

The Trauma of Racism in Translation: Making the Personal Universal through Language, Point of View and a Raced Aesthetic

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I. INTRODUCTION: The Literally Tools Wielded in *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* is a creative achievement whose impact is much more than literary. *Citizen* is a political act—a personal call-to-action written in the language of the universal. In this work, Rankine bears witness to the racist reality thriving in the hidden folds of our collective unconscious. She argues that racism has been driven underground by its ubiquitousness and an emergent post-racial cultural pathology born of institutionalized racism and society's profane unwillingness to see the prevalence of the disease. Relying on lyricism and a politicized artistic aesthetic, Rankine elevates and makes conscious the history and depth of racism and racial trauma that permeates America's cultural zeitgeist. *Citizen* effectively argues that when society refuses to look at racism and closes its heart to racist realities, we lose our empathy. Rankine's creative and finely structured craft reminds us that in fact, we stand to lose so much more—we stand to lose our very humanity.

Despite how explosive and visible issues of race and racism are in current affairs, the dominant cultural narrative asserts that we live in a post-racial society, in effect driving conversations about injustice, racial violence, and the existence and prevalence of systemic racism underground. As a culture, we therefore rarely dig into the why, what, and how of racism, or as importantly, into the why, what, and how of reconciliation and the collective path to healing. As a society, we find ourselves deeply stuck in the pathos and profanity of a legacy of injustice and violence that

lurks in the shadows, gaining power through its invisibility. Anyone who engages in social change work knows how this feeling of stuckness mutates into a highly destructive concoction of numbness, paralysis, and hopelessness. In the raced space of biocultural conservation, where I've worked for over two decades, I repeatedly witness conversations shut down before they even start, or worse, devolving into divisive and destructive acts of finger-pointing and assertions of otherness. Sadly, I have never had the opportunity to participate in a conversation about diversity or justice that succeeded in traveling past the charged layers of race and catalyzing the compassion, empathy, and understanding that is needed to co-create a shared context and commitment to personal and political transformation. That is until, I read Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*.

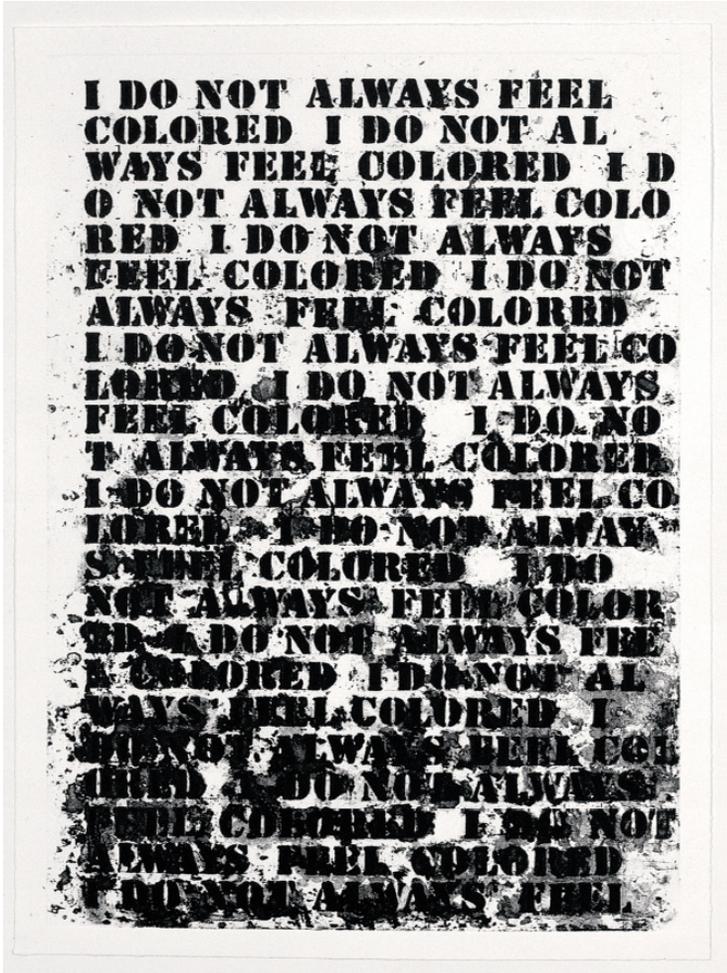
The future of our humanity mandates that authentic, deep, and brave conversations about race and racism happen—and happen now. After reading Rankine, my belief that these conversations are most likely to happen through the force of the creative, through art, has only intensified. And I aspire to catalyze and create the substrate for these conversations through my own work. My analysis of *Citizen* is thus, an effort to learn from a master the craft elements that hold the raw power and devious finesse to push society past pathological states of indifference to a vantage point from which it is possible to see, feel, and ultimately embody the damage racism has done and continues to do to the good in all of us. I believe this movement is necessary to fuel transformation. I believe it is only from this vantage point that we, as a society, as a culture, will actually own the past, acknowledge the institutionalized nature of racism, and be willingly to exorcise these violent elements from our humanity. To this end, I've focused my research and analysis on Rankine's use of language, point of view, and artistic curation.

At a high level, analysis of *Citizen* offers the reader a mixed media collage, whose jazz-like arrangement reverberates with the multilayered sounds and interplay of poetry, prose, and visual composition. Poetic language reveals the complex emotionality that defines racism: anger, grief, resignation, scandal, loneliness. Rankine then relies on poetic devices such as repetition, alliteration, rhythm, and enjambment to elevate these emotions, drive them past cultural indifference, and race our collective bodies with the sensations of injustice. Not finished with us, Rankine drops us into the space she has designed just for the purpose of cultivating deeper understanding still—the mostly blank page. A shockingly white and silent space, where we finally hear the complexity of Rankine’s racial poetics and emotion riffing against each other. The words ricochet off the whiteness of the paper and pierce our unsuspecting bodies.

Along with her poet’s quiver, Rankine also arms herself with the language and tone of her prose. In *Citizen*, she puts language to use “as an everyday maneuver... allowing language to morph into a blanket or a gun” (Berlant 2014). She thus moves the reader past the steeled language that traditionally has been used to disarm discussions of oppression or racism, and with the reader paralyzed in her literary crosshairs, Rankine relies on the second person point of view to draw us intimately into the black body and the black experience and make us complicit in the violence of oppression.

Finally, Rankine’s visual aesthetic and design sense are as complex and curated as her literary one. In *Citizen*, we see the master work with an intricate palette of white space and art forms—sculpture, graffiti, photography and video—to bear silent witness to racism in a way that both parallels and elevates the power of her literary storytelling. Rankine’s politicized aesthetic allows her to awaken the message of race

and racism by enervating more than one of our senses. While Rankine’s literary craft encourages the reader to listen more deeply—*What did I hear? What did you say?*—her



visual aesthetic incites us not to look away—*What did I see? Did you see that?* (Berlant 2014). *Citizen’s* multidimensional refrain exposes the anesthetizing commonality of racism and offers first-hand proof of Barbara Kingsolver’s statement: “Art is the antidote that can call us back from the edge of numbness, restoring the ability to feel for another... [because] art is so very nearly the same as life” (232). Art, Kingsolver argues, makes great social tragedies like

racism “small and dense and real enough to fit through the door, get in [our] heart[s] and explode” (232). For this power alone, it is worth dissecting how Rankine applies her craft.

II. RACED LANGUAGE: Embodying Racism

The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind, a selection of writing and visual art edited by Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda & Max King Cap, provides critical insight into *Citizen’s* use of language and tone. Loffreda & Rankine

write, "...in our moment, writing about race has its own set of literary and intellectual conventions that we as writers sometimes use and sometimes struggle to reinvent" (15). They go on: " ...certain assumptions about craft and aesthetics can and do warp the conversations among writers about race" (15).

The collection's introduction helps one better understand how *Citizen* works to detonate linguistic conventions that typically are used to talk about race: "...it seems a lot of us here when asked to talk about race are most comfortable, or least uncomfortable, talking about it in the language of scandal. We're all a little relieved by scandal. It's so satisfying, so clear, so easy. The wronged. The evildoers. The undeserving. The shady. The good intentions and the cynical manipulations. The righteous side taking, the head shaking. Scandal is such a helpful, such a relieving distraction. There are times when scandal feels like the sun that race revolves around" (13-14).

The tone or language of scandal is the all too common language of victimhood and blame; it is a language of projection and finger pointing. Ta-Nehisi Coates exemplifies this type of language when he writes in *Between the World and Me*, "They were utterly fearless. I did not understand it until I looked out on the street. That was where I saw white parents pushing double-wide strollers down gentrifying Harlem boulevards in T-shirts and jogging shorts. Or I saw them lost in conversation with each other, mother and father, while their sons commanded entire sidewalks with their tricycles. The galaxy belonged to them, and as terror was communicated to our children, I saw mastery communicated to theirs" (89).

Coates language illustrates how the language of scandal is encoded in the jarring assumptions of an "us vs. them." This is a painfully common dialect in the world of social activism. It says, *You are other; you will never understand what it is to walk in*

my shoes. And this is somehow your fault." Consistently, the net effect of this language is to create the illusion of an unbridgeable otherness that serves only to divide and disempower, rather than foster the cross-cultural fluencies and co-created visions needed for transformation and the emergence of a more just and humane world.

The Racial Imaginary also draws attention to the equally dangerous languages of sentiment and the past tense. "There are a few other common languages for race that we'd like to evade, too. One is the sentimental, which rather than polarize, as scandal does, smudges. The other is even simpler: the past tense. Because if we're not scandalized or sentimental about race, we're often jaded instead. This, again? Didn't we wear this out already? Hasn't enough been said, haven't enough already said it?" (14).

Rankine's tone or language is not scandalous; it is not sentimental or jaded. By contrast, Rankine's craft forges an internally raced language and tone, which brings the reader into the intimacy of emotion and feeling, rather than the distancing of accusation, mawkishness, or cynicism. She never tells the reader what or how to feel. In a *Guernica* interview she explains, "I wanted the book to speak to intimate moments...I wasn't interested in scandal, or outrageous moments. I was interested in the surprise of the intimate, or the surprise of the ordinary." She went on to say, "I want, in a way, my text to go away. So that the words on the page become a door to one's own internal investigation. It's just a passage. If the work does its job, it just opens."

It is Rankine's use of language and tone that allows her to realize this aspiration for her work and take the conversation about racism to an entirely different place. Her tone is pained, mournful, but we also hear in it the exhausted desperation and resignation of living in a relentlessly racist world. "Every day your mouth opens and

receives the kiss the world offers, which seals you shut though you are feeling sick to your stomach about the beginning of the feeling that was born from understanding and now stumbles around in you—the go-along-to-get-along tongue pushing your tongue aside. Yes, and your mouth is full up and the feeling is still tottering” (154).

In addition to language and tone, it is the power of Rankine’s craft as a poet that allows the reader to experience the full breath of emotion that is prejudice and racism. *The Racial Imaginary* makes the case that an “act of creativity” (18) like poetry, is one way in which “race enters writing, the making of art, as a structure of feeling, as something that structures feelings in the moment of encounter that lays down tracks of affection and repulsion, rage and hurt, desire and ache” (18).

Rankine further explains her use of the poetic in a radio interview on *Studio 360*: “Poetry unlocks and illuminates. In a way, poetry allows us into feeling, into the realm of feeling. And this is one place I can say I feel bad. That genre handles that and I love poetry for that, that feeling is as important as perception and description.” Poetry she says, is “not arguing a point. It’s creating an environment” (Guernica 2014).

And this is exactly, how Rankine puts the poetic craft to work in *Citizen*. She creates the art that Kingsolver calls for, “These are things...that cannot be said in words because they are too familiar to move us, too big and bold and flat to penetrate our souls. The artist must craft missiles to deliver these truths so unerringly to the right place inside of us we are left panting, with no possibility of doubting they are true” (234).

Poetics are critical to Rankine’s arsenal. Through them, she shows us what race, racism, and the aggression of oppression feel like in our hearts, in our bodies, in our souls. “The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only spoken over the phone...When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top

of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard? It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. And then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry/I am so sorry, so so sorry" (18). Feeling the wounding so fully, how can we ignore Rankine's story of race. The intimacy Rankine achieves through her lyricism and poetics layers race and racism with a visceral emotional relevancy and immediacy in our lives that is impossible to close our ears or look away from.

Another essential tool in Rankine's language cache is how she races our bodies through the sparse rawness of an embodied language. The repeating, rhythmic physicality of Rankine's writing imbues the reader with a felt sense of the black body in America and allows us to experience, virtually firsthand, the relentless "assault of racism" on this body (BuzzFeed 2015).

This is a critical perspective because the impact of racism and prejudice is, borrowing from Ta-Nehisi Coates, "intimately connected to the destruction of black bodies" (44). *Between the World* makes this point brilliantly: "It is hard to face this. But all of our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscles, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body" (10).

Citizen embodies this physicality and the trauma of the disembodied and denounced, the disowned and unseen through the language of flesh and bone,

tissue and tendon. "Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs. Like thunder they drown you in sound, no, like lightening they strike you across the larynx (7)." In giving racism physical form, Rankine appeals to our most elemental way of knowing and experiencing the world—our bodies—and translates an entrenched, polarized, and often, impossible conversation into a language all humans speak. Racism is transformed into something we suffer materially in our blood and bones, mouth and marrow. "To live through the days sometimes you moan like a deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that... Perhaps each sigh is drawn into existence to pull in, pull under, who knows: truth be told, you could no more controls those sighs than that which brings the sighs about (59)."

Rankine undoubtedly believes that through the shared language of the body we can share the experience of racism. In response to the question, "How difficult is it for one body to feel the injustice wheeled at another?" (116), Rankine would probably respond: It is possible; it is necessary; it is a priority. But she leaves nothing to chance; she cleaves the space for her likely reader to feel the injustice of racism out of a world of white privilege—the private school classroom, tennis club, therapy session, or academic lectern. In a *BuzzFeed* interview, Rankine says, "...I wanted the book to exist in the space of the white liberal. Because people like to say 'oh, it's the South', 'it's ignorance', 'it's white supremacist Fox News'. And I'm like no, no, no. It's white alliance with all of those things...So it was a very conscious thing to move the book away from scandal and towards white alliance."

Holly Bass builds on what Rankine shares about *Citizen's* intent, when she writes in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, "...Rankine wants us to know that no American citizen is ever really free of race and racism. The potential to say a racist thing or think a racist thought resides in all of us like an unearthed mine from a

forgotten war.” And this knowledge is devastating living in a body now thoroughly raced by Rankine’s embodied language. The crux question she so artfully forces onto us, without us even knowing it, is: What will I do with this knowledge?

Rankine suggests the answer: “That time and that time the outside blistered the inside of you, words outmaneuvered years, had you in a chokehold, every part roughed up, the eyes dripping. That’s the bruise the ice in the heart was meant to ice. To arrive like this every day for it to be like this to have so many memories and no other memory than these for as long as they can be remembered to remember this. Though a share of all remembering, a measure of all memory, is breath and to breathe you have to create a truce—a truce with the patience of a stethoscope (156).” *Citizen* creates the space—a truce—for all American citizens to breath in the physicality of racism, and breath out the possibility of justice and healing.

III. POINT OF VIEW: Making ‘Us’ Complicit Through ‘You’

But Rankine doesn’t stop here. In addition to relying on language to “disarm readers and circumvent our carefully constructed defense mechanisms against the hint of possibly being racists ourselves,” Rankine “mudd[ies] the personas and pronouns in a way that forces us to work a little harder” (Bass 2014). Rankine’s use of the second person draws the reader intimately into the experience of racism, and then makes us an accessory to it. Partially she achieves this through her disorienting pronoun play.

At first, the reader assumes that Rankine’s “you” is black and the “he” or “she” is white, but we quickly realize that this is not always the case—and maybe, in the end, it doesn’t even matter who is white or black—we are all complicit. We come to realize, as Rankine confesses in her *BuzzFeed* interview, “The use of the second person—that

“you”—was meant to say, ‘Step in here with me, because there is no me without [white liberal] you inside this dynamic.’ ”

Rankine writes: “When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows...you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor. The route is often associative. You smell good (5).”

Here, her second person speaks directly to the reader and invites us into her physical experience of racism and efforts to metabolize it. The voice insists on intimacy and gets it—the reader is implicated. The second person inculcates the reader by conflating the “I” and “you,” making Rankine’s experience ours.

She goes on, “You are twelve attending Sts. Phillip and James School on White Plains Road and the girl sitting in the seat behind you asks you to lean to the right during exams so she can copy what you have written...You never really speak except for the time she makes her request and later when she tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person. You assume she thinks she is thanking you for letting her cheat and feels better cheating from an almost white person (5).”

The intimacy this “you” evokes is intriguing, but also disturbing; it makes the reader uncomfortable. The second person brings the reader in close, too close, enabling Rankine to land the full blunt force trauma of her chosen craft element and drive us headfirst into the brutality of oppression. The option of easing our discomfort through conceptualization or abstraction is obliterated.

Rankine’s use of the “you” is particularly brilliant given the subject matter. In conflating her experience with the reader’s, she evokes a collective human experience. “You” doesn’t delimit; it stands in easily for the “we” “us” “he” “she” and is

exactly what is needed to ensure the impact of racism reverberates at the level of the larger collective. "I can hear even breathing that creates passages to dreams. And yes, I want to interrupt to tell him her us you me I don't know how to end what doesn't have an ending (159)."

Dissolving the boundary between you and I, Rankine brings the reader firmly into the realm of the universal and then from this highly transferable reality she shares her experience, her knowledge, her felt sense of what it means to be a person of color in a racist world. "Not everything remembered is useful but it all comes from the world to be stored in you. Who did what to whom on which date? Who said that? She said what? What did he just do? Did she really just say that? He said what? What did she do? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? Do you remember when you sighed? (63)."

Finally, analysis of Rankine's use of the second person reveals the artistry of exerting elements of craft in concert to amplify their individual literary intent. In *Citizen*, the pounding voice of the "you" is welded to the relentlessly repeating rhythm and emotional language of the poet to forge a muscular architecture that leaves the reader no option but to linger in this space built of trauma. Rankine then solders a language made flesh to this "you," effectively punching all the air out of the room. It takes the reader's breath away, it sears our lungs, makes us gasp for air, for a safe-zone, for any form of relief. Rankine gives us this relief through her use of blindingly white space, through the distraction of photography, video, art.

We grasp for it, anything but the righteous truth of her words. Relieved and disarmed, the reader clings to the possibility of a shaft of light in the darkness; the silence Rankine seems to offer so generously—a blank page, an arresting image, a

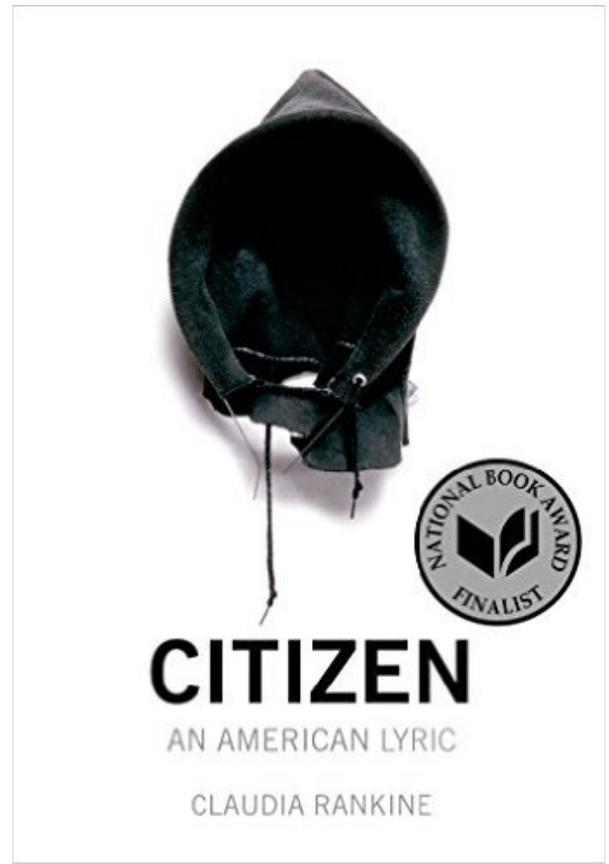
compelling work of art –relieved that is, until we realize this too is an opening crafted from the violence of oppression.

IV. A POLITICIZED AESTHETIC: The Art of Race

Rankine’s visual aesthetic is curated with one specific purpose: to make the reader know in her heart, in her body, what it means to “feel most colored when thrown against a sharp white background (53).” *Citizen’s* provocative visual gallery thus arrests and holds the viewer’s attention, and then slows everything down showing us racism frame-by-frame and in forms we could never have imagined. We can not look away. In the intimate silence of the visual art experience, the reader sees and feels the incredulous invisibility of race along side its hyper-visibility. We feel its alienating power and suffocating loneliness—we come to dwell inside art made of the flesh and bones and blood of race: the hood is removed; we see the horror of what racism looks like.

Berlant (2014) describes *Citizen* “as a kind of art gallery playing out the aesthetics of supremacist sterility, each segment being like a long, painfully white hall we are walking down, punctuated by stunning images of black intensity and alterity.” And this is one of the first things we notice about *Citizen*—the startling whiteness of its pages, which we know is not a coincidence. The extensive use of white space in itself is also visually arresting and appears to create the same breathlessness and relationally layered meaning enjambment does in Rankine’s poetry. In the case of *Citizen* though, the delineation tends to happen between the poems, rather than between the lines. Regardless, the space engages multiple senses—a literary form of shape-shifting, which forces the reader to translate the trauma of racism across multiple dimensions and experiences.

Rankine's choices of visual art are arresting individually and in juxtaposition to each other. The use of white space and the various works of art collected in *Citizen* accentuate the impact of Rankine's words by catalyzing an ocular experience of race, as well as bringing new elements or aspects of racism to the conversation silently and subversively. In particular, David Hammons' *In the Hood* (cover), Michael David Murphy's *Jim Crow Road* (6), Kate Clark's *Little Girl* (19), and Wangechi Mutu's *Sleeping Heads* (147) achieve this to stunning effect. David Hammons' cut black hoodie hovers on *Citizen's* cover—its shadowed, disembodied form ominous and murderous.



Ironically, this piece is more than twenty years old, created in response to the beating of Rodney King. For Rankine, the hoodie “clings to the black body as a sign of criminality like nothing else...the hoodie became the thing that attested to blackness as bound up in criminality in the white imagination. But as a projection of white imagination and not of a thing in itself. It seemed to me to be the best and most open space. Also, anybody can fit in there. So it becomes also a kind of the hood of the executioner. Who actually belongs inside its construction? It becomes an open question” (BuzzFeed 2015).

Rankine's use of Michael David Murphy's *Jim Crow Road* disrupts and then proves, through its inherent unbelievability. Murphy's photograph shows us a-could-be-anywhere suburban street, which is on the corner of the surreal “Jim Crow Road.”

My first reaction to the image was to think, *No way, this can't be a real picture*. But of course it is, and the photograph allows Rankine to say something without actually



having to say anything at all. In an interview in *BOMB*, Rankine explains: “In this case, his [Murphy’s] image stands in place of my text. The tangential relation of the images with the text, in a sense mimics a form of the ‘the public.’”

In Rankine’s creative hands, art is selected in service of her narrative and the larger goal of *Citizen*. It functions as archetype. A narrative is coaxed into emergence that whispers seductively to the collective unconscious.

Kate Clark’s *Little Girl* and Wangechi Mutu’s *Sleeping Heads* are both disturbing works of art. *Little Girl* is positioned right after the story quoted earlier in this essay of the therapist who behaves “as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd gained the power of speech” (18).

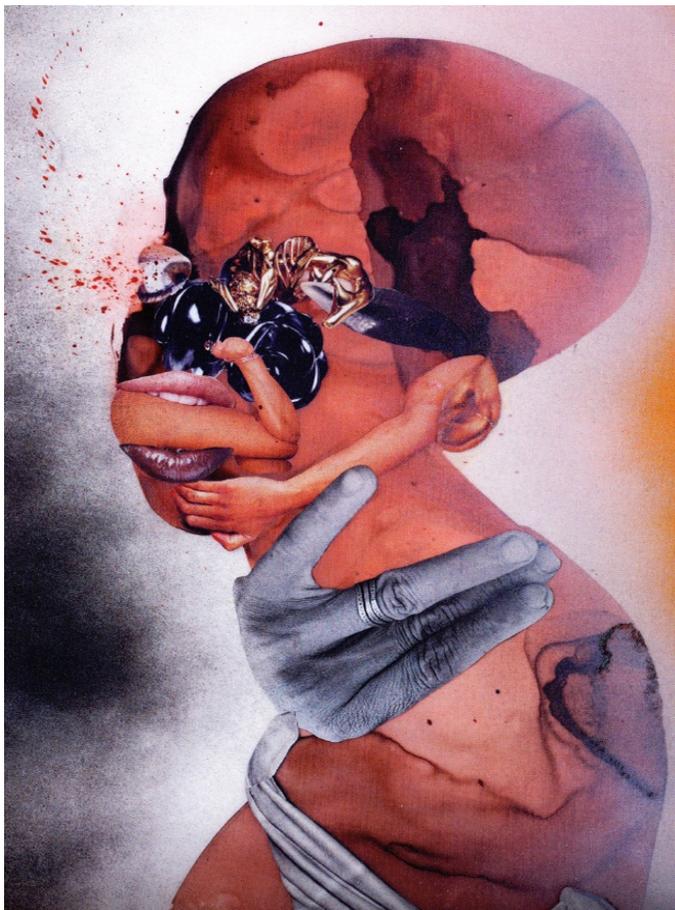
Moving from this prose poem, directly to Clark’s sculpture viscerally brings to mind lunging, shredding fangs pummeling vulnerable, defenseless flesh. It brings to mind predator and prey, the hunter and the hunted.



Sleeping Heads sits opposite the poem, "Everything shaded everything darkened/shadowed/is the stripped is the struck-/is the trace/is the aftertaste/I they he she we you were too concluded yesterday to know whatever was done could also be done, was also done, was never done-/The worst injury is feeling you don't belong so much/to you" (146).

Sleeping Heads, like *Little Girl*, imposes dissonant images upon each other in a beautiful, yet repulsive collage. The overall aesthetic effect of the piece is lush,

sumptuous, and presents a richness of pigment, texture, and form that thrusts the sacred and the profane into creative confusion or paradox. Both Clark and Mutu's works, like much of *Citizen*, "feel violent and intimate instantaneously" (Berlant 2014). In these images, as in Rankine's writing, we are forced to look into the shadows and



witness what happens when truth is driven underground. The viewer is thrust in the bewildering tension of discordant images—not all together different than living in the discordant reality of race and racism in America.

Rankine's visual aesthetic and her curated gallery of images, thus represent a brilliant element of craft that Rankine weaves into her work and allows her to deliver her message to even more shocking effect. The use of white space, visual images, along with the choice of

images, enables Rankine to "talk back to the unbearable or the unbearable encounter" at the heart of oppression without words, without prejudice, without telling the reader what to think, feel, or do (Berlant 2014). Rankine relies on visual imagery to "consider, sidestep, and groove into the disruption" or unbearableness of racism.

She tells Berlant in their 2014 interview, "I was attracted to images engaged in conversation with an incoherence...in the world. They were placed in text where I

thought silence was needed, but I wasn't interested in making the silence feel empty or effortless the way a blank page would. Quoting Berlant's writing, she points to "creating intensities that require management" (Berlant 2014). And intense disruption is just what she curates—swimming in the creative chaos that ensues, we unpack new and different layers of the story of race and come to understand entirely different ways we are complicit in this story.

In conclusion, it is difficult to summarize *Citizen's* impact and import other than to say it is a deeply humbling and inspiring work of art in the context of my own aspirations and work as a writer. Plying craft like an alchemist artist, Rankine transforms her personal message about racism into a universal one and draws us fully into the complex and layered expression of the race she's conjured. Rankine not only tackles one of the most important issues of our time creatively and masterfully, but also does so to tremendous impact. Using language, point of view, art and design, Rankine translates the trauma of racism, sneaks it past the closed door of our collective hearts, and then explodes it inside of them. There is no going back. Her free-ranging dedication to art and the authoritative use of craft in the service of social change gives us all the opportunity to move past polarizing stories of "us vs. them" to the enormous possibility of a larger "we."

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