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Eng 490 Insiders, Outsiders & Strangers

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Literary Activism: Rewriting the Past to Encourage Social Justice

Reading literature such as *Citizen: an American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine informed my understanding of the disturbing hypocrisy that surfaces within the majority of white American society. *Citizen* offers accounts of moments that demonstrate the current racism black people in America face daily and the white people who neglect the effect that their words and actions have on marginalized groups. The book exposes various microaggressions that black people are forced to react to in our modern and supposedly post-racial America. Rankine’s carefully written lyric combines impactful images, prose and poetry to artistically demonstrate atrocious American attitudes through a beautifully crafted narrative which disproves the myth that we live in a post-racial America. Rankine, like many writers passionate about creating social justice, uses literature to critique American ideologies around discrimination. Literature can be effectively used as a platform to invoke social change by giving accurate representation to those seen as “other” within the American context of a mainstream culture dominated by white people. Narratives like *The Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad or *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe that are taught in contemporary American classrooms, use language that diminish the identities of the black people they describe. These stories describe minority groups, namely non-white people, as being “other” from the perspective of the white male authors who wrote them. The negative depiction of marginalized characters by texts like these reduce the individual identities of particular people. Stereotypes reduce individual identities to generalizations that white storytellers created. Engaging in modern literature that critiques the ideologies produced by ignorant and white oppressors can help move people toward a societal change.

Studying “otherness” through American society’s treatment of other races within literature highlights ways that contemporary authors and activists are challenging many traditional American texts. The overarching narratives past Americans have created, have been deteriorating the reputation of entire groups since before our country began. All life is not equal within our society, despite the façade that America’s patriotism is grounded in the premise that we are all equal. Rankine’s book urges us to consider injustices in American society like the inequality demonstrated by law enforcement.

The section titled, “Stop-and-Frisk” uses the refrain, “you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description,” (105). Rankine’s conversational poetic form invites readers to be with the narrator in the moment and consider the experience of a person who has been targeted because of the stereotypes created by a bunch of ignorant, cruel white guys. Rankine’s lyric shows the small instances that comprise the reality that police are more likely to pull over and frisk black people than white people. The refrain plainly states that police generalize when accusing black people of crimes. The description that the man fits has to do with the stories that white men have created about black people over time rather than the identity of the individual black man accused. Blanket generalizations are applied to all black people in ways that we do not see when police accuse white people of crimes. There is an imbalance of justice and Rankine addresses this through out her “Stop-and-Frisk” section.

One microagression Rankine writes about that implies racial divides without ever particularly stating the skin color of the people involved, happens in the subway. A man knocked over someone’s son and does not stop walking. The narrator watches as the mother attempts to get an apology for her son from the offender. The scenario sounds logical; any mother would do the same if their child was shoved, knocked over, and disregarded. It is sad to picture, despite what the child looks like. However, the retelling of this story indicates the significance of what the child *did* look like. Rankine writes, “…you want the child pushed to the ground to be seen… 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 reflection of himself,” (17). These lines emulate the very essence of egocentrism present in many white American perspectives. Rankine shares this story to create awareness of the absurdity of these aggressive acts that are overlooked when we only hear stories from the white person who never saw the child because the child was not, could not, and should not have to be, a reflection of the offender. There is an urgency to reawaken the American conscience so that all living beings are recognized and respected equally. Rankine calls out the common occurrence of white people neglecting Others by refusing to even accept them as visible.

Rankine’s use of the second person helps create a close relationship between the reader and the text. In the description of the boy being shoved in the subway, Rankine writes, “You feel your own body wince,” (17). Her approach forces the reader to be there, in the moment, to experience the event and take accountability for their own position within the text. Rankine’s rhetorical strategy invites readers to enter the particular moment where racist aggression is present. She places the reader in that moment so that regardless of their positionality, they can get a closer view of what it looks like and how it feels for the oppressed to exist in a culture rooted in racist ideologies.

Similarly, author Jonathan Safran Foer uses his book *Eating Animals* as a platform to draw attention to another area where the values in American society come up short due to the general ignorance of the whole scope of a story. He starts the book with a chapter titled ‘Storytelling’. On the page is just the word storytelling and a statistic, “Americans choose to eat less than .25% of the known edible food on the planet.” Like Rankine, Foer sparks our attention right from the beginning of the book by pointing out areas of our own interactions and experiences worth questioning. He intends to write an unbiased account of the current farming practices in our country as an animal activist seeking some social justice. When he introduces the subject of food in American society, he draws attention to the fact that we eat food that pleases us, never questioning what this food is. Thinking about Foer’s *Eating Animals* in comparison to *Citizen* helps readers understand that there are many reasons activists choose to use literature as an act of protest. I intend not to denote the horror of racism by drawing this comparison, instead I mean to provoke thinkers to consider the ways that in American society, lives of countless humans and animals are disregarded, pushed to a category of otherness, and thus denigrated as unworthy of basic humility. The society is structured in a way that allows white Americans privileges that are not present for all Others. Many white Americans do not understand those privileges. As members of the dominant group that is oppressing others, white people do not share the experiences of being prejudiced against like those members of marginalized groups in our country. Other is a creation of those members of the dominant majority, here meaning white people, that have created a separation between themselves and anyone that is different. Texts like Rankine’s and Foer’s are progressive in calling out the social injustices of oppressors while educating the reader without berating them. Each text is written as an act of uncovering the small stories that comprise a big problem.

Engaging in literature that challenges us to face what Foer calls a, “*how-in-the-world-could-I-have-never-thought-of-that-before-and-why-didn’t-someone-tell-me?* moment,” we are able to form our own opinions, perspectives, and approaches about compassion and what it means to live with consideration of Others’ positionality, identity, and natural rights.

Foer writes that his babysitter provoked the first instance that he realized eating a chicken dinner meant that a chicken suffered and died for his plate. She didn’t eat meat so that she would not hurt anyone and he says how the logic of not hurting anything coincided with the many important lessons his parents had attempted to teach him as a boy. Foer says how he was taught not to hurt family members, friends or strangers and that him not having animals on that list early in life did not make them an exception. Reading this section completely sparked connections between *Citizen* and *Eating Animals*. Each book is concerned with representing the current experience of Others who are facing discrimination and misrepresentation because of the narratives that outsiders tell about the Other’s inside story. Foer and Rankine both use literature as a means for activism and sharing progressive ideas. In this example from Foer, he is talking about how his parents taught him not to hurt any living things, but that animals were never mentioned in that discussion. Here he discusses how the stories he had been told, shaped his views, until he was told even more stories that altered his understanding of the world. Essentially this is just how we learn- replacing past thoughts with new discoveries through studying facts and examples. This offers a clear view of the ways that literature tells stories in order to enhance ideas about topics and inform the perspectives of readers.

Similarly, Rankine uses a microaggression to convey the same ideas. Right in the beginning of section I, Rankine describes a scenario where a white student is copying answers from a black student in class. During what seems to be an attempt to thank the black student, the white student says, “you smell good and have features more like a white person,” (5). These lines are full of the stories white people told this white girl about black people. Her words imply that it is uncommon that a black person smells good, and that ideally all people who are considered attractive have white features. It is inappropriate for people to be so blatantly racist, however it is engrained in many white people’s psyche because of the stories their parents have told. It is difficult to say whether the white girl realized the ways her compliment was insulting. The text does not indicate the girls’ age, so it adds tension to deciding whether the white girl was out of line or a product of the stories she had been told. This emphasizes the scope of the problem, because whether the girl was 5, 7 or 16 years old, she should not be making anybody feel as though they are “other”. Rankine writes about this scenario in order to expose the level to which racism permeates our social order, even in a classroom of children.

By engaging in literature geared towards telling the smaller, individual stories, we eliminate the blanket generalizations present in literature by white authors who attempt to represent non-white groups. In Sterling A. Brown’s piece, *Negro Character as Seen by White Authors*, he discusses the ways white people generalize races. He critiques a piece by Roark Bradford that argues that all black people fall under one of three categories of characterization. Without explanation, it is obvious that a whole race of people has more than three differences. Narrow minded stories like these, as Brown says, remain, “a far better analysis of a white man than of *the* Negro,” (179). Brown is careful to express this sentiment. By italicizing ‘the’ he emphasizes that white authors dehumanize black people with language. He writes ‘the’ because that is the way it was written in the literature he is critiquing. Brown himself is not dehumanizing the people he is writing about, instead he is exposing past acts of hate through the written word that black people have been subjected to. This line drives home the idea that we need to consider the positionality of authors writing about marginalized groups because it can help us as readers to identify misrepresentations of those considered Others.

One story about one black person does not explain the experience of all black people. Brown explains in his piece that “Authors are too anxious to have it said, ‘Here is *the* Negro,’ rather than here are a few Negroes whom I have seen,” (179). Brown’s piece goes on to elaborate on many instances of white authors misrepresenting black identity through awfully written black characters. Literature can be used as a platform to reinforce or destroy stereotypes and so reading modern texts that critique our societal faults is crucial to growing into a well rounded and sound minded nation.

Reading narratives that expose the ethical problems in the United States, like recent instances of racism or stories that detail the neglectful treatment of animals, help to expose the faults of a country that is simultaneously advanced enough to exercise humility and extremely prejudiced in its practices. The U.S. misrepresents itself as being a country rooted in equality for all and it is up to its citizens to properly earn the reputation of the land of the free. There is a difference between the story of America and the story we tell about America, much like the way Foer felt in *Eating Animals* about his and his wife’s pre-vegetarian life. He describes the constant struggle with hypocrisy, “there were things [we] believed while lying in bed at night, and there were choices made at the breakfast table the next morning,” (8). This resonates with the ways that white people treat the current state of racism in our culture. Many who argue, “I have black friends” or “I am not a racist…” use these lines to cover the racism within their perspectives that follow. While a white person is most likely to say, “I am not racist…,” Rankine’s book exposes those moments that are seemingly insignificant to the white oppressor, which are in truth scarring and degrading to the black people the moment offends. There are many aspects of the current American culture that are failing but persist because of white people’s ignorance.

Civil Rights activist and scholar W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “…the full complete Negro message of the whole Negro Race has not yet been given to the world: that the messages and ideal of the yellow race have not been completed, and that the striving of the mighty Slavs has but begun. The question is, then: How shall this message be delivered; how shall these various ideals be realized?” (183). Essentially, those who critique racism tend to explain that storytelling is the crux for the presence of prejudice in our society. Du Bois says that stories have not been told about black people by black people and that black people are not the only group in this position. In order for the message of black people to be understood, it must be fastened there by black people themselves. Rankine has taken great literary strides towards the goal of adding black narratives by black people that critique wrongful prejudices to book shelves and has tried to answer Du Bois’ question.

Reading theory from other discourses can often give an outside approach to understanding the current problems of racism in America. In “From Heroic to Holistic Ethics: The Ecofeminist Challenge”, Marti Kheel explains, “The *quality* of relation is more important than the fact that a relation of some kind exists. If our society is to regain a sense of psychic health, we must learn to attend to the quality of relations and interactions, not just the existence of relations in themselves.” While Kheel focuses mostly on understanding nature through a feminist lens, this applies to the concept of human interactions with all living beings within our society. While we live in a country with people from all over the world, that is not enough. We must interact, engage and coexist in this country. Relationships are a matter of quality rather than quantity.

This idea ties directly into one microaggression shared in *Citizen*. “You are rushing to meet a friend,” the scene begins. Then as you see the friend she says you’re late, “you nappy-headed ho,” (Rankine 41). As mentioned before, it is the quality of the relationships we have that matters, not their existence. This example shows how friendship often gives people a sense of closeness that allows them to let their guard down and say things they may not say outwardly otherwise. Rankine gives us the scene directly and follows the insult with the line, “What did you say?” a motif throughout the lyric. A motif that plagues our current American society, because friends still put down other friends based on racist thoughts and language. This microaggression directly demonstrates the need for better quality within relationships in America. We might have friends from various ethnic backgrounds, but if we are making racist jokes and comments towards those friends, we continue to be at fault as a country rooted in hypocrisy.

That being said, there are major problems by the ways the U.S. failed to integrate. In a 2012 publication, *Some of My Best Friends Are Black* by Tanner Colby, the white author attempts to address the fact that he himself lacked any diversity within his friend group. He gathers the individual stories of various African Americans across the United States to gather insight about the experience of black people in America. He, a white author, spent time getting to know black individuals so he could crush some of the prejudices he was raised to believe.

Colby shares a story about a white girl he was dating that had studied abroad in South Africa to do research about the history of Apartheid. While there, she randomly received an invite to a small gathering where the former South African president Nelson Mandela would attend. At the meeting she told Mandela how his life and struggle had inspired her. Colby asked her whether she told Mandela that she belonged to a restricted country club. Colby uses the story as a metaphor to explain that being white in America is like being part of a restricted country club by default. What he means, is that white people can’t always see their privilege because it has always been there. They prefer to believe that they are not at a higher advantage, however white people can’t change the way other people interpret them any more than people of color. This might explain why many white people deny the existence of racial barriers, because they have never fallen victim. Colby says that the problems of race do not intrude on you personally in this country when you are born white. This is a very important aspect to studying racism within America as a white American. Too much time, energy, and hope is sucked from the souls of black people who face each day in the United States with an overarching ‘burden’ placed there by white eyes, but the act of educating myself to try to understand is a move in the right direction.

Clearly the struggle with race in America is still very much a burden to our not-so innocent society. In *Ghosts of Jim Crow: Ending Racism in Post-Racial America,* F. Michael Higginbotham concludes at the end of a section called ‘Black Empowerment and Self-Help’ that, “it will take a concerted effort, for all parts of society, to destroy the paradigm of race once and for all,” (199). He reaffirms that there must be efforts from all beings in the transition of the United States into a country that practices what it claims it stands for: equality. Higginbotham explains that Jim Crow and the minstrel shows that misrepresented black people in American entertainment in effect, “those mocking images of black inferiority became deeply engrained in our psyche as a nation,” (199). Literature by authors like Rankine and Foer are meant to respond to these false images that Americans have engrained in their memories from the stories we are told.

Higginbotham explains that, “Diversity enriches the educational experience by helping students learn from peers and mentors whose experiences, beliefs, and perspectives differ from their own,” (216 Higginbotham). In his critique of post-civil rights integration, he examines the ways that America has failed to move past racial divides. He explains the benefits of learning from those with varying outlooks. This is fundamentally the reason that readers engage in texts such as *Citizen*. Reading literature that exemplifies the view of someone far removed from your own positionality is how we become well rounded and considerate thinkers, as well as unprejudiced members of society. Our nation must expand the stories we have been telling about marginalized groups. We must encourage those misrepresented members of society to add their own stories to bookshelves so that future generations might coexist within the boundaries of the U.S. without racial divides.

At this point, it is not clear how we are going to express all sides of the story regarding the many current social injustices within American society. What is clear, is that the remaining racist ideologies expressed by white Americans are unacceptable. Reading literature by passionate activists can alter our perception of old myths. Educating ourselves by reading work by Others can help us to replace those delusional stories. Reading personal stories of people helps us remember that they do not alone represent their whole race, but rather, represent their own self, their life, their own individual struggle, and hopefully thus diminishing old stereotypes.

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