

# ALABAMA CIVIL RIGHTS & CIVIL LIBERTIES LAW REVIEW

---

VOLUME 9.2

2018

---

## CLAUDIA RANKINE’S *CITIZEN*: DOCUMENTING AND PROTESTING AMERICA’S HALTING MARCH TOWARD RACIAL JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

Susan Ayres\*

INTRODUCTION.....	214
I. “CITIZEN” AS PROTEST POETRY IN A DOCUMENTARY AND EPIDEICTIC MODE .....	219
A. <i>Documentary Poetry</i> .....	222
B. <i>Epideictic Discourse—Does Poetry Matter?</i> .....	225
II. RACISM AND THE “RACIAL IMAGINARY”: MICROAGGRESSIONS AND MAJOR MOMENTS .....	228
A. <i>“The Racial Imaginary”</i> .....	229
B. <i>Examples of Racism in Citizen—Call Out Racism When You     See It</i> .....	237
1. Microaggressions .....	237
2. Macroaggressions (or Major Moments).....	244
III. TRAUMA AND THE BODY.....	252
CONCLUSION.....	255

---

\* Professor of Law, Texas A&M University School of Law. The author wishes to thank Professor Richard Delgado for his generous response and suggestions to an earlier version of this article. Comments by my colleague Professor Peter Reilly, Daniel Orr, and participants of the 2016 Association for the Study of Law, Culture and Humanities Conference were welcome and helped shape this article. Thanks also to Najmu Mohseen and Zachary Ford for excellent research assistance, and to Texas A&M School of Law for financial support of this project.

## INTRODUCTION

After the first election of President Barak Obama in 2008, there was a sense that the United States had reached a post-racial phase in its history.<sup>1</sup> That sentiment was relatively short-lived because by 2013, when Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson,<sup>2</sup> it was clear that President Obama's election was not transformative. More recently, during the presidential campaign and after the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, undisguised racism in the United States reared its ugly head. From protests by groups such as Black Lives Matter<sup>3</sup> and by individual NFL football players,<sup>4</sup> to President Trump's racist tweets and threats to "build that wall" and to ban Muslims,<sup>5</sup> society is

---

1. See, e.g., Ian F. Haney Lopez, *Post-Racial Racism: Racial Stratification and Mass Incarceration in the Age of Obama*, 98 CAL. L. REV. 1023, 1024 (2010).

2. Charles "Chip" P. Linscott, *#Black Lives Matter and the Mediatic Lives of a Movement*, 8 BLACK CAMERA 75, 76 (2017).

3. See CHRISTOPHER J. LEBRON, *THE MAKING OF BLACK LIVES MATTER: A BRIEF HISTORY OF AN IDEA* (Oxford Univ. Press 2017); see also Linscott, *supra* note 2, at 76 (reviewing the history of the movement, which started after George Zimmerman's acquittal in 2013 for Trayvon Martin's murder, "and gained mounting exposure and increased membership following the police killings of Michael Brown . . . and Eric Garner in 2014").

4. Valerie Richardson, *NFL's Kneeling Comes to Abrupt Halt: Protesters Miss Playoffs*, WASH. TIMES (Jan. 16, 2018); Debbie Elliot, *In Louisiana, NFL Anthem Protests Threaten Saints' Tax Breaks*, NPR (Dec. 21, 2017, 4:55 PM) (noting that activist Gary Chambers in Louisiana stated that "Trump is basically telling all the other slave owners, get your negroes in check," and Representative Ted James stated that "[a]s a black man and as a black player, you are telling these athletes, go throw that ball, catch that ball, run that ball, tackle that quarterback, but you dare not say a word. And that's a plantation mentality.").

5. Nick O'Malley, *British, Dutch Censure Trump for Reckless Racist Retweets*, SYDNEY MORNING HERALD (Nov. 30, 2017), <http://www.smh.com.au/world/donald-trumps-reckless-farright-retweet-sparks-british-dutch-condemnation-20171130-gzvvn.html> (discussing President Trump's re-tweeting of Britain First's anti-Muslim posts); Suzanne Lynch, *Trump's Tweets Increase Risk of Government Shutdown*, IRISH TIMES, (Jan. 18, 2018), <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/us/trump-s-tweets-increase-risk-of-government-shutdown-1.3360326>. During his campaign, as well as a year after he was in office, President Trump promised to build a wall to keep undocumented immigrants out of the United States. He has tweeted: "The Wall is the Wall, it has never changed or evolved from the first day I conceived of it," and "that it was

again reacting to undisguised racism. Activists such as the Reverend Al Sharpton have been outspoken in their criticism of President Trump; Sharpton commented,

A half-century ago King led a movement – a movement that was predicated upon securing voting rights, job opportunities, fair housing, educational opportunities, an end to racial discrimination and ending income inequality. . . . Today, in 2018, we find ourselves at a crossroads: Everything King fought so tirelessly for is under attack once again.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, poet and activist Claudia Rankine sees “white terrorism” as a “failure of the imagination,” and she considers it very likely that “whiteness is irredeemable” in the United States<sup>7</sup> because “whiteness and white supremacy [are interlocked], . . . you cannot untangle them, . . . this country was founded on white supremacy.”<sup>8</sup> Rankine adds that throughout the history of the United States, “white terrorism has brutalized the Native American community, the black community, and others.”<sup>9</sup> Rankine criticized racism during the Bush Administration (for the administration’s chaotic response to Hurricane Katrina),<sup>10</sup> and also during the Obama Administration (for the

---

never intended to be built in areas with natural protection such as mountains, wastelands, or rivers.” *Id.* He added: “The Wall will be paid for, directly or indirectly, or through longer term reimbursement, by Mexico, which has [a] ridiculous \$71 billion dollar trade surplus with the U.S. The \$20 billion dollar Wall is “peanuts” compared to what Mexico makes from the U.S. NAFTA is a bad joke!” *Id.*

6. Alexandra Wilts, *‘These Are Evil Days’: Martin Luther King Jr’s children condemn Trump over ‘\*\*\*\*hole comments,’* INDEPENDENT ONLINE (UK) (Jan. 15, 2018), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-martin-luther-king-jr-day-2018-shithole-comments-evil-racism-deny-a8161001.html> (discussing criticism by not only King’s children, but also others, such as Sharpton).

7. Emily Temple, *Claudia Rankine: “I Think We Need to Be Frightened,”* TERARY HUB, May 11, 2017, <http://lithub.com/claudia-rankine-i-think-we-need-to-be-frightened/> (last visited Feb. 2, 2018).

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.* Rankine refers to the research and ideas of Linda Alcoff in *The Future of Whiteness* (Polity 2015).

10. Rankine wrote the first piece in *Citizen* “in response to Hurricane Katrina [because she] was profoundly moved by the events in New Orleans as they

Birther Movement).<sup>11</sup> She considers the Trump Administration to be “about the *primacy* of whiteness,” and that as citizens, we must discuss the concept of white privilege, or white dominance, which undergirds our society.<sup>12</sup> Rankine asks, “how do you move forward?”<sup>13</sup> One answer she provides is that one can move forward by recording and confronting racist moments and attitudes, which she does in *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014),<sup>14</sup> and which she continues to do in her research on whiteness,<sup>15</sup>—including the creation of the Racial Imaginary Institute, a gallery space and institute that examines whiteness and “investigate[s] themes of injustice, inequality, and accountability.”<sup>16</sup>

---

unfolded.” David L. Ulin, *The Art of Poetry No. 102*, 219 *PARIS REVIEW* 1, 8 (2016), <https://www.graywolfpress.org/sites/default/files/Claudia%20Rankine%20Paris%20Review%20Interview.pdf>. Rankine commented that she “*couldn’t* forget” the things people said about “the abandonment of all those people,” such as Barbara Bush’s statement that “And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them,” or Wolf Blitzer’s comment that “These people . . . are so poor and they are so black.” *Id.*

11. Harvard Univ. Woodberry Poetry Room, *The Making of “Citizen”*: Claudia Rankine, YOUTUBE (May 4, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RylFX9OG54> (commenting on racism towards Obama during the question and answer period of Rankine’s reading).

12. Temple, *supra* note 7. Rankine has been outspoken in her belief that the Trump Administration is something which “should terrify us . . . We need to be frightened by this administration, we need to understand that they mean what they say.” *Id.* Rankine explains that she prefers the term “white dominance” over “white privilege” “because privilege assumes that you *want* this thing. But white dominance is really what white people have grown up to believe. That others are inferior to them.” *Id.*

13. *Id.*

14. CLAUDIA RANKINE, *CITIZEN: AN AMERICAN LYRIC* (Graywolf Press 2014).

15. Rankine has studied and written about whiteness in *THE RACIAL IMAGINARY*, (Max King Cap et al. eds., Fence Books 2015). She also used her 2016 MacArthur “Genius” Grant to study whiteness and to establish an institute. Steven W. Thrasher, *Claudia Rankine: Why I’m Spending \$625,000 to Study Whiteness*, *GUARDIAN* (Oct. 19, 2016). Furthermore, she now teaches a seminar on whiteness (Constructions of Whiteness) at Yale University. Temple, *supra* note 7.

16. Laretta Charlton, *Claudia Rankine’s Home for the Racial Imaginary*, *NEW YORKER* (Jan. 19, 2017).

This article analyzes Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, which is a National Book Award finalist and winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award, among other literary prizes.<sup>17</sup> It is a multi-genre work that combines visual art, poetry, prose, essays, and video scripts. In *Citizen*, Rankine describes or responds to moments of racism—both public moments (such as Trayvon Martin's fatal shooting) and personal quotidian moments or “microaggressions” (such as the remark by “the woman with multiple degrees” that “I didn't know black women could get cancer”).<sup>18</sup> The public moments range from sports events (tennis matches of Serena Williams), to Hurricane Katrina, to the Jena Six. Her acknowledged debt to Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* is apparent in the volume, especially in vignettes<sup>19</sup> such as “In Memory of Trayvon Martin,” which is an elegy for “these brothers, each brother, my brother, dear brother, my dearest brothers, dear heart,” imprisoned and subject to a history of “Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities . . . .”<sup>20</sup>

As a work of art, *Citizen* can be considered documentary poetry or protest written in an epideictic rhetorical mode. Part I of this article analyzes how Rankine's vignettes “invite[] us to renew public perspectives on institutional legitimacy, disciplinary practice, and citizenship”<sup>21</sup> through the use of a rhetorical epideictic mode. Part II discusses Rankine's views of racism in *Citizen* as an example of critical race theory and also examines the documentary strategies Rankine uses in both visual images and vignettes to confront and record the private and public moments of erasure and of hypervisibility.<sup>22</sup> For instance, one vignette describes a speaker being cut in

---

17. See *Citizen's* Awards, <https://www.graywolfpress.org/books/citizen> (last visited Jan. 22, 2018).

18. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 45.

19. The writings in *Citizen* may be referred to as “vignettes” because they straddle the genres of poetry and prose. They include both lyrical essays and poems, some of which may be considered prose poems.

20. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 89–90.

21. See DALE SMITH, *POETS BEYOND THE BARRICADE* 20 (U. Ala. Press 2012).

22. See Nick Laird, ‘A New Way of Writing About Race,’ *NEW YORK REV. BOOKS* (2015) (reviewing CLAUDIA RANKINE, *CITIZEN: AN AMERICAN LYRIC* (2014)), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/04/23/claudia-rankine-new-way-writing-about-race/> (commenting on the “recurring theme . . . the paradox of being seen but not seen, of being both overly visible and completely invisible”).

line at a drugstore by another customer.<sup>23</sup> The vignette ends with the following exchange: “You must be in a hurry, you offer. // No, no, no, I really didn’t see you.”<sup>24</sup> In addition to recording such moments of erasure, *Citizen* includes instances of hypervisibility, such as the story of her attorney friend’s unfounded/illegal arrests for driving while black.<sup>25</sup> Throughout, Rankine theorizes these moments by paraphrasing Judith Butler’s philosophy about vulnerability and “what makes language hurtful”: “Our very being exposes us to the address of another . . . We suffer from the condition of being addressable.”<sup>26</sup>

Part III considers how *Citizen* weaves together memory, desire, and trauma. Rankine repeatedly describes these vulnerable and hurtful moments, along with her desire for “connection, community, and citizenship,” and the desire simply to *belong*.<sup>27</sup> This desire to belong is an example of the “cruel optimism” Lauren Berlant has written about in her book by that same title.<sup>28</sup> Rankine has said, “I find [Berlant’s] work invaluable, because she has allowed me to sort of understand and also appreciate our own aspirational desire to belong, even when the belonging is knocking us down.”<sup>29</sup> As the vignettes show, being knocked down is not just metaphorical, but includes physical violence and the accumulation of slights that may result in the medical condition called “John Henryism,” alluded to in one vignette,<sup>30</sup> and detailed in many others that recount examples of stress’s effect on the body. As Rankine writes, “You can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard.”<sup>31</sup>

A stunning and powerful work, *Citizen*’s documentary poems and art gallery of images may not trigger a revolution, but Rankine’s use of epideictic rhetoric encourages new perspectives and critical reflection and

---

23. *Id.* at 77.

24. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 77.

25. *Id.* at 10.

26. *Id.* at 49.

27. Meara Sharma, *Claudia Rankine on Blackness as the Second Person*, GUERNICA MAG. (Nov. 17, 2014), <https://www.guernicamag.com/blackness-as-the-second-person/>.

28. LAUREN BERLANT, *CRUEL OPTIMISM* (Duke U. Press 2011).

29. Alexander Schwartz, *On Being Seen: An Interview with Claudia Rankine from Ferguson*, NEW YORKER (Aug. 22, 2014).

30. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 11. As discussed in Part III, “John Henryism” is “the medical term . . . for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism.” *Id.*

31. *Id.* at 63.

inspires the “possibility of social transformation.”<sup>32</sup> Rankine personally hopes for transformation, as she says in an interview: “I believe in the possibility. I believe in the possibility of another way of being.”<sup>33</sup> In another interview, Rankine comments, “The experience of writing it, which might or might not be the experience of reading it, was to see my community a little better, to see it, to understand my place in it, to know how it sounds, what it looks like, and yet, to stay on my street anyway.”<sup>34</sup> Rankine’s belief in possibility and her tenacity inform a reading of *Citizen*.

I. “CITIZEN” AS PROTEST POETRY IN A DOCUMENTARY AND EPIDEICTIC MODE

*Something as seemingly ephemeral as a poem can influence an audience or a larger public with its argument.*

—Dale Smith<sup>35</sup>

Mainstream society fears poetry of protest because, as the poet Adrienne Rich has asserted, it “reminds us [white majority] of what is better left forgotten.”<sup>36</sup> Rich explains that “[t]his fear attributes real power to the voices of passion and of poetry which connect us with all that is not simply white chauvinist / male supremacist / straight / puritanical—[but] with what is ‘dark,’ ‘effeminate,’ ‘inverted,’ ‘primitive,’ ‘volatile,’ ‘sinister.’”<sup>37</sup> Not surprisingly, for much of the modern and contemporary era, political poetry has been excluded from the literary canon because it is “suspected of immense subversive power, yet accused of being, by definition, bad writing, impotent, lacking in breadth.”<sup>38</sup> Political poetry breaks the mainstream

---

32. SMITH, *supra* note 21, at 108.

33. Sharma, *supra* note 27.

34. Lauren Berlant, *Claudia Rankine*, BOMB MAGAZINE 129 (Oct. 1, 2014), <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/claudia-rankine/>.

35. SMITH, *supra* note 21, at 15.

36. ADRIENNE RICH, BLOOD, BREAD, AND POETRY: THE LOCATION OF THE POET 167, 179 (W.W. Norton & Company ed., 1st ed. (1986)).

37. *Id.*

38. *Id.* Eleanor Wilner also describes the critical reception to protest poetry, remarking “that what was called ‘political poetry’ was almost by definition, no matter one’s ethnicity, bad poetry in which the polemical purpose must necessarily overwhelm the poetic.” Eleanor Wilner, *Homeland Insecurity and the Poetry of*

expectations of “propriety, sublimity, and taste,”<sup>39</sup> so it has traditionally been looked upon with suspicion by academics.<sup>40</sup> More recently, however, political poetry has been tolerated and even welcomed.<sup>41</sup> As part of this growing acceptance, the term “political poetry” has been replaced by “poetry of engagement” or “public poetry,” which connotes “a respectable civic term that sheds the old pejorative so often attached to ‘political poetry.’”<sup>42</sup>

African-American poets have been writing poems of protest for decades. Harlem Renaissance poets, such as Countee Cullen, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Helene Johnson, Claude McKay, and Alice Dunbar Nelson, wrote poems of racial protest, as did Langston Hughes, who, unlike others, rejected traditional white forms in his writings.<sup>43</sup> The mid-twentieth century saw a shift from the DuBois’ concept of double consciousness to that of “Negro Poet.”<sup>44</sup> Then, in the 1960s, some African American poets became radicalized during the Black Arts Movement, with its demand that “all art must reflect and support the Black Revolution.”<sup>45</sup> LeRoi Jones (who changed his name to Amiri Baraka) called for poems with a primary purpose to “assault white culture and bring down its oppressive authority,” to make the “world . . . safe for black people.”<sup>46</sup> By 2013, Amiri Baraka refuted Charles Henry Rowell’s claim that contemporary black poets had turned away from poetry of protest.<sup>47</sup> Baraka disagreed with Rowell, stating, “The Black Arts spirit is old, it is historical, psychological, intellectual, cultural. It

---

*Engagement*, FREE LIBRARY (Mar. 1, 2016), <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Homeland+Insecurity+and+the+Poetry+of+Engagement.-a0445109470>.

39. SMITH, *supra* note 21, at 8–9.

40. *Id.* at 11.

41. Wilner, *supra* note 38, at 11.

42. *Id.*

43. KAREN JACKSON FORD, *The Fight and the Fiddle*, in TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY 370, 378 (Cary Nelson ed., 2012).

44. *Id.* at 371, 384. “Double consciousness” is DuBois’ concept that African-Americans have a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” *Id.* at 370–71. A few years before the Black Arts Movement, Langston Hughes published a volume called *New Negro Poets, USA*. *Id.* at 384.

45. *Id.* at 388 (quoting Ron Karenga).

46. *Id.* at 389.

47. AMIRI BARAKA, A POST-RACIAL ANTHOLOGY? 166, 171 (Charles Henry Rowell ed., W.W. Norton 2013). Baraka’s critique is aimed at the anthology edited by Charles Henry Rowell. CHARLES HENRY ROWELL, *ANGLES OF ASCENT: A NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY* (W.W. Norton & Co. 2013).

is the same as Black Abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet's call in 1843 . . . 'resistance, resistance, *RESISTANCE*.'"48

Claudia Rankine's writings can arguably be interpreted as continuing this lineage of protest poetry in the Black Arts spirit. Moreover, *Citizen* has not only been included in the literary canon,<sup>49</sup> but some law professors have even incorporated *Citizen* into their curricula.<sup>50</sup> In terms of her own goals for *Citizen*, Rankine explains that she is interested in affect, and her approach in *Citizen* is not to teach or persuade.<sup>51</sup> She states:

I am not interested in narrative, or truth, or truth to power . . .  
I am fascinated by affect, by positioning, and by intimacy . . .  
What happens when I stand close to you? What's your body  
going to do? What's my body going to do? On myriad levels,  
we are both going to fail, fail, fail each other and ourselves.  
The simplicity of the language is never to suggest truth, but to  
make transparent the failure.<sup>52</sup>

In another interview discussing why poetry has advantages over prose (such as "an op-ed piece or an essay"), Rankine suggests it is because "poetry has no investment in anything besides openness. It's not arguing a point. It's creating an environment . . . With poetry you can stay in a moment for as long as you want. Poetry is about metaphor, about a thing standing in for something else."<sup>53</sup> Despite Rankine's claim that *Citizen*'s purpose is not to

---

48. Baraka, *supra* note 47, at 171 (emphasis added). Baraka's critique is aimed at the anthology edited by Charles Henry Rowell, which contains a blurb stating that the anthology "demonstrate[s] what happens when writers in a marginalized community collectively turn from dedicating their writing to political, social, and economic struggles, and instead devote themselves, as artists, to the art of their poems and to the ideas they embody." *Id.* at 166. Baraka acknowledges that some contemporary Black poets have separated themselves from the spirit of the Black Arts Movement and do not write poetry of protest, just as Robert Hayden made that choice throughout his career. *Id.* at 167–69.

49. *Citizen's Awards*, *supra* note 17.

50. See, e.g., Susan A. Bandes, *Moral Shock and Legal Education*, 65 J. LEGAL EDUC. 298, 304 (2015).

51. Interview by Lauren Berlant with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 34.

52. *Id.*

53. Sharma, *supra* note 27.

teach or persuade,<sup>54</sup> this article argues that its impact does just that, and agrees with the reviewer, Nick Laird, that Rankine *is* didactic, even though some readers, such as critic Marjorie Perloff, might find ‘Rankine . . . never didactic: she merely *presents* . . . allowing you to draw your own conclusions.’”<sup>55</sup> As Laird observes to the contrary, “Rankine’s series of anecdotes are geared to a purpose and theme: they are ethical formulations that are too honest and angry to be merely presentations; they’re intended as proofs.”<sup>56</sup> *Citizen* succeeds in conveying the affect or environment of present-day racism in our supposedly color-blind, post-racial society through its approach as documentary poetry and epideictic discourse, and thus opens the way for social change.

#### A. Documentary Poetry

Rankine’s *Citizen* is an example of documentary poetry, as was her previous collection, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* (2004).<sup>57</sup> Documentary poetry critiques historical events, often employing collage, sampling, and fragmentation, which is presented in a collective first-person plural voice.<sup>58</sup> Documents incorporated into poetry may include “testimonials, interviews, facts, and figures.”<sup>59</sup> The documentary poet “infus[es] the lyric line with ‘data clusters’ so ‘that poetry should again assume responsibility for the description of history.’”<sup>60</sup> Examples include Muriel Rukeyser’s series of

---

54. *Id.*

55. Laird, *supra* note 22 (quoting Perloff).

56. *Id.* Fischer agrees that “*Citizen* is poetry written to a Horatian imperative: it delights and instructs.” BK Fischer, *Chokehold*, BOSTON REV. (2014) (reviewing CLAUDIA RANKINE, *CITIZEN: AN AMERICAN LYRIC* (2014)).

57. See Tana Jean Welch, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: The Trans-Corporeal Ethics of Claudia Rankine’s Investigative Poetics*, 40 MELUS 124, 124 (2015) (reviewing CLAUDIA RANKINE, *DON’T LET ME BE LONELY: AN AMERICAN LYRIC* (Graywolf Press 2004)).

58. Philip Metres & Mark Nowak, *Poetry as Social Practice in the First Person Plural: A Dialogue on Documentary Poetics*, 12 IOWA J. CULT. STUD. 9, 10, 12, 15 (2010).

59. Welch, *supra* note 57, at 124. “Documentary poetry” is also referred to as “Investigative poetry.” *Id.* at 125.

60. *Id.* at 129 (quoting ED SANDERS, *INVESTIGATIVE POETRY* 3 (City Lights 1976)).

poems in the 1930s about the Gauley Mine disaster in *The Book of the Dead*<sup>61</sup> and the more recent collections by Mark Nowak documenting coal mining accidents in the United States and China (*Coal Mountain Elementary*), along with his class critique of Capitalism (*Shut Up Shut Down*).<sup>62</sup> Rankine's documentary poems were directly influenced by Rukeyser's.<sup>63</sup>

For many documentary poets, including Rukeyser and Nowak, the impetus for documentary poetry is to "writ[e] from the working-class movement's needs."<sup>64</sup> These protest poets believe it is the responsibility of the poet to "speak for more freedom, more imagination, more poetry with all its meanings. As we go deeper into conflict, we shall find ourselves more constrained, the repressive codes will turn to iron."<sup>65</sup> Rankine also believes in the social responsibility of the poet, drawing her inspiration from Cornell West: "lives are constructed and language is part of that construct. We are either contributing to the fictions or retraining those fictions. As a black person, I am interested in keeping blackness a present and active part of the world."<sup>66</sup> Similarly, as Rankine writes in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, "the poem is really a responsibility to everyone in a social space."<sup>67</sup> Thus, documentary poetry may often be classified as poetry of protest, although not all documentary poets focus on the working class or write in the first-person plural.<sup>68</sup>

*Citizen* focuses on racism through a montage of poems, lyric essays, video scripts, photographic screen shots, and reproductions of art. Rankine said that she placed the images in places where she felt "silence was needed" and "to destabilize the text so both image and text would always have

---

61. *Id.* at 136; MURIEL RUKEYSER, *THE LIFE OF POETRY* (Paris Press 1996).

62. Metres & Nowak, *supra* note 58, at 9, 15.

63. Schwartz, *supra* note 26.

64. Metres & Nowak, *supra* note 58, at 10.

65. Rukeyser, *supra* note 61, at 28; *see also* Susan Ayres, *Outlaw Against the Thinking Fathers* in *HOW SHALL WE TELL EACH OTHER OF THE POET?: THE LIFE AND WRITING OF MURIEL RUKEYSER* 149 (Anne F. Herzog & Janet E. Kaufman eds., St. Martin's 1999).

66. Jennifer Flescher & Robert N. Caspar, *Interview with Claudia Rankine*, *POETRY DAILY*(2006), [http://poems.com/special\\_features/prose/essay\\_rankine.php](http://poems.com/special_features/prose/essay_rankine.php) (last visited April 2, 2018).

67. Welch, *supra* note 57, at 132 (quoting Rankine, *supra* note 57).

68. *Defining Documentary Poetry*, *DOCUMENTARY POETRY*, <http://docupoemunit.weebly.com/> (last visited Jan. 30, 2018).

possibilities.”<sup>69</sup> The front cover of *Citizen* itself contains the image of a hoodie, like that worn by Trayvon Martin, which is actually the reproduction of a work of art, “In the Hood,” by the conceptual artist David Hammons.<sup>70</sup> Other visuals include photographs, such as Michael David Murphy’s photograph of a Georgia neighborhood with a “Jim Crow Rd” street sign; “screen grabs” of moments in sports (such as tennis player Caroline Wozniacki’s mimicking of Serena Williams); visual art, such as Turner’s painting “The Slave Ship”; collages; and Glenn Ligon’s four untitled etchings that repeat the two phrases “I do not always feel colored” and Zora Neal Hurston’s “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.”<sup>71</sup>

In addition to an “art gallery,” *Citizen*’s vignettes are comprised of lyric essays or prose poems, as well as lyric poems. The lyric poems function to enhance the reader’s emotional response, as Rankine explains:

The lyric created the lines to sit inside the feeling that the stories had blurred out. The prose sections and the essays have their own logic in terms of what they do with narrative. The poems, as tied to history and politics as they still are, don’t necessarily have to work as narrative. They don’t have to work linearly. I think verse allowed for the accumulative buildup of feeling to happen through the use of poetic forms like repetition and anaphora.<sup>72</sup>

For example, the lyric poem in Part VII repeats the phrase “hey you,” as a motif of police brutality developed earlier in the collection, and it is also used in this poem as the speaker talks to herself:

---

69. Interview by Lauren Berlant with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 34.

70. RANKINE, *supra* note 14. Hammons’s sculpture (the hood part of a black hoodie) was created in 1993, almost ten years before Martin was shot. Rankine points out that “many believe Hammons made the piece in response to [Martin’s] murder.” Ratik Asokan, *I am Interested in Keeping Present the Forgotten Bodies*, BELIEVER LOGGER (Dec. 10, 2014) <https://logger.believermag.com/post/2014/12/10/i-am-invested-in-keeping-present-the-forgotten>.

71. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 6, 37, 52–53, 160.

72. Asokan, *supra* note 70.

Even now your voice entangles this mouth  
 whose words are here as pulse, strumming  
 shut out, shut in, shut up—  
 You cannot say—  
 A body translates its you—  
 you there, hey you<sup>73</sup>

In this poem, the emphasis shifts away from logic in the more linear and prose passages to feeling and bodily experience, which is explored in greater depth in Part III.

While Rankine's *Citizen* exhibits characteristics of documentary poetry, Rankine differs from Nowak and other documentary poets by her frequent use of second-person voice, rather than first-person plural. Rankine explains that she wrote *Citizen* largely in the second-person voice for several reasons, including that some of the experiences she documents had occurred to other people and that second-person voice unsettles readers by making them unsure "how to position themselves"<sup>74</sup> when reading about incidents of racism. Additionally, unlike the documentary poetry of Nowak and Rukeyser, Rankine does not focus on the working class, but instead documents racist experiences in a broad socio-economic spectrum— from the educated middle-class elite to the lower class and disenfranchised.

### B. *Epidictic Discourse—Does Poetry Matter?*

In addition to considering the documentary aspects of *Citizen*, it is useful to consider its epideictic aspects. In its traditional definition, epideictic rhetoric is one of the three branches of Aristotelian rhetoric, which includes deliberative ("legislative; to exhort or dissuade"); judicial ("forensic; to accuse or defend"); and epideictic ("ceremonial; to commemorate or blame").<sup>75</sup> Although the three overlap, the primary purpose of epideictic rhetoric, according to Aristotle, "is to praise or censure someone, not to persuade others to do or not to do something."<sup>76</sup> Traditional examples of epideictic rhetoric include graduation speeches, funeral eulogies, and

---

73. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 143.

74. Sharma, *supra* note 27.

75. RICHARD A. LANHAM, A HANDBOOK OF RHETORICAL TERMS 164 (Univ. Cal. Press 2d ed. 2012) (1968).

76. *Id.* at 126–27. It may be to praise or blame "a person or group of persons."

political nomination speeches,<sup>77</sup> as well as poems recited during presidential inaugurations.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, epideictic rhetoric “is the most ‘literary’” of the three<sup>79</sup> and often includes literary devices such as characterization, dialogue, description, and figures of speech.<sup>80</sup>

Modern rhetoricians, such as Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard, have challenged this traditional definition of epideictic rhetoric.<sup>81</sup> Sheard argues that “we need to go beyond Aristotle’s criteria”<sup>82</sup> because ancient prejudices surrounding epideictic rhetoric have limited its definition.<sup>83</sup> Sheard offers a modern reconceptualization of the epideictic— not as a genre, but as a mode of discourse or a gesture, which overlaps with both deliberative and forensic rhetoric.<sup>84</sup> In Sheard’s view, epideictic is “a rhetorical gesture that moves its audience toward a process of critical reflection that goes beyond evaluation toward envisioning and *actualizing* alternative realities, possible worlds.”<sup>85</sup>

Epideictic has a civic and visionary quality.<sup>86</sup> Sheard characterizes it as civic ethics because it includes “a sense of civic responsibility that would guide both public and private conduct, decisions, and action.”<sup>87</sup> In addition to having a civic quality with designs on the public sphere, it also has a visionary quality because it “allows speaker and audience to envision possible, new, or at least different worlds” as a result of “bringing together images of both the real—what *is* or at least *appears to be*—and the fictive or imaginary—what *might be*.”<sup>88</sup>

“[T]he epideictic ‘moment’ is one of dis-ease to which discourse may respond therapeutically (as in the eulogy . . .) or critically (as in political

---

77. *Id.* at 126.

78. Three presidents, John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama, invited poets to read at their inaugurations. *Inaugural Poems in History*, POETS.ORG, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/stanza/inaugural-poems-history> (last visited Jan. 30, 2018).

79. Lanham, *supra* note 75, at 23.

80. *Id.* at 129.

81. Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard, *The Public Value of Epideictic Rhetoric*, 58 C. ENG. 765, 765 (1996).

82. *Id.* at 769–70.

83. *Id.* at 773. The ancient prejudices primarily stem from the association of epideictic rhetoric with the Sophists.

84. *Id.* at 789–90.

85. *Id.* at 787.

86. *Id.* at 770.

87. *Id.*

88. *Id.*

speeches . . .).”<sup>89</sup> In responding to epideictic discourse, the audience may agree with the speaker’s views (as in political speeches by a candidate the audience favors) or the audience may be pressed to exercise critical judgment.<sup>90</sup> In the latter response, epideictic discourse can be “a force for change:”

[E]pideictic discourse can be a vehicle for self-reflection and self-criticism, an expression of critical and rhetorical self-consciousness, both publicly and privately. It can help us to scrutinize our own privately and publicly held beliefs and prejudices, to evaluate them, and to decide whether to reaffirm or reform them.<sup>91</sup>

In *Poets Beyond the Barricade*, Dale Smith examines the epideictic aspects of modern and contemporary poets who have confronted social problems, including activist poets who have been “motivated [to intervene] by a need to voice their dissent and to perform their citizenship with the tools of their art.”<sup>92</sup> These poets use epideictic discourse to focus on specific social situations, rather than on “larger social movements.”<sup>93</sup> Consequently, Smith argues that we should not be concerned with whether these poets accomplish revolutionary change; this is the wrong question.<sup>94</sup> Rather, in answer to the question, “Why poetry?,” Smith argues that it offers “specific kinds of pressure . . . in particular situations,” and that poets who use an epideictic discourse “often explore new cultural and social possibilities by creating a kind of liminal space wherein public action can be modeled, explored, and invented for particular public audiences.”<sup>95</sup> Rankine describes her project in *Citizen* to be similar to Rukeyser’s documentary poems on the Gauley Mine Disaster, but says that “[u]nlike Rukeyser, . . . I was less interested in the facts of the event, and more interested in the way these historical events have eroded our ability to identify each other as citizens.”<sup>96</sup> Like the poets Smith

---

89. *Id.* at 790.

90. *Id.* at 776.

91. *Id.* at 777.

92. SMITH, *supra* note 21, at 5.

93. *Id.* at 11. Smith analyzes the mid-to-late Twentieth Century poetry of Lorenzo Thomas and Edward Dorn, two poets who protested racism. *Id.* at 75–108.

94. *Id.* at 2.

95. *Id.* at 8.

96. Schwartz, *supra* note 29.

considers, Rankine employs many epideictic gestures that lead the reader to self-reflection and self-criticism on both a public and private scale in response to macroaggressions (major moments of racism) and microaggressions (subtle moments of racism).<sup>97</sup> In this way, *Citizen* is “a force for change” to the dis-ease of racism. However, *Citizen* responds to racism not just critically, but also therapeutically (for example, in its eulogy of young black men shot by police). Like the poets Smith describes, Rankine’s “poetry invites us to renew public perspectives on institutional legitimacy, disciplinary practice, and citizenship.”<sup>98</sup> Her use of the epideictic mode allows for “new perspective and resolutions” and for the “possibility of social transformation.”<sup>99</sup>

## II. RACISM AND THE “RACIAL IMAGINARY”: MICROAGGRESSIONS AND MAJOR MOMENTS

*What happens to the heart of the artist, here in North America? What toll is taken of art when it is separated from the social fabric? How is art curbed, how are we made to feel useless and helpless, in a system that so depends on our alienation?*

—Adrienne Rich<sup>100</sup>

*Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

—James Baldwin<sup>101</sup>

The epideictic moment of dis-ease Rankine addresses is racism in America. *Citizen* tackles this using some tools and concepts developed by Critical Race Theorists such as Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell, and Cornel

---

97. See Welch, *supra* note 57, at 3 (describing how documentary poetry “encourages active engagement on the part of the reader”).

98. SMITH, *supra* note 21, at 20.

99. *Id.* at 79.

100. RICH, *supra* note 36, at 185.

101. Asokan, *supra* note 70 (quoting James Baldwin).

West.<sup>102</sup> Like her previous collection (*Don't Let Me Be Lonely*), *Citizen* is also subtitled “*An American Lyric*.”<sup>103</sup> Rankine has explained that the subtitle refers to the “exploration of the self in a social space. I live in America and I felt all of the sudden barraged by it.”<sup>104</sup> In *Citizen*, Rankine is barraged by microaggressions and major moments of racism, and these moments build up in her body to cause headaches and other physical ailments.<sup>105</sup> Instead of silence, she chooses to “speak out because if you don't, it's going to harm you.”<sup>106</sup>

#### A. “*The Racial Imaginary*”

*The Racial Imaginary*, co-edited by Rankine and Beth Lofreta, was published after *Citizen* and collects various writers' musings on “the racial imaginary” to explore how “[r]ace enters the writing.”<sup>107</sup> The “racial imaginary” is defined as “the way our culture has imagined over and over again the narrative opportunities, the feelings and attributes and situations, the subjects and metaphors and forms and voices, available both to characters of different races and their authors.”<sup>108</sup> This definition of the “racial imaginary” corresponds to the beliefs of Derrick Bell and other Critical Race Theorists that racism is a permanent and structural feature of society, so it is impossible to eradicate racism by changing individual beliefs, “because racism is not grounded in individual consciousness”<sup>109</sup> and takes different forms.

---

102. Flescher & Caspar, *supra* note 66 (expressing admiration for work of Cornel West); THE DERRICK BELL READER (Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic eds., NYU Press) (2005); CORNEL WEST, RACE MATTERS (Beacon Press 1993); Richard Delgado, *Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative*, 87 MICH. L. REV. 2411 (1989).

103. RANKINE, *supra* note 57.

104. Welch, *supra* note 57, at 9 (quoting Rankine's remarks about *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* in an interview by Leonard Lopate).

105. See RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 54–61.

106. Ulin, *supra* note 10; RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 159 (Rankine quotes Rich's “idea of silence as a poison”).

107. THE RACIAL IMAGINARY, *supra* note 15, at 18.

108. *Id.* at 22.

109. Kenneth B. Nunn, *The R-Word: A Tribute to Derrick Bell*, 22 U. FLA. J.L. & PUB. POL'Y 431, 435 (2011).

As Rankine has said, “[o]urs is a structural and institutional problem;”<sup>110</sup> racism is “deeply rooted in America,” and we “are being driven by projections and stereotypes that were formed in the creation of our country,”<sup>111</sup> such as the idea “that the black body in the white imagination is still equated with bestiality, criminality.”<sup>112</sup> One vignette in *Citizen* metaphorically describes how social interactions are driven by these unconscious biases that often collide:

A friend argues that Americans battle between the “historical self” and “self self.” By this she means you mostly interact as friends with mutual interest and, for the most part, compatible personalities; however, 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. Then you are standing face-to-face in seconds that wipe the affable smiles right from your mouths. What did you say?<sup>113</sup>

Rankine also believes that “[i]n the case of white writers, often the sense of privilege allows for the assumption that their realities are ‘normal’ . . . that their choices are not choices—they are just living life.”<sup>114</sup> In other words, whites often act from an unstated premise of white superiority, because “[t]he

---

110. Ulin, *supra* note 9; RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 151.

111. Asokan, *supra* note 70.

112. Boris Kachka, *Claudia Rankine: Serena, Indian Wells, and Race*, VULTURE MAG. (Mar. 18, 2015) <http://www.vulture.com/2015/03/claudia-rankine-serena-indian-wells-and-race.html>.

113. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 14. This vignette has overtones of Rankine’s description about her exchange with Tony Hoagland about whether his poem was racist. In her speech, she described their exchange as: Needless to say, before our conversation started it was over. I can still see myself back then confused at the rate of escalation, given that I was so used to everyone reassuring everyone that everyone accepted everyone and race didn’t matter. Who let America in the room? How did things get out of hand so quickly? Claudia Rankine, *Open Letter: A Dialogue on Race and Poetry*, POETS.ORG (Feb. 15, 2011), <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/open-letter-dialogue-race-and-poetry>.

114. Flescher & Caspar, *supra* note 66. Rankine goes on to say, “I am always happy to see white writers who are responsible—who take race and class into account.”

American imagination has never been able to fully recover from its white-supremacist beginnings. . . . This assumption both frames and determines our individual interactions and experiences as citizens.”<sup>115</sup>

However, as suggested in the Introduction, many believe that America is a colorblind or post-racial society, so racism is no longer a problem.<sup>116</sup> Others view the refusal to talk about racism as actually aiding the consensus viewpoint, and believe it is the duty of subordinate groups to call out racism when they see it.<sup>117</sup> Rankine agrees that the notion of a colorblind society creates dangerous problems, which can be remedied through “recognition and accountability to the self.”<sup>118</sup> One example in *Citizen* is the recognition that the election of a black President did not mean America had achieved a post-racial status.<sup>119</sup> Rankine subtly makes this point in a poem documenting Obama's first inauguration in 2009 when Chief Justice Roberts misquoted the Oath of Office.<sup>120</sup> Rankine's poem includes Roberts' literal transposition of words:

And what had been  
 “I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully  
 execute the office of President of the United States . . .”  
 becomes  
 “I do solemnly swear that I will execute  
 the office of President to the United States faithfully. . . .”<sup>121</sup>

Rankine's poem also contains a description rich in metaphor of Americans' stunned reaction to Roberts' mistake:

And yes, the inaudible spreads across state lines.  
 Its call backing away from the face of America.  
 Bloodshot eyes calling on America

---

115. Claudia Rankine, *The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning*, N.Y. TIMES (June 22, 2015).

116. Nunn, *supra* note 109, at 437.

117. *Id.* at 438.

118. Flescher & Caspar, *supra* note 66. Rankine comments, “The perception that race is not an active part of our existence allows people to make the kinds of mistakes they make against each other.”

119. See RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 112–13.

120. *Id.*

121. *Id.* at 113.

that can't look forward for being called back.<sup>122</sup>

The face of America is a collective, but part of that collective (“Bloodshot eyes”) is “backing away” because the hopes for a post-racial society have been quickly shattered. Rankine suggests Roberts may have acted out of an unconscious, but structural racism.<sup>123</sup> However, it is possible he just made an honest mistake.<sup>124</sup> Or it is possible that Chief Justice Roberts was being cavalier in his first occasion to swear in a president of another political party than that which appointed him.<sup>125</sup> Or Roberts could have been uncomfortable swearing in the first black president, which would suggest he acted with implicit bias, or structural racism.

These different interpretations probably crossed Rankine's mind, as shown by a speech she gave several years before the publication of *Citizen*: “Don't go there. Don't be like that. Supreme Court Justice Roberts simply forgot the right words to swear in our first black President. He was probably nervous. Don't go there. Don't be like that.”<sup>126</sup> In *Citizen*, Rankine goes there. She implies Roberts acted out of unconscious racism because the phrase “LONG FORM BIRTH CERTIFICATE” is superimposed in a shadow-gray font across the two pages of the poem, referencing the Birthers' conscious racism against Obama.<sup>127</sup> Moreover, by contrasting the actual oath of office with the words Roberts said, Rankine draws our attention to his misstatement, the phrase “the office of President to the United States.”<sup>128</sup> Roberts was not swearing in Obama to “the office of President of the United States” but “to the United States,” in effect, subordinating Obama to the United States.<sup>129</sup>

While *Citizen* is Rankine's first collection that focuses solely on racial injustice, she has written on this topic previously in *Don't Let Me Be*

---

122. *Id.* at 112.

123. *Id.* at 112–13.

124. My Law and Literature seminar class in 2016 thought that Roberts had made an honest mistake and was nervous before the huge crowd.

125. This reading was suggested by my colleague, Michael Green, during an informal reading group meeting on Critical Race Theory in 2016.

126. Rankine, *supra* note 113.

127. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 112–13.

128. *Id.* at 113.

129. I thank Richard Delgado for developing this interpretation during a reading group discussion on Critical Race Theory in 2016.

*Lonely*, an earlier book of documentary poetry.<sup>130</sup> *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* does not explicitly "mention race or racism,"<sup>131</sup> like *Citizen* does, but it contains photographs and lyrical narratives about four black men who were victims of racism: James Byrd (the black man brutally killed by three white men in Jasper, Texas);<sup>132</sup> Abner Louima (the black man "sodomized with a broken broomstick while in police custody");<sup>133</sup> Amadou Diallo (the immigrant shot by New York police, who mistook him for a rape suspect);<sup>134</sup> and Lionel Tate (the thirteen-year-old given a life sentence without parole for the killing of another child).<sup>135</sup>

Additionally, before *Citizen* was published, Rankine publicly exchanged a heated debate with her colleague at the time, the poet Tony Hoagland, about whether his poem, "The Change," was racist.<sup>136</sup> Hoagland's poem describes a tennis match between a white player ("some tough little European blonde") and a black player, "that big black girl from Alabama, / cornrowed hair and Zulu bangles on her arms, / some outrageous name like Vondella Aphrodite."<sup>137</sup> The speaker of Hoagland's poem goes on to wish for "the white girl to come out on top, / because she was one of my kind, my

---

130. Rankine, *supra* note 57.

131. Welch, *supra* note 52, at 12.

132. Rankine, *supra* note 57, at 21; in the section on James Byrd, Rankine praises President Bush for "saying that they [the men who killed Byrd] had been dealt with harshly," but Rankine felt like "Byrd got lost in that gesture of closure," and "[she] wanted to bring him back visually because comments like that erase him." Flescher & Caspar, *supra* note 66.

133. Rankine, *supra* note 57, at 56.

134. *Id.* at 57. See also SMITH, *supra* note 21, at 94. Thomas also wrote a poem, *Dirge for Amadou Diallo*, discussed by Smith.

135. Rankine, *supra* note 57, at 67. Kevin Bell also comments that it shows the impossibility of distinguishing with any certainty childhood from adulthood, especially in the context of life without parole. Bell comments that the passage shows "the audacity and violence of the word that presumes to know and preside over differences that are too complex, too mutually constitutive to be reduced to oppositions; differences that have yet to make themselves understood in idioms not yet administered to us." Kevin Bell, *Unheard Writing in the Climate of Spectacular Noise: Claudia Rankine on TV*, 3 GLOBAL SOUTH 93, 106 (2009).

136. Rankine, *supra* note 113; Tony Hoagland, *Dear Claudia: A Letter in Response*, POETS.ORG (Mar. 15, 2011), <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/dear-claudia-letter-response>.

137. Tony Hoagland, *The Change*, POETS.ORG (2003), <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/change>.

tribe / with her pale eyes and thin lips.”<sup>138</sup> Hoagland’s poem contains veiled allusions to Venus Williams, which led Rankine and others to criticize the poem’s racism.<sup>139</sup> In Rankine’s speech at the 2011 Associated Writing Programs Conference, Rankine asked, “Were these phrases intended as a performance of the n-[word]?”<sup>140</sup> Or, maybe “the poet was outing a certain kind of white thought.”<sup>141</sup> For Rankine, the poem was objectionable, in part because Hoagland told her “this poem is for white people,” but also because of the racism in preferring the white European tennis player to the black American player.<sup>142</sup> Hoagland’s written response to Rankine’s speech defended the poem as humorous and claimed that racism was structural and unconscious (“We drank racism with our mother’s milk and we re-learn it every day”);<sup>143</sup> that the topic of racism did not belong solely to people of color; that political correctness spoiled humor; and that the poem was “racially complex.”<sup>144</sup>

Rankine’s response to this exchange with Hoagland appears in a long lyrical essay in Part II of *Citizen*. This essay catalogues various racial incidents (microaggressions and macroaggressions) suffered by Venus and Serena Williams. The essay ends with a still shot of a Danish tennis player, Caroline Wozniacki, mocking Serena “by stuffing towels in her top and shorts,” and “finally giv[ing] the people what they have wanted all along by embodying Serena’s attributes while leaving Serena’s ‘angry nigger exterior’ behind. At last, in this real, and unreal, moment, we have Wozniacki’s image of smiling blond goodness posing as the best female tennis player of all time.”<sup>145</sup>

---

138. *Id.*

139. See Daisy Fried, *Tony Hoagland’s “The Change,”* POETRY FOUND. (Apr. 28, 2011), <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/04/tony-hoaglands-the-change>; Rankine, *supra* note 105.

140. Rankine, *Open Letter supra* note 113.

141. *Id.*

142. *Id.*

143. Tony Hoagland, *Dear Claudia: A Letter in Response*, POETS.ORG (Mar. 15, 2011), <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/dear-claudia-letter-response>.

144. *Id.* Daisy Fried points out that Hoagland’s poem was both praised and attacked when it was published, and that it “is a poem which believes that white liberals’ relationship to race is more complicated than our consciously held and universally agreed-upon opinion that Racism is Bad.” Fried, *supra* note 139.

145. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 23–37. *Citizen* includes a screen shot of this incident. *Id.* at 37.

*Citizen* documents over twenty racist microaggressions and over nine macroaggressions.<sup>146</sup> One rhetorical and critical race theory strategy Rankine employs is providing many examples in order to demonstrate “a feeling of accumulation.”<sup>147</sup> This strategy can be seen as an attempt to overcome the “empathic fallacy,” “the belief that one can change a narrative by merely offering another, better one—that the reader’s or listener’s empathy will quickly and reliably take over.”<sup>148</sup> This belief is a fallacy because most people are caught in their established prejudices and narratives.<sup>149</sup> In his review, Laird points out that this lack of empathy is depicted in a vignette in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, when the speaker goes to a “Museum of Emotions in London,” and plays a yes/no game.<sup>150</sup> The speaker answers “no” when the question is “Were you terribly upset and did you find yourself weeping when Princess Diana died?”<sup>151</sup> The speaker muses, “I couldn’t help but think the question should have been, Was Princess Diana ever really alive? I mean, alive to anyone outside of her friends and family—truly?”<sup>152</sup> Laird asks whether the reader of *Citizen* might have a similar lack of empathy for the black victims of police violence that Rankine catalogues.<sup>153</sup> While one or two narratives of anti-racism likely cannot overcome racist beliefs and biases, perhaps an “accumulation” of thirty different examples might have more of an impact in establishing an empathic response, or at least in providing examples of the type of racism that the reader can then consciously identify.

---

146. See RANKINE, *supra* note 14.

147. Interview by Meara Sharma with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 27. See also Laird, *supra* note 22 (commenting that Rankine’s “series of anecdotes . . . [are] intended as proofs.”).

148. RICHARD DELGADO & JEAN STEFANCIC, CRITICAL RACE THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION 34 (N.Y. Univ. Press 3d ed. 2017) (2001). See also, Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic, *Images of the Outsider in American Law and Culture: Can Free Expression Remedy Systemic Social Ills?* 77 CORNELL L. REV. 1258 (1992); Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic, *Norms and Narratives: Can Judges Avoid Serious Moral Error?* 69 TEX. L. REV. 1929 (1991).

149. DELGADO & STEFANCIC, *supra* note 148, at 34.

150. Laird, *supra* note 22.

151. Laird, *supra* note 22 (quoting CLAUDIA RANKINE, *DON’T LET ME BE LONELY: AN AMERICAN LYRIC* 39 (Graywolf Press 2004)).

152. *Id.*

153. Laird, *supra* note 22.

As the epigraph by French filmmaker Chris Marker reads: “If they don’t see happiness in the picture, at least they’ll see the black.”<sup>154</sup>

In addition to providing many examples, another rhetorical strategy Rankine uses to illustrate racism and elicit empathy is the second-person voice, which she chose in order to open the book to a wider universe of readers, who could not automatically reject the experience of an “I.”<sup>155</sup> The use of “you,” works to “provoke[] self-examination while positioning a reader of any possible background as a raced subject who will share (for a time) in this stifling and maddening experience.”<sup>156</sup> The use of “you” also symbolizes how blackness is like the second person: “Not the *first* person, but the *second* person, the *other* person.”<sup>157</sup> Rankine explains that the use of second-person voice reflects a sense of disempowerment, of “who can stand in that ‘I’ versus who can’t, and, talking specifically about African-Americans, on the notion that we started as property. The notion that personhood came *after* objecthood.”<sup>158</sup> The heavy use of “you” thus becomes a metaphor for white superiority. *Citizen* self-reflexively ponders the use of the second-person voice in several vignettes. For instance, the last section provides a long meditation on “you,” with questions such as: “And always, who is this you?” (140); “Who do you think you are, saying I to me? / You nothing. / You nobody. / You” (142).<sup>159</sup>

*Citizen* catalogs incident after incident of expansive racism, and it furthers the goals of critical race theory through its documentary and epideictic modes. It is “an instrument for addressing private and public ‘dis-

---

154. RANKINE, *supra* note 14. This quote by Marker is from the essay-film *Sans soleil* and refers to a scene in which a volcano erupts and lava runs towards a landscape where two blond children have just been seen. Rankine explains that in the quote “happiness refers to the kids, and the black to the lava. Though the line isn’t literally about race, it speaks to events, natural or otherwise, that make difficult attempts to live a life.” Claire Schwartz, *An Interview with Claudia Rankine*, TRIQUARTERLY (Jul. 15, 2016), <http://www.triquarterly.org/issues/issue-150/interview-claudia-rankine>.

155. Interview by Alexandra Schwartz with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 29.

156. Jesse McCarthy, *The Protest Poets*, DISSENT (Fall 2015), <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/protest-contemporary-black-poetry-claudia-rankine>.

157. Interview by Meara Sharma with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 27.

158. Interview by Alexandra Schwartz with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 29.

159. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 140, 142.

ease,' discomfort with the status quo."<sup>160</sup> One reviewer comments, "The success of *Citizen* lies in its searing moral vision and reader-implicating provocations."<sup>161</sup> As the following examples demonstrate, *Citizen* contains the epideictic characteristics of both the civic and visionary spheres, and it inspires both critical inquiry and possibility for change.

*B. Examples of Racism in Citizen—Call Out Racism When You See It*<sup>162</sup>

Rankine documents moments of erasure and of hypervisibility in vignettes describing both microaggressions and macroaggressions. She believes in the responsibility of the poet to document such moments that "have eroded our ability to identify each other as citizens."<sup>163</sup>

1. Microaggressions

*Citizen* contains many examples of microaggressions, the term coined by Harvard University psychiatrist Chester Pierce to mean the "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are "put downs" of Blacks by offenders."<sup>164</sup> The incidents in *Citizen* are examples of both erasure/invisibility and hypervisibility<sup>165</sup> that Rankine culled from her own experience and that of her friends, both white and nonwhite, "as a way of talking about invisible racism—moments that you experience and that happen really fast."<sup>166</sup> The slipperiness or elusiveness of microaggressions

---

160. Sheard, *supra* note 82, at 766.

161. Fischer, *supra* note 56.

162. Nunn, *supra* note 109, at 437.

163. Schwartz, *supra* note 154.

164. Walter R. Allen, Grace Carrol, & Daniel Solóranzo, *Keeping Race in Place: Racial Microaggressions and Campus Racial Climate at the University of California, Berkeley*, 23 CHICANO-LATINO L. REV. 15, 17 (2002). *See also* DELGADO & STEFANCIC, *supra* note 148, at 2 (describing "microaggression" as "one of those many sudden, stunning, or dispiriting transactions that mar the days of women and folks of color. Like water dripping on sandstone, they can be thought of as small acts of racism, consciously or unconsciously perpetrated, welling up from the assumptions about racial matters most of us absorb from the cultural heritage").

165. *See* Laird, *supra* note 22 (pointing out the "recurring theme . . . of being seen but not seen, of being both overly visible and completely invisible").

166. Interview by Alexandra Schwartz with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 29.

are further described in the introduction to *The Racial Imaginary*, a book edited by Rankine and Loffreda:

This anxiety is fueled by the fact that racism, in its very daily-ness, in its very variety of expression, isn't fixed. It's there, and then it's not, and then it's there again. One is always doing the math: Was it there? Was it not? What just happened? Did I hear what I thought I heard? Should I let it go? Am I making too much of it? Racism often does its ugly work by not manifesting itself clearly and indisputably . . . you feel it, you feel the injury, the racist address, and then you question yourself for feeling it. You wonder if you've made your own prison.<sup>167</sup>

This sentiment is echoed in *Citizen* when Rankine asks, "What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth?"<sup>168</sup>

The microaggressions in *Citizen* are epideictic moments of personal dis-ease, suffered by a speaker with an admittedly "elite status,"<sup>169</sup> who attended a "prestigious school"<sup>170</sup> and who sees a therapist specializing in trauma.<sup>171</sup> The microaggressions seem to be moments personally experienced by Rankine; however, she explains that *Citizen* includes stories she collected from her friends and colleagues as well.<sup>172</sup> Nonetheless, in an interview, Rankine explains,

I made a conscious decision to inhabit my own subjectivity in this book in the sense that the middle-class life I live, with my highly educated, professional, and privileged friends, remains as the backdrop for whatever is being foregrounded. Everyone is having a good time together—doing what they do, buying what they can afford, going where they go—until they are not.

---

167. THE RACIAL IMAGINARY, *supra* note 15, at 18–19.

168. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 9.

169. *Id.* at 12.

170. *Id.* at 13.

171. *Id.* at 18.

172. Ulin, *supra* note 10; RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 144.

The break in the encounter wouldn't wound without the presumed intimacy and the good times.<sup>173</sup>

In another interview, Rankine adds that she placed the collection “in the world of middle-class America,” because that is “where we have expectations of equality.”<sup>174</sup> Of course, this strategy can be criticized for “do[ing] little for the underlying structures of inequality, much less the plight of the deeply poor.”<sup>175</sup> However, unlike some other black poets raised and living in educated, middle-class America, who consciously avoid writing about race issues,<sup>176</sup> Rankine’s conscious decision to write about middle-class microaggressions allows her to connect with middle-class readers, who may be inspired to critically scrutinize their own lives. As one reviewer observes, *Citizen* “confront[s] the conflicted emotional guilt that accompanies being a bourgeois subject caught in a largely privileged relationship to racist violence.”<sup>177</sup> Moreover, as indicated above, Rankine does not write solely about middle-class microaggressions, but also about macroaggressions, which are examined below in Part II.B.2.

The microaggressions Rankine describes are subtle, fleeting, almost not-there, and subject to self-doubt and second-guessing. They appear primarily in Parts I, III, and VII of *Citizen* and include experiences from childhood (such as the time a white student cheats off the speaker’s exam and then praises her for being “an almost white person”).<sup>178</sup> They include experiences from adult personal life (such as the time a close friend calls her by the name of the friend’s housekeeper,<sup>179</sup> the time the speaker is late to

---

173. Interview by Lauren Berlant with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 34.

174. Interview by Ratik Asokan with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 70.

175. DELGADO & STEFANCIC, *supra* note 148, at 107.

176. See Baraka, *supra* note 47, at 169 (quoting the poet, Rita Dove’s reasons for not writing about race issues: “As I wrote more and more . . . I realized that the blighted urban world inhabited by the poems of the Black Arts Movement was not mine. I had grown up in Ohio . . . I enjoyed the gamut of middle class experience, in a comfy house with picket fences and rose bushes on a tree-lined street in West Akron.”). Baraka also quotes the poet Yusef Komunyakaa’s rejection of the Black Arts Movement: “Growing up in the South, having closely observed what hatred does to the human spirit, how it corrupts and diminishes . . . I unconsciously disavowed any direct association with the Black Arts Movement.” *Id.* at 168.

177. McCarthy, *supra* note 156.

178. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 5.

179. *Id.* at 7.

meet a friend who calls her a “nappy-headed ho,”<sup>180</sup> or the time the speaker’s new therapist yells at her “Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?”<sup>181</sup>). They include experiences from professional life (such as the colleague who accuses her of always being on sabbatical,<sup>182</sup> the conference attendees who comments as she is walking into the room that “being around black people is like watching a foreign film without translation,”<sup>183</sup> or the time another professor “tells [her] his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there”<sup>184</sup>). Finally, they include experiences from casual everyday life (such as being cut in line at the drugstore by a man who claims he did not see her,<sup>185</sup> hearing a “woman with the multiple degrees” remark that “I didn’t know black women could get cancer,”<sup>186</sup> being asked by a cashier whether she thinks her credit card will work,<sup>187</sup> or being told by a prospective apartment manager that “I didn’t know you were black!”<sup>188</sup>). These and other microaggressions are described in *Citizen*. The speaker registers disgust (“The wrong words enter your day

---

180. *Id.* at 41. About this incident, Rankine has explained that:

When I heard that story, I found it fascinating. It’s a matter of perception, of course, but as my friend was speaking, I thought that person [who called her a ‘nappy-headed ho’] wished to belittle her because they felt ignored. It could be because she was late, simply that . . . I also thought the ‘nappy-headed’ utterance could be an attempt to say, I was anxious to see you. Why were you not anxious to see me? But because whiteness sees itself in a place of dominance, suddenly the racial dynamic comes into play. One benefit of white privilege is that whiteness has an arsenal of racialized insults at the ready. Like, I was anxious to see you and I’m *white* so I will put you in your *black* place. . . . When I listen to people, I’m constantly thinking, Why do you remember this moment over everything else?

Ulin, *supra* note 10; RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 148.

181. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 18.

182. *Id.* at 47.

183. *Id.* at 50.

184. *Id.* at 10. The vignette does not explain whether this was a job interview for the speaker or a random comment/insult.

185. *Id.* at 77.

186. *Id.* at 45.

187. *Id.* at 54.

188. *Id.* at 44.

like a bad egg in your mouth and puke runs down your blouse”),<sup>189</sup> outrage (“Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me? You wish the light would turn red . . . so you could slam on the brakes”),<sup>190</sup> and hurt (“Do you feel hurt because it’s the ‘all black people look the same’ moment, or because you are being confused with another after being so close to this other?”).<sup>191</sup>

These microaggressions also freeze further communication between friends and colleagues. For instance, when her friend calls the speaker a “nappy-headed ho,” the speaker reacts with a feeling of confusion and paralysis:

You don’t know what she means. You don’t know what response she expects from you nor do you care. For all your previous understandings, suddenly incoherence feels violent. You both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, you watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture.<sup>192</sup>

The downside of Rankine’s project, as she acknowledges, is the “impossibility of actually putting your body in the place of devastation if it doesn’t belong to you.”<sup>193</sup> For instance, in a subway vignette, the speaker sits next to an ostracized black man.<sup>194</sup> While the speaker acts in empathic solidarity, Rankine actually sees the vignette as a “critique . . . of wanting to repair historical damage in localized moments.”<sup>195</sup>

---

189. *Id.* at 8.

190. *Id.* at 10. Rankine quotes or paraphrases James Baldwin’s observation that “there is no (Black) who has not felt, briefly or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees and to varying effect, simple, naked, and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter in a day. . . .” *Id.* at 124.

191. *Id.* at 7.

192. *Id.* at 41–42. Similarly, in another incident in which a professional acquaintance makes a reference to affirmative action to explain why her son did not get into their alma mater, the speaker realizes that “[t]his exchange, in effect, ends your lunch. The salads arrive.” *Id.* at 13.

193. Interview by Lauren Berlant with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 34.

194. *Id.*

195. *Id.*

In reading these microaggressions, the reader's response includes a sense of disgust, outrage, hurt, and recognition.<sup>196</sup> Rankine has said that she "didn't anticipate . . . how broadly the anecdotes documented in the text resonated as true. Many readers recognize the validity of the interaction because they have had similar interactions."<sup>197</sup> *Citizen* also spurs critical inquiry, especially the self-searching question of whether one has been the victim or perpetrator of similar microaggressions. As poet and reviewer B.K. Fischer comments, "The book's excruciating narratives of racism in familiar settings—academic office, supermarket, restaurant—induce incredible anxiety," prompting questions like "Have *I* made these mistakes? Have I inflicted this kind of pain? I'm sure I have."<sup>198</sup> Like Fischer, as a white reader of *Citizen*, I respond similarly. This is especially true since I grew up in El Paso, Texas, a border city which had a black population of about 3% in the 1980s, and a population with over 62% Spanish surnames.<sup>199</sup> Many of my best friends were Hispanic, and I was culturally steeped and raised in Hispanic traditions. Now living in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, in a more diverse community (with African Americans, whites, Asian Americans, Hispanics), I find that *Citizen* causes me to feel the anxiety about my own racist microaggressions. I doubt I am alone; Rankine succeeds in making readers feel this anxiety "not by attacking them, but by unsettling and reframing what is most familiar to them."<sup>200</sup>

Part of Rankine's project in spurring people to examine racist microaggressions is to accept that "[w]e will always fail each other," and to realize that the solution to acknowledging an act of racism is to own up:

If you make a mistake, then you should own that mistake. You should admit, "What I said [or did] was racist and that is really unacceptable." You don't say, "Get a sense of humor" . . . The problem is not only that the blow is dealt. The blow is dealt,

---

196. Mark Bernard White, *The Rhetoric of Edification: African American Didactic Literature and the Ethical Function of Epideictic*, 9 HOWARD J. COMM. 125, 127–28 (1998).

197. Schwartz, *supra* note 154.

198. Fischer, *supra* note 56 (emphasis in original).

199. W.H. Timmons, *El Paso, Texas*, TEXAS STATE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION (Jun. 12, 2010), <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hde01>.

200. McCarthy, *supra* note 156.

and then the brown or black person is told that the blow wasn't a blow.<sup>201</sup>

If you own up, Rankine believes, “you acknowledge that you are being driven by projections and stereotypes that were formed in the creation of our country,” because “[r]acism is deeply rooted in America.”<sup>202</sup> As discussed above, Rankine sees racism as structural and pervasive.<sup>203</sup> One remedy is to call out incidents of racism, including microaggressions. Another remedy is to own up when you commit a racist act. These are the epideictic possibilities Rankine offers in *Citizen*.

In other words, for Rankine, one remedy for racism is “consciousness.”<sup>204</sup> In this sense, she is more of an idealist than a materialist, as those terms are used in Critical Race Theory. An “idealist” “holds that racism and discrimination are matters of thinking, mental categorization, attitude, and discourse. Race is a social construction . . . Hence we may unmake it and deprive it of much of its sting by changing the system of images, words, attitudes, unconscious feelings, scripts, and social teachings.”<sup>205</sup> Rankine falls into this idealist camp when she expresses the belief that “the real change needs to be a rerouting of interior belief. It’s an individual challenge that needs to happen before any action by a political justice system would signify true societal change.”<sup>206</sup> In contrast to idealists, materialists (or realists) hold that “racism is much more than a collection of unfavorable impressions . . . [it] is a means by which society allocates privilege and status.”<sup>207</sup> Moreover, materialists, such as Derrick Bell, contend that positive change results from “interest convergence,” that “civil rights gains for communities of color coincide with the dictates of white self-interest.”<sup>208</sup> For materialists, racism abates only when “the physical circumstances of minorities’ lives” are changed.<sup>209</sup> Rankine does not

---

201. Interview by Ratik Asokan with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 70.

202. *Id.*

203. *Id.*

204. Interview by Boris Kachka with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 112.

205. DELGADO & STEFANCIC, *supra* note 148, at 21.

206. Rankine, *supra* note 115.

207. DELGADO & STEFANCIC, *supra* note 148, at 21.

208. *Id.* at 22–24. *See also*, Derrick Bell, Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma, 93 HARV. L. REV. 518 (1980).

209. DELGADO & STEFANCIC, *supra* note 148, at 25.

necessarily disagree with materialists, but as a creative writer, her primary power lies in the use of words and stories to effectuate change.

## 2. Macroaggressions (or Major Moments)

*Citizen* documents not just microaggressions, but also major moments of racism. What is the relation between the two? Rankine believes that microaggressions allow or build up to major moments of racism.<sup>210</sup> In an interview she explains:

[O]ne of the questions I often hear is “How did that happen?” as it relates to mind-numbing moments of injustice—the aftermath of Katrina, for example, or juries letting supremacists off with a slap on the wrist for killing black men. It seems obvious, but I don’t think we connect micro-aggressions that indicate the lack of recognition of the black body as a body to the creation and enforcement of laws. Everyone is cool with seeing micro-aggressions as misunderstandings until the same misunderstood person ends up on a jury or running national response teams after a hurricane.<sup>211</sup>

As discussed above, for Rankine, as for other critical race theorists (who might be described as idealists), one remedy for structural and unconscious racism is to speak out about microaggressions.<sup>212</sup> Moreover, Rankine believes that these major moments of racism will continue to occur until change sets in at an individual level.<sup>213</sup>

---

210. Interview by Lauren Berlant with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 34.

211. *Id.*; see also Interview by Boris Kachka with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 112 (Rankine makes a similar statement: “I wanted to create a narrative that showed that these microaggressions reveal a kind of positioning that allows people then to arrive on juries, and to arrive in the Senate, and to arrive in police cars, or in New Orleans organizing evacuations; that that positioning of the white imagination is inside all people. That’s how we get to those bigger moments. We’re not in the world of self-declared white supremacists. We’re in the world of regular Americans who hold those premises or beliefs unconsciously.”).

212. Interview by Lauren Berlant with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 34.

213. *Id.*

The parts of *Citizen* documenting the major moments of racism are generally longer pieces than the vignettes describing microaggressions. Additionally, Rankine presents many of the major moments as video scripts, in a project that she collaborated on with her husband, filmmaker John Lucas.<sup>214</sup> Rankine's use of video scripts broadens the audience she reaches and adds an element of performance art to *Citizen's* multiple genres.

Interestingly, Rankine reads the scripts in a monotone, which is unlike most "spoken word" performance poetry. Her controlled and lulling voice serves to remove her own emotional response as "an angry black person,"<sup>215</sup> and leaves a blank slate for the listener's emotional response to many nuances in the prose. As reviewer Nick Laird observes, her monotone allows for multiple meanings: "'Are you cold?' can mean 'Are you unfeeling?' even 'Are you dead?'" "'Is it cool?' can mean 'Is this allowed?'" "'What is happening?'"<sup>216</sup> It is almost as if Rankine wants to avoid the classic critiques of epideictic rhetoric as "mere rhetoric" in which the Sophists manipulate the listeners.<sup>217</sup> Instead, listeners must become active participants in creating meaning. Rankine's monotone voice also serves as a metaphor for the traumatic impact of racism on the black body. The major moments and microaggressions culminate to a destructive level, leaving behind a numb witness, discussed below in Part III.

*Citizen* documents major moments of racism in a wide spectrum of locations. They include tennis tournaments in which the Williams' sisters participated,<sup>218</sup> a 2006 World Cup incident in which Zinedine Zidane head-butted another player,<sup>219</sup> Hurricane Katrina,<sup>220</sup> and the 2009 Inauguration of President Obama.<sup>221</sup> Rankine focuses much of her critique on the criminal

---

214. See RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 82; CLAUDIA RANKINE'S SITUATIONS, <http://claudiarankine.com/> (last visited Feb. 5, 2018).

215. Rankine, *Open Letter* *supra* note 113 (she comments "I don't like using the word *racist* because if you use it it means you are an angry black person.").

216. Laird, *supra* note 22. Laird finds these multiple meanings and "phrasal variations, a form of verbal riffing that finds its musical equivalent in jazz." *Id.* Rankine has commented that she is more influenced by visual art than music, but that jazz did inspire *Citizen*. Interview by Ratik Asokan with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 70.

217. Welch, *supra* note 57.

218. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 23–37.

219. *Id.* at 120–29.

220. *Id.* at 82–87.

221. *Id.* at 112–13. See discussion in Part II.A.

justice system, for which she lost trust after the outcome of the Rodney King trial. She remembers,

I literally burst into tears. I had this weird feeling walking around the streets of New York, that I didn't know who these people were. All of a sudden I felt like an alien. I felt like, holy shit, I am walking around, and all of these people, white people, are okay with my black body being beaten and kicked, even when they're seeing the violence actually happen and don't have to rely on hearsay . . . Because I think I always sort of believed in the justice system before that, even though I knew the history. I still felt that when you're not leaving it up to hearsay, when you have documentation, people will step up. And it didn't happen. That was really a crisis moment for me.<sup>222</sup>

This is the same reaction many had when the grand jury in Ferguson, Missouri failed to indict the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown. Rankine responded to this failure by asserting,

Vigilance is great, but we can never have a camera at every angle. So the Darren Wilsons will exist. They will kill random black men no matter what happens. But what throws black people out of the American citizenry is when it goes to the courts and no indictments come. That's the real problem.<sup>223</sup>

That problem—of failed indictments—leads to riots because of the incessant history (“Before it happened, it had happened and happened.”).<sup>224</sup>

*Citizen* describes the response to Rodney King in visceral terms:

Though the moment had occurred and occurred again with the deaths, beatings, and imprisonment of other random, unarmed black men, Rodney King's beating somehow cut off the air supply in the US [sic] body politic by virtue of the excessive,

---

222. Interview by Meara Sharma with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 27.

223. Interview by Boris Kachka with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 112.

224. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 116.

blatant barrage of racism and compromised justice that followed on the heels of his beating.<sup>225</sup>

*Citizen* documents police violence against Rodney King and also contains a growing list of victims, each preceded by the words “In memory of”: Jordan Russell Davis, Eric Garner, John Crawford, Michael Brown, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray.<sup>226</sup> The third printing of the book includes this haiku on the page following the list of victims: “because white men can’t / police their imagination / black men are dying.”<sup>227</sup> What is powerful about this haiku and the list of victims is the sparseness of the writing. Rankine suggests there is nothing more to say, but then expounds in an interview:

I think that one of the positions we have taken around the question of race, is that we already know . . . . And so we don’t need to look at it again. And yet everybody is still upset. Everybody is still being driven by their outrageous imagination to the point of killing people because they feel that a black man in front of them is a demon . . . . A twelve-year-old is still being shot to death and described as a twenty-year-old with a gun. Obviously in such cases, the white imagination has taken over reality. If the police in these cases would begin to ask *why* that happens . . . then maybe we could back up, and look at white subjectivity, and the types of things that whiteness fears. Things that have nothing to do with the brown or black body; things that have everything to do with white privilege, wanting to hold on to white privilege.<sup>228</sup>

---

225. *Id.* at 117; discussed in contrast to English incident involving riots after Scotland Yard officials killed Mark Duggan.

226. *Id.* at 134. As Laird notes in his review, Rankine added names to the list with each edition. Laird, *supra* note 22.

227. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 135. Before the third printing, the page containing the haiku contained the words “The Justice System.” Laird, *supra* note 22.

228. Interview by Ratik Asokan with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 70.

*Citizen* documents many instances of “police violence against black men,” because Rankine finds it incredible that society allows it.<sup>229</sup> This includes killings and the phenomenon of “driving while black,” a topic of the “Stop-and-Frisk” Situation video script.<sup>230</sup> In this lyrical narrative, which repeats “you are not the guy,” Rankine describes the experience related to her by a black friend who was an attorney and who had been pulled over by police many times.<sup>231</sup> The narrative explains,

I left my client’s house knowing I would be pulled over. I knew. I just knew. I opened my briefcase on the passenger seat, just so they could see. Yes officer rolled around on my tongue, which grew out of a bell that could never ring because its emergency was a tolling I was meant to swallow.<sup>232</sup>

The attorney is booked and then released.<sup>233</sup> He ponders another repeated sentence, “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.”<sup>234</sup> In discussing the point of the Stop-and-Frisk Situation Video script,<sup>235</sup> Rankine explains,

That feeling of dread is what we wanted to communicate. Black men are attempting to go about their lives, buying a T-shirt or whatever, but at any moment something could happen, at any moment the police could pull up and decide destiny, at

---

229. Claudia Rankine, *Using poetry to uncover the moments that lead to racism*, PBS NEWS HOUR (Dec. 4, 2014), <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/using-poetry-uncover-moments-lead-racism/>.

230. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 104. This Situation Video script, like the others in *Citizen*, were written by Rankine in collaboration with her husband, photographer and filmmaker John Lucas.

231. *Id.* at 105. Rankine offered to cook him dinner if he would share his experiences. He agreed, and his wife, who had never heard his stories, was shocked. Harvard University, *The Making of “Citizen”*: Claudia Rankine, YOUTUBE (May 4, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RylFX9OG54>.

232. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 105.

233. *Id.* at 109.

234. *Id.* at 108.

235. *Id.* at 104.

any moment you could be confused with somebody else. And that would be that.<sup>236</sup>

Rankine also documents the imprisonment of black men. Concerning the problem of mass incarceration, Rankine has expressed her debt to the work of Michelle Alexander,<sup>237</sup> and has commented, “You know one in three black men spend time in prison, but you don’t know the justice system needs that to happen, ensures that it happens.”<sup>238</sup> Instead, Rankine hopes that in the future, people will be incredulous that “we let this happen? How could an entire country warehouse black men, shoot them constantly, and no one object?”<sup>239</sup> *Citizen* chronicles these problems in Situation Video scripts.<sup>240</sup>

In the two-page Situation Video script, “In Memory of Trayvon Martin,” Rankine repeats the phrases “My brothers are notorious” and “my brother, dear brother, my dearest brothers, dear heart,” and the primary image is that of “brother.”<sup>241</sup> The speaker describes a sense of loss and anguish in the vignette, bemoaning that “Your hearts are broken . . . . The hearts of my brothers are broken.”<sup>242</sup> In part of the script, the first-person speaker (who seems to be a prisoner) is calling a “brother” on the phone, not wanting to hang up or to say good-bye.<sup>243</sup> The speaker relates: “My brother is completed by sky. The sky is his silence. Eventually, he says, it is raining. It is raining down. [...] He won’t hang up. He’s there, he’s there but he’s hung up though he is there.”<sup>244</sup> The words give a sense of a telephone call to a prisoner, yet the image on the opposite page gives a completely different meaning to “he’s there but he’s hung up though he is there,” because it is an altered photo of a

---

236. Interview by Ratik Asokan with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 70.

237. *Id.* See MICHELLE ALEXANDER, *THE NEW JIM CROW: MASS INCARCERATION IN THE AGE OF COLORBLINDNESS* (The New Press, Revised ed. 2012) (2010).

238. Interview by Ratik Asokan with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 70.

239. Rankine, *supra* note 229; DELGADO & STEFANCIC, *supra* note 148 (posing and answering the “How could they” question).

240. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 88, 92, 98. See also, Amber Baylor, *Centering Women in Prisoners’ Rights Litigation*, 25 MICH. J. GENDER & L. \_\_\_ (forthcoming fall 2018).

241. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 89–90.

242. *Id.* at 89.

243. *Id.* at 90.

244. *Id.*

lynching—altered by the removal of the hanging bodies.<sup>245</sup> The altered photo suggests a historical connection between the end of slavery, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and mass incarceration of blacks that Michelle Alexander makes in her book, *The New Jim Crow*.<sup>246</sup> By altering the photo, the focus shifts to:

[T]he white supremacist gesture of the mustachioed man in the foreground. His pointing to the bodies claimed ownership of the lynching, . . . [a gesture that] was truly offensive. . . . Consequently, after cropping [the lynched] bodies out of the photograph, what is found is systemic racism embodied in the faces of the white mob.<sup>247</sup>

In the vignette, “In Memory of Trayvon Martin,” systemic or structural racism self-perpetuates through time:

Those years of and before me and my brothers, the years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs, boy, hey boy, each a felony, accumulate into the hours inside our lives where we are all caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its roots our limbs . . .<sup>248</sup>

In the Situation Video script following the Trayvon Martin script is another eulogy “In Memory of James Craig Anderson.”<sup>249</sup> Anderson was a black man in Mississippi who was the victim of a hate crime committed by several white men, including Deryl Dedmon,<sup>250</sup> and which was captured, in part, on a parking lot video surveillance camera.<sup>251</sup> In this script, Rankine

---

245. *Id.* at 91. The photo is “Public Lynching,” dated August 3, 1930, from the Hulton Archive, and was altered by John Lucas with permission. *Id.* at 165.

246. ALEXANDER, *supra* note 237, at 21–22 (and *see generally*, Chapter 1). This Jim Crow allusion is echoed in *Citizen* in one of the volume’s first images, of a neighborhood street sign entitled “JIM CROW RD.” RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 6 (the photograph by Michael David Murphy).

247. Schwartz, *supra* note 154.

248. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 89–90.

249. *Id.* at 92.

250. *Id.* at 92–95.

251. Michael Martinez, *Three men sentenced in hate crime death of black man in Mississippi*, CNN (Feb. 11, 2015, 4:07 PM).

does not so much describe or mourn for Anderson (unlike the previous script that mourned for “my brother”). Rather, this script focuses more on the killer and his truck. Rankine includes the media’s description of Dedmon as “‘just a teen,’ ‘with straggly blond hair,’ ‘a slight blond man,’” who ran over Anderson in his truck after he and his friends robbed him.<sup>252</sup> The actions and sounds were recorded on a surveillance camera, and include Dedmon’s statement repeated three times in Rankine’s script, “I ran that nigger over.”<sup>253</sup> Rankine emphasizes Dedmon’s hate or “anger” by stating, “You are angry, an explosive anger, an effective one: I ran that nigger over.”<sup>254</sup> While the news tried to shift blame from Dedmon to the pickup truck, as Rankine notes, “[t]he pickup is human in this predictable way.”<sup>255</sup> Rankine describes the pickup as a “figure of speech,” as a “crown” of Dedmon’s powerful whiteness.<sup>256</sup> While the tone of the Martin eulogy script is sorrowful and lyrical, the tone of the Anderson eulogy script is angry, and it objectively describes the murder like a news report, addressing Dedmon as the “you” in the script: “Were you dreaming of this day all the days of your youth?”<sup>257</sup> “James Craig Anderson is dead.”<sup>258</sup> Rankine believes that men like Dedmon or Dylann Roof (who committed a mass shooting at a Charleston church in 2015) are not an aberration, but rather that “[t]he making of Dylann Roof is a cultural making, and we see variations of him all over our society at this point, maybe not overtly shooting nine people, but there are different ways that it gets articulated and implemented, that kind of ideology.”<sup>259</sup>

In an essay published after the shooting at a Charleston church, Rankine quotes a friend who said, “‘The condition of black life is one of mourning.’”<sup>260</sup> Rankine goes on to explain that mourning is the black condition because a mother fears for her son’s life whenever he steps out of the house, and that “[t]hrough the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can

---

252. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 92–95.

253. *Id.* at 94.

254. *Id.*

255. *Id.*

256. *Id.* at 95.

257. *Id.* at 94.

258. *Id.* at 95.

259. Charlton, *supra* note 16.

260. Rankine, *supra* note 115.

be killed for simply being black.”<sup>261</sup> Through her vignettes and Situation Video scripts, Rankine subscribes to the empathic fallacy, discussed above. Even though she provides many examples of racism, in an attempt to wear away at structural racism, this task might prove Herculean, if not impossible, because “there is no escape inside a world built on white supremacy.”<sup>262</sup>

### III. TRAUMA AND THE BODY

*[B]reathe . . . a truce with the patience of a stethoscope.*

—Claudia Rankine<sup>263</sup>

Berlant reads *Citizen* as “metabolizing in the language of your flesh . . . the ‘ordinary’ injury of racist encounter.”<sup>264</sup> Rankine has said that one impetus for *Citizen* was “to show how black people’s health was connected to their day-to-day life,” by showing how racist moments are detrimental to health.<sup>265</sup> Early in *Citizen*, Rankine describes the detrimental effects caused by racism: “Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs. Like thunder they drown you in sound, no, like lightning they strike you across the larynx.”<sup>266</sup> Another early vignette describes the effects of racism on the body as being “coded on a cellular level,” and explains “the medical term—John Henryism—for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure.”<sup>267</sup> More recently, researchers have coined the term “weathering” to explain the high rates of maternal mortality and chronic diseases, such as hypertension and diabetes, that disproportionately affect

---

261. *Id.*

262. Interview by Alexandra Schwartz with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 29.

263. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 156.

264. Interview by Lauren Berlant with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 34.

265. Interview by Meara Sharma with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 27. In her previous collection, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine also connected the writing and the experience to effects on the body. See Welch, *supra* note 57, at 4 (describing Rankine’s “trans-corporeal ethics”).

266. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 7.

267. *Id.* at 11. This poem goes on to state, “Sherman James, the researcher who came up with the term, claimed the physiological costs were high.” *Id.*

Blacks.<sup>268</sup> “Weathering” refers to “stress-induced wear and tear on the body.”<sup>269</sup>

Among the visceral experiences Rankine describes in *Citizen* is nausea: “The wrong words enter your day like a bad egg in your mouth and puke runs down your blouse, a dampness drawing your stomach in toward your rib cage.”<sup>270</sup> She also describes sighing, moaning, and headaches in a string of poems in Part IV of *Citizen*.<sup>271</sup> One vignette, quoted in full, reads:

The sigh is the pathway to breath; it allows breathing. That’s just self-preservation. No one fabricates that. You sit down, you sigh. You stand up, you sigh. The sighing is a worrying exhale of an ache. You wouldn’t call it an illness; still it is not the iteration of a free being. What else to liken yourself to but an animal, the ruminant kind?<sup>272</sup>

Sighing leads to headaches, and to more self-preservation: “Don’t wear sunglasses in the house, the world says, though they soothe, soothe sight, soothe you.”<sup>273</sup> The trauma lodges itself in the body because past memories can’t be erased, both historical wrongs and public and private wrongs:

You can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard. Not everything remembered is useful but it all comes from the world to be stored in you. Who did what to whom on which day? Who said that? She said what? What did he just do? . . . Do you remember when you sighed?<sup>274</sup>

*Citizen* enacts this buildup in the body through the repetition of moments and through certain images that serve as metaphors for this buildup. Rankine explained that she collected many incidents together because she

---

268. *Black Mothers Keep Dying After Giving Birth. Shalon Irving’s Story Explains Why*, NPR (Dec. 7, 2017). The term “weathering” was coined by Professor Arline Geronimus. *Id.*

269. *Id.*

270. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 8.

271. *See id.* at 60.

272. *Id.*

273. *Id.* at 61.

274. *Id.* at 63.

“wanted a feeling of accumulation” or “a strategy that would allow these moments to accumulate in the reader’s body in a way that they do accumulate in the body.”<sup>275</sup> And many reviewers have alluded to the emotional and physical impact of reading *Citizen*.<sup>276</sup> One refers to the “gut punch” effect in reading the poems.<sup>277</sup>

Images reproduced in the book serve as metaphors for the buildup of trauma in the body. For instance, Radcliffe Bailey’s *Cerebral Caverns*, a sculpture of a wooden cabinet containing plaster heads,<sup>278</sup> is a metaphor for the memories lodged in each person’s head, and it is a visual depiction of the “cupboard” Rankine refers to.<sup>279</sup> But rather than a cupboard in her own head, it is a cupboard of heads.<sup>280</sup> Another image is Wangechi Mutu’s *Sleeping Heads*, a mixed media collage of a skull-looking (or embryonic) head being embraced/strangled by various hands and arms, one of which is held between (or bitten by) the skull’s lips.<sup>281</sup> The collage evokes the painful feeling of a headache or a desire to sigh or moan that Rankine describes in a series of poems. Finally, Rankine also includes the reproduction of Kate Clark’s *Little Girl*, a sculpture of an infant caribou with the face of a human little girl, whose face is decorated with white dots that look pearl-like.<sup>282</sup> Clark’s sculpture reflects Rankine’s later description of the sighing self as a ruminant animal, and because it follows the vignette about a trauma therapist who screams, “Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?,” it also represents how the patient must feel—a vulnerable little girl who has been attacked by a therapist turned into a yelling “wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd.”<sup>283</sup>

---

275. Interview by Meara Sharma with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 27.

276. See, e.g., Fischer, *supra* note 56 (referring to the effect in reading the poems as a “gut punch”).

277. Fischer, *supra* note 56.

278. Reproduced in RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 119. This is placed between the Situation Video Scripts “In Memory of Mark Duggan” and “World Cup.”

279. See *id.*

280. *Id.*

281. Reproduced in RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 147. This is placed in the middle of a series of lyric passages in the final part of the book, Part VII.

282. RANKINE, *supra* note 14, at 19. This image is placed after the vignette about being turned away by the screaming trauma therapist, and the end of Part I.

283. *Id.* at 18. Rankine explains that “[t]he image of this deer-like, mythic creature felt as if it was flipping back and forth between the two women,” the patient and the “psychiatrist, who obviously had her own projections around blackness, and

## CONCLUSION

Despite the detrimental effects of racism on the body politic and the personal body, Rankine understands the desire to invest in things that hurt us through Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, and admits that she realized "that thing that I am invested in that is hurting me would be this country."<sup>284</sup> When Langston Hughes's poem, "Let America Be America Again," was viewed more than 25,000 times after Michael Brown's death, and Rankine visited Ferguson to honor Brown's death, she commented that Hughes's important message was that "'American never was America to me."<sup>285</sup> Despite the catalog of microaggressions and macroaggressions in *Citizen*, Rankine also documents the sense of longing to be treated as an "American" or "citizen," and sees this as a common desire of blacks. The much quoted phrase in *Citizen*—to "breathe . . . a truce with the patience of a stethoscope"—refers to a longing for "connection, community, and citizenship" that makes one "forgive all of these moments because you're constantly waiting for the moment when you will be *seen*. As an equal. As just another person. As another *first* person."<sup>286</sup> In other words, a *citizen*.

---

was so frightened by it that she was willing to hurt anybody in order to protect herself from whatever incident was informing her imagination, whatever was haunting her." Interview by Ratik Asokan with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 70.

284. Interview by Meara Sharma with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 27.

285. Interview by Alexandra Schwartz with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 29 (emphasis added).

286. Interview by Meara Sharma with Claudia Rankine, *supra* note 27.