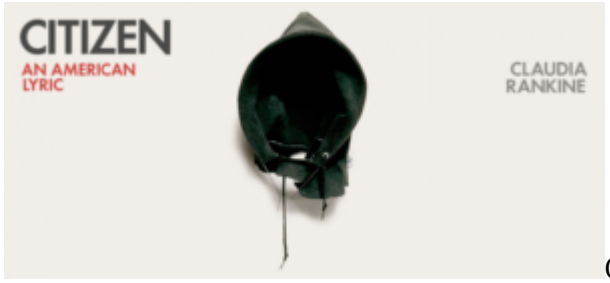
A Review of Claudia Rankine's 'Citizen, An American Lyric'

July 2, 2020



Claudia Rankine's provocative and polyphonic work, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, has spurred much-needed conversations around race and racism both in academia as well as in more informal discourse. In the wake of the recent protests following the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, this book—winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry and the PEN Open Book Award—finds itself all the more relevant and also unnervingly prescient. Black Americans, to this day, Rankine reminds us, continue to be sidelined and deprived through residential isolation and through diminished access to housing, education, healthcare, and structural facilities. They are regularly subjected to racism and colorism, at times when they least expect to be—while driving to work, taking the subway, meeting a real-estate agent, or visiting a therapist, among other mundane routines—and such prejudices can be confounding, destabilizing, and painfully hard to make sense of. These violations settle in black bodies and are passed on as generational trauma, a trauma largely repressed but occasionally finding vent as hurt, embarrassment, horror, and rage, the kind now sweeping America.

Through a recounting of her own experiences as well as reflections on the injustices meted out to other black Americans, especially black women like her, Rankine lays bare the systemic as well as interpersonal, intimate racisms that have led to a continual othering of black Americans. She explores racism's myriad manifestations, never losing sight of its historical roots, highlighting how it affects not only entire communities collectively but also their individual members, in different, physically and psychologically scarring ways. She suggests that racial discriminations exist as a variegated spectrum: Some take the form of blatant aggressions, like hate crimes, state-sanctioned infractions, and controversial laws (like "Stand Your Ground" and voter-registration laws), many of which function like de facto Jim Crow laws. Other discriminations, however, are more cloaked and covert in nature, and manifest as insidious microaggressions, as indirect and quotidian indignities ranging from averted gazes at traffic stops, casual slurs at coffeehouses, misunderstandings and misconceptions between friends and colleagues, to careless, stray remarks like "I didn't know black women could get cancer," discriminations that are harder to spot because they're often unintentional, sometimes even well-meaning, that appear innocuous on the surface but are just as detrimental and denigrating as more egregious forms of harassment and hostility.

Rankine's pastiche intersperses hybrid prose-poems with excerpts from news and pop culture and with visual images—photographs, artwork, a YouTube screen grab—that examine the social and cultural representations of the black body. Some visuals (like Kate Clark's sculpture *Little Girl*) highlight the dehumanization and animalization experienced by black bodies; others (like J. M. W. Turner's oil painting *The Slave Ship* and an altered photograph of the 1930 lynching) depict the horrors that the black body has been subjected to throughout America's tumultuous history. Rankine examines black bodies in white-perceived, white-dominated spaces—spaces that reinforce a normative sensibility, that range from tennis courts, recreation centers, neighborhood drugstores, to the hallowed halls of prestigious universities—echoing Zora Neale Hurston's words: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." Blackness is not an essential category, she reminds us, but rather an encounter emergent through specific experiential and discursive conditions that are constantly constructed through interactions with whiteness.

On the one hand, these constant and relentless negations of blackness have led to the invisibility of the black body, the black body as being treated as safely disattendable, as being erased, devalued, and dismissed. Ironically, and on the other hand, the hyperscrutiny trained on racialized bodies—such as on unarmed black youth like Trayvon Martin by the police, or on black women like Serena Williams by critics and sporting organizations—hints at hypervisibility and violent stereotyping, at the black body as being deemed sinister, threatening, volatile, and demonic and demanding surveillance and control. "And 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," Rankine writes, recounting an interaction with the police that is one among a litany of police abuses including profiling and unwarranted searches. The hood on the book's cover, a reference to Rodney King, could also refer to Michael Brown, Eric Garner, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Stephon Clark, Elijah McClain, or De'Von Bailey—all victims of race-motivated shootings, beatings, and other brutalities often also followed by compromised justice. "Because white men can't police their imagination," Rankine laments, "black men are dying."

Post-racial America is a myth, and colorblindness counterproductive. Racism—both at the institutional and individual levels—is pervasive, its grip on contemporary society tenacious and bruising. We are born into systemic racism and many of us, the racially entitled ones, frolic about our lives without ever bumping up against it or getting tripped up by it the way that black Americans inescapably do. We assimilate into American culture, a culture inseparable with racism, and we advance this racism often without acknowledging our knee-deep complicity. We—nonblack liberals—are dismayed by the recent deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Sterling Higgins, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, Riah Milton, and Dominique "Rem'Mie" Fells, but is expressing shock enough or do we, as beneficiaries of race, class, and/or heterosexual privilege, need to do more? "why and why and why should i call a white man brother?" asks Lucille Clifton in her poem "jasper texas 1998, bearing witness to James Byrd's murder by three white supremacists. "who is the human in this place, the thing that is dragged or the dragger?"

Citizen can help us make sense of and better grapple with the grief that we are now experiencing. George Floyd's death didn't come out of nowhere; racism is fundamental to America through the institutionally racist ideologies, policies, and practices that this country was built upon and is undergirded by even today. His death was not a wound but rather a rupture—the wound has always been there. The inflammatory tweets and speeches of state leaders aren't created in a vacuum but are informed by and stem from a complicated history. To be born black in America is to be born disadvantaged due to the historicized structures of hegemony enacted through systems of colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy. "The past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow." Racism then, Rankine suggests, needs to be reframed and redrafted not as a black American issue but rather an American issue. We cannot

afford to regard Floyd's death as a one-off incident but must see it for what it is—the culmination of decades of oppression by the state, an oppression that traces its roots to slavery and enforced segregation, an oppression that white Americans are inescapably imbricated and tangled in.

Ultimately, Rankine challenges the assumptions that we—the citizens of America, white Americans in particular—harbor and heightens our awareness of our implicit, ingrained biases. She urges us to speak out against the hurtful slights and affronts that black Americans have been swallowing all these years, and also to, just as importantly, address our blind spots and remove our blindfolds. She nudges us to consider and empathize with the struggles of those with peripheral citizenships and marginalized belongings (as norms of citizenship have often been a cover for privilege and a means of reinforcing that privilege). Her language—in particular her use of the universalizing second person—evokes a strong emotional response, as it includes us readers in the text, urging us to consider black experiences and thereby confront the plight of dispossessed and disempowered bodies. She shifts the burden of the racialized experience onto politically entitled Americans, onto those who assign blackness through the exercise of labelling and observing others, and her self-reflexive mode of inquiry appears grounded in Toni Morrison's assertion that the critical gaze needs to be averted from the racialized object to the racializing subject, "from the described and imagined to the describers and the imaginers," in the words of Morrison.

We are invited to situate ourselves in positions different from our own, to try and imagine different possible "yous." We are encouraged to recognize our problematic socialization and also self-critique our participation in the maintenance of discriminatory hierarchies, our perpetuations of structural injustices. "How do you make a body accountable for its language, its positioning?" Rankine asks us, exposing our collective ignorance and indifference, questioning the silence, invisibility, and normalcy of whiteness. "How difficult is it for one body to feel the injustice wheeled at another?" Are the tensions, the recognitions, the disappointments, and the failures that exploded in the riots too foreign?" Are we responsible for the failure of America's policing system? Are we, as citizens, failing one another? How do we bridge the spaces between white and nonwhite bodies? How do we forge a path toward a shared community, humanity, and citizenship? — These are some of the unspoken, unanswered questions that this book leaves us with.