

***Citizen: An American Lyric.* By Claudia Rankine. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014. 160 pp. ISBN: 978-1-55597-690-3.**

Claudia Rankine's (2014) creative exploration of citizenship in *Citizen: An American Lyric* disrupts not only how citizenship is conceptualized, but also how it is written about. Using a narrative that relies heavily on a lyrical exploration (through poetry, movie scripts, analysis of visual texts, and creative nonfiction essays), Rankine's work positions race as a central element in understanding articulations of citizenship and lays bare an inner "battle between the 'historical self' and 'the self self'" (p. 14). Her work situates this tension with its inescapable geographic and historic roots, concluding that "sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American positioning" (p. 14). Rankine dramatically disrupts patterns of lived experiences in America by truncating them with interjections of how racism violently affects citizenship within daily-lived experience for a particular group of people.

It is my intention to provide a creative critical review of Rankine's work that demonstrates how it ruptures the concept of citizenship and opens up a new space for understanding citizenship. I argue that the text itself is an object that disrupts the subject or the reader, which in this case is myself. To do this, I have chosen to take an unconventional approach to this critical analysis because I believe Rankine's work, in its reliance on creative narrative, calls for a creative response to conceptualize the new understandings of citizenship it generates. Furthermore, I found that a creative approach was the best way to move through the emotional intensity and rawness of *Citizen*.

#### Disrupting Habitus: Shifting Established Practices, Status and Order

Wherein I will consider *it* to be an act of citizenship:

This is how *it* begins.

This is how *it* becomes.

Rankine tells a story. It begins with her spotting an empty seat on a train, the only empty seat. It begins with her acknowledging that a man, whom you are intended to presume is a person of colour, occupies the seat next to the empty seat. It begins with other passengers refusing to sit in the seat. It begins with Rankine spotting the only empty seat on a train and suddenly it becomes "the space next to the man is the pause in a conversation you are suddenly rushing to fill" (p.131). (Remember: wherein I will consider *it* to be an act of citizenship, *it* is no longer just an empty seat that has been filled.) It becomes Rankine's silent act of physicality. It becomes a negation of empty space. It becomes the *matra*: "you don't speak unless you are spoken to and your body speaks to the space you fill and you keep trying to fill it except the space belongs to the body of the man next to you, not to you" (p. 131). It begins with this story: an interruption of a pattern on public transit. And suddenly, it becomes every empty seat that I have never sat in based on the presence of an unfair, assumptive narrative contained in my body about another's body whom I do not know. And suddenly, it becomes desperation and I am desperate to blame myself, desperate to remember all the spaces

that I have left empty. And suddenly, in my mouth this story has become an interrupted pattern of making note of every empty seat I pass, making note of the fact that my silent act of physicality is always an addition of empty space. In my mouth, this story becomes an embarrassment of the spaces the privilege of my citizenship has afforded me to leave unoccupied. Uncomfortable though it is, I know it needs to begin this way. This is how the invisible becomes visible.

(This is how *it* begins.)

(This is how *it* becomes.)

Rankine's *Citizen* addresses the notion of the seen and the unseen. She writes, "Each moment is like this – before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced, it has to be seen" (p. 9). In her work to make visible unseen bodies, Rankine ruptures an endemic system of categorization and dismissal that privileges certain bodies in citizenship over others. This disruptive act is so powerful that the reader is uprooted from their systemic understanding of categorization and dismissal and previously unseen bodies become hypervisible while also being uncategorizable and undismissable. This manipulation of visibility is most evident in Rankine's poetic essay on Serena Williams, where she writes:

Serena's frustrations, her disappointments, exist within a system you understand not to try to understand in any fair-minded way because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systemic, as ordinary. 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. (p. 32)

Making Serena Williams's experience visible allows Rankine to position the physical body as a marker of American citizenship within a historical racial framework that continues to be negatively enacted upon people of colour. Thereby, Rankine delineates an understanding of citizenship that has one side winning and the other side losing, just like in Serena Williams' tennis match. But, Rankine shifts the rules of the game once the body is made seen. She importantly agitates and demands that the reader call into question the insidious privilege (or lack of) in their own citizenship and reorder or re-categorize to account for (rather than dismiss) the violent experiences of those who do not experience the same positionality in society as themselves. Essentially, to return to the beginning, Rankine positions the reader into a place where they are encouraged to search for every empty seat in which they have not sat.

(This is how *it* begins.)

(This is how *it* repeats.)

Rankine goes further than just letting this repositioning rest with Serena Williams. In a series of scripts for situational videos she rewrites lived, recent historical trauma narratives experienced by people of colour, including one on Hurricane Katrina. In the Hurricane Katrina script she dialogues: "He said, I don't know what the water wanted. It

wanted to show you no one would come” (p. 85). While Rankine doesn’t specify who the dialogue is between, or who the “who” is, she is still drawing attention to a darkness. By referencing the lack of emergency aide to the poorest areas of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, Rankine brings attention to the geographic borders than delineate a visibility and an invisibility of the privileges citizenship and the erasure of rights that occurs in the invisible zones. Rankine is not only showing the reader that no one would come, she is also pointing out where no one wanted to go, and in doing this, she is in fact making the reader go. In *Citizen*, societal narratives – ones fraught with racist implications - are reordering by making unarticulated spaces visible. In return, the reader is compelled to reorder their perceptions of citizenship to account for these newly evident spaces, as well as to account for their own racially-assumptive narratives. Returning again to the beginning, by drawing the reader’s attention to the fact that geographically the seat exists, it is not a void space or a place of erasure, Rankine is continually filling the empty seat in the subway over and over throughout *Citizen*.

(This is how *it* begins.)

(This is how *it* repeats.)

This repositioning of spaces through the use of making visible the body, continues with Rankine’s multiple retellings of experiences of daily narratives, interactions, and patterns of racist behaviour. She upends being skipped in line at drugstore counter, recounting the dialogue as: “Oh my God, I didn’t see you. You must be in a hurry, you offer. No, no, no, I really didn’t see you” (p. 77). Once again, Rankine makes visible a moment of invisibility and in doing so she is able to call attention to what is seen and unseen in daily social behaviour and responses to that. The physicality of positioning bodies alongside the notion of citizenship is a powerful method of disrupting the habitus as it relies upon eliciting a visceral reaction in the reader that complicates their understanding of how their own bodies enact citizenship and how that enactment is based on a positioning of others.

(This is how *it* begins.)

(This is how *it* becomes.)

Interrupting patterns of social behaviour and disrupting the notions citizenship contained deeply within our physical beings contributes to *Citizen* becoming a disruptive act in both its writing and, also reflexively, in its reading. In focusing on physicality, *Citizen* uniquely addresses the embodiment and iteration of citizenship through daily, lived experiences. The radical citizenship act of Rankine’s work does not rest solely in her writing the book, but rather extends to the reaction of the reader in its urgent demand to reconsider citizenship from a new lens. In a situational video script on the death of Mark Duggan, Rankine asks, “How difficult is it for one body to feel the injustice wheeled at another?” (p. 116). This notion of a deeply shared sense of injustice, as expressed in very physical ways, is where *Citizen* not only contributes to the study of citizenship, but also where it can become a point of pedagogy for citizenship educators. Through making seen the previously unseen, it is impossible to read *Citizen* and not be affected by its dramatic unsettling of citizenship.

This is, indeed, how *it* begins.  
This is, indeed, how *it* repeats.  
This is how *it* becomes.

### **Conclusion**

Quoting James Baldwin, Rankine writes, “the purpose of art is to lay bare the questions hidden by answers” (p. 115). What then has been exposed? Where does this actually begin? With the empty seat? The invisibility of bodies? The invisibility of citizenship? The erasure of narratives? The acknowledgement of narratives? The acknowledgement of bodies? The filling of the seat? The grief? But no, the grief is just an easy response. The hard part is holding onto this grief. The hard part is acknowledging it and existing in the most uncomfortable space. Letting myself fill the space of silence this grief has created in my conversation of citizenship. The hard part is rushing to fill the empty seat, like the gap in a conversation. The hard part is sitting alongside it, letting my body fill the space it is meant to fill, not the other space beside it – the one I ride alongside. The hard part is continually filling the empty seat over and over, placing myself beside the narrative in the next seat. Giving that narrative next to me precedence, remaining silent until I am spoken to.

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