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Rankine's Varied Writing Styles and Subtle Symbols in *Citizen*:

How Holly Bass' Interpretations Clash with Mine

In her New York Times Book Review on Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, Holly Bass argues that Rankine sheds light upon experiences of black oppression from both ends of the spectrum, from microaggressions to public murders, by using poetic language intertwined with evocative internal monologues and artwork. Citing certain paragraphs from the work, Bass describes Rankine as a lyrical painter; with her non-traditional layout, she pushes past the boundaries of writing in order to disrupt the readers' preconceptions of freedom in America. In addition to breaking down the umbrella topics of the piece, Bass dives deeper into the connections between art and printed storytelling. She describes the use of blank pages to represent the "stunned silence" of the black community in response to targeted endless hate crimes. Similarly, she ties together the "breathing space" between texts and the repeated motif of sighing/exhaling throughout, mimicking the liminal condition of living as a black American. Bass ends her critique on an intriguing note, leaving readers to consider Rankine's apparent overall message being "a reduction of injustice is the same as freedom".

In her article, Holly Bass makes several claims regarding Rankine's messages and intentions with which I agree, though interprets differently the range of writing styles in *Citizen* and their varied purposes. To start, Bass interprets Rankine's use of the words "you" versus

“she” or “he” within the various anecdotes as a separation between black and white experiences, which gradually get muddied throughout in order to make the audience work a little harder. To support her claim, she cites from the Jena Six excerpt of the writing, quoting “*Boys will be boys being boys feeling their capacity heaving butting heads righting their wrongs in the violence of aggravated adolescence...*” (101). I agree with the idea that these run-on sentences lacking a clear narrator may confuse the reader and cause them to “work harder”, though I might go further to say that Rankine not only wants her readers to dig deep into uncovering the content of these sentences, but the intent behind using unorthodox grammar as well. Rankine cleverly uses the form of prose poem to eliminate the barrier of strict grammar in order to create an easy-flowing, breathless feeling between her words mimicking the ease of discussing imprisoned black teens that has come to be in our society. The content of the excerpt, the six black teens convicted of attempted murder, is muddied by her disorienting writing style, painting the incident in a similar manner to how it was portrayed in the media at the time.

Throughout the constant intertwining of prose poems, images, and essays of *Citizen* appear certain reappearing symbols mimicking the persistence of racial inequality in America. A prominent symbol that Bass addresses is the image of the sigh, quoting “*You sit down, you sigh. You stand up, you sigh. The sighing is a worrying exhale of an ache. You wouldn’t call it an illness; still it is not the iteration of a free being.*” (60). Bass writes that at best, this monologue “captures the liminal quality of being black and American — what Du Bois called double consciousness” (Bass). I would disagree with this statement in the sense that the image of a sigh does more than capture the pain of being black in America— it serves as an image open to interpretation and connection based on the reader’s individual identity and experiences. For certain black readers, a sigh could be a pathway to breathing, a coping mechanism for the

feelings of struggle they face in everyday life turning into a sense of control and strength. The image of breathing represents resistance to oppression, counter to the words of victim Eric Garner, “I can’t breathe”. On the other hand, sighing for white readers can be a message to learn more about the black experience; sighs are small and unnoticeable, as how black victims feel in the presence of white bystanders. Non-blacks are encouraged through these subtle but powerful symbols to step out of their comfort zone and face their subconscious complacency head-on.

Though Bass and I may differ in our in-depth interpretations of Rankine’s work, we both agree on the general message and intent behind her words. Using well-educated, mature narrators in wealthy settings, Rankine emphasizes the notion that “the potential to say a racist thing” (Bass) resides in every human being despite our social, economic or emotional differences. Rankine succeeds in pushing to boundaries of poem and prose in order to connect the experiences of young black Americans in a cohesive, profound and change-inspiring piece.

Works Cited:

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