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Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and Protective Memory

In the fourth section of *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine points out the truth that, for the black population, “[m]emory is a tough place” (64). Through her series of lyrics, Rankine is able to depict the way that memory is used as a protective space for the black community, albeit an uncomfortable one. Though living in the past may sometimes be seen as detrimental, it prevents further harm through microaggressions; language “that feels hurtful” and “is intended to exploit all the ways” that the black community is present (49). Rankine redefines our understanding of memory and the past as an ineffective and dysfunctional space within which to reside to a protective, even necessary mindset. Memory provides needed shelter for the black community.

In *Citizen*, Rankine redefines presence to reflect a state of vulnerability to attack by the white community. Just as presence is a perilous position, the state of nostalgia isn't a sweet reflective state, but rather an ensnaring rumination upon negative experiences that leads to further harm. Instead of dwelling in nostalgia, memory is a safer alternative to both presence and nostalgia which prevents abuse from others and lessens the sting of hurtful actions and behaviors. This protective memory, however, becomes unpleasant and creates inner turbulence and discomfort. Finally, given that protective memory can be a hurtful place in and of itself, moving on can offer a solution. As opposed to the conventional meaning of “moving on,” which implies starting fresh, moving on for the black community incorporates the helpful utilization of memory in order to resolve turbulent emotions and harmful experiences. Moving on isn't abandoning

memory, but capitalizing upon its power to enable the black community to lead more meaningful and less confined lives.

The safeguards of memory are crucial precisely because the alternative, presence, exposes the individual to attack. In the third section of the book, Rankine tells the story of the protagonist learning from the philosopher Judith Butler about what makes language hurtful. Butler responds by explaining that “[l]anguage that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present” (49). Closer examination of this passage reveals that, by logical extension, a natural defense against hurtful speech and behavior is retreating into the only other space accessible to the individual—the past, encapsulated by memory. In this instance we can see how racist language and behavior effectively crowds out the black individual from the present. They are forced into the all too often unpleasant refuge of memory.

Given that presence itself is a dangerous space for the black community, nostalgia represents a rumination upon the past which leads to a feeling of being trapped. The traditional understanding of nostalgia is underpinned with notions of sweetness, childhood, innocence, and similar ideas. Nostalgia in the context of *Citizen*, however, is devoid of such innocuous realities. According to Rankine, there are “benefits to being without nostalgia,” avoiding nostalgia altogether relieves the burdens of the past. Excessive nostalgia can reveal the lack, not of memories, but a sheer lack “before, during and after” (64). Through this passage, we can understand the negativity revealed by nostalgia, and the drive to avoid nostalgia in order to preserve the well-being of the black community. Earlier in the book, the narrator notes that “you don’t forget,” and that this inability to escape ruminative nostalgia “would be your fatal flaw...vessel of your feelings” (7). It’s clear that the protagonist is feeling trapped in nostalgia, in memories that don’t serve them and are further propagating their pain. It’s this very state of

dwelling upon injustices and turbulent emotions that can become emotionally fatal to the black community. Thus, in this analysis of the necessity and protectivity of memory, a fine distinction must be drawn between the safeguards of memory and the entrapment of polluted nostalgia.

Though nostalgia is a destructive state of mind for the black community, memory prevents openness and lessens the sting of microaggressions, so it is an essential component for the survival of the black community. As far as forgetting goes, which is the inverse of memory, the “world’s had a lot of practice,” and “remembering was never recommended” (61). According to the world, which is primarily driven by dominating white voices, remembering should be avoided and forgetting is a more productive practice. However, put simply, for the black community, the “world is wrong. You can’t put the past behind you” (63). In theory, simply forgetting and putting past experiences and memories of microaggressions away and moving on seems desirable and effortless. In reality, though, putting away memory would actually set up the individual for further future harm and would lead to greater pain down the road. Though not “everything remembered is useful”, the material of memory “all comes from the world to be stored in you” (63). Memory, then, though not *always* useful, can serve as a beneficial remembrance of the wrongs brought about by the world. Memory is a survival mode; a shelter against the constant onslaught of harm and persecution from the world. It allows the black community to remain resilient against opposition.

This protective memory, though a refuge for the black community, painfully traps them in an unpleasant space. Protective memory evokes powerful feelings that become “something wild vandalizing whatever the skull holds” (61). This language powerfully expresses the turbulent inner world of the black community, one that heavily influences the mind and self-esteem of individuals. Thus, memory, instead of being only a protection, simultaneously creates an

unsavory force that leads to further pain for the black community. With this realization, we see that the black community is held in a double-bind: the very space within which they feel safe and protected from microaggressions of the world also becomes a space which vandalizes their thoughts and feelings.

Given that protective memory can be an undesirable place for the black community, to “move on” is actually a restorative practice of resolving traumas and unhealed wounds in the past which enables them to reflect upon the past without feeling its sting. This contrasts to the traditional definition of the term, meaning to start a new endeavor or to move forward. In order to truly “move on,” the black community must reach back into their protective memory and promote healing of the exposed sutures of the wounds of racism. The healing promoted by moving on is fundamental in righting the wrongs imposed upon the black community. Even if microaggressions were decreased, these memories would still live on in the minds of individuals. “Let it go. Come on. Come on...Move on. Let it go. Come on,” mummurs the protagonist. This string of internal commands shows an intrinsic desire to let go of the past, but the failure of this venture reflects the real need to first heal the past trauma in order to, then, move on and let it go. *Citizen* as a whole is a crucial reflection, a communal contemplation back to the past in order to move on and move forward. In writing about series of traumas all too relatable for myriad members of the black community, Rankine is able to redefine the concept of “moving on” from immediately jumping to a new pursuit to giving past struggles their due, reflecting on them and learning from them, and, eventually, opening to new experiences in the future, less burdened by past traumas. Moving on through repairing past wounds helps liberate the black community.