



***Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine, Graywolf Press, 2014**

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Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, is described as a timely "acute critique of contemporary American culture" (Andersen, 2015). Unfortunately, as *Citizen* so beautifully and painfully depicts, the timeliness of this work is actually its *timelessness*, as issues of racist ideology and violence against Black bodies *continue* to pervade American culture, historically and contemporarily. Rankine uses multiple mediums to explore the nuanced ways that racism is both expressed and experienced from the micro (remarks, glances, implied judgements) to the macro (police violence) (Chiasson, 2014; Rankine, 2014). From racism in our everyday lives and intimate interactions, to the handling of hurricane Katrina, Rankine closes the gap between the "smallness" of microaggressions and the seriousness of macroaggressions by demonstrating they are sides of the same coin. This review seeks to use *Citizen* as a medium to further understand the cultural ideological dimensions of genocide against African/Americans.

Many interconnected elements maintain our societal structure, and what Rankine manages to do with this expertly curated *American Lyric* is to display the various ways that the insidiousness of white supremacist ideology manifests in our personal experiences to our experiences with entire state apparatuses. This has been maintained through various and

interconnected dimensions - culture, language and even the imagination being some of them. Rankine asks and takes a critical look at how it is that a country could "warehouse black men, shoot them constantly, and no one object" (Rankine, 2014b). By looking at some common examples of "unintended" racist episodes, such as "When a woman you work with calls you the name of another woman you work with" (p. 43) to the impending anxiety of police encounter because "you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description" (p. 105), Rankine shows the complexities of the relationship between the stacking of personal instances of racism to the large and overt expressions that characterize the experiences of black bodies in the States (Rankine, 2014). "Today, as in the past, this oppression is not just a surface level feature of American society, but rather pervades and interconnects major social groups, networks, and institutions across the society" (Feagin, 2006, p. 2).

The technique of referring to the reader often as "you", displacing the body both of the transgressor and transgressed, works as a method that decenters solely white racism and instead draws critical attention to the complicity of all bodies, conscious or unconscious, with behaviors, emotions, feelings, habits, and reactions that maintain white supremacy (Andersen, 2015; Feagin, 2006; hooks, 2014). This places the reader in the position to question whether the "you" she uses applies to *you* and lays bare the deeply unconscious ways that the insidiousness of racist ideology is inescapably a part of and embedded in American culture. "The real estate woman, who didn't fathom she could have made an appointment to show her house to you, spends much of the walk-through telling your friend, repeatedly, how comfortable she feels around her. Neither you nor your friend bothers to ask who is making her feel uncomfortable" (Rankine, 2014, p. 51).

This normalization of the fear of black bodies is a revisited theme throughout the work. From not sitting next to a black man on a train to the description of Michael Brown as "a demon", fear of blackness is played out in multiple contexts. "You step quickly over the woman's fear, a fear she shares. You let her have it" (Rankine, 2014, p. 131). "This fear she shares" of the black man on the train exposes the very ideology that not only leaves the seat next to him empty but goes as far as justifying violence against bodies that resemble his.

What Rankine demonstrates is that if people in our everyday interactions, reactions, habits, behaviors, and feelings normalize anti-black violence, these seemingly "small" behaviors accumulate into an entire societal structure that allows genocidal violence against a group (Feagin, 2006; Rankine, 2014; Rankine, 2014b). *Citizen* weaves together the complex ways that large and abstract systems that shape our lives are omnipresent, down to the intimate sphere where we most tenderly experience them (Starr & Adams, 2016). The violence hidden in these acts is recounted from the psychic, emotional, and physical damage they cause the transgressed to the oblivion of the transgressor.

Another friend tells you you have to learn not to absorb the world. She says sometimes, she can hear her own voice saying *silently* to whomever – you are saying this thing and I am not going to accept it. Your friend refuses to carry what does not belong to her.

You take in things you don't want all the time. The second you hear or see some ordinary moment, all its intended targets, all the meanings behind the retreating seconds, as far as you are able to see, come into focus. Hold up, did you just hear, did you just say, did you just see, did you just do that? Then the voice in your head silently tells you to take your foot off your throat because just getting along shouldn't be an ambition (Rankine, 2014, p. 55).

Rankine, with poet ease, demonstrates what these "small" moments actually reflect about American society, its culture and ideology as a whole. It is the quotidian accumulation of these moments that build a society in which violence at genocidal levels can be enacted upon a group and "no one object" (Rankine, 2014b). Seen as casual expressions of racism, Rankine weaves together the complicated fabrics of American culture to show how such interactions ultimately sustain a society where: Black people are more likely to be pulled over by the police (Rankine, 2014), suffer police brutality, where "black infants are about 230% more likely than white infants to die before their first birthday" (Norris, 2011), and an unfortunately long list of racial disparities that characterize the conditions of one's citizenship to the state "with the full force of your American positioning" (Rankine, 2014, p. 14). *Citizen* artistically portrays the dangerous and unsettling connection between those "certain moments [that] send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs" and a social reality where "Whether it is premature birth, infant mortality, homicide, childhood

obesity, or HIV infection, black children and young adults disproportionately bear the brunt of these medical and social ills" (Tweedy, 2015, p.4).

This "casual" racism, thus is part and parcel of a broad range of white-racist dimensions: the racist ideology, attitudes, emotions, habits, actions, and institutions of whites in this society" (Feagin, 2006, p. 2). Rankine's *Lyric* explores all of these dimensions of racism "in familiar settings – academic office, supermarket, restaurant" (Fischer, 2014). The varied settings racism manifests itself speaks both to its insidious nature and the myth that it can be escaped by class, location, or level of education (Rankine, 2015). Rankine, in an interview, contends that "the black body, visually, can trigger violence, despite age, gender, just by enter a certain space in the face of white fear or the white imagination" (Rankine, 2015). Central to the persistence of racism are the ways that fear and the imagination shape "the white racial frame – that is, an organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate. This white racial frame generates closely associated, recurring, and habitual discriminatory actions" (Feagin, 2006, p. 25). Rankine's work eloquently traces the associated, recurring and habitual racist interactions to the very fabric of American society and culture.

Both Rankine (2014) and Feagin (2006) speak of the multiple dimensions, parts, and "bits" that maintain a web of cultural ideological genocide. Rankine traces and demystifies the "gap" between casual, every day, encounters with racism and overt racial violence, exposing them as interconnected facets that structure our experiences, citizenship and relationship to the state (Rankine, 2015). "'Citizen' carefully catalogs the ways in which casual racism permeates our day-to-day interactions -- both spoken and unspoken; those "Did that really happen?" moments. These are slights, dismissals and elisions that are deeply ingrained. They are reflexive gestures -- judgments -- enacted upon another: the door that is not held open, the seat that is not occupied, the fumbled or "mistaken" identity. Each slip, each cut, is an obliteration" (Rankine, 2015). Exploring the expression and internalization of racism in many familiar settings, laying bare the intimacy of oppressive racial ideology, Rankine weaves a timely and timeless poetic essay of American culture that captures with full force one's "American positioning" (Rankine, 2014).

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