

Alessandra Gorospe

Professor Koning

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Inside Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*: A Reader's Response

You find yourself in an odd place in your neighborhood. You have never explored this area before but you are tasked with selling bars of chocolate for your school field trip. You approach a young woman walking casually. You say, "Good morning, ma'am". You felt her eyes on you for half a second. You know that she took notice of you but the lady does not feel obligated to speak. "Excuse me mis-", she cuts you off. "Oh, I didn't see you there." She walks away faster than before. You ask yourself if you should say "Sorry".

The passage above is written in the same style as Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*. It illustrates a microaggression which one of my best friends went through. She was barely 7 at the time, but she already felt like an abnormality to her neighborhood community. Reading upon the book *Citizen*, helped me realize that no matter how small the interaction may look, it will affect the person tremendously such as the case of my friend. In this way, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* effectively involves readers in daily racial encounters in the text as well as their impacts through the use of second-person perspective, genuine experiences, and visual images, which also can connect to modern-day society.

First, Rankine writes *Citizen* in the second-person perspective, which compels her readers to put themselves in the speaker's shoes. Using an uncommon perspective creates an intimate

relationship between the reader and the speaker. Thereby, this connection helps the reader understand how microaggressions affect people's lives on a daily basis. In one of the scenarios on the first page, the speaker starts off by saying:

“You are twelve attending Sts. Philip and James School on White Plains Road and the girl sitting in the seat behind you asks you to lean to the right during exams so she can copy what you have written. ...she tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person. You assume she thinks she is thanking you for letting her cheat and feels better cheating from an almost white person” (Rankine Section I).

The quote above lets us know what we are going into throughout the entire text. The speaker attends a school, only to be helping another girl cheat off of her. What caught my attention was the blatant racist comment, “[you] have features more like a white person.” The subtle tone makes it seem like it was nothing important, but as a matter of fact, this small assertion damaged the speaker. The reader is also aware of this because the book uses multiple ‘you’ statements. As a result, the interaction forces the reader to feel as if he or she was the one being targeted through prejudices. In another example, Rankine writes:

“Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. ...you could no more control those sighs than that which brings the sighs about. ...The world is wrong you can't put the past behind you. It's buried in you; it's turned your flesh into its own cupboard” (Rankine, Section IV).

This quote shows that the speaker keeps sighing because it has become an automatic response to something upsetting in her life. Her sighs represent her struggle to cope with stressful emotions likely because of racism and mistreatment, which she cannot control. She wants to

control her sighs by telling herself “the world says stop that”; however, the world was the one that evoked her sighs in the first place. As a reader, I continuously have headaches reading this book, although that emotional response is what Claudia Rankine might want out of us. That feeling of sadness, stress, and dismay enables the reader to become aware of how greatly microaggressions impact people. For this reason, *Citizen*’s rare perspective style allows for a more personal interaction and empathy towards the speaker and their day-to-day racial experiences.

Similarly, *Citizen* uses real experiences from fellow African Americans to engage us, the reader, to understand why the speaker or speakers are having these unpleasant encounters. The reader can relate more to the speaker when they recognized that these experiences are from real oppressed groups who wanted to help Rankine reveal the foulness of microaggressions. In a paragraph about the 2009 tennis U.S Open, Rankine wrote:

“What does a victorious or defeated black woman's body in [a] historically white space look like? Serena and her big sister Venus Williams brought to mind Zora Neale Hurston's 'I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background' “ (Rankine, Section II).

This quote speaks volumes of what black bodies have to go through. The text clarifies that the speaker was watching the 2009 tennis U.S Open. Both the players on the field and viewers on the benches were white-colored individuals. Thus, like graphite onto a white paper; the center of attention was on a black-colored woman, Serena Williams. She felt as if anything she did, win or lose, look confident or cry out, she would be the talk of the day in every news outlet. I felt as annoyed as the speaker when this line came up, but it was nonetheless true, even

in today's society. Claudia Rankine's book, *Citizen*, brings awareness to African Americans' history of prejudices in America and many parts of the world by providing real encounters in which includes a handful of genuine people such as Serena Williams.



(Fig. 1) "Little Girl"

An infant caribou carved by Kate Clark

Along with real daily situational injustice, the few amounts of images in *Citizen* contribute to the meaning of the text. This helps the reader visualize the speaker's distress after the previous pages of text. In essence, the book provides several images which complement its

corresponding blocks of text. For instance, an image is shown after and below the end of *Citizen: An American Lyric*, section I (e.g. see fig. 1). This sculpture was commissioned by Rankine in order to incorporate it into her book. In an interview with Lauren Berlant, she expresses her reason why: “They are both, in a sense, collaged pieces insisting the viewer bring together that which does not live together. They are disturbing because they are ‘wrong’ and yet familiar on a certain level” (Cultural Collaborations). This quote explains why Rankine wanted certain images for her essay. Specifically the “Little Girl”, which displays a black girl’s face sewn into a deer-like body. The viewer would be revolted alongside curiosity due to how familiar and uncanny the sculpture feels. This image goes well in-between blocks of text in *Citizen: An American Lyric* because it feels out of place however, the reader wants to understand and relate it back to the text. The infant caribou is seen as a fascinating object or specimen, something not even close to human. It is a familiar feeling to oppressed minority groups in our society because they are not so different from animals, or livestock.

Last but not least, the speaker suddenly talks in the first-person point of view at the very end of the book. Rankine writes: “Tell me a story, he says, wrapping his arms around me. ...Did you win? he asks. It wasn't a match, I say. It was a lesson” (Rankine, Section VII). In this quote, the forced second-person perspective suddenly becomes a first-person perspective. It seemed as if Claudia Rankine narrates this line as well as the next few lines herself. This could be signifying that this is her own experience we are witnessing. She does not know how to end the book since there are no endings to the prejudice against minority groups. Instead, she comes to a closing, stating this was a ‘lesson’ to all Americans and all the readers that decide to look inside *Citizen*.

Works Cited

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STUDIO, www.kateclark.com/cultural-collaborations. Accessed 8 Oct. 2021.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. 1st ed., Graywolf Press, 2014.