

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

In her most recent book of poetry and lyric essays, *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine includes a number of “Scripts for Situations,” in memory of such people as Trayvon Martin and James Craig Anderson. Some of Rankine’s scripts serve as filmscripts, a point of origin for the short films made by her partner John Lucas. More generally, though, the scripts offer a set of imaginative instructions for approaching contemporary violations of human rights, for empathizing with victims of microaggressions, police brutality, and corrupt systems. Rankine asks us to put ourselves “in proximity to, adjacent to, alongside, within” (131) these victims and their experiences. That is exactly what Sarah Hirsch has done in her “Situation Script” for India Kager, an unarmed woman who was shot and killed by Virginia police in September, 2015.

Sarah was a student in WR 100 “Reading Disaster: #FergusonSyllabus,” which used creative texts as a lens onto contemporary racial injustice and violence. For Paper 2, Sarah opted to write a research-based Situation Script and Afterword that continued Rankine’s project. In her script, Sarah uses facts and found texts, while acknowledging the limitations of pure fact by making imaginative gestures and the more common tools of poetry (like imagery and repetition) relevant in conveying the emotional truth of Kager’s life and death. Proceeding from a gap in the national conversation (the sometimes-fatal consequences of invisibility for black women) and using texts the class read as models, Sarah creates a stunning elegy for someone who should not have died as she did.

Jessica Bozek
WR 100: Reading Disaster

FROM THE WRITER

I was walking home from a party, in the comfort of my white skin, when I learned of India Kager's murder. We went to the same high school and shared a common mentor, but I will never understand what it's like to walk in her combat boots. She served in the Navy and played four instruments and was the mother to a four-month-old baby boy. I will never forget the day that I received a text message from our mentor, informing me of her death, but the world will forget (if they even noticed) because there was no video documentation. Her murder only made local news and mostly not more than a headline. We walked through the same hallways, but I will never understand what it's like to walk in her skin. But I can imagine. "Caught in the crossfire" is my alternative genre paper for my WR 100 class, "Reading Disaster."

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SARAH HIRSCH

SITUATION SCRIPT: INDIA KAGER "CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE"

You wear a highly decorative uniform. In it, you are visible. Among the masses. In the front lines, you are seen. When you fight, when your arm muscles ripple like the men beside you, you are seen. You wave to the commanding officers, exhaustion making you forget. G'night. Excuse me? What did you say, soldier? Goodnight, sir. Watch your tongue. Your "aggression" makes you visible. Your eyes focus on a fly trying to escape as the commander devours you. Your breasts try to hide. The fly hits the glass, falling onto the windowsill. So close. Only when his belly swells, full, do your eyes leave the small black body.

Your feet are so numb they do not feel the itch of your wool socks. You walk back to your room and just sit on the bed. You wiggle your toes to make sure they are still there. You've had trouble sleeping. Tonight will be no different. How many bodies did you watch fall to the ground? Thank God you could not hear the sound they made. They will rot like fallen trees in far away forests. How many bodies make up the soil we walk on? You rub infinities into the left side of your temple. Nameless and far away. You think about the almost made-up college diploma. 365 multiplied by three. 1095 days. Now 1094. Your toes fade into the dust beneath your bed.

"caught in the crossfire"

These days and nights will bite at your ankles for years to come. This morning is no different. Fallen bodies wade in your oatmeal. You poke a chunk of banana. Your appetite and stomach are gone. You hum Duke Ellington to remember simpler days of blowing out music, the taste stuck in your cheeks.

Angelo comes into the kitchen and sits down. He takes your bowl and finishes your past.

"No one to talk with
All by myself
No one to walk with
But I'm happy on the shelf
Ain't misbehavin'
I'm savin' my love for you"

He talks and talks about something or other, your mind is focused on his fingers. They've parked themselves in the crook of your elbow. Warm and rough. Just like the man who owns them. You breathe him in. It's time to go, he says. You wish you could sit in this moment just a little longer. But baby is pulling you up. I got him, spills out of your mouth.

"caught in the crossfire"

You pick up your son from his white crib. Four months. Still so small. You are afraid that one of these days you will wrap him too tightly in your arms and break him. You are afraid that one day he will be broken. You are already thinking about what age you should teach him to walk, not run. On the playground, on his way home from school, on the way to the grocery store. Your lip quivers and disappears. Your teeth bite on air. One by one they fall out of your mouth. Fallen trees in a far away forest. When will he learn to talk? How will you teach him to speak?

“caught in the crossfire”

Your body is a bottle to be broken against the pavement. Intentional. But mostly pieces of a second thought. Try to pick up your pieces without getting cut. You try. Blood bubbles up on your finger tips. There has been so much blood in your life. You bleed for your country. Your ears pop and blow away with the wind.

“caught in the crossfire”

Today’s to do list:

Call mama, she’s worried about you

Buy diapers

Dry cleaning

Get guitar from baby brother’s house

Stop by 7-11 on the way home

Diet coke, orbit spearmint gum, peanut butter, ooh cheerios

Get home

What?

What officer? Your elbows unlock from the rest of your body. Angelo shoots at the policemen.

Your mind twists around itself, confused. Your knees buckle and leave you with your strength and understanding.

Run

Run.

Your legs are ripped off and pulled into the pavement. Your lungs cave in, crushing your spine into powder.

Get in the car

India! I said get in the car!

Where are you?

“caught in the crossfire”

The pain of losing yourself drains as you feel the open space embrace what is left of you. The rest is gone. You do not exist.

On September 5th, nameless baby boy lost his mother and father.

“Why didn’t they wait until she exited the car? That’s the question...If they were surveilling her, why didn’t they wait and just wait until the baby and India were safe, away from whatever they were planning to do?”

AFTERWORD

The visual dominating old runaway slave advertisements is the image of a black man with one leg up and bent, as if in motion. This criminalization of black mobility, specifically for black men, still rears its brutal head today. Both Jesmyn Ward and Claudia Rankine explore and dissect this criminalization of black male mobility in *Men We Reaped* and *Citizen*, each presenting different forms of emotional evidence. Ward focuses on narrative, utilizing imagination and speculation to create the moments before death that evoke empathy from the reader, for the five men taken from her. On the other hand, Rankine manipulates repetition, quotation and imagery to reveal the effect police brutality and microaggressions have on the body. With *Men We Reaped* and *Citizen* in mind, I used these methods to illustrate the way black women's bodies (India Kager's specifically) are rendered invisible and inconsequential by society (media and police), unless they are sexualized or masculinized.

In order to highlight India's invisibility, I needed to first make her visible by communicating her humanity. Making only local news, there are many unanswered questions about the shooting of India Kager and Angelo Perry, including Kager's life prior. Knowing only that she went to Duke Ellington School of the Arts for music and fought in the Navy, I chose to follow Ward's example and imagine a more precise past and what the morning before Kager was murdered was like, in order to elicit an emotional response from the reader. I wanted to cultivate a tangible humanity for the character of "you" (India). I did so by being specific: her memory and experience of war, recognizable exhaustion, and decision to leave a bowl of oatmeal unfinished. Even her moment with Angelo was loving but mundane. I wanted it to be understood that the police officers' act of brutal violence was indifferent, or perhaps personal by consciously deciding that her life was not worth anything. By giving "you" a daily life influenced by a past, the impact and urgency of this pervasive collective social understanding that black women either do not matter or do not exist increases.

One way I navigated these imagined and actual events was repetition. Several media sources reported India's murder as a result of her being "caught in the crossfire." The word "caught" implies that India's death was in the hands of fate, something beyond anyone's control. This word choice relieves the four white police officers of accountability. It diminishes the fact that the police officers either neglected to see India, her body invisible to them, or saw her and deemed her inconsequential, a casualty of war. The repetition of the word "bang" thirty times, mostly in succession, was intended to startle the reader and emphasize the excessive and aggressive nature of the police officers' response to the situation. The police officers did in fact shoot at Angelo Perry and India Kager thirty times in a row.

Another strategy I derived from *Citizen* is Rankine's incorporation of quotation into her situation scripts. She includes the words of family, witnesses, media, and police in order to cultivate a wider context for the various injustices she writes about. Her placement and juxtaposition of these quotations often adds another layer of meaning. Related to India Kager's death, Virginia Beach Police Chief Jim Cervera told the *Washington Post*, "Virginia Beach Police Department and our officers believe in the sanctity of life. We do everything we can to mitigate violent conflict." Cervera not only denied the use of excessive force but claimed, on behalf of the police department, the desire to protect and honor life. Placing this quotation in the midst of the chorus of "bang"s was intended to beg the questions: Whose life is deemed worth protecting? Why was India's life not considered? Why is she not seen, or not seen as a citizen whose existence should be acknowledged or valued? These questions I attempted to evoke also reflect the response of Kager's mother to the shooting. The two quotations I included in the situation script are both a series of questions. The

accumulation of questions is evidence of the notion that the condition of black life is not only one of mourning, as Rankine has argued, but also uncertainty. This condition of living is not only a result of the invisibility attributed to black (female) life, but also of the danger and vulnerability in the moments that black life is visible.

In class, we discussed Rankine's focus on the effects of microaggressions and blatant aggression on the black body, embodied by imagery of these physical reactions to being damaged: a headache or a sigh. I tackled physical imagery as well in my situation script, but took a slightly different approach inspired by bell hooks, who said, "No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women... When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women." I explored this idea of a body being forced to disappear in my writing. Throughout the text, pieces of India, of the character "you," become part of the surrounding environment. Some body parts disappear more violently than others. For example, India's toes simply "fade" into dust, while her legs are "ripped off and pulled into the pavement." This variation represents the various faces making someone invisible can wear: a hurtful remark or a round of bullets. In the beginning of the script, there is an exchange between India and her commanding naval officer. In this moment her body (though not her personal humanity) is visible because of her perceived "aggression" and sexuality. The other black body in the room, the fly she stares at to avoid eye contact, is conducive to understanding the danger that India's own body is experiencing inside of her moment of visibility. The image of the fallen fly (and beer bottle) also represents the concept, reinforced by action, that black bodies are disposable and an afterthought. These images mirror the way India and her body were considered only after she and it were shot.

Without video documentation, it doesn't surprise me that most people don't know about India Kager. In this situation script, I wanted to not only employ the devices used by Jesmyn Ward and Claudia Rankine to demonstrate the ways in which black female bodies are in danger when seen and not seen, but also to give India's name a body and an individual history held within that body, though the details were of my own imagination. While America often deems black women inconsequential, I hope that the emotional weight of this script convinces readers that the life of this black woman, unknown to most, mattered.

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