English & Cultural Studies 1A03: Study Notes

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Yusef Komunyakaa, “Facing It”

“Why did you have to die?” –From a hand-written letter that I saw left at the Vietnam War Memorial in 1987.

Hammad speaks of a “smouldering grief” associated with the devastations of war, but in her poems that grief has mostly threatening possibilities, as if it could flare up in destructive ways at some point in the future. Komunyakaa’s poem emerges from an analogous form of grief, a sadness and confusion that burned in the background for many years, but when it quickens, a wonderfully evocative poem is what results. Komunyakaa is a veteran of the Vietnam War, the enormously deadly conflict between the U.S. and North Vietnam that began in the 1950s and ended with the capture of the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon, by the North Vietnamese army in 1975. Komunyakaa served in Vietnam in the late 1960s but it wasn’t until several years after his return that he began writing poetry in earnest. And it wasn’t until visiting the Vietnam War Memorial in 1983 that he discovered the need to write poetry about both the war and his personal experience of it. A year after that visit, he composed “Facing It.”

The memorial and the war that it commemorates is certainly the most important context for the poem. The memorial was designed by Maya Lin, who was an undergraduate student at Yale University when she submitted the winning design proposal in a national competition that involved hundreds of applicants. She has described her memorial as “an open wound,” i.e., a wound that has not healed and may never heal, an “inside” forever exposed painfully to the “outside.” In what ways is “Facing It” a poem that agonizes over the war in similar terms, i.e., as a hurtful event that continues to be a source of sorrow and difficulty long after the fact? In what ways does the poem marshal the resources of language—using metaphor, ambiguity, closure, repetition, volta, etc..—to capture and embody that

painful ambivalence about a catastrophe in the past that continues to form and deform the present? Lin's memorial remains unlike most war memorials in the world, which often affirm the gigantic heroism of a victorious nation and its heroic soldiers. Consider, for example, the Canadian National Vimy Memorial in France, a memorial commemorating the Canadian war dead in the First World War. It is a massive edifice that soars into the sky, as if to lift a grieving nation from the corpse strewn battlefields of Europe to the expanse of heaven above. By contrast, Lin's memorial built on a much more legibly human scale. It is a slit in the ground framed by two walls of shiny black granite, upon which the names of all the American war dead are inscribed, in the historical order of their deaths. (The memorial is situated so that it gestures towards other, more conventional monuments and memorials in Washington, DC, as if to be in a critical conversation with them. Interestingly, many photographs of the memorial seem reluctant to show it unless one of these other monuments is also in the picture.) Like literature, architecture brings together form and content in complex ways. What sort of work does the unique *form* of Lin's memorial do? What do you make of the way that the memorial invites you to descend into the ground? Why black granite, with its highly reflective surface? What does this memorial ask of you? In what ways are you the subject of its address? (Memorials, like poems, address their audiences in particular ways.)

The memorial clearly had a profoundly moving effect on Komunyakaa. The poem addresses us. But first, Komunyakaa addresses the memorial just as the memorial addresses him . . . although it is important to note *how* it addresses him, sometimes dissolving him, other times preying upon him. As the title tells us, the poem itself is an act of addressing or "facing *it.*" What is *it*? That is the challenge of the poem. Among other things, "It" is the war as Komunyakaa experienced it, as a young black man who grew up in an America that saw the birth of the civil rights movement, the movement seeking legal and social equality for all Americans, black Americans in particular. "It" is the country that sent Komunyakaa to a war that more and more Americans opposed as murderously unwarranted. It is a war in which the politics of race played an enormously significant role: although, strictly speaking, all young men were eligible for the draft, the fact was that young black man were disproportionately represented on the battlefield and among the dead. Moreover, many black soldiers faced forms of racial discrimination "in country" that mimicked the discrimination they experienced in the homeland. But the war in Vietnam coincided with the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement; the two things are complexly intertwined, informed by and informing each other. The "it" that Komunyakaa faces is the ways in which the war abroad and the war at home were forever connected, one to the other. That's why the allusion in the poem to "Andrew Johnson" is weighted with significance. Komunyakaa's lights on that name, seemingly at random, among the 58,022 names inscribed into "The Wall" (as the memorial has come to be known). But this name is no accident. Johnson was the name of a boy from Komunyakaa's hometown who was killed. The war tore him to pieces, and presumably tore his surviving family to pieces too. (For a deeply moving novel about the ways in which a war death can disfigure generations of a single family, see Bobbie Ann Mason's "Vietnam" book, *In Country*, which was subsequently made into a motion picture.) Komunyakaa survived the war, and like many survivors of catastrophes, survival is an extremely difficult thing, involving bewilderment, guilt, and sadness, a sense that "it could just as easily have been my name on the wall . . . but, for no reason at all, it is Johnson up there in the black granite, not me." The poem embodies the struggle to face *that*. Komunyakaa's survival is haunted by the loss of others; whatever he is, he carries the burden of those who didn't survive with him, a smouldering grief. But Andrew Johnson's name is no ordinary name; it is also the name of the President who followed Lincoln, a conservative politician who ensured that former slaves where denied civil rights, a problem that was not rectified until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, several years *after* Komunyakaa completed his tour of duty in Vietnam. It is very unclear even today whether the U.S. has overcome the inequality that President Andrew Johnson enshrined in law in the 1860s. What makes Johnson's name so resonant in this poem, though, is this: the Civil War was fought, in part, to ensure the end of human slavery in America. The end of the war *might* have marked the difficult beginning of a new age of political equality. But instead, the post-war era saw deepening of forms of conservatism and exploitation, and the re-entrenchment of civil and economic inequalities. The country fell into the hands not of reformers and visionaries but of the land barons and the "carpet baggers." The Civil War had shaken the country to the core, to be sure; more soldiers were killed in that war than in all of the subsequent American wars combined: unimaginable suffering, death, and destruction, not to mention the grief and loss that resonated in individuals and communities for generations afterwards. The civil war traumatized the nation, but not in a way, as it turned out, that led to radical reform. Indeed, quite the opposite happened. Komunyakaa uses the poem to capture his worry that the incalculable losses and political upheaval of the Vietnam War may, in a similar way, have led to relatively little change in the country.

What if the country were still “Andrew Johnson’s” America rather than the country that the “other” “Andrew Johnson,” the one who was killed on the battlefield so far from the homeland, might have hoped it to become? “Facing It” faces those troubling questions too. And Komunyakaa faces other things; “it” is a carefully chosen pronoun because in English “it” can mean so many different things. It is an oddly weak part of the language, a part that awaits the arrival of a noun for which it stands. It is always “it, what?” The poet faces what has become of the war in his memory, a powerful mixture of the present and the past. Where in the poem does the poet capture the uncertain melding of past and present, the experience of not knowing with certainty whether the past is the present or the present is the past? “It” is that part of the poet that is tied up with the war, that part of him that remains in Vietnam and that he carries with him everywhere, perhaps like the “shadow” that Hammad says does not fall behind her but is instead inside of her. By calling that part of himself, “it,” rather than, say, “me,” Komunyakaa tries to distance himself from those memories, making them into an anonymous “thing” that is part of him yet still somehow apart *from* him, an *it*. But the poem is also the place where the poet comes to see that “it” is also him. He is a part of these memories and they are a part of him.

The poem is a “facing,” meaning both confronting a problem or difficulty, standing up to it, as well as putting a human face on something, especially something that otherwise can feel inhuman or dehumanizing. Note too that “facing” is a part of English speech called a “verbal,” i.e., a class of words ending in “-ing” that convey an ongoing rather than completed action. Komunyakaa does not *face* it; he is instead *facing it*, meaning that he is in an ongoing and interminable or never-ending *process* of negotiating with all the various “its” that I have described above. Go back to the poem, tracing in its

language where each of those "its" is evoked. And as important, determine for yourself how the poet captures the process of facing it. The poem is in motion; it is a scene of intense struggle with all of those "its" that are in play; it is active, involved, worried, uncertain, puzzled, sometimes speeding up, sometimes bringing itself to a stop. How does the poem marshal the resources of language to embody that motion of the mind in action?

The poet looks into the black granite memorial. It envelopes him, captures him. How does the poem tell us that the memorial possesses these powers? The memorial schools the poet into a difficult reflection. How so? Komunyakaa reads the names at the same moment that he sees his own "black face" in the granite, a detail that captures how he is divided from himself throughout this poem. Whoever Komunyakaa is, he is both himself and his reflection. Trace the poem's work with this self-division. Consider the ways in which the poem labours with various splits or splittings: the presence of all the names, the absence of his; his presence on this day, the absence of all the dead; the desire to stay strong, stay "stone," the realization that he is "flesh;" a woman "trying to erase names," a woman "brushing a boy's hair." Consider the verse: "I'm stone. I'm flesh." Metaphorically, the poet characterizes himself as "stone," not unlike the material substance of the memorial, which lists the names of the dead but of course, as an inanimate object, feels nothing for them and knows nothing of them. Memorials for the dead are themselves without life . . . except the life that we, the survivors, give them. Insofar as the poet is "stone," he too is a kind of memorial; the dead, those who didn't make it back from Vietnam, are in some sense inscribed into this mind and body. The poet carries the memories of the dead and of the war which cost so many lives in him; he is a living memorial who now visits the official memorial. There are many ways to memorialize the war dead, a realization that both Maya Lin and Yusef Komunyakaa share. "I'm stone" registers the sharp insistence in a part of the poet to keep his feelings at bay, to remain composed . . . but another part of him cannot help but weep and endure the sorrow of grief. To compose a beautiful poem, after all, requires an unusual degree of composure, even if the poem includes moments in which the poet loses his composure, as he does here, weeping, or towards the end of the poem, in which his mind momentarily becomes a jumble of competing images and in which what he is imagining and what is happening appear to be two separate things. Look carefully at the end of the poem, tracing how it captures that momentary sense of derangement, followed by the poet's quiet recovery. Two short sentences make up this one verse: "I'm stone. I'm flesh." The poet affirms the importance of both parts of himself and so honours each with a sentence of its own, the two sentences making up a single verse. The poet is telling us that he endures a contest between composure and something else. The poet is both and the memorial becomes the occasion in which to live both and to consider both.

The poet acknowledges that his reflections will not and cannot be crystal clear. His reflection is "clouded," as he says, and what he sees and thinks and feels changes as the poem unfolds, "depending on the light." Your task as a reader is to track those changes, remembering that almost all poems are dynamically unfolding scenes not fixed or static objects. Where a speaker is at the start of a poem is most often at a great distance from where the speaker is at the end. With grief and loss in particular, moreover, nothing is ever straightforward. But what *is* glaringly straightforward is that horrible number, "58,022." That number jumps out of the poem, so exacting and fixed, in contrast to the poem's

exploratory and tentative qualities. The dead are dead, reduced here to a precise number. It is the living who cannot be "mathed," as Hammad would say; the living live lives that are messy, in process. We can number the dead, but the losses those numbers represent are incalculable. Poetry, like all literature, *thrives* amid the incalculable. Poetry, like all literature, sounds the depths of the world without needing to put a number to it.

The memorial "lets" the poet "go" . . . but only for a moment. Others who visit the memorial seem to be able to come and go. He sees a woman who "walks away," and notices that "the names stay on the wall." She gets to go, but the names of the dead remain where they are. I wonder if that is in fact the case, or does the poet here use the figure of the woman as a way to *imagine* what it would be like simply to walk away from all of "it"? The poem gives him an opportunity to imagine someone, a "woman," who does so. She is in effect an extension of himself, a version of himself that he sometimes wished he could be. And no one could blame the poet for experimenting with that feeling, and for indulging in a dream of a life in which he could walk away and leave the names behind. But it is only a dream, and I'll wager that a part of Komunyakaa realizes that almost no one visiting the memorial can in fact walk away and leave the names behind. You really would need to be made of "stone" to do so. You might not experience the memorial the way a veteran does, but of course the memorial was made not only for veterans but for everyone and for the precise purpose of giving everyone the opportunity quietly to reflect on war and its aftermath, on *this* war and *its* aftermath. I can tell you that I have visited few memorials in the world that have had as powerful an impact on me as "The Wall." Indeed, until I saw it for the first time in 1987, I had never known that a built-structure could speak so strongly to me. Until then, I had always moved *through* buildings, no matter how beautiful or affecting they were. Now I saw that a building could move through *me*, the way that poems and literature have since my boyhood. The next time that I would have a similar experience was when I visited another memorial, Peter Eisenman's enormous "The Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe," a field of differently sized stones which lies in the heart of Berlin.

The poet uses the resources of language to embody the uncertain process of memory (an uncertainty that Eisenman's memorial, seen in the image above, embodies in the undulating motion of the monument's many individual stones laid in rows over almost 5 acres), which is never linear or straightforward and which has its own timing, by turns speeding up and slowing down, coming to a halt and starting up again. One of the many ways that the poet expresses this uncertainty is through the use

of punctuation. Note how some of the verses in the poem end with periods or end-stops, the punctuation that brings a verse to a complete stop: "I see the booby trap's white flash." As the verse ends, the punctuation tells us that the poet takes a half-breath, pausing for a millisecond, before taking the next step and moving the next verse below. But many of the verses in the poem spill over the end of the line: "My clouded reflection eyes me / like a bird of prey, the profile of night / slanted against the morning." Here the poet's thoughts spill over into three verses before coming to a stop with the period after "morning." This kind of spilling-over motion in a poem is called ***enjambment***. Mixing full-stops with *enjambment*, a poet creates a rhythm of forward momentum and stopping that is important to the sense of the poem. It is up to you as a reader to consider why the verses stop when they do, sometimes at the end, and why, at other moments in the course of a poem, verses spill over into the next one. Poems are dynamic and changeful, and how they are punctuated at the end of verses helps make them so.

The poet suddenly realizes that a "white vet" stands next to him, a man who is also parsing the names on the black granite wall. Or rather, the poet sees the "image" of the veteran—he is looking into the mirrored surface of the memorial and in that surface he sees another soldier, a white soldier. Because it is a reflection, we can't be sure what the poet is looking at and how much of what he is looking at is altered and shaped by his own thoughts, feelings, and memories. Is the white veteran there or does he only *appear* to be there? Why does the poet stage things this way? Why is it important that he see the "white vet" in the reflection rather than face-to-face? The veteran in turns "looks through" the poet's eyes, as if the poet were invisible. But is this an act of indifference to the poet? Is Komunyakaa really invisible to the other vet, or is the veteran doing what the poet is doing, namely looking intently at the wall and at the worlds of memory that the wall unfurls before his eyes? Note how the poet doesn't pass judgment on the "white vet" but instead observes how they are each trapped by the same monument yet dwelling for the moment in their own reveries. And there is another detail: in the reflection, the other vet has been wounded, disfigured. What does the poet mean by saying that "He's lost his right arm/*inside the stone*." Why does it seem, for a moment, that the memorial is the site of the injury or wound rather than the war? The monument "preys" on the vets, capturing their minds and bodies. Or so it seems to those who bring their memories to the Wall.

Notice how, as the poem comes to its conclusion, the poet loses his composure. He is no longer sure of what he is seeing or remembering now. The Wall has given him the opportunity to explore and experience this part of himself. Whenever I have been to the memorial, I have seen men and women sobbing uncontrollably amid all the names of the dead. I myself felt have overwhelmed. Look carefully at this concluding section of the poem, considering the jumble of images that the poet gathers together. As the poem ends, he sees or rather he thinks he says a woman "trying to erase names." Again, curiously, it is a woman who is said to be in a relationship with the memorial that is fraught: the first woman seemed to be able to walk away from the names, leaving them where they stood; the second woman appears to be defacing the wall, rubbing the names out. (Many people at the memorial transfer the names of the dead to tracing paper. Indeed, you are encouraged to do so, as if to take a bit of the monument away with you. And when visitors do so, it *looks* like they are erasing the names when in fact they are recording them again, taking an imprint of the engraved names with them so that they always

have a part of the memorial in their lives. Isn't this a marvellous metaphor for Komunyakaa's poem? *Isn't it a kind of tracing of the names on the memorial wall and a way of honouring the fact that he is himself a trace of those names, their loss, that war?*)

Why does the poet say that a woman does these things and has these kinds of relationships with the memorial? As with the earlier example, the poet imagines a woman is able to separate herself from the names, now not walking away but instead staying to deface them. As before, she momentarily embodies a part of him that might well want to erase the names, and to live a life where the war dead and his memories of the war were erased or perhaps had faded away. It is important to acknowledge those sorts of fears and desires. The great poet, Keats, whose work we turn to next, was remarkably frank about these sorts of things. It seems important to him, as it does to Komunyakaa, to put them into words, to honour ideas and feelings that are en route to other ideas and feelings. But we know that the desire to erase the past is only fleeting; the poet looks again: "No, she's brushing a boy's hair." *No*, the poet uses a sharp, single-syllable word to reject that desire to forget and gently to correct himself. He regains his composure in the instant that he says *No*. Speakers of poems often use the poems which they inhabit to change their minds, shifting on the go. That is the case here. One of your classmates came up to me after class and offered an elegant reading of this image in the poem. She pointed out that mothers and others mourning the loss of loved ones trace their fingers over the names engraved into the black reflective wall of the monument, touching the names as if once more brushing the hair of the boys—and they were boys, just boys—who were sent to Vietnam to be kill and be killed. Mothers and others touch the surface of that granite wall *as if* brushing a boy's hair, with all the love and affection and tenderness that such a simple gesture conveys. By tracing the names, she *faces* the wall, not only facing the irrevocable loss that the wall represents but also *giving* its stony and inhuman surface a human face. To trace the names on the wall is to touch it as if, for a moment, those names were boys.

The curious image of the woman erasing the names that flickers up in Komunyakaa's imagination before being rejected also captures another problem. Facing death on the battlefield, a young soldier might well fear one thing more even than death . . . and that is being forgotten in death. The memorial is there to ensure that the names are not forgotten, *erased* by time. And yet those lives will also be threatened by time, always exposed to the frailty of memory. One, and now two generations have gone by since the Vietnam War, and bit by bit, those lives and those deaths fade into the past, in part because the war drums of the present drown out the deaths from the wars that came before. Komunyakaa feels that push and pull, wanting to remember but also struggling to remember, living in the present and burdened with a past whose future can never be guaranteed. The monument itself is perdurable and never fades. But citizens and visitors, especially those touched directly by war, flicker uncertainly as they stand before it, reading the names and observing shifting reflections of themselves in its glassy surface. Komunyakaa finds a language with which to capture that experience, mixing the personal with the political, the past with the present, the desire to remember with the fear of forgetting. Among the most controversial elements of the controversial monument is that it is missing any representations of the dead soldiers, just as it is lacking allegorical images associated with the war. Compare, for example, Maya Lin's design to the Canadian war memorial at Vimy, which includes enormous statues of twenty

human figures, some representing “Justice” and “Peace,” others representing the 11, 169 Canadian soldiers killed during the First World War. Lin’s memorial is conspicuous for not including such human figures, and is much more minimalistic in design: two black granite walls meeting in a sloping trench, upon which are inscribed thousands of names of the dead. As visitors and mourners to the memorial, *we* are the ones who “supply” human figures to the memorial, thereby connecting us intimately to its design. We bring a human face to those names in reading and remembering them, in tracing our fingers over them. We face it. Komunyakaa is facing it.

Before Komunyakaa is the simple scene, then, a woman brushing a boy’s hair, that brings the poem to its ambiguous conclusion . . . a gesture of love and affection amid the immense loss that will not go away. Let us hope that that boy, years later, did not meet his violent death in Afghanistan.