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Looking Back in an American Lyric

Citizen: An American Lyric, an award winning 2014 work from poet Claudia Rankine provides readers with a complex look at the racial aggressions that occur regularly in the modern world. Throughout *Citizen*, Rankine revisits historical events in order to create a better understanding of the present. This technique, employed by many contemporary African American poets, invites readers to create connections through time and uncover the areas in which society has stagnated, improved, or regressed. This line of thinking, poets such as Rankine may argue, will bring about the solutions needed in order to move forward. In *Citizen*, the theme of looking back to look forward appears frequently in Part VI, where Rankine narrates several modern tragedies against African Americans. Among the pieces in this section are “August 29, 2005 / Hurricane Katrina” and “June 26, 2011 / In Memory of James Craig Anderson.” By employing precise structure and language when analyzing these past events, Rankine comments on present issues such as the lack of support given to the African American community and unfair media coverage of minority groups.

“August 29, 2005 / Hurricane Katrina” provides an eye-opening look at the feelings of hopelessness and neglect felt by many African Americans trapped in the aftermath of the storm. Making landfall in Louisiana on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina achieved wind speeds up to 140 miles per hour with winds extending outwards of up to 105 miles from the storm-eye (The Federal Emergency Management Agency). With flooding of 20 to 30 feet above normal tide

levels, Hurricane Katrina caused widespread damage to homes and infrastructure, and resulted in an estimated death toll of over 1,800 individuals (The Federal Emergency Management Agency). In his piece “Katrina: Race, Class, and Poverty,” Troy Allen explains that Hurricane Katrina “brought to the center of our national consciousness issues that have long been on the periphery—namely, the enduring legacy of systematic and structural racism that has resulted in a disproportionate number of African Americans mired in poverty for generations” (Allen 466). At the time of Katrina, nearly one-third of New Orleans’s population was considered “poor,” nearly 70% of the poor people affected were African American, and nearly half of those harmed by broken levees were African American (466). Immediately following the storm, George W. Bush and the United States government failed to provide a sufficient response. “Disproportionately represented among the victims of the storm,” the African American psyche took a detrimental hit as the events surrounding the hurricane led to widespread feelings of anger and depression (White et al. 523).

“August 29, 2005 / Hurricane Katrina” consists of twenty-five stanzas that Claudia Rankine uses to uncover the African American consciousness during the events of the storm. Throughout her poem, Rankine suggests that the despair felt by African Americans during the hurricane is not isolated to that single tragedy, but instead an experience that endures. “August 29, 2005 / Hurricane Katrina” uses a free verse form. The piece’s lengthy nature, along with the lack of an apparent rhythm and rhyme scheme creates a feeling of seemingly unending disarray. Rankine jumps from image to image in “Hurricane Katrina,” describing African Americans questioning their faith, thinking about the “classic binary between the rich and the poor,” describing “bodies lodged in piles of rubble,” etc. (Rankine 83-86). By overwhelming her readers with these images in the majority of the first twelve stanzas, Rankine creates chaos while

also establishing the community's suffering as complex and diverse; individual victims choose to grieve differently and injustice against them comes in many forms. The Katrina experience Rankine creates through her poem's structure mirrors that of African Americans fourteen years later. Similar to the poem overwhelming readers with these images, the news-cycle of 2019 bombards televisions and social media feeds, constantly exposing acts of police brutality, the use of racial slurs, hate crimes, etc. Similar to the diverse range of misfortunes in the poem, each one of these headlines varies in its story and public response while also sharing many common threads. With each act of racial injustice comes a sense of demoralization as the African American community and its allies question if these tragedies will ever end.

Claudia Rankine continues to use the Hurricane Katrina experience to show everlasting trauma through her use of language. Throughout the poem, Rankine uses words such as "later," "still," and "coming" to suggest that the community suffers today years removed from the tragedy the poem centers around. Rankine uses this language when opening the poem: "Hours later, still in the difficulty of what it is to be..." (83). While this line, for example, is speaking literally about the hours following the landing of the storm, readers may interpret it figuratively suggesting that life is still difficult for African Americans despite Katrina having passed. Similarly, around halfway through the poem a victim states, "We never reached out to anyone to tell our story, because / there's no ending to our story" (84). It can be understood that this victim may be speaking for the greater African American community when describing their story of hardship as unending. Two lines later, another victim states, "It's awful to go back home... to find your own dead child" (84). This line, referring to children killed in the storm, may cause readers to recall recent acts of racial violence against young people such as Trayvon Martin. A bridge between Katrina and more recent events, this line shows the reality that there is "no

ending to [the African American] story” (84). Furthermore, Rankine also creates this bridge from the past to the present by speaking directly to her readers. Interspersed throughout “Hurricane Katrina” are various forms of the question, “Have you seen their faces?” (83). Reflecting on this question, readers can understand that failure to spot the anguished faces of people in need suggests ignorance on the part of the government and public, while choosing to not help them despite being aware of their condition suggests a high degree of negligence. While in the context of Hurricane Katrina, the “you” in the question specifically refers to the parties that failed to provide adequate aid, Rankine uses “you” deliberately to pull readers away from Katrina and reflect on their own awareness of social injustice. Repeatedly confronted by this question, readers begin to wonder if they are doing enough to help those effected by this systemic racial inequality. This reflection, alongside the revelation that the African American psyche during Hurricane Katrina is not isolated to that incident, invites readers to begin searching for solutions for the neglect and hopelessness that many African Americans feel. “August 29, 2005 / Hurricane Katrina” asks readers to find an “ending to this story” so that a brighter future may begin (84).

Claudia Rankine’s use of the past continues in “June 26, 2011 / In Memory of James Craig Anderson.” This piece, two poems after “August 29, 2005 / Hurricane Katrina” in Part VI of *Citizen* describes the horrific 2011 murder of James Craig Anderson, a 47-year-old African American man who worked at a Nissan plant in Jackson, Mississippi (Hassan). A group of ten white teenagers, including 18-year old Deryl Dedmond who Rankine refers to throughout the poem, robbed and beat Anderson before running over him with a pickup truck (Hassan). In eight stanzas, Rankine describes the event using structure and language that uncovers issues with contemporary media coverage. “June 26, 2011 / In Memory of James Craig Anderson” uses a

free verse form. Unlike “August 29, 2005 / Hurricane Katrina,” each stanza is of a similar length. The first stanza is featured on its own page with a significant amount of white space underneath it:

In the next frame the pickup truck is in motion. Its motion
activates its darkness. The pickup truck is a condition of
darkness in motion. It makes a dark subject. You mean a
black subject. No, a black object. (Rankine 93)

By choosing to put this first stanza on its own page, Rankine emphasizes the main theme running throughout her piece: the dehumanization of the African American individual. Rankine’s reduction of the “black subject” to the “black object” comes through a “frame,” suggesting that a video is playing (93). Similar to the effect of structure in “August 29, 2005 / Hurricane Katrina,” this first stanza may cause readers to think of the news reports or videos of injustice that are fresh in their conscious. The white space following the stanza invites readers to pause and reflect on these images before proceeding in the poem. Furthermore, the white space juxtaposes Rankine’s use of words such as “dark,” “darkness,” and “black” in the stanza (93). This serves as a reminder to readers of the racial divide that endures in the United States, both in 2011 and today.

Alongside this use of structure, Rankine also deliberately uses language to uncover contemporary issues. In the second stanza, Rankine states, “Then the audio, / I ran that n***** over, is itself a record-breaking hot June / day in the twenty-first century” (94). The use of the words “twenty-first century” reminds readers that the murder was a recent occurrence (94). Readers are invited to reflect upon other hate crimes that have occurred during the twenty-first century, perhaps bringing more recent events to mind. The time period evoked, alongside the racial slur used in the line, reminds readers that this heinous language is still used today. In the

fourth stanza, Rankine describes a news broadcast of the event: “The announcer patronizes the pickup truck, no hoodlums, / ‘just teens,’ no gang, ‘just a teen,’ ‘with scraggly blond hair,’ ‘a slight blond man.’” (94). The language used here by the announcer portrays Deryl Dedmond as simply a teen instead of a hate-filled criminal. The flawed use of language by the media in the poem may remind readers of an ongoing discourse: white males who commit horrific acts of violence are often referred to by the media as troubled, while those from minority backgrounds may be stereotyped as thugs, gang members, drug users, or terrorists. The media’s subdued portrayal of the white criminal here is an injustice towards the black victim and lines up with Rankine’s description of him as “the black object.” Anderson, along with many African Americans today, are not only dehumanized by the perpetrators of hate crimes, but also media outlets. In the following stanza, Rankine speaks to Dedmond: “In the circulating photo you are looking down. Were you / dreaming of this day all the days of your youth?” (94). Rankine’s description of the photo as “circulating” and Dedmond’s gaze as “downward” may bring to readers’ minds several other similar images of those who have carried out recent hate crimes. For example, a mugshot and several images of Dylann Roof, who committed the 2015 Charleston Church shooting, widely circulated the internet following his crime and during his trial. In many images, Dylann also looks downward as if thinking about the moment of his crime (Robles). In the final stanza of “June 26, 2011 / In Memory of James Craig Anderson,” Rankine again talks directly to Dedmond: “What ails you, Dedmond? / What up? What’s up is James Craig Anderson is dead” (95). By questioning Dedmond, Rankine employs language that is similar to what is often seen when a white male commits a heinous crime; it is often asked what went wrong in the individual’s development or why they were so angry. Today, as was the case in the past, African Americans and other minorities groups do not get this treatment. They are dealt with using much

harsher language and their actions are not usually attributed to a troubled past or mental illness. Rankine quickly stops showing concern by stating that what truly matters is that “James Craig Anderson is dead” (95). Rankine makes evident that a man like Deryl Dedmond, who is motivated by racial hatred, should not be given any benefit of the doubt simply because he is a white man.

In *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine uses the same technique employed by many of her peers in African American Poetry: using the past to uncover the present. In poems such as “August 29, 2005 / Hurricane Katrina” and “June 26, 2011 / In Memory of James Craig Anderson” Rankine shows her readers that as the twenty-first century progresses, African Americans are still suffering from feelings of hopelessness and are receiving unfair portrayal by the media. In these two works, Rankine uses deliberate structure and language in order for her readers to make connections between these past events and the present, where society has not made as much progress as should be hoped for. By uncovering these problems “that many [don’t] want to shine a light on”, Rankine invites readers to partake in self-reflection and find solutions so that society may move forward (84). It is through *Citizen* that Rankine hopes readers can “see [African American] faces” with greater understanding and a sense of alliance (85).

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