.

### *"No Right" to an Opinion*

Having taken American history as teens in the 1980s, we both felt that our school skipped past the civil rights movement. Therefore, we entered the exhibition feeling at a bit of a loss because we were embarrassed at our lack of knowledge about the historical period. From the opening of the exhibition, where dozens of photographs of civil rights figures were displayed, we were ashamed to realize that we recognized only the most prominent figures, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X. Within the exhibition, *Blackboard* (Joseph, 1969) is an oil painting that depicts a Black woman behind a young male child who is standing in front of a chalkboard covered in words that are associated with African history and the civil rights movement. While this painting provided insight into the hope that can come from education, as White women with limited knowledge and experience, we were embarrassed to recognize only a few of the words. Because of our ignorance, we felt as if we didn't have a right to an opinion about this work that relayed such a powerful message.

### *Guilt and Shame*

The painting *The First One Hundred Years: He Amongst You Who Is Without Sin Shall Cast the First Stone; Forgive Them Father for They Know Not What They Do* (Motley, c. 1963–1972) contrasts benign symbols of US history, such as the Statue of Liberty, with images of terror, such as hooded Klansmen, caged and lynched figures, and the many injustices faced by African American people. We both felt guilt and shame upon seeing the Confederate flag in the painting, a flag that had flown in our local high school until 2015 and one that is strongly connected with hatred and death. The sports mascot of the school was the "Rebel," depicted by a Confederate soldier carrying the flag, and our school fight song was "Dixie." At high-school games, the rallying cry was "the South will rise again!" All

of these memories bring embarrassment and dismay that we took for granted things that have caused such pain to African Americans.

### Lessons

In an effort to better understand our disorienting dilemmas, we returned to the literature. We connected with the concept of “White fragility”: a “state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable triggering a range of defensive moves” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). In essence, both our longing and reluctance to engage with other visitors to the exhibition and our feeling that we had no right to an opinion were possibly responses to our own guilt and need to re-establish “White racial equilibrium.” We were silent and fearful because we have not had to develop the skills that would allow us to take constructive action, so we simply retreated into our own emotions.

Our own guilt and shame, in particular our experiences attending a high school that used the Rebel as a mascot and the Confederate battle flag as an expression of school spirit, are problematic. Feelings of shame have been correlated to anger and hostility, while guilt has been correlated to positive responses (Tangney, 1995, p. 1,140). Shame and guilt can be counterproductive, because

the overwhelming evidence that white guilt and shame do not help and even harm racial justice movements suggests that unconscious habits of white privilege are at work...Even though good white liberals might not consciously intend it, their promotion of and participation in white guilt and white shame functions to exacerbate insidious class divisions between white people that simultaneously support white racism. (Sullivan, 2014, p. 137)

While we focus on our own discomfort and emotions, we shut down discussion and unintentionally marginalize Black experiences.

Our hesitancy to speak up about the systematic racism of the United States as depicted in the exhibition is problematic, because “our silence, which is a function of privilege and fear, forces still more black writers and artists to speak up” (Fershtman, 2018). We are responsible for acknowledging in our words the legacy of slavery and segregation that is foundational to our country’s ongoing troubles with race. While we have spoken with American and non-American Black colleagues about our experience, we suspect that our motives are more about justifying ourselves than truly learning about and acknowledging the lived experience of being a person of colour in our society. We have more to learn.

As college professors who consider ourselves enlightened, we have been taken aback by the whole experience. A central part of our self-image is seeing ourselves as anti-racist, but our reflections have caused us to acknowledge our White privilege. We find it ironic that as adult educators who hope to create transformative learning experiences for our students, this exhibition provided disorienting dilemmas for us that have caused us to re-evaluate our assumptions about race and about ourselves. As Sullivan (2014) wrote,

At the heart of this anti-racism, however, is not necessarily an attempt to eliminate racial injustice—which, to be successful, might involve strategies or tactics that don’t make white people look or feel morally

good—but a desire to be recognized as Not Racist, perhaps especially by people of color. (p. 5)

In attending *Soul of a Nation*, an exhibition that highlights the atrocities of racial injustice in the United States, we not only discovered hidden biases, but managed to make the entire experience about ourselves and our own reactions—in essence, it appears that we are trying to be recognized as Not Racist, as Sullivan noted. The final irony is that we must acknowledge that this essay is another example of our White privilege.

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