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Honors Program Second Prize Essay

“GEORGE BUSH DOESN’T CARE ABOUT BLACK PEOPLE:” CITIZEN, RACE, CLASS, AND THE AFTERMATH OF HURRICANE KATRINA

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In August of 2005 Hurricane Katrina tore through New Orleans, destroying property, lives, and flooding an estimated 80% of the city when the storm surge overwhelmed the levees. The damage was most prominent in the lowest lying, poorest portion of the city— an area inhabited predominantly by people of color. Despite the devastation, government aid to the area was virtually nonexistent. In Rankine’s “Citizen”, the racial and class dynamics present in the relief effort are brought to light through a poem comprised of a collection of CNN quotes regarding the devastation in the aftermath of the hurricane. The audience is asked several times “Have you seen their faces?”, which brings to light two issues. First, many people purposefully ignore tragedy, particularly when there is a class or racial issue at play— being forced to confront one’s privilege can be difficult. Second, the repetition of this phrase illustrates both urgency and disbelief— the person asking the question is highlighting the horror that people have gone through, and how it is conveyed in their facial expressions. It is as though the author is suggesting that the magnitude of the issue cannot be fully comprehended by just a passing glance, or even one good look. I argue that this serves to establish an atmosphere of shocked ambiguity so as to demonstrate the systemic and deliberate disregard for the safety and physical well-being of people of color. Ultimately, Rankine brings to light the racial and class division that became apparent before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina, and shows that the government response was part of a much larger cycle of disregard and deliberate wrongdoing towards people of color.

It had been known for years that the poor, black victims portrayed in Citizen would be hardest hit in the event of a hurricane in New Orleans. The black population comprised 67% of the total population in New Orleans, 84% of those living under the poverty line (Katz), and was highly concentrated in areas of extreme poverty (defined as areas where >40% of the population is living below the poverty line) (Katz). In Citizen, these population demographics become clear when someone left anonymous remarks that “so many of these people almost all of them that we see, are so poor, someone else said, and they are so black” (Rankine 85); the victims portrayed earlier in the poem are now revealed to have been not only poor, but black as well. Fussell points to the establishment of a biracial society in New Orleans as the cause of these disturbing population demographics, the origins of which lie in the 1900’s, when employment, housing, and social discrimination forced people of color to remain in the lower lying city as whites left for the suburbs (Fussell 851). During Hurricane Katrina, the safety implications for those living in the low-lying city (below sea level in many cases) included “no electricity, no power, no way to communicate. We are drowning here” (Rankine 85). After the hurricane, some portions of the city had flooding up to 20 feet deep (National Geographic). Perhaps most disturbingly, this devastation had been forecasted years ago. In 2001, when FEMA ranked the top 3 most catastrophic disasters likely to occur, a hurricane in New Orleans was second only to a terrorist attack in New York City (Bullard 768). In short, they deemed it not only catastrophic, but assigned a high likelihood of occurrence. Environmental scientists warned

that the coastal wetlands that had previously served as a buffer for flooding had been destroyed by erosion, drilling, and urban development. Should a storm surge occur, they said, the most low-lying parts of New Orleans (and the poorest at that) would be in terrible danger (Bullard 768). While entirely aware of this information, neither FEMA nor the government initially went to New Orleans to provide direct humanitarian relief, as shown in *Citizen* by the remark that “FEMA said it wasn’t safe to be there...they all want to stay in Texas” (Rankine 84). The poor distribution of aid and services persisted in the relief effort. Lakeview and other such wealthy suburban areas have now been given and increased 5.5 feet of levee protection, whereas no such promise was made to lower lying areas that dealt with the most flooding (Bullard 777).

The repetition of phrases like “have you seen their faces?” (Rankine 83) and “I don’t know what the water wanted” (Rankine 85) is used as a metaphor for the constant discrimination faced by people of color beyond what was seen during Hurricane Katrina. The juxtaposition of the phrase, “Have you seen their faces” (Rankine 83) to the reporter’s musing “as if the faces in the images hold all the consequences” demonstrates two ideas. First, seeing these “images” through the news will never have the same impact as being at the scene of the disaster. Secondly, it concedes that even the emotion conveyed in their faces, giving her “chills”, can only convey the result of the disaster, be it trauma, fear, or anger. While the images and their faces are powerful, they do not tell the story of the systemic injustice that gave rise to those emotions. The second passage to which the phrase “have you seen their faces?” (Rankine 83) is juxtaposed is the narrator’s remark that “this assumes ignorance, lack of intention...” (Rankine 83). We are told that their faces show “the fiction of the facts”: the victims somehow know that deliberate malintention is at play. This lack of hope suggests that this disregard for their safety wasn’t new to the poor, black population of New Orleans depicted in the poem. They were used to having a government that was elected to protect their needs actively harm them instead. The phrase “I don’t know what the water wanted” (Rankine 85) is frequently repeated as well, juxtaposed most notably to two phrases. Her first response is that “It wanted to show you no one would come” (Rankine 85), pointing to the water as the catalyst for, rather than the cause of the indignation that followed the tragedy. It personifies the water, and paints the damage it caused as being purposeful, just as the ignorance of the victims was no accident. While damage was done, it exposed the true malintention of the government. This malintention is further revealed via the juxtaposition of the phrase “I don’t know what the water wanted” (Rankine 85) with the retort “As if then and now weren’t the same moment” (Rankine 86), suggesting that inaction requires the same choice, regardless of how immediate and obvious the turmoil is. Whether it’s denial of humanitarian aid in the wake of a category 5 hurricane on an already vulnerable city, or denial of humanity through poverty and discrimination, the same deliberate choice to strip someone of their dignity is required.

In the poem, the reporter’s demeanor and determination to bring the immense suffering to light forces the audience to consider how such devastation came to fruition. Perrow hypothesizes that the media played a crucial role in bringing the crisis to light because “the continued broadcast of these images reinforced the conclusion that this tragedy should not have happened in the United States” (Potter 5). The poem itself is a compilation of quotes from a CNN reporter. Given this, the fear and shock displayed become even more poignant- as a reporter, she should be used to covering disasters of all sorts. In the poem, however, she is repeatedly asking the reader “have you seen their faces?” (Rankine 85). The purpose of this is twofold; first, it illustrates her own shock at the extent of the trauma to survivors, particularly when she states that “you simply get chills every time you see these poor individuals” (Rankine 85) just before. The repetition of this phrase shows that their expressions have affected her profoundly, as they merit more than a passing observation. Moreover, it implores the reader to meaningfully consider not just the damage to property that was so often portrayed in the news, but the impact on the psyche of those that survived. What’s more, it acknowledges that even these images are an insufficient portrayal of the di-

saster at hand. She says, “we are drowning here...still in the difficulty...as if the faces in the images hold all the consequences” (Rankine 85). This imagery provides insight into just how abhorrent the situation was: she has stated that their faces give her chills, and yet she knows that their expressions still don’t reveal the full extent of everything these people have gone through. An element of fear is present as well: when her coworker gives her a flashlight in a dark area, she notes “I didn’t want to turn it on. It was all black. I didn’t want to shine a light on that” (Rankine 84). Previous scenes tell us that “that” is likely a slew of disembodied people, rotten infrastructure, and traumatized victims. She’s a reporter, and yet is afraid that whatever she is about to see is worse than the faces that gave her “chills”. Despite that, we see a certain determination that most clearly illustrates her character’s role as the activist. At the end of the passage she commands her colleague to “Call out to them.” (Rankine 86) When he replies, “I don’t see them.” (Rankine 86), she responds by telling him to “Call out to them anyway” (Rankine 86). This final line in the poem implores the audience to actively search out and assist the vulnerable. The initial fear that she conveyed has been dwarfed by her desire to ensure the safety of the victims. Through her, Rankine is suggesting that we find that same bravery to help others most in need.

The continuous lack of reference to specific people and places serves to craft an atmosphere of ambiguity, which in turn allows the text to serve as a metaphor for racial dynamics more broadly. The reporter remarks that “you simply get chills every time you see these poor individuals, so many of these people almost all of them that we see, are so poor, and someone else said, and they are so black” (Rankine 85). Those in the arena are referred to as a collective. Even when one of the men is being interviewed, nobody is speaking in first person. He says that “we never reached out to anyone to tell our story because there’s no ending to our story” (Rankine 84). The reasoning behind why they’ve “never reached out” likely stems from just how systemic these discriminatory conditions are; continuing to remind people of the daily struggles they face would be exhausting. Use of the words “we” and “never” illustrate his belief— one he states “we” (presumably the black community) share in the futility of speaking out. A more disturbing idea implicit in the previous statement is the belief that even if they are to share their story, nothing will come of it. There is “no end”, perhaps because they feel no one is listening. The scene laid out for the reader, one in which the houses are “peeling apart, the yellow foam, the contaminated drawl of mildew, mold.” (Rankine 84), can be seen as a metaphor for the culmination of this systemic discrimination. The living conditions from the beginning would have to have been subpar— mold can’t overtake a house in mere days, even after flooding from a hurricane. The area was known to be a flood risk, and yet the houses were neither reinforced nor elevated; they were left to peel apart, because evidently nobody cared about preventing collapse and respiratory conditions in the poorest of the poor communities. The hurricane tearing apart the buildings, revealing the safety hazards and poor constructions, can be seen as a metaphor for the culmination of racial issues. Flooding did not create this social division, in the same way that it did not create structural instability: it merely exposed the two. That said, the repetition of the phrase “Still in the difficulty” (Rankine 83) juxtaposed with phrases such as “we are drowning here” (Rankine 85) and “climbing over bodies” (Rankine 83) emphasizes the horror that persists, even when people are made aware of the victims’ plight. They are still literally climbing over bodies, but they are also still dealing with the same social inequality that left them trapped in the lowest social caste in the lowest lying parts of the city in the first place. Even in the case that people are armed with the details of the situation, that information is useless until an overhaul of the social narrative that allowed that to persist is pursued.

The narrator’s continuous emphasis on the idea that “the fiction of the facts assumes randomness and indeterminacy” furthers the idea that the government purposefully ignored the plight of black victims before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. The reporter states “the fiction of the facts assumes randomness and indeterminacy” (Rankine 85) and “the fiction of the facts assumes innocence, ignorance, lack of

intention, misdirection” (Rankine 83). Both variations assert that this was a deliberate denial of aid, not an “innocent” or “random” misallocation of resources. What’s more, those who survived remain trapped in the city due to the lack of transportation: “someone said where are the buses?” (Rankine 84). This idea of entrapment extends beyond being trapped in the city after the hurricane ruined most people’s homes. They are trapped in a cycle of poverty and discrimination, to the point where there are limbs floating around the city and most homes have been destroyed and the government is neither trying to help them leave nor make the city fit for them to stay in. The situation is so dire, that even FEMA didn’t show up. In the arena, a woman says, “What I’m hearing, she said, which is sort of scary, is that [FEMA] wanted to stay in Texas” (Rankine 84). Note that the role of FEMA is to provide emergency aid during or after a disaster, or to assist the state government in doing so where possible. Given that the state and local governments were incapacitated due to the widespread destruction of infrastructure, FEMA going into New Orleans and bringing the necessary equipment for aid. FEMA presence was the last line of defense, and they failed to provide assistance. What’s most disturbing about this failure was the justification for it: New Orleans was too dangerous. Just this past year, FEMA deployed personnel prior to Category 5 Hurricane (Maria) in both Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands (FEMA)- a much more dangerous situation than a post-hurricane clean-up. This blatant inconsistency regarding what is deemed “too dangerous” suggests the designation of lower safety standards and priority to black lives further cementing their actions as morally abhorrent at best. The systemic nature of this disregard is implied in the following exchange between the female reporter and her colleague: “I don’t know what the water wanted... It wanted to show you no one would come...as if then and now were not the same moment”. This comparison between then and now sets up a divide between the past and the present, only to tear it down and state the circumstances are no different; they’re “the same moment”. In past, even at their most vulnerable, people didn’t come to offer assistance. Now, it may have been FEMA, but “they” can also be seen as to be part of the population (Whites) that for decades have sought to separate themselves. They are the same moment because each time their cry for help has been ignored by those with the power to alleviate their suffering.

Rankine repetition of the phrase “I don’t know what the water wanted” (Rankine 85) highlights our tendency to remove personal responsibility in events where racial dynamics are at play. Dyson points to an inability to properly empathize with black victims as a reason why we can express sympathy for them, yet not feel guilty about abdicating our responsibility to help. In the poem, the phrase is spoken several times by a man (likely a reporter) while viewing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on the poorest parts of New Orleans, Bodies are everywhere, flooding persists, and the living are traumatized- an unsettling scene for any onlooker. What is notable, however, is this individual’s inclination to attribute any and all damage to “the water”. The devastation was caused in the first place by the levees breaking- a situation that humans could have entirely prevented via fortification prior to the hurricane. Even the degree of devastation observed in the aftermath could have been mitigated to some degree had the government, FEMA, the National Guard, or other humanitarian organizations opted to allocate manpower or resources. This shifting of blame to the water, an inanimate force that moves with no deliberate malintention, is in fact nothing more than a pervasive attempt to absolve oneself of any possible wrongdoing. Directly afterwards, when the narrator commands “call out to them” (Rankine 86), the structure implies the man says, “I don’t see them” (Rankine 86). Given that the narrator has emphasized in detail how profoundly seeing the victims has affected her, it seems strange that he can’t see them as well. As such, this serves as a metaphor for a degree of purposeful ignorance, as he fails to see the devastation to individuals in the wake of a humanitarian disaster. Finally, the emphasis on the individual, “I”, sets the speaker (or society more broadly) up to look innocent every time- even in the case that one proves white people contribute to institutionalized racism, this separation from the collective allows the individual to put their mind at

rest, and continue to live in blissful ignorance of their own privilege. Ultimately, this individual's comment depicts the absolution of guilt that allowed the poor of New Orleans to suffer long before the hurricane.

Rankine's use of repetition, ambiguity, and narration technique furthers the idea that this was not a natural disaster: it was a virtually unprecedented, government perpetrated crisis fueled by societal indifference and targeted towards the most vulnerable in society. From the beginning, poor black residents of New Orleans had been relegated to the lowest lying parts of the cities, and their concerns ignored. It was only when they were subject to conditions so undeniably inhumane that we were finally forced to question "Have you seen their faces?" (Rankine 83), and consider the conditions and organizations that allowed for such poverty to exist, and such devastation to go ignored. Even in acknowledging the role of the government in purposefully disregarding the needs of a minority, it is demonstrated that many still blame the water instead of looking at the role their own actions and privilege play in perpetuating the widespread employment, housing, and social discrimination that allows for such horrors to continue. As one of the victims says, "there is no end to our story" (Rankine 84)- without a radical paradigm shift, the situation will not improve. To use the term natural disaster is to exonerate the government of the role it plays in setting up people of color to facial, and then ignoring them when they need help most. Ultimately, Rankine suggests that the hurricane was not the source of this destruction; perhaps it was our response that set the scene for a humanitarian disaster.

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