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All American Boys Thesis Essay

Many of us think that visuals have changed us. But did they really? *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendon Kiely is a very good book about two teenage boys, one black and one white, who have to deal with the aftermath of an assault by a police officer. Rashad, the black teenager, is assaulted by a police officer who happens to be very close to Quinn, the white teenager, and Quinn witnesses the assault. Rashad must process the assault and how he wants to be involved with protests and the aftermath, all while recovering from his injuries. Quinn is extremely conflicted about what to do and where to stand, and he feels pulled to both sides by his loyalties on one side, and his beliefs on the other. When graffiti about Rashad sparks a protest, they both are forced to choose how active they want to be. But none of it can happen without visuals, which, throughout the book, help make people think differently and express their feelings and thoughts.

The first clear sign of a visual changing the way a character thinks is when Quinn sees a shirt and it makes him think differently about racism. In this scene, Quinn is remembering another incident of Paul's brutality against black people. As Quinn recalls, he had complained to Paul about a black kid, Marc Blair, who bullied him. In response, Paul had gone and beat Marc up. Quinn realized that he was afraid of Marc Blair, and remembered another moment centered on fear six years ago: "I was making leaps in my mind now, but once I'd hung on that word 'fear,' I remembered the time I was a freshman and I saw a senior walking down the hall. He was black, and I didn't know his name, but he was wearing an old-school public enemy T-shirt: *Fear of a Black Planet*-- the bull's eye logo poised to eclipse the Earth. Fear. The T-shirt was right." (132) After remembering the T-shirt, Quinn draws more connections between fear and racism. While he did realize that he was afraid of Marc before he remembered the T-shirt (though it might have just as much because of his actions than his race), he only realized that it was specifically a fear of black people (a realization that changed his

view of the entire world), after he remembered the shirt and its words. While this may seem like only a small victory on the part of visuals, they will do more important things later on.

Soon after Quinn remembers the T-shirt and reflects on fear because of it, Rashad uses art to help process his emotions. A few days after he is assaulted, Rashad receives his sketchbook from his mother. He begins a drawing, and while he knows what he's going to draw, he doesn't know *how*. He comments: "I knew *exactly* what I was drawing. The only thing I could. I was going to re-create the scene, what had happened to me, what was playing constantly on the news, on the page." (144) Here, Rashad is using the drawing to help express his feelings and process the assault. When he says "The only thing I could," he's saying that his feelings are so strong that that's all that he can think of, but when he draws he can fully process all his emotions and thoughts as well as express himself. Visuals play a huge role in Rashad's transformation, but they are also integral to Quinn's.

When Quinn finally watches the viral video of Rashad's assault, something he'd been avoiding doing, it completely revolutionizes the way he thinks, and he is compelled to act. After watching the video, Quinn talks to his friend Jill. He hangs up, then contemplates his position in the world right then. He realizes that "[I was] trying to stare so hard at my own two feet so I wouldn't have to look up and see what was really going on. And while I'd been doing that, I'd been walking in the wrong direction. I didn't want to walk away anymore." (185) While Quinn has been leaning more towards action for the past few days, that urge really picks up after he watches the video. Seeing the scene again makes him realize just how terrible the assault was, and it forces him to stop ignoring the situation. The video is the main reason that Quinn changes his thinking and decides to act.

Throughout *All American Boys*, the expression of thoughts and feelings is greatly aided by visuals, which also help people think differently. From a T-shirt image that teaches Quinn about the roots of racist behavior to a drawing that helps Rashad process the assault, to a video that propels Quinn towards action, and many other instances, visuals clearly changed characters' thinking and helped them express their emotions and thoughts. How have visuals affected *you*?