

On Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*

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READING Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) in the wake of global populist movements of insularity and nationalistic fervour, alongside the recognition of widespread sexual assault across all communities, is a sobering experience. If anything, the concerns of the book-length poem have only increased in their intensity.¹ *Citizen* is a hybrid text in both its composition and content. Through a combination of poetry and prose, the text explores violent stereotyping to address various forms of discrimination, including both contemporary race relations and sexism. As such, the text becomes a refraction of the reality of marginalised experience within the United States and beyond.

Citizen also functions as an unflinching recount of the emotional and physical violence projected on African American citizens within the United States, both historically and in the present. Rankine's manipulation of form and language inform the political threads of the text, prompting readers to entertain the plight of those with periph-

eral citizenship and belonging, and to directly confront the ugly blight of prejudice. *Citizen*, then, conveys an urgent message of awareness to both American and global citizens, existing as a didactic tool for social discourse, one that is desperately important in the current political climate.

Within *Citizen*, Rankine expresses the effect of recurring “micro-aggressions” — everyday prejudices directed towards minorities — on a fictional yet personal character who is described, in second person, as “you.”² Such microaggressions are evident to various degrees throughout the text, including in its commonly masked but implicit narratives of racism:

The man at the cash register wants to know if you think your card will work. If this is his routine, he didn't use it on the friend who went before you. (54)

Of course, these subtle yet common examples of racist behaviour are only inceptions for broader, more harmful forms of racism:

And the woman with the multiple degrees says, I didn't know black women could get cancer, instinctively you take two steps back. (45)

Through its portrayal of these microaggressions, *Citizen* offers an implicit critique of the spectrum of racial discrimination in the United States, and presents the ignorance that comprises this behaviour.

In Rankine's text, the narrator's voice vacillates between introspection and retrospection, frequently utilising a pointed second-person address:

You never really speak except for the time she makes her request and later when she tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person. (5)

Elsewhere, readers are addressed in assertive second-person apostrophes:

Hey you — / Slipping down burying the you buried within. You are everywhere and you are nowhere in the day. / The outside comes in — / Then you, hey you — (140-141).

Such manipulations of the second-person address carry connotations of urgency and violence, as these short, staccato-like sentences, with their continual fragmentation by em-dashes, come to represent the “wounds” inflicted by words. Over the course of the text, the repeated microaggressions gradually result in a movement away from anger and towards exhaustion:

You are even before you
grow into understanding you
are not anyone, worthless,
not worth you.
Even as your own weight insists
you are here, fighting off
the weight of nonexistence. (139)

The contrasting effects of aggression and exhaustion reflect the process of interpellation in both action and reception. Interpellation — defined here as the projection of a particular identity onto an individual resulting in the internalisation of that identity — is represented in both the themes and structure of Rankine’s writing.

As a synthesis of various media and textual modes (the text includes, most prominently, poetry, essays, and photography), *Citizen* challenges conventional forms of literature. This challenging form demands our continual attention; indeed, *Citizen* resists any simplistic comparison to its generic predecessors as it is so different to and divorced from other singular modes. The text’s blending of forms also mirrors the analytic of intersectionality, which is a dominant theme of the text; and *Citizen* explores both subtle and more overt forms of racism from an intersectional position. Intersectionality describes the way in which multiple frameworks of identity — and thus forms of discrimination — are linked in complex ways. Kimberlé Crenshaw, in defining intersectionality, writes of the importance of women’s rights within anti-racism

movements, noting the connection between all oppressive institutions: “The intersection of racism and sexism [in] black women’s lives cannot be captured by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately.”³ As an intersectional text, *Citizen* indicates that racism and sexism cannot be analysed as detached or unrelated issues. Nor, it suggests, should attempts to overcome these forms of oppression be separated. Thus, *Citizen* shows us how the injustices of racial and gendered prejudice are aligned, developing a prominent concern with the constructed image of gender, and highlighting the inequality that follows from this construction.

Interpellation can thus be seen as a tool Rankine uses to analyse the formation of gender roles.⁴ Indeed, *Citizen* is explicit in its gendered perspective, directly quoting Judith Butler’s description of the power of the language of address: “Our very being exposes us to the address of another ... Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability” (49). Yet while the majority of *Citizen*’s pages recount the personal experiences of a (presumed) black woman, the second-person address of “you” remains largely genderless. As such, it becomes necessary to continually imagine different “yous” of different classifications, which underlines the intersectional values established by Rankine. Indeed, while *Citizen* is certainly a text concerned with the injustices surrounding race, women of colour are merely one of its focal points.

Cynthia Enloe suggests that to make “feminist sense” of the political and social sphere, it is necessary to give emphasis and our curiosity to women of all kinds and throughout all areas, drawing attention toward the fact that discrimination and injustice exists within places that are often overlooked.⁵ *Citizen* exemplifies this notion. In a microcosmic sense, the text acts as a synecdochal and polemical mirror that reflects the experience of black women in contemporary America. Rankine’s use of animal motifs is one technique that heightens her account of inequality; another is the process of interpellation within her lyric. “To live through the days sometimes you moan like deer ... What else to liken yourself to but an animal, the ruminant kind?” (59–60) It is in the final elucidation of this simile that the distressing

power of this comparison lies: here, “ruminant” refers to both a person prone to contemplation and an animal that continuously chews its own regurgitated food to gain nutrients. The cyclical struggle of peripheral communities — as epitomised by communities of black women in America — is illuminated through this motif: minoritised populations are marked by a convergence between the human and the nonhuman; they are forced to repeatedly digest the bitter regurgitations of social prejudice. Furthermore, this convergence is additionally emphasised by the reproduction of particularly striking artworks throughout the hybrid text. The photographic reproduction of Kate Clark’s sculpture “Little Girl,” for instance, reduces Rankine’s identification as an African American woman to animalism: an extreme form of “otherness.”⁶ Clark’s artwork performs this reduction by creating a synthesis of a human face with the body of an infant reindeer. Within *Citizen*, the artwork appears in isolation from text (or context); the use of interpellation, then, is extended in the explicit and confronting visual collation of human and nonhuman identity, which has plagued racial prejudice for centuries.

Rankine uses the widely recognised struggles faced by African American tennis player Serena Williams as a prominent example of racism in all degrees:

For Serena, the daily diminishment is a low flame, a constant drip. Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you. To understand is to see Serena as hemmed in as any other black body thrown against our American background ... “Really, don’t even look at me. Don’t look my way.” (32)

The continual mocking of Williams, as far as it is described in *Citizen*, is an issue concerning both race and gender. The section ends with a description and image of the Danish tennis star Caroline Wozniacki stuffing towels into her tennis skirt and top to impersonate Williams’s appearance. As the narrator comments,

Wozniacki ... finally gives the people what they have wanted all along by embodying Serena’s attributes while leaving Serena’s “angry nigger

exterior” behind ... smiling blonde goodness posing as the best female tennis player of all time. (36)

Here, the gendered and racialised discrimination become irreversibly intertwined. It is gendered because Rankine writes of discrimination toward Serena Williams based on the attributes that define her as a woman: “Wozniacki ... imitates Serena by stuffing towels in her top and shorts.” (36) And race becomes involved when Williams becomes defined as a certain “type” of woman, an “angry nigger” who is “immature and classless ... a gangster.” (33–34) Wozniacki’s performance caricatures the body of the black woman, invoking a stereotype that informs the cultural perception of not just Williams but, by implication, all black women. Throughout *Citizen*, however, Rankine’s focus on the feminist implications of discrimination does not detract from her commentary on racial discrimination. Rather, the multifaceted text exemplifies the focus of intersectional feminism in that it identifies how racism can be encoded within gender inequality.

Ultimately, *Citizen* is an evocative and multifaceted work of literature that comments on the intersectional foundation of institutional oppression. It follows that the way in which the text must be read and interpreted is from an intersectional perspective as well; that is, we must agree that one issue cannot be wholly represented without acknowledging and valuing another. The book is also an example of politically infused literature that not only reveals the reality of discrimination but successfully reinforces the role that poetry can play in the modern political realm: as a tool for action, discourse, and change.

Notes

1. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014). All subsequent references will appear in the body of the essay and will refer to this edition.

2. Sue Derald Wing, “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life,” *The American Psychologist* 62, no. 4 (2007): 271–86.

3. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Close Encounters of Three Kinds: On Teaching Dominance Feminism and Intersectionality," *Tulsa Law Review* 46, no. 1 (2010): 151–89.
4. Aisha & Ann Phoenix, "Racialisation, Relationally and Riots: Intersections and Interpellations," *Feminist Review*, no. 100 (2012): 52-71.
5. Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).
6. Aretha Faye, "African-American Women's Feelings on Alienation from Third-Wave Feminism: A Conversation with My Sisters," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 3 (2005): 605c14.