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An American Lyric: Citizen

I suggest that “Citizen”: An American lyric, written by Claudia Rankine binds together the overall genre of a lyric. A Lyric is “originally a composition meant for musical accompaniment. The term refers to a short poem in which the poet, the poet’s persona, or another speaker expresses personal feelings.” This American Lyric does so, by specifically using the technology of the poetic function. Rankine uses this function to evoke certain sounds in certain moments that exhibit the specific expressions and emotions at hand. This helps introduce the subjective set of feelings to a more objective set of feelings. Rankine encourages us as the audience to be anchored in the stories, as if we were the one telling it, and going through those particular encounters with racism on a daily basis. The core of *Citizen* is an anger, a deep hurt built up through experience and the diurnal struggles against dehumanization every brown or black person lives simply because of skin color. Through this depressive lyric she makes sure to release this dark energy unto the audience—she places an emphasis on this by constantly using repetitive language like “you”, historical photographs, and even paper choice, as the influencers.

"You begin to move around in search of the steps it will take before you are thrown back into your own body, back into your own need to be found. The destination is illusory. You raise your lids, No one else is seeing. You exhaust yourself looking into the blue light. All day blue burrows the atmosphere. What doesn't belong with you wont be seen" (citizen, 80)-section V.

You, you, and you— Rankine's sentences have a great deal of doubling and repetition in them—you,your, you're—and the eye is encouraged to skim over the surface, however, while the language appears at first direct, colloquial, it's actually distinctly odd and becomes more immediate. The distinct detail in the writing, the positioning and structure of the words, like having "You" at the head of each sentence... it is capitalized, it crystalizes an overall concept.

I for example, personally feel signaled out while analyzing this quote. I feel the suspense and emotional context in witnessing a moment, that no one else has witnessed, overlooked, I senses a loneliness, judgement, and fear. Not being one with your own body, an out of body experience if you will, an illusion. 'You' are the one being signaled out, which is somewhat ironic considering Rankine is trying to paint a bigger picture or meaning of specifically black people being signaled out/racially profiled.

Iambic pentameter, rhyme, and imagery, commands the audiences attention by using second-person present. This style conveys racism in which black-americans including Ranknie herself have experienced over time, whether they realize its happening, or have to recollect these moments.

"You can't drive yourself sane."(Citizen, 127) - Section VI

Yet again, we see “You” ... What are ‘your’ actions when you witness racism?

This compact quote signifies a multitude of racial conflicts indicated throughout the American lyric. The narrators in each story are driven to the point of insanity with knowing that nothing seems to help: so, it seems to me that they hand it off to the audience to see what they are capable of by making it personal. The 'historical-self' grasps onto the hand of the 'self-self' and any other language or art produced by this blackness...It is changed from its original nature, just as a result of where it came from. Sanity is the baseline for human life, but this apparent baseline quickly drops from existence as one realizes that one is 'a black person', a black person going through hell. This may indeed be a fact for the author, because she grew up in Jamaica and came to understand 'blackness' in America with an outside perspective, and as an insider being racially profiled herself.

The same concept goes for the imagery on page 91. The image has the top portion blacked out, while below there are white people that seem to be partying or having a dandy time— that is not the case... In the historically documented picture, the portion blacked out are really supposed to be two lynched african americans, while below the white persons are partying and having a blast, even though murder just took place... Why did Rankine do this? To prove to America that we are uneducated of past historical events. Or, that these innocent victims were completely over looked, treated as nothing more than objects, therefore they were blacked out in the photograph. Notice I didn't place a question mark at the end of that sentence? That's because these statements are both EXACTLY what she is representing to the audience in this twisted photo.

The feeling of happiness and excitement is shown in a time of such darkness and somberness— a time that should be set aside for the lives of lost loved ones, to a time of celebrating the death of innocent human beings, based off the tone of their skin— It's the past though, slavery and racism is in the past... FALSE. Racism, to this day is still proven. For instance even one of the worlds top athletes Serena Williams felt it. She specifically stated “ I feel most colored when I am thrown upon a sharp white background”(Citizen,29). Serena too has experienced racism and tension in her lifetime in one of her most important matches, she was falsely judged by the referee and ended up losing when she should have VISIBLY won— even Monroe a male world tennis star, gave his two sense on how discriminating this referee was to Serena...including her opponent who mocked her by stuffing her breasts and butt with pillows to “look like” Serena(Image on page 37). It is okay though because she still came out on top and has won, and continues to win countless matches having undergone tough circumstances. What would it feel like to be Serena, being mocked about her curvaceous body, and to lose a match based off of the judges preference on skin tone? This is the harsh message Rankine produces here, people of all rankings are discriminated against on a day to day basis without any punishment. Its moments like these that stand out to the public, but what about the others who aren't seen?

Claudia Rankine states in *The New York Times*, “One cannot forget the times a friend called her by the name of a black housekeeper. Another suffers a lunch companion who complains that because of affirmative action, her son cannot attend the same school that she, her father, her grandfather “and you” all attended. Yet another shows up for her appointment at the house of a specialist in trauma therapy. The

therapist opens the door and yells: “Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?”

In other words, you cannot place the past behind you, no: it is engraved in who you are as a person. Racism is so unconscious and springs from imagined fears and hurtful times. It has to do with who gets pulled over, who gets locked up, who gets pushed down, who gets cursed at— it’s not about seeing it directly, but indirectly, and choosing to do something about it.

The thick white pages help incorporate specific messages of racial conflict— these heavy, white, ‘thick’ pages strongly bring out the blackened photographs and writing on the page. I believe Rankine did this to prove to the audience that racism is strongly brought out by the idea of a color(dark tones), through a ‘thick’ history blacks were tortured, enslaved, murdered, and dehumanized. Yet, without these black photographs and words on the page, what would this book be? What I am getting at here is maybe Rankine did this to show we are all human, we all work together to promote a better purpose on this earth, none better than the other, we are all equal. Whether this has to be expressed through a short american lyric, during a tennis tournament, at the super market, at school, in front of a house... you name it. Just as a lyric acquires words, photographs, and thickened paper to convey a feeling / message, we as a human race acquire certain abilities to create something on a larger scale. We are the people represented in this lyric, and can be the individuals to make bigger changes.

work cited:

Citizen by Claudia Rankine

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/lyric>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/29/books/claudia-rankine-on-citizen-and-racial-politics.html>