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Contrast of a Conflagration

I discovered this image in an article on CNN.com. Published during the riots that followed the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the photo delivers a poignant message that is perhaps more relevant now than it was only a few months ago. Recently, movements such as #BlackLivesMatter have sprung into existence in response to the instances of police brutality against black males. Because the officers involved in these cases have tended to be white, a schism has been created, leading black citizens to believe that they are treated worse than their peers and neighbors simply because of their skin color. Police incidents leading to the deaths of young black males such as Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and an alarming number of others, have only fanned the flames of racial outrage, and it seems that race relations, specifically between whites and blacks, have reached a breaking point. However, this image stands in stark contrast to these prevalent cultural grievances. The photo targets and speaks to Americans of all ages, races, and backgrounds, boldly displaying a vulnerability, and maybe

even an optimism rarely depicted in the media. The image resoundingly champions the idea that racial relations are ultimately salvageable, and relies on the assumption that at its core, the audience wants to remedy the racial tension that has exponentially grown in America.

The most emotionally striking pathemata of the image are its subjects. They are absolute opposites; one is a child, the other is an adult. One wears body armor, the other wears a jacket. One is white, one is black. Considered alone, any one of these contrasting details could make a case for the false binary that has been erected between whites and blacks. When examined through the context of the photo however, we see that this juxtaposition is obliterated. Yes, all of the differences still exist, but the two supposed polar opposites are locked in an embrace that shatters the racial boundaries that have been constructed by news media in recent months. The image intentionally attacks the divide that has been created between whites and blacks by bridging the gap and showing that it is possible for a white, adult authority figure to get along with a black youth.

The photo is overwhelmingly hopeful, and it expects the same of its audience. At the same time though, the image implies that a simple hug has become a rarity amidst the racial conflict in America, which creates a sense of dismay in the audience. This dismay ultimately begets hopefulness though, as the audience is expected to have hope that one day, the warmth of this surprising notion will become the norm. The photo attempts to provide an impetus for the audience to change the way they view racial tension in America. Rather than jump to conclusions and immediately defend whichever “side” the audience’s skin dictates, the photo urges people to be proactive. By focusing on positive, unifying emotions as opposed to destructive ones, the picture argues that race relations can be repaired in America. The picture

impels the audience not to act, but to adopt a kinder, more tolerant mindset in order to avoid further inflammatory actions and reactions in the future.

It almost goes without saying that in order for the pathemata present in the picture to work, the audience must believe that race relations can be healed. Further, the audience should not believe that there is a fundamental divide between whites and blacks, for if they do, the picture will have no effect. The image relies on an optimistic estimation of human nature. It assumes that people want to end the unnecessary racial animosity that has become so prevalent, or are at least neutral and receptive to the idea of peace between races. Because of that assumption, the image may seem naïve, as some people surely want to continue lashing out at perceived injustices. However, the honesty present in the photo is sure to speak to the audience's optimism, therefore strengthening its emotional appeal and fostering the burgeoning sense of hope that it touts.

Aside from willingness to peacefully repair race relations, there are no specific requirements for the audience. The photo is universal in its message, and it appeals to something inherently human in all American citizens, rather than divisive factors such as race. The symbols present in the photo are strong, and they help it to resonate with its audience. The tears on the boy's face are indicative of the complex emotions felt by African Americans presently. It is unclear whether the boy is crying because he is happy, scared, or confused, but I believe his face intimates all three feelings, which are reflected in the audience. The face of the officer seems to be wholly positive, symbolically suggesting that all parties involved should act as adults, and they should remedy racial tension for the next generation. The photo is also very bright and saturated with color. This suggests that people of all colors can stand together, and when viewed together, create a picture, and a future, that is all the brighter for their unification.