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ENGL 384: New Brown America

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Blackness in Claudia Rankine's "Citizen"

Racial identity in modern America deals with continued subjugation of the black community along with distinctly new challenges of the coexistence of blackness and patriotism. The creation and proliferation of a white hegemony has shaped the white perception of blackness in the United States. Demonstrated in Claudia Rankine's "Citizen", white attitude towards blackness and brownness focuses on the act of othering through language, action, and the construction of arbitrary differences. Through the distinction between whiteness and blackness, the relationship between the two is called to question. How does one influence the other and in what ways can we see the outcomes? Rankine demonstrates mainstream black isolation from whiteness in an illustrious light, providing real life accounts of this modern othering and continued subjugation.

In order to understand the ways in which whiteness effects black identity in modern America, the definition of blackness through the existence of whiteness requires clarification. In James Baldwin's article, "On Being White and Other Lies", he claims that whiteness as an identity came before the existence of blackness. This distinction stemmed from the denial of black presence and justification of black subjugation, creating a white hegemony. Blackness was then pinned as an other. Rankine depicts this claim with a modern example:

A friend argues that Americans “battle between the ‘historical self’ and the ‘self self’.

By this she means you mostly interact as friends with mutual interests, and, for the

most part, compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical selves,

her white self and her black self, arrive with full force of your American positioning (27).

The distinction between ‘historical self’ and ‘self self’ lays in the segregation of the past, and

present, of her and her friend. The friend argues that although she may only disregard the

wholeness of black identity accidentally, her past, her identity, is built on her dominance over it.

Using poetic delivery, Rankine demonstrates the way in which the existence of whiteness lays in

its historical implications— the claiming of blackness as property. This is the historical self

which the friend battles with.

In modern America, the white relationship to blackness, and more recently the recognition of brownness, takes the form of microaggressions along with outward acts of racism and discrimination. These othering remarks, so often casually slipped into conversation, define the modern distinction of blackness from whiteness. The white hegemony has become so institutionalized and ingrained in societal relationships that black identity is not recognized as is but rather as a property of whiteness. Rankine demonstrates that these distincting actions roll off the tongue without thought, without any effect on the white deliverer. Rankine writes, “The fiction of facts assumes innocence, ignorance, lack of intention, misdirection; the necessary conditions of a certain time and place” (103). While blackness exists from the creation and naming of the white hegemony, the claimed white superiority relies on the denial of black presence to sustain itself. Rankine showcases this denial in everyday situations, writing:

Yes, and you want it to stop, you want the child pushed to the ground to be seen, to be

helped to his feet, to be brushed off by the person that did not see him, has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a direct reflection of himself (45).

In Rankine's poetic delivery, the mistreatment of the mentioned child is symbolic of the struggles of black recognition by whiteness. The white identity has never and will never be relatable to the struggles that blackness has endured through its existence. The white man who pushed the child to the ground has no perception of being on the ground. Rankine uses these lines to illustrate the niche of whiteness that continues the othering and degradation of people of color in modern America. These hegemonic tendencies have been continually perpetrated and ingrained into whiteness that the implications of their actions are not even in the realm of thought while being carried out. These implications include an overall lack of representation, or subsequently large misrepresentations, which diminish the wholeness of black identity and its place in modern America.

Every action, every word, every creation of art or literature by a black individual becomes critiqued by whiteness in comparison. Rankine describes the feeling of this limitation as "being thrown against a sharp, white background" (65). The presence and recognition of her blackness is most prevalent when compared to whiteness. Along with describing her own relationship to black identity and the instances in which that seems to be the only facet whiteness focuses on, Rankine references Hennessy Youngman, an artist using his platform to bring light to continued black segregation, who says, "If a nigger paints a flower it becomes a slavery flower" (70). This is the same battle with one's 'historical self' and 'self self' that Claudia Rankine mentions earlier in her work. The publication and perception of black attitudes and experiences are continually tied to their historical position of subservience rather than the work or point being

wholly analyzed like white work and action. The impact of this belittlement can be seen through the ways in which black work is marketed to the American mainstream.

Blackness and patriotism have grown to have an increasingly complex relationship, neither one knowing how it fits into the other. Along with challenges related to the existence and recognition of blackness as a whole, Rankine tells of the internal struggle of her black identity and belonging to a society built from her degradation and how she sees the two fit. In order to demonstrate the immense ways in which whiteness has interacted with blackness in modern America she writes, “Each time it begins in the same way, it does not begin the same way, each time it begins it’s the same” (121). The shooting unarmed teenagers, solidifying labels of ‘angry black woman’, assuming wrongdoing and fear which would not be otherwise be in a white community... Rankine illustrates the ways in which these acts of violence, no matter how the modern American mainstream differentiates them, are all adding to degradation of black identity in similar manners. The black community is faced with the test of American patriotism— assimilate or be pinned as other. Different than whiteness, black acts of victory are perceived as attempts to “prove [their] red-blooded American patriotism” (93).

The perception of blackness in the modern American mainstream and its relation to patriotism has been largely based on fear. The white hegemony has painted people of color into stories of crime and inherent wrongdoing, making sure to advertise them as such in the headlines. Rankine calls out these false narratives and further analyzes the relationship of whiteness and blackness as they exist in a supposedly desegregated environment. One of the most instrumental exemplifications of this perception of white fear in “Citizen” is Rankine’s conversation about Serena Williams, a twenty-three title winner still pinned as the angry black

woman of sports television. Rankine remarks how inspired and shocked she was by Serena's retaliation to outward acts of racial prejudice writing, "Occasionally it is interesting to think about the outburst if you would just cry out— To know what you'll sound like is worth noting—" (80). Rankine draws on the power of recognition

While the continuation of white hegemonic attitudes is not reflective of the wholeness of black identity, that is not to even remotely say that black identity is not whole; black identity is so whole that it cannot properly fit within the current model for patriotism. The fear-based perceptions of blackness rest in the same historical facts and societal constructions that have been present and perpetrated alongside the concept of patriotism in America. Throughout "Citizen", Claudia Rankine illustrates the existence and perception of blackness in an environment dictated by a white hegemony. Rankine and Baldwin define blackness from its distinction from whiteness, namely drawn by those who would categorize themselves as white. This distinction has ingrained itself into societal constructions placing black contributions at a lesser significance than their white counterparts. This narrative of othering is illustrated in the American mainstream throughout "Citizen" by calling out the erected white power and challenging its legitimacy, paving way for blackness in America to sit comfortably on its own, disconnected from its comparisons to whiteness.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. "On Being White and Other Lies." 1984.

Rankine, Claudia. "Citizen." 2014.