

Can satire save us?

It can prompt repentance, anyway—if we let it.

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Scene from *Full Frontal* special "The Great American* Puerto Rico (*It's Complicated)"

I'm a fan of late-night political comedian Samantha Bee, and not just for her sport jacket style and her knack for interviewing people whom other corporate media overlook. I love Samantha Bee because her TBS show *Full Frontal* calls me to confession, unexpectedly.

Take, for example, her special "[The Great American* Puerto Rico \(*It's Complicated\)](#)," which documents the failure of the United States to help our fellow citizens—[who do not get a vote in U.S. elections](#)—recover from Hurricane Maria. Bee and her staffers wash up on Puerto Rico's beaches with an earnest white savior mission to lend a helping hand while reporting on the recovery progress six months post-hurricane.

I had to admit that much of what I knew about Puerto Rico hadn't been updated since I memorized all of *West Side Story* in the seventh grade. Bee's special asked me repeatedly, How could I be so ignorant?

The gift of satire is that it can convict and correct us—sometimes gently, and sometimes with more bite—by showing our flaws reflected back to us from the comedian's mirror. Satirists examine our human shortcomings more closely than most, which may have made it easier for Bee [to make her own apologies this year](#). Whether it's the reporting behind *Full Frontal's* Puerto Rico special, or [Luvvie Ajayi throwing shade on her blog](#) or in her book [I'm Judging You: The Do-Better Manual](#) (which we white women especially keep needing), satire is getting under our white skin with the truth in affecting ways.

A few years ago, I attended the premiere of the film [Dear White People](#), a satirical comedy told from the perspective of black students on the campus of a fictitious Ivy league university where racial tensions build. The film is fictional. But as the credits rolled, I gasped with others in the audience as photographs and news clippings showed real “race parties” at real college campuses—racist incidents that occurred mere months before the film was released.

I sat there for a moment, waiting for the first subconscious critique to crystalize as an articulated thought. When it did, I heard myself think, *I would have liked to see more white characters in that story. It was really about a bunch of black people. I couldn't identify with any of them.*

Oof. The spirit of Justin Simien, who wrote the screenplay, whispered “Gotcha!” in my ear. I managed a rueful half-laugh at myself as the next thought came: *I wonder how often black people see films mostly centered on the lives and stories of white people and walk out thinking the exact same thing.*

Simien short-circuited my usually defensive brain with tragic comedy, which starts in the belly before ascending through the heart to actually change the mind. Since then, the mountain of evidence grows larger, and I wonder: Can satire save us?

The night of the film premiere, near the end of a Q&A hosted by the white actor who plays a character nicknamed “Black Mitch,” a woman broke down. She was white, maybe at the younger end of the cohort who get mailings from AARP. And the movie broke her heart. She raised her hand to say she was dear friends with several multiracial families, beautiful families, and the movie just didn't portray them right.

“This isn’t them,” she said. “This is so cruel and mean.” It couldn’t be their experience of race in America, she said. It just couldn’t be. The movie so distressed her, she wept.

Dear White People disabused that woman of her fantasy of a post-racial America. Satire can do that.

The summer when I read Baratunde Thurston’s [*How to Be Black*](#), I hid it more than once between pages of a spiral-bound notebook at a coffee shop or on a plane. But I’m also an evangelist for the book. I’d like to get it in hotel bedside tables all across the land.

Page after page, in chapters like “How to Be The Black Friend” and “How to Be the Black Employee,” Thurston’s satire showed me through deep belly laughs that as a white person, the joke is on me. I felt embarrassed, silly, typical, humbled as a so-called progressive, and very, very sorry. But I didn’t feel completely damned. Good satire helps me welcome my subconsciously racist self to the corner table for a beer: “Hello, there! We’ve got a lot in common. How ya been? So about this racist assumption you made last week...”

The Christian practice of repentance shows us that we have to face the broken parts of our selves if we want to truly change. With white supremacy and racism looming so largely in the United States in 2018, satire—from “The Great American* Puerto Rico” to *Dear White People*—delivers the humanity and hilarity we desperately need.