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**Final Exam Essay**

In this American literature class, we have discussed several works and how they comment on different aspects of American culture and identity. In particular, we have discussed works of literature that have critiqued and commented on the constructions of race and ethnicity, such as *The Marrow of Tradition, Ceremony, Citizen* and *A Lesson Before Dying*. *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine and *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines stood out to me in terms of how the works contributed to the conversation about constructions of race and ethnicity in America. The works that we have read from Rankine and Gaines both critique and reflect on America’s ideas of race, what mental health is, and how to cope with it through the mental strains of racism and coping brought on anonymous African-Americans mentioned in *Citizen* and the mental strains of Jefferson’s death sentence and coping brought on Jefferson and Grant Wiggins in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

*Citizen* critiques America’s ideas on construction of race and ethnicity through a series of stories with anonymous black people as the subject. Chapter 4 specifically and repetitively discusses the mental and physical reaction to the racism that is brought to light throughout the novel. One particular episode talks specifically about the person’s head, exclaiming that it, “evaporates into a state of numbness, a cave of sighs…the sighing ceases; the headaches remain” (Rankine 62). From this passage, it is clear that racism and prejudice has a large affect on the individual, mentally and physically, making it a larger issue that goes unnoticed by society. The end of Chapter 4 further explains why this mental health issue goes unnoticed by many Americans. The individual is overwhelmed mentally with “too much commotion---too much for a head remembering to ache,” so they tell themselves: “Move on. Let it go. Come on” (Rankine 66). Rather than dealing with the emotional and mental strains of racism, the individual suppresses their mental health issues because to society and the world around them, in favor of being socially acceptable and politically correct.

A way to cope with the previously mentioned mental strains of racism discussed in Chapter 4 of *Citizen* is through binge eating discussed in Chapter 5. After a long day of mental stress and exhaustion, the individual decides to “pour a bowl of cereal, then another, and would a third if [they] didn’t interrupt themselves with the statement---they aren’t hungry” and they do so because “appetite won’t attach [them] to anything no matter how depleted [they] feel” (Rankine 79). Food proves to be a comfort for the individual and an escape from the harsh, racial issues and realities of the day. Though it is very unhealthy, it is the only thing that the individual can find as a source of relief from the unforgiving systemic racism that exists in their everyday life.

In a similar way, *A Lesson Before Dying* critiques the constructions of race and ethnicity in late 1940’s Louisiana through a man named Jefferson who is wrongfully convicted of a crime and sentenced to death by electrocution. To try to defend Jefferson’s innocence, his lawyer degraded him heavily, saying, “I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this” (Gaines 8). Though his lawyer meant well, Jefferson feeds into the all of the degrading things that his lawyer said and he starts to take on a hog-like mentality as a result. When a friend of Jefferson’s family, Grant Wiggins, visits Jefferson in his cell, and offers him food, Jefferson repeatedly attempts to define himself as a hog and everyone else as “youmans,” saying “I’m go’n show you how a old hog eat” as he knelt on the floor of his cell, “put his head inside the bag and started eating, without using his hands. He even sounded like a hog” (Gaines 83). Because he has been belittled for the majority of his life, Jefferson doesn’t know anything better to do but to believe that he is a hog just like his lawyer and the other white people believe him to be rather than be the grown man that he really is.

Through *Citizen* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, the immense mental and emotional pressure put on African-Americans because of their race is an apparent and alarming issue. Whether it is through binge eating in *Citizen* or acting animalistic in *A Lesson Before Dying*, people with these mental issues often end up behaving in unhealthy and unseemly ways rather than healthily dealing with their issues. These coping mechanisms are direct results of the distorted constructs of race and ethnicity critiqued in *Citizen* and *A Lesson Before Dying*.