

RADICAL READINGS

AN ANTI-RACISM DIGEST

“Radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root.’” - Angela Davis

July 20, 2020

There’s an umbrella
by the door, not for yesterday but for the weather
that’s here. I say weather but I mean
a form of governing that deals out death
and names it living.

—Claudia Rankine, “Weather”

Dear all,

My name is Victoria Papa, and I am Assistant Professor of English. My teaching and research focuses on 20th- and 21st-century American ethnic literatures and visual art. My work is particularly interested in the intersection of cultural trauma and experimental aesthetics. In my courses and scholarship, I investigate how writers and artists—who examine race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability in their work—create life-affirming counternarratives of survival and resilience.

In my edition of our collaborative digest, I would like to offer some information and reflections on trauma, and provide an example of how literature may serve as resource for expanding our understandings of trauma.

In 1980, the diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD was first published in the DSM-III. (This is the handbook health care professionals use to diagnose “mental disorders” in the US and other parts of the world.) This landmark moment gave trauma the status of disease and tagged PTSD as the predominant

symptom of trauma. It relied upon a narrow understanding of trauma, which was based on major catastrophe, sudden accident, and events that posed imminent threat of physical death. This clinical model—still largely in place today—largely ignores the chronic distress of systemic injustice as well as the accumulative impact of durational, intersectional, and collective traumas, like those we have seen so powerfully exposed in recent months through the murderous displays of police violence against Black life.

The implications of having a mental health care system which institutionally operates via this limited framework of trauma are far-reaching and disturbing, to say the least. The system in place does not recognize, for instance, how white supremacy poses imminent threat of physical death to Black life on a day-to-day basis. Such threat need not be couched in an acute display of violence, although it is most certainly at times. More fundamentally, the threat is built into the very fabric of American capitalist empire and the history of chattel slavery upon which it rests.

There's a scene in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* which captures something of the failures of the mental health care system and the everyday violence of white supremacy. Rankine goes to see a "new therapist who specializes in trauma counseling." When Rankine arrives at the therapist's door for her appointment, the woman yells at her, "Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?"

"It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech," Rankine reports.

This moment, like many others in Rankine's book, depicts a racist microaggression. The therapist racially profiles Rankine as a trespasser, failing to realize that Rankine—a Black woman—is in fact her new client. The painful irony is, of course, that this trauma therapist is perpetrating trauma. You can read this scene from *Citizen* in full, [here](#).

Recently, Rankine has written a new poem, "Weather," which responds to the twinning pandemics of our moment: Covid-19 and anti-Black racism. I invite you to listen to Rankine recite "Weather," [here](#).

Even as Rankine's poetry portrays the daily traumas of racism, it clears a sight line of survival. In a language that is charged with the radical imaginings of abolition and reparation, Rankine turns writing into revolution. As she writes in the last lines of "Weather,"

“I say weather but I mean
a November that won’t be held off. This time
nothing, no one forgotten. We are here for the storm
that’s storming because what’s taken matters.”

Yours,
Victoria Papa

Victoria Papa, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts
victoriahpapa.com