

*Analyzing essays from James Baldwin and Claudia Rankine, Louder develops a compelling problem: Why do white Americans fail to mourn properly the violence against black bodies? She argues that as long as black Americans are perceived as strangers and outsiders in their own nation, the tragedy will persist. (Instructor: Beth Machlan)*

## WE GON' BE ALRIGHT

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**A**ugust 28, 1955: fourteen-year-old Emmett Till is brutally beaten and murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Beaten nearly to death, tied with barbed wire, eyes gouged out, and shot in the head, Till's naked body was thrown into the Tallahatchie River and left to be found three days later. Unidentifiable: that was the state of his body. He could only be recognized by a ring on his finger. However, despite the brutality of the situation, the two men responsible were declared not guilty ("Death"). Over sixty-one years later, on October 15, 2016, a visitor to the spot where Till's body was found posts a picture on Facebook of Till's memorial sign riddled with bullet holes (Wilson).

The disrespect and disregard for black bodies has not disappeared over time. There is something intrinsic about this disrespect; it is in the fabric of our country, in the nuances of our laws, and in the everyday actions of Americans everywhere. Black Americans can relate: we have all experienced the many forms racism takes, yet, somehow, we all know that we must persevere. Somehow, in the words of Kendrick Lamar, we all know that "we gon' be alright." Perpetual disregard sparks a question, though, that is essential to understanding how Emmett Till can be subjected to hateful bigotry even in death: what does it mean to be black in America, and how do we, as black people, deal with this identity?

In "Stranger in the Village," James Baldwin discusses how his own identity as a black American was called into question. Comparing his experience in America to his experience in a small, all-white Swiss town, Baldwin reflects on how black people are treated as

“living wonder[s]” by white observers in both countries (148). Though the landscape, demographics, and interactions may differ, Baldwin’s identity remains the same. He is regarded as a stranger in Switzerland and as a familiar yet unwelcome outsider in America, an outsider whose existence has created not only a “new black man” but “a new white man, too” (156). Baldwin illuminates how blackness shapes not only how you fit into the world, but also how others react to your presence in it. Blackness is not a mask that can be taken off and put on at will; it is an identity that cannot be shed for your convenience. Blackness is who you are. To Baldwin, blackness is an involuntary commitment to living your life as less than human.

Baldwin ascribes this involuntary commitment in part to white supremacy and the hold it continues to have over this country. At its core, white supremacy functions to deny human beings their humanity and to uphold false ideologies that place white men as the “creators of civilization” and the supreme judges of whose identities are acceptable and whose are not (154). Surrounded by a culture that has both controlled and created you, and the realization of what this means, instills in black people what Baldwin calls an “absolutely inevitable” rage (150). His solution, his means of coping with what his blackness means in America, is a hopeful acceptance. However, in Baldwin’s terms, acceptance does not equal complacency. Instead, he posits that as a black man, he “must accept the status which myth, if nothing else, gives [him] in the West before [he] can hope to change the myth” (155). He believes in finding the pockets of progress that exist in the history of the black man in America. In acknowledging that progress, we gain clarity that although the history of black people in this country is difficult and “shameful,” to say the least, “it is also something of an achievement” (156). Baldwin believes that these moments can provide us with the hope we need to continue to work for our own upliftment and achievement. We are angry, and understandably so, but Baldwin advocates for the channeling of this frustration into turning our “peculiar status in the Western world to [our] own advantage” (155). Only through becoming aware ourselves and informing others of our inescapable presence in this country will we be able to acknowledge the fact that “this world is white no longer, and it will never be white again” (156). “Stranger in the Village” was written in 1953; it is

now 2016, and this country is still not okay with its multifaceted racial identity. This country is still trying to deny its differences rather than learning to live with and embrace them.

At the New York Hall of Science, I witnessed an exhibit called *Reverse Masks*, in which a mold of a face is placed beside a cast made of it, both of which are backlit against a dark background. The two plaster masks are identical, except that one is the negative of an image and one is the positive (Phelps). However, as the viewer observes the piece from different angles, it appears as if one mask is following their every movement—this is not the mold, though; it is the cast. The cast, which caves inward, appears to protrude outwards towards the viewer as if the two are identical, despite the viewer's explicit knowledge that they are not. This perception of difference, or lack thereof, implies that what we see is not always under our own control. Confronted by this phenomenon, I shied away. I had to physically move away from the exhibit because interacting with it became disturbing. Why is difference so jarring?

We, as Americans, have yet to figure out how to live with the differences staring us in the face—the racial differences upon which this country is based—but, unlike with the reversed masks, we do not have the option of ignoring those differences. Let me rephrase: perhaps white people have the option of ignoring differences, but that option, once employed, is detrimental to American progress. After all, “people who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster” (Baldwin 156). Racial differences are ingrained in American life, and all of us come face to face with them every day, whether we want to or not. Baldwin's hope relies on a certain optimism that implies that time is all that is needed for progress or for people to stop running away. *Give it some time, make them keep seeing us, and soon they will understand. They will be forced to accept us as human and to accept our contributions to this country.* Time has passed since Baldwin's essay, though—more than sixty years' worth—and black people across the country still face willful and deliberate ignorance daily. Remaining optimistic through our frustration is nice in theory, but it doesn't do much in practice. There are still Emmett Tills all across the country,

but now their names are Michael Brown and Eric Garner, Tamir Rice and Rekia Boyd.

In “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning,” Claudia Rankine states: “Anti-black racism is in the culture” (781). For Rankine, racism is undeniable and inescapable when every day we see slain black bodies on the streets and on the news. “We live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings,” she says. “Dead blacks are a part of normal life here” (779). We, as Americans, are desensitized now to the sight of disfigured and disrespected black bodies. According to Rankine, being black in America means living with an omnipresent sense of grief, a grief that comes with the knowledge that “on any given day it can be open season on any black person”—the knowledge that next time it could be any one of our daughters, sons, husbands, wives, mothers, or fathers (784). Rankine posits not only that “the condition of black life is one of mourning,” but also that this condition is commonplace. Almost always, it is accompanied by an awareness that your worth in this country is decided by a justice system that views you no differently than the rest of the country does—as an ‘other,’ and with contempt (779, 781). We mourn when we lose something that meant a lot to us, when we realize that we will now be left without someone or something important. Black people live in a state of mourning because black lives matter to us. But do they matter to the rest of the American people? Rankine believes that the path to progress must be paved first with a national recognition of black issues (782). She states that “history’s authority over us is not broken by maintaining a silence about its continued effects” (784). It is of the utmost importance to recognize the effects history continues to have on America’s present climate, specifically with regard to race. For example, the never-ending attacks on black bodies cannot be contextualized without an understanding of how America has viewed black people since it built an entire nation on our backs. Ignoring that does us more harm than good—it allows us to continue to live under the control of the past and inhibits us from moving towards a livable future.

To Rankine, there should be no qualms about making a few people uncomfortable for the sake of a good cause. What cause could be better? Black people have been fighting to be seen as innately valu-

able—to *matter*—for far too long. Perhaps, then, we do need to mourn together. Perhaps Mamie Till Mobley, mother of Emmett Till, had the right idea in “insisting we look with her upon the dead,” thus reframing “mourning as a method of acknowledgment” (Rankine 780). In allowing an open casket at her son’s funeral, Mobley forced Americans to see her son and to see what their systems had wrought. She forced them to take a position and claim some kind of ownership over their role in atrocities like Till’s murder. By forcing the world to see what she saw—“by placing both herself and her son’s corpse in positions of refusal relative to the etiquette of grief”—Mobley hoped to make them feel even a sliver of what she felt (Rankine 780). It is clear that this did not galvanize or even change the minds of all Americans. However, Mobley still made an important point: upon seeing the image of Till’s mangled body, “a person had to decide whether his dead black body mattered enough to be mourned” (Rankine 781). This is the call to recognition for which Rankine advocates. We must establish national responsibility for what happens to black lives and for what actions we take when they are prematurely ended.

White people, though, are *already* forced to see us. This perpetual presence means that they cannot ever have a world without us. White people in America are not allowed that blissful ignorance once afforded to white people in small Swiss villages. They see us everywhere they go and are therefore forced to see our differences and react to them. Baldwin believed that having to live with and see black people would cause white people, and in turn all Americans, to open their eyes. He believed that this would allow for steps forward in black people’s fight for racial upliftment. Baldwin spoke with an optimism that Rankine, sixty-two years later, no longer has, despite the world being “white no longer” (Baldwin 156). Seeing us has not been enough. White people see our slaughtered bodies on the television and their newsfeeds every day; videos of cops shooting black men, women, and children proliferate; and yet, black people are still being murdered at the hands of police officers who walk free.

Rankine claims that the present climate only deepens the divide between black and white people, making it harder to meet that “perpetual challenge” (Baldwin 156). Yes, whiteness in America cannot

exist independent of blackness, but does that necessarily mean anything more than that? Does it mean there will be more empathy from white people for the black experience? Yes, “the white liberal imagination” can try to “feel temporarily bad about black suffering,” but this short-lived and easily escapable empathy is not equal to the experiences of black people (Rankine 779). Sympathy and empathy are two different things; you can feel bad for someone without ever feeling *for* them. Sympathy is what has allowed the American people to look briefly at the decimation of black bodies with sadness, maybe even regret. Their discomfort is what keeps them from moving on to empathy.

The ability to detach yourself from what is happening and not see yourself in a victim is powerful; because you view someone as an ‘other,’ you suddenly do not have to, and will not, mourn. You do not have to and will not make yourself change for the sake of making progress. Perhaps this is the core issue: this detachment white Americans allow themselves. Our bodies are not the same, so we do not grieve the same way. Being black in America is not an experience that can be defined by one person or one mindset. It is a state of being that I know I can never fully explain accurately because it is so complex. There is no perfect answer; no one, not even Rankine or Baldwin, can tell you how to cope with your black life. Discovering what blackness means today is of the utmost importance, but believing that any one of us has the complete right answer will prove more detrimental than beneficial. What I can tell you is that some serious soul-searching needs to occur in America if we are to move forward. The state of race relations here is far too dangerous for things to continue the way they are. Emmett Till was murdered over sixty years ago, yet I can directly relate to the anguish, disgust, fear, and grief that comes with seeing a body, just like mine, destroyed and ignored. Till’s death occurred before Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Michael Brown were even born. Yet the vandalism of his memorial occurred after all their deaths; this is sadly indicative of little, if any, progress in American race relations. Black people are still not seen as Americans, or even as people. Perhaps if our grief was taken up by all, we would all feel the sense of urgency for substantial change. Perhaps if

American life, and not just black life, was riddled with endless mourning, something would have changed by now.

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