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Constructing the "Not-Me"

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Constructing the "Not-Me" : A Critique of the Institutionalization of Identity Through Discourse as Shown Through Race and Sexuality in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

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As a society we have become disconnected from each other. We have distinguished and separated ourselves by the color of our skin, the organs between our legs, and the way we choose to present ourselves in the world. We make generalizing judgements about each other based on these factors and ideas which are dependent on what our society believes is "normal" or not; those who fit within the bounds of our societal norms are accepted and those who are different are discriminated against. This kind of discrimination is institutionalized. However, when we take a closer look at who is being discriminated against and who is not, we can begin to see the structure of institutionalized oppression. Across race, gender, and sexuality, we as a society have created identities through discourse. Because of this discourse, we have set in place a hierarchy of subdivisions for these identities. Both Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* demonstrate the institutionalized oppression that individuals face because of the discourse that creates their identities.

Alison Bechdel examines how her younger self understands her identity and sexuality, and how the discourse surrounding it is perceived in society, while Rankine emphasizes that as a black person it is impossible to escape the 'identity' that discourse has already created for them. Throughout history, society has given labels to different communities of people in order to marginalize them, forever establishing them as inferior to those with power. By further polarizing the privileged and the marginalized, this gives those with privilege, predominantly white men, the power to exploit them. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison uses slavery and the exploitation of black bodies as an example of the historical beginnings of racial hierarchies. She says, "Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me" (38). Here, Morrison is explaining that slavery allowed whites to construct an identity for blacks, giving the "not-free" all the characteristics that whites wanted to consider as "not-me". Morrison states that blackness is constructed through discourse by what white people didn't want to associate with, thus whatever blacks

are not, whites have become. With this construction of whiteness and blackness through discourse, white supremacy was created and with this, the construction of the racial hierarchy in our society had begun. The construction of race has continued to be present throughout history as a means of discrimination. This social discrimination is used for the purposes of taking social power from the marginalized and giving it to whites, who are constantly hungry for more.

In Citizen: An American Lyric, Claudia Rankine writes poems based on real situations that have occurred in the lives of people of color. Many of these incidents were very similar in motive and reason, all surrounded by discourse that is both verbal and visual. The language she uses in her poems helps to demonstrate the way identity is perceived in society and how people of color are objectified through discourse: "Words work as release.... [W]ords encoding the bodies they cover" (Rankine 69). Here, Rankine is explaining how the verbal judgement that society creates is aimed towards marginalized races. It is referring to the way that discourse in society paints them, "covering" their body with false stereotypes in order to place them lower in the social hierarchy.

Visual discourse also plays a large role in this structure of institutionalized discrimination. It is especially prevalent when black people are being discriminated against because of the color of their skin "And 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). In this specific situation, a man is being objectified by the police, assumed of committing a crime solely because he is black. When Rankine says "always the guy," she is showing that through white supremacy, discourse has defined this person's identity and created objectifying stereotypes. Many people of color, especially black men, are racially profiled and assumed guilty and suspicious when there is no "evidence" besides the color of their skin. This is a form of objectification.

The white man speaking in Rankine's next poem has previously met the man he is objectifying, but he assumes it is not the same man because he is black. He is objectifying and racially profiling the man based on the the color of his skin and is convinced that the man he is seeing is not the same man that he's met, even though they are the same: "He's met your friend and this isn't that nice young man" (15). He automatically profiles the black man as suspicious because of his skin color. Another poem depicting a similar situation describes a white female psychiatrist meeting her client for the first time. She meets her new client when he comes to her home for their first appointment and she screams: "Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?" (18). Both of these white people in the different poems are

using skin color as "evidence" that the black men are threatening. This kind of racialized discourse is how society shapes identity, establishing who has more power in the hierarchy—emphasizing the polarity of whiteness, blackness, and the "not-me".

Another form of objectification is aestheticization. In Rankine's next poem, a woman is objectified by a man who compares her to his wife: "She is, he says, beautiful and black, like you" (78). Here, the man is stating that because he thinks his black wife is beautiful, this woman must be beautiful because she is also black. This is an instance of discrimination by aesthetic objectification , because he is using the woman's skin color as the sole reason that she is beautiful. This demonstrates how black people are objectified through visual discourse and how each person becomes no different from another, being stereotyped into the same box, according to this racialized language.

We can also see these aesthetic stereotypes projected through mimicry. Two weeks after a high-stakes tennis match, "Dane Caroline Wozniacki, a former number-one player, imitates Serena [Williams] by stuffing towels in her top and shorts" (36), another form of aestheticising objectification. Wozniacki stuffs her clothes as a way to make fun of Serena, objectifying the black body for the stereotypes society has constructed of black women being curvy. By imitating Serena, not only is she perpetuating those stereotypes, but because of her platform of white privilege, she is using them as a way to degrade Serena and her identity. Because of the creation of racial identity through white supremacy, the idea of racial hierarchy is best examined through the discourse that creates it. Rankine's book shows how this hierarchy created by white supremacy is used as a method of discrimination. When Rankine says "'I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background'" (25) she demonstrates how the minority identity is discriminated against because of the way discourse frames them separately from whites. Thus, they are "most colored" when the background of what society deems as the norm is whiteness. Because of this construction of whiteness being viewed as higher in society than what blackness has been constructed to be, whiteness is what sets the norm for society, becoming the background, the status quo, what we need to have in order to fit in.

In *Fun Home*, a graphic memoir, Alison Bechdel depicts sexuality and the many ways it is constructed and perceived as an identity in the United States. While growing up, Alison was interested in wearing boy's clothes and was fascinated by the social constructs of masculinity. It wasn't until she was in college, that Bechdel came to the realization that she was lesbian: "My realization at nineteen that I was a

lesbian came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing (Bechdel 74.1). I'd been having qualms since I was thirteen... (74.2A) ... When I first learned the word due to its alarming prominence in my dictionary (74.2B)." However, this is not to say she didn't have this identity until she knew the definition, she only knew that this label described her identity because of the discourse that created it. Bechdel, after discovering this new identity, proclaimed it in a letter: "I had made an announcement to my parents. 'I am a lesbian'" (58.1A). Bechdel's desire to come out to her parents demonstrates how society requires us to label ourselves— to use the discourse that created it in order to be culturally defined.

As shown through Rankine's writing, visual discourse dictates the norms of a person's appearance within that society. With Bechdel's realization that "there were women who wore men's clothes and had men's haircuts" (118.1) after seeing a "masculinely" dressed woman, her father's response was: "Is that what you want to look like?" (118.2). This example of gendering shows how visual discourse creates a minority identity within society. When her father responded negatively to the woman's non-conformist gender expression, we can see how visual discourse shapes what society thinks about non-normative gender identities. Along the same lines, visual discourse also dictates what people should look like. Bechdel's father, Bruce, tells her that she "need[s] some pearls" (99.1A) and after she expresses that she doesn't want any, her father accuses her: "What're you afraid of? Being beautiful?" (99.1B). Through this societal expectation of female identity and femininity, Bechdel's father is attempting to manipulate her appearance in order to normalize her into society's visual discourse. He hints that society dictates femininity as the norm for women, suggesting that they are only beautiful when they conform to this feminine norm. This female norm of femininity can also be seen being constructed through visual discourse in a poster Bechdel sees of a naked woman (112.1A), objectified for her body: "I felt as if I'd been stripped naked myself" (112.1B). She feels as if she is being objectified through what discourse constructs as femininity. By showcasing a naked woman on a poster, society is able to objectify the female body, and in doing so, take control of the female identity and construct, through visual discourse, what femininity means in society. Through the way the female body has been represented in society, women are being marginalized through the objectification and aestheticization of their visual form.

Race and sexuality theorist Paula Rothenberg writes in, *The Social Construction of Difference: Race, Class Gender, and Sexuality*, that the "United States society, like many others, places a priority on

sex, race, and class. To this end, race and gender difference have been portrayed as unbridgeable and immutable" (Rothenberg 7). Here, Rothenberg is explaining that because of the way race and gender have been constructed in our society, we view each race and each gender as eternally disconnected. When she states that they are "unbridgeable and immutable" (7) she is saying that the discourse we use in our society makes it so that we are unable to bring together these identities we've separated. Because of the way race and gender are talked about, people of color, women, nonconforming sexualities, and gender identities are highly marginalized identity groups within our society. These minority identities are created through discourse solely for the purpose of being marginalized in order to perpetuate the privilege of the socially powerful.

Much like the ways in which race has become a means for discrimination through discourse, sexuality has also evolved in this manner. We can see how sexuality is constructed according to Foucault's application of sexuality to the social constructionist theory: "[sexuality] is a cultural construct. Its meaning is derived from language or discourse; each institution in society has a discourse about sex, a way of thinking and talking about the broad array of behaviors and actors who are involved in sexual expression" (DeLamater and Hyde 15). This is saying that because of discourse, we have created ideas about sexuality and have prescribed it meaning within our society. It has only become a necessary means of identity because of the language we use to reference it. Through discourse, anything but heterosexuality has been frowned upon in the past, and any relations other than that between one man and one woman have to be labeled alternately in order to correctly define and marginalize them. When we look at sexuality through a social constructionist lens, we can see how discourse in society and culture favors some categories of seuxality over others. Because heterosexuality is institutionalized, any non-normative sexualities are minoritized because they don't fit society's "normal" description.

Throughout time, not only has non-normative sexuality been a means of discrimination, but with the increasing differences in performance and presentation of gender identity, it has become another reason to marginalize someone. We are trained in our culture, from a young age to conform to our gender's roles and norms in order to fit into society. We are taught this because when we become members of society, we are expected to fulfill those positions and characteristics that society dictates. However, these expectations of men and women are purely social constructions, formed in order to give men a social advantage over women. Rothenberg says, "Differences between women and men are never merely differences but are constructed hierarchically

so that women are always portrayed as different in the sense of being deviant and deficient" (Rothenberg 9). As a result of these false ideas about gender, men are able to construct femininity in a way that both benefits men and degrades women, based on what society tells us is true about them. Because of these constructions, women are placed lower in the hierarchy of society and demonstrates how men and women cannot be equal, as Rothenberg emphasises.

Through Claudia Rankine and Alison Bechdel's texts, we can see how society uses discourse as a means to create identities. However, not only are these identities created, but with the social construction of whiteness, they are placed low in the hierarchy that white supremacy requires to maintain control. Those lower in the hierarchy are labelled as minorities, and because of that social status they are discriminated against. These identities are created through discourse, either visual or verbal, and because of this institution of oppression these constructions of identity have been in place for so long it has become an ingrained part of our society. Although it is something that cannot be changed easily, it is the discourse we use now in our daily lives that reinforces that institution. These concepts are only real because they have been socially constructed and they are not impervious to change. Although the way we choose to use discourse won't overthrow white supremacy, if we start to resist the discourse used to construct identities, we can start to make social change.

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