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Claudia Rankine's Citizen and South African Literature: Comparing and Contrasting Racism in the US and South African Context [Literature]

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Demetrios Kapetanakos
ENG 295- World Literatures Written in English
Final Reflective Essay

On May 5, 2016, Professor Andrea Francis gave a powerful description of what life was like under Apartheid. She described how the law had inscribed the most mundane actions into an insidious process of racial internalization. One of the most powerful moments for me was the way fear drove her need to succeed academically. She struggled with the internalization of the Apartheid system and its effects on her such as the fear of failure during her university studies. While writing this prompt, I kept struggling to make sure that the next sentence(s) do not insinuate that despite her career success, Professor Francis has overcome it. She sees her personal story as a continual struggle with Apartheid even this moment and how it still shapes her sense of self. The questions that arise in her journey are present throughout the works that we have read and discussed this semester.

As we conclude the course, I want you to connect these issues with a short prose poem from the American poet Claudia Rankine, taken from her book *Citizen: An American Lyric*:

In line at the drugstore it's finally your turn, and then it's not as he walks in front of you and puts his things on the counter. The cashier says, Sir, she was next. When he turns to you he is truly surprised.

Oh my God, I didn't see you.

You must be in a hurry, you offer.

No, no, no, I really didn't see you.

In this short, seemingly minor incident, Rankine exemplifies and amplifies the state of race relations in the United States. Remember, she calls this collection *Citizen* and adds the subtitle *An American Lyric*.

In this final reflective essay, I want you to write about the parallels between the situation in the United States and South Africa. As you think about the themes found in South African literature, I want you to compare and contrast Rankine's encounter in the drugstore and one of your choosing from the assigned texts. What does race relations mean in the South African context and American ones respectively? How have the exterior forces of Apartheid shaped the encounters of the everyday captured in literature? How are they similar/different from the ones that exist here in the United States? Do you have a personal story to tell that highlights this? Take some

time and break down the poem and your chosen example from the readings to support your answers. Finally, I want you to consider the ethical possibilities of reconciliation in the Rankine piece. In *A Human Being Died That Night*, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela describes the potential of language and narrative as a medium for empathy and ultimately forgiveness. What kind of model, if any, do you envision would help counteract the racism and sexism that Rankine captures in this excerpt from *Citizen: An American Lyric*? Can we learn anything from the post-Apartheid moment in South Africa? The essay must be at least 1200 words.