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Being Private in Public : Claudia Rankine and John Lucas's "Situation" Videos

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Being Private in Public : Claudia Rankine and John Lucas's "Situation" Videos

A Presentation by Chad Bennett, A Faculty Words & Process Workshop, University of Austin at Texas, Friday April 14, 2017

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- ¹ The talk was part of the faculty words Words & Process Workshop, organized by Minou Arjomand,¹ David Kornhaber,² Gretchen Murphy³ and Hannah C. Wojciehowski⁴. Chad Bennett,⁵ an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin, gave a fascinating presentation on John Lucas and Claudia Rankine's "Situation" videos as part of a series of workshops organized by the English department faculty. Bennett has published numerous articles on the intersections of poetry and queer theory, and authored a forthcoming book entitled *Word of Mouth: Gossip and American Poetry*. His presentation on Lucas and Rankine's experimental poetry videos relates to a planned book on what Bennett terms the "poetics of niceness." Contextualizing "niceness" as a traditionally dismissive term that connotes banality and quiet politeness, Bennett intends to reclaim the word as a potentially subversive concept and situate Lucas and Rankine's work within his proposed book project. As a starting point, Bennett framed the experimental videos within discourses of race and civility and examined how public displays of silent absorption function as acts of resistance.
- ² Since 2010, Lucas and Rankine have collaborated on a series of videos that "exist around the public experiences in individual lives," particularly the lives of black Americans.⁶ In the videos, Rankine, a renowned author and poet, narrates selections from her 2014 book *Civilian: An American Lyric* over a combination of still and moving images shot by Lucas, a documentary photographer. Many of the videos depict people performing private everyday acts (sleeping, reading, etc.) in public spaces. Bennett presented a clip from "Situation 2" to illustrate the dominant formal characteristics of the video series.⁷ Centered exclusively on shots of sleeping airplane passengers, the video superimposes

still photographs over moving images, most evocatively in a shot where clouds drift by in an otherwise motionless photo of a slumbering passenger's window. According to Bennett, the intermingling of different visual media highlights the dichotomy between the private and public. Frames within frames and slow dissolves further divide the space of the airplane and illustrate the disruptiveness of private engagement. Although the figures represented in the videos engage in quiet and introspective behaviors, their absorption carries an element of theatricality that invites speculation into interiority. While Rankine's voiceover appears to articulate private thoughts, outsiders cannot access the subjective states of these figures. Bennett thus argued that acts of absorption function as forms of spectacle that allow people to withdraw from public spaces while still drawing attention to their actions.

- 3 After explaining the power of absorption and providing a brief formal analysis of the videos, Bennett situated them within discourses of race and civility. He discussed how the historical demand for black Americans to "act civil" implies a demand for silence and subjugation. In the context of Lucas and Rankine's videos, people of color separate themselves from the racist public spaces they inhabit through displays of private engagement, which function as a form of protest due to their disruptive theatricality. In "Situation 7," Claudia Rankine's narration describes an incident aboard a train, in which an unidentified individual notices that one woman would rather stand than sit next to a black man, who quietly stares out the train window.⁸ The anonymous bystander quickly fills the empty seat next to the man, but as Rankine's voiceover states: "the man doesn't acknowledge you as you sit down because the man knows more about the unoccupied seat than you do." He understands firsthand the experience of moving through public spaces as a person of color, and while the bystander attempts to imagine what the man is thinking, he can only manufacture a fantasy of the man's private experience of communal spaces. Through his silent repose, the man retains authority over his private thoughts while simultaneously drawing the bystander's attention to his experience within intimate public environments.
- 4 Bennett opened the room to questions at the end of his presentation and invited colleagues to speculate on how to broaden his scholarship on Lucas and Rankine's work and the "poetics of niceness." The scholars who were present lauded Bennett on his incisive argumentation and suggested ways to frame "niceness" in the context of gender and sexuality. They also proposed alternative definitions of "niceness," which in its antiquated usage means inane and ridiculous, and contemplated new ways to reclaim the term as a gentle form of resistance that could be deployed by marginalized groups. The workshop presented Bennett with new avenues for his research and gave sharp insight into how silence can function as a mode of protest.

NOTES

1. <http://liberalarts.utexas.edu/english/faculty/a4475>
2. <http://liberalarts.utexas.edu/english/faculty/dk8358>

3. <http://liberalarts.utexas.edu/english/faculty/gm7468>
 4. <http://liberalarts.utexas.edu/english/faculty/dolora>
 5. <http://liberalarts.utexas.edu/english/faculty/cjb2885>
 6. <http://vimeo.com/channels/situations/page:2>.
 7. <http://vimeo.com/183560842>
 8. <http://vimeo.com/103738835>
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