

Racism in america through the works of finney, trethewey and mckay essay

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Race remains a vital and fascinating subject in American culture; race relations, particularly between black and white, are still genuine concerns even past the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. One way in which these tensions and anxieties are expressed is through literature and poetry; black poets verbalize their concerns and their experiences in these ways to cement the unique struggles they go through. In the works of Nikki Finney, Natasha Trethewey and Claude McKay, the struggles of blacks to remain safe and surviving in a threatening and disenfranchising America are conveyed through discussion about life and death.

Racism often led blacks to fear for their lives, as much of their interactions with whites ended in death. In Nikki Finney's "Left," the main character, a "woman with cheerleading legs" is "left for dead", in a poem about the devastation and isolation that came for many blacks during Hurricane Katrina (lines 1-2). Slowly, ever more, despite her pleas ("even if the e has been left off"), the white-run government ("the national council of observers") take four days to consider dropping a bottle of water or any other supplies. This sense of isolation and helplessness is indicative of the black experience, and is furthered by the narrator's description of the white establishment as "Mr. Every Child Left Behind", a not-so-subtle jab at President George W. Bush. In Claude McKay's "Lynching," the very real threat of the titular death by hanging, common amongst hate crimes, is depicted with horror and lament - "All night a bright and solitary star/Hugh pitifully o'er the swinging char" (lines 5-9). The whites responsible for the lynching are forbidden any access to God or forgiveness - "The awful sin remained still unforgiven" (line 4). In these passages, the lack of forgiveness

for these terrible crimes and discrimination is depicted, defining them as patently evil and horrible.

In America, race issues were even quite prevalent for those who were not fully black; the issue of race identity in spite of one's own color was a pertinent issue. In Natasha Trethewey's "Flounder," being black is shown as being akin to a dying fish, which thrashes about from side to side, being black at one point and white in another, "switch[ing] sides with every jump" (line 28). In "Left," it is strongly implied that being white would have meant the woman in question would have gotten the help she needed - the people in San Diego will "wait in a civilized manner / And they will receive foie gras and free massage / for all their trouble", as they receive appropriate care while she and other blacks suffer in silence (Trethewey). Speaking specifically of the Cajun people, Finney describes them sardonically as "funny spellers. Nonswimmers / with squeeze-box accordion accents," showing exactly how little whites would care for them. This is furthered in "The Lynching," as the horror of another man killed is ignored by whites - "Never a one / Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue" (lines 11-12).

The traditional elements of black culture are very prevalent in these poems, as relationships between parent and child (particularly through song and sermon) are used to ensure continuity and progress in race relations/black agency. This is also echoed in the tradition of poetry itself, as these poems are attempts to pass on wisdom about the black experience to its readers (Jones 16). In "Left," written tradition and song is echoed through the repetition of the "Eenee Menee Mainee Mo!" song throughout the poem, linking it to parental guidance by continuing the song - "My mother said to

pick / The very best one / and you are not it!" (Finney). This poem both indicates the childlike helplessness that blacks feel without the proper agency to help them, and also shows the importance of song and tradition to maintain a vibrant black culture in the face of overwhelming odds. This is also apparent in "Flounder," as stanzas are broken up by the 'flounder's mother's advice regarding being a person of mixed race - "You 'bout as white as your dad, / and you gone stay like that" (Trethewey, lines 3-4). In conclusion, McKay, Finney and Trethewey show very unique and pertinent issues that remain an important part of the racial conversation in America. Whites are shown to be indifferent to the black struggle, as they are constantly disenfranchised, either through murder (lynching) or slow death due to lack of resources (as in "Left"). The tenuous relationship between black and white, and how they often interact, is shown through violence and the desperate desire to see mixed-race children as white (so they might avoid the unfortunate social implications of half of their bloodline). These issues are presented by these poets as very real and immediate, and as necessary to be understood in order to fully comprehend racism in America.

Works Cited

" Claude McKay." Wikipedia. Dec. 19 2012. .

Jones, Meta DuEwa. " Understanding the New New Black Poetry." Souls 5. 1 (2003): 16-31.