



LJMU Research Online

Adams, BF

Black Lives / White Backgrounds: Claudia Rankine's Citizen: An America Lyric and Critical Race Theory

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/8108/>

Article

Citation (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

Adams, BF (2017) Black Lives / White Backgrounds: Claudia Rankine's Citizen: An America Lyric and Critical Race Theory. Comparative American Studies, 15 (1-2). pp. 54-71. ISSN 1477-5700

LJMU has developed **LJMU Research Online** for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/>

Bella Adams, Liverpool John Moores University

Black Lives / White Backgrounds:

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* and Critical Race Theory

Before Donald Trump's election in 2016, America's background, specifically its 'racial formation' (Omi and Winant, 2015: 12) seemed a little less sharply defined, a little less white, and even a little less racist. Even now, a good many of Trump's supporters consider this post-racial formation a reality because the new president is not racist, 'only' nativist, when it comes to 'the blacks' (Trump quoted in 'On African-Americans', 2017) and other racialised groups. In contrast, Trump's detractors saw in 2016 'the election of a white supremacist to the highest office in American government' (Black Lives Matter quoted in Morrison, 2016). Black Lives Matter activists expose the 'farce ... [of] living in a post-racial America' (quoted in Morrison, 2016), as do contemporary critical race theorists and antiracist artists, such as Michelle Alexander, Derrick Bell, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Richard Delgado, Claudia Rankine, and Jesmyn Ward.

This essay focuses on one of these writers, Jamaican immigrant Claudia Rankine. Her 2014 prose poetry collection, *Citizen: An American Lyric* exposes, in words Rankine borrows from literary predecessor Zora Neale Hurston, the 'sharp white background' against which black American bodies are still 'thrown' (2014: 25), almost a century after Hurston was writing. In *Citizen*, Rankine conveys how black men and boys in particular are subjected to what she calls an 'American positioning' as the 'criminalized already ... and then the litigious hitting back is life imprisoned' (2014: 14, 101). This a priori positioning often proves fatal, a reality demonstrated

most recently by the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile ('The Counted', 2016). The deaths of these real-life Americans are the inevitable consequence of a life-denying 'racial imaginary' unable and often unwilling to 'outrun its birth in racism' (Loffreda and Rankine, 2015: 21). These deaths indicate to Rankine and others, most notably, Black Lives Matter activists, that racist polarising is not diminishing now, nor apparently anytime soon.

Racism's never-ending persistence, or 'permanence' (Bell, 1992: 12), is most obviously demonstrated by these recent racist murders. Beyond such explicit acts of racism are racial aggressions that go by almost unnoticed because they are built into institutions and everyday life, to the extent that they have become commonplace. Typically with no sense of irony, this more subtle form of racism maintains white privilege in ways proclaimed race-neutral, non-racial or colour-blind, and, ultimately, non-racist. Ordinariness and colour-blindness represent a powerful combination remarkably resistant to critique. How do you criticise a hierarchical racial formation that is rendered nearly invisible by its colour (white) and positioning (background) in the contemporary, so-called colour-blind or post-racial United States?

The reading of Rankine's *Citizen* that this essay will undertake seeks to offer a response to this question utilising some key insights from Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT emerged in the post-war U.S., specifically in law, the social sciences and education. It engages critically with liberal rights discourse, for example, *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), which Derrick Bell claimed mainly served white interests (1994). In addition to challenging liberalism, CRT uses rhetorical strategies to expose and critique ordinary racism and colour-blindness. It argues that legal discourses are not objective and neutral, but stories with, as Richard Delgado asserts, 'reality-creating potential', thus opening up the possibility of 'Storytelling for Oppositionists',

or ‘counterstorytelling’ (1989: 71-72). As they are understood here, both CRT and *Citizen* offer counter-stories by ‘call[ing] out’ to what you ‘don’t see’ (Rankine, 2014: 86), specifically to America’s racial formations so as to promote colour-consciousness and an anti-racist critique. Beginning with a discussion of the relationship between literary and legal narratives, followed by two sections on Rankine’s rhetorical strategies, this essay ends by closely reading her texts about Trayvon Martin, who was murdered on February 26, 2012.

An American lyric and the law

In a 2014 interview with Tavis Smiley, Rankine defines an American lyric as an ‘internal song’ of American voices in their multiplicity. An American lyric thus departs from the traditional understanding of the lyrical form as the personal expression of interiorised thoughts and feelings by a single, autonomous figure. Such a figure is for her impossible since the lyrical ‘I’ is always connected to political and racial contexts. In Rankine’s words:

The lyric normally is thought of as a kind of internal song and I want to marry the position of blackness to the American song. You know, it’s not about American life then Black life. It’s Black life as American life. And ‘American Lyric’ keeps that marriage singular (quoted in Smiley, 2014).

By combining private and public discourses in this way, Rankine challenges the historical separation of blackness and Americanness.

For Rankine, the lyrical ‘I’ is both autobiographical and fictional. Similarly, her ‘you’ is sometimes Rankine, at other times, her speaker, her addressee, and the reader.

The fact that neither ‘I’ nor ‘you’ is a discrete entity is reinforced by the intimacy she establishes between people in their wider cultural contexts, or ‘between the “his- / torical self” and the “self self”’ (2014: 14). Here, enjambment helps to indicate how the self is structured and fractured by his- / tory, presumably, white patriarchal history.

In a poem about friendship, Rankine’s speaker explains that the ‘self self’ is an intimate understanding of self that is shared between friends whose ‘joined personal histories’ (2014: 14) should bring them closer together, but this does not happen because of larger historical forces. The ‘his / torical self’ impacts on the ‘self self’ and friendship. Rankine’s two friends might have ‘mutual interest[s]’ and

... 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 (2014: 14).

Beyond social pleasantries, American’s racial history powerfully determines how friendships and other relationships play out. Even anonymous relationships, for example, the everyday act of crossing a street depends for its success on the skill and sanity of a driver. Assuming the position of the pedestrian, Rankine elaborates: ‘I don’t know that person but I am already in a relationship with them. I am asking them to abide by the traffic laws. If they decided not to, I’d be dead’ (quoted in Sharma, 2014). This personal and anonymous relationship is also institutional in that it relies on the law to protect the rights of the pedestrian and the driver equally, if not as humans, then, at least, as citizens.

In American history, however, civil and human rights are unequally acknowledged because the black/white violent hierarchy remains persistent, if not permanent, from ‘Whites Only’ declarations under slavery and Jim Crow to the contemporary, colour-blind era in which dominant white interests are maintained in ways proclaimed race-neutral and apparently non-racist. Governing American’s racial formation at least from the 1980s onwards, colour-blindness is, as critical race scholar Eduardo Bonilla Silva observes, the ‘New Racism’ (2010: 3). Under colour-blind racism, race is not referenced explicitly. Institutionally endorsed racial codes are used instead, among the most effective of which are those issuing from the American criminal justice system. Michelle Alexander explains the workings of this system in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*: ‘Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color “criminals” and then engage in all the [racist] practices we supposedly left behind’ (2012: 2). While the Constitution makes discrimination against blacks illegal in education, employment, housing, and voting rights, this is not the situation for criminals, and even, if the opportunity presents itself, non-criminals, too.

For example, Rankine’s man in *Citizen* ‘didn’t do anything wrong’ (2014: 106), but is stopped and frisked by the police anyway:

And still 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 (2014: 109).

As with many of her poems, Rankine does not racialise her speakers or addressees, letting their experiences instead signal or direct their racial positioning. Here,

Rankine's guy invariably fits the description because he is 'driving while black', with the enjambment 'descrip- / tion' reinforcing the violence of racial profiling. In another prose poem, Rankine describes a babysitter, who, although known to a neighbour as a 'nice young man,' is still mistaken for

... a menacing
black guy casing both your homes. The guy is walking
back and forth talking to himself and seems disturbed (2014: 15).

The neighbour calls the police on the babysitter for, as it turns out, 'speak[ing] on the phone wherever he wants' (2014: 15). In these cases, everyday activities such as driving, walking, and talking are criminalised for blacks. On other occasions, black men's clothes mark them out as criminal, at least according to the police. Alexander gives the example of a young black man whose attire is profiled as criminal. His baggy pants, similar to the hoodies that many Americans wear, are proclaimed good reason for this profile (Alexander, 2012: 131)

Although the assumption of criminality is most often associated with casually-dressed, young black men, Rankine's speaker, possibly, an older, middle-class black woman, highlights how she, too, is subject to racist stereotyping. Take, for example, the trauma counsellor in *Citizen* who mistakes her new patient for a trespasser (2014: 18). If not directly linked to criminality, then blackness tends to be associated with poverty, anger, and laziness, or 'social pathologies' that the American Right declares peculiar to black culture rather than to structural inequalities dating back to slavery and Jim Crow (Alexander, 2012: 45). Pathologised thus, Rankine's speaker describes an appointment with a real estate agent 'who didn't fathom she could / have made an

appointment to show her house to you’ (2014: 51), or the cashier who ‘wants to know if you think / your card will work’ (2014: 54). Even among acquaintances and friends, Rankine’s speaker is assumed lazy, or undeservedly and unfairly advantaged in her job as a university professor (2014: 47). Apparently, her ‘advantage’ undermines the national democratic principle of meritocracy, or, more accurately, white privilege.

Citizen exposes how whiteness is associated with ‘great writer’ (2014: 10), ‘successful artist’ (2014: 34), patient, professional, consumer, and, ultimately law-abiding, American citizen, while blackness is assumed pathological and criminal—some notable occasions in U.S. history aside. For instance, the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Civil Rights Act (1964) permitted black people ‘personhood ... after objecthood’ (Rankine quoted in Schwartz, 2014). Rankine notes how this ‘move into the “I” was actually—insanely—a step that had to be taken legally’ (quoted in Schwartz, 2014). She highlights the insanity of a racial imaginary that is incapable of recognising the fact of black humanity, unless compelled to by law. Even then, personhood, legally achieved, remains vulnerable because it is normally permitted only so long as it converges with the interests of dominant whites (Bell, 1994), whose humanity is assumed a priori: no legal step is needed. These different experiences of personhood help to explain why black people are still not viewed by dominant whites as human enough to die from a single, *fatal* gunshot wound – Michael Brown was shot multiple times, twice in the head – or to suffer from cancer.

Moreover, the institutional positioning of whites, or their education, occupation and class, hardly makes a difference to this interracial relationship. As Rankine observes in a short poem from *Citizen* about a black woman who is left reeling when the well-educated woman with whom she is talking announces:

... I

didn't know black women could get cancer, instinctively
you take two steps back though all urgency leaves the
possibility of any kind of relationship as you realize no-
where is where you will get from here (2014: 45).

The fact that interracial relationships are going nowhere makes racism a problem for everyone. Is it at all possible to get somewhere? 'How do you continue?' asks Rankine in her interview with Smiley: 'You show that racism is as much a part of whiteness as it is [of] a Black life' (2014). Racism is even the case for those liberals who claim that their identities and the institutions which they dominate, including the law and literature, if not the whole nation, are post-racial.

Citizen is replete with these sorts of questions about racism, some of which are repeatedly asked:

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? (2014: 9)

Rankine's rhetorical strategy of switching personal pronouns serves to destabilise relationships, both within and beyond her writing. By setting much of *Citizen* in the second person, Rankine draws attention to the second-class status of black citizens in the U.S., or 'blackness as the second person' (Sharma, 2014). The use of the second person also upsets the autobiographical assumption, that the experiences described in

Citizen are hers alone, since this would allow the aesthetic and political distancing of I/you and by extension them/us binaries that underpin racism. The second person breaks down subject/object separations. *Citizen* denies ‘you’ the reader distance from the stories and the lives therein, and in so doing positions the reader as racist and recipient of racism simultaneously. Often, this interracial encounter is incoherent, which Rankine demonstrates visually when her speakers’ questions typically go unanswered, at least on the page, its blankness seeming to suggest silence—or not.

Repetition as sign

Citizen makes much use of the rhetorical strategy of repetition. Along with repeatedly asking questions about racism, the typical response to which seems to be silence, Rankine’s poetry repeats certain figures, lines and images. In another context, she insists, ‘repetition should be taken as a sign’ (Loffreda and Rankine, 2015: 15), arguably, a sign of racism’s permanence in American life. While permanence would seem to suggest essentialism, setting up racism as a reality beyond history and critique, critical race theorists and antiracist artists oppose this suggestion by demonstrating that liberalism is ahistorical and racism is dynamic. Admittedly, liberal rights discourses have contributed to racial progress, but, according to critical race theorists Bell, Delgado, and even the self-proclaimed liberal Alexander, this has not occurred in a substantial way because of an inability and unwillingness to address structural racism. For instance, the liberal principle of meliorism, or ‘the idea that people and institutions can be improved’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2010: 26) might seem to offer the best possibility for historical change. Yet, too often in U.S. history, meliorism for non-whites is demonstrated by an example, or token, as was arguably the case in the election of a black president. Tokenism necessarily overlooks

America's history of slavery and Jim Crow as legacies structuring the contemporary racial formation. For Rankine and her co-editor, Beth Loffreda in their 'Introduction' to *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, liberalism meets one of its greatest challenges in the fact, 'We're still there—there differently than those before us, but there, otherwise known as here' (2015: 13).

This complicated there/here dynamic provides an historical understanding of racism's permanence and, with it, the possibility of an anti-racist critique. Rankine challenges the assumption of racial progress in the contemporary, colour-blind era, from *Citizen's* start to finish. Her cover design features David Hammons' *In the Hood* from 1993, a depiction of a dark-coloured, rough-cut hood set against a white background. *In the Hood* is a response to the police beating of Rodney King in 1991. Its reproduction on Rankine's front cover over two decades later underlines the continuing fact of racial injustice, particularly for those caught on its sharp end, as in the case of Trayvon Martin. Martin's hoodie-as-thug-wear, not American sportswear, was for his killer and lawyers sufficient justification for his death. To them, his attire signalled a criminal type so that he was, as Black Lives Matter cofounder Alicia Garza notes, 'posthumously placed ... on trial for his own murder while the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed' (2014).

'The violence of becoming a "type": a type of person, or, terribly, not even that, a type of nonperson' of course has a long history that dates back at least to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its transformation of black people into 'a type of property, a type of commodity, a type of money' (Baucom, 2005: 11). Rankine references this history on the last pages of *Citizen* when she reproduces abolitionist J. M. W. Turner's 1840 painting, *Slave Ship* and, on the opposing page, *Detail of Fish Attacking Slave*. Turner's painting represents the 1781 *Zong* massacre in which over

one hundred slaves were thrown overboard for insurance purposes. For some of Turner's critics, the orange-hued natural backdrop of sky and sea, if only by its dominance of the canvas alone, risks obscuring the horrifying history of slavery consistent with a 'colonial' (Döring, 1997: 3) or a 'liberal cosmopolitan' (Baucom, 2005: 296) gaze. According to Ian Baucom, this gaze allows those that stand before the painting 'to observe, make sense of, and screen themselves off from the greater violence of history' (2005: 294). Moreover, this screening process is reinforced by the shift of violence from culture to nature in the sense that water drowns and 'fish attack.' Following this logic, nature is held responsible for black people's deaths.

In contrast, *Citizen* resists and exposes the screening process. It also draws attention to the cultural and historical underpinnings of violence against black people. Rankine's final focus on *Detail of Fish Attacking Slave from Slave Ship* helps to shift the viewer's attention away from the slave ship in nature, to the yoked limb in such a way as to make the black body more visible in Turner's painting and, by extension, Anglo-American history. Rankine compels with these images a return to all that went before in her American lyric and the American song. Her suggestion is that transatlantic slavery provides the historical context for understanding the contemporary, colour-blind period.

Rankine further explores the continuing impact of the past on the present in another text from *Citizen* that is also set in a watery environment. Co-produced with visual artist and husband, John Lucas, Rankine's script 'August 29, 2005 / Hurricane Katrina' quotes from CNN's coverage of the event. One quotation collected from CNN refers to 'missing limbs', while another, insists three times, no less, 'I don't know what the water wanted' (2014: 84, 85-6). There are echoes of Turner's painting in the reference to limbs and the assumption that the water is somehow responsible for

the Katrina disaster. While nature's intentions might not be obvious to this particular speaker, the script makes it clear that 'we are drowning here' (2014: 85), as black people did centuries before in the 1781 *Zong* massacre and, for some, in Turner's 1840 painting.

The script's clarity regarding the Katrina disaster is in contrast to the CNN reportage of the event. Another of Rankine's speaker notes that CNN tends to shift responsibility from culture to nature when Hurricane Katrina is simply classified as a natural disaster. This particular speaker makes it clear that other, equally powerful forces are also at play. These forces function a little like nature by revealing human limitations vis-à-vis an event considered unavoidable because people are powerless to predict or control the future—despite a history of devastating hurricanes in low-lying New Orleans. Importantly, Rankine's speaker dismisses this argument, elsewhere referred to as an 'epistemology of ignorance' (Tuana, 2007: 204):

The fiction of the facts assumes innocence, ignorance,
lack of intention, misdirection; the necessary conditions
of a certain time and place (2014: 83).

Against these misdirecting efforts that seek to shift responsibility for black people's deaths from culture to something more than human is Rankine's final focus on the yoked black limb that is only in this condition because of a violent history of racism.

The legacy of *Zong* massacre emerges in the Katrina disaster or the 'Federal Flood' (Richard, 2010: 162). By renaming the disaster, those in New Orleans who felt the event most strongly accord it a history. Like them, Rankine's speaker redirects attention to a history of federal government neglect: 'Hours later, still in the difficulty

of what it is to be' and 'in the difficulty, nobody coming and still someone saying, / who could see it coming, the difficulty of that' (2014: 83), as if federal under-funding of a predominantly black city already devastated by poverty had no part to play in a disaster to which the government was reluctant to respond. 'As if then / and now were not the same moment' (Rankine, 2014: 86). Thus understood, the difficulties are historical; the blackness and the poverty of the flood victims are the reasons for their marginalisation both in and out of the water. No amount of blaming it on the water or, worse, on the victims themselves, can change the historical and institutional origins of black drowning, neither in the *Zong* Massacre nor in New Orleans.

Detail of Fish Attacking Slave from *Slave Ship* when interpreted alongside 'August 29, 2005 / Hurricane Katrina' and Rankine's other water-themed texts set in 'the midst of azure, oceanic' (2014: 75) and 'a landscape drawn from an ocean bed' (2014: 105, 109) constitute an understanding of why black people are so precariously positioned by America's racial history that they are easily lost and forgotten. In his way, *Citizen* 'call[s] out' to what you 'don't see' (2014: 86). What it does is compel readers, often by repeatedly asking them to discover or uncover the missing black bodies—the limbs, the faces—in American history. 'Have you seen their faces?' (2014: 83, 85), Rankine's speaker twice asks in the Hurricane Katrina script, before instructing her addressee to

Call out to them.

I don't see them.

Call out to them anyway.

Did you see their faces? (86)

The rest of the page is left blank as if to suggest that no answer is forthcoming.

Importantly, however, this silence generates several interpretative possibilities, thereby undermining the view of silence as formless and meaningless. ‘Did you see their faces’? Does the ensuing ‘silence’ mean that the speaker’s addressee does not and cannot see their faces? Perhaps he does not want to see their faces. Or, perhaps he can see them but is so shocked by what he sees that he is left incoherent and silent. What prevents him from seeing them and from answering the question? Have they literally disappeared from view? Are they lost to the water or to his vision? Could his ‘American positioning’ screen him off from them consistent with

... the classic binary between

the rich and the poor, between the haves and the have-

nots, between the whites and the blacks (Rankine, 2014: 83)?

The fact that he is in the position of the observer indicates some privilege, and his inability to see their faces arguably renders this privilege white.

There is the suggestion that whiteness keeps Rankine’s addressee physically safe from the floodwaters, a racialised outcome that might have been good for him, but not for the poor, black and often disabled people who were left to drown in New Orleans. Moreover, whiteness reassures him that he is simply an ‘innocent’ bystander because natural disasters are mainly viewed as ‘necessary conditions’, beyond human intentionality (Rankine, 2014: 83). Less innocent, more ‘ignorant’, proposes Rankine’s speaker (2014: 83), much like other writers who have studied the Katrina disaster. For example, Nancy Tuana insists, ‘Katrina is a natural phenomenon that is

what it is in part because of human social structures and practices', most notably, racialisation and 'anthropogenic climate change' (2007: 192-3).

The 'silence' after 'Did you see their faces?' (2014: 86) is temporary, lasting only as long as the rest of the page, if that, because at the very bottom of the page in the right-hand corner a shoulder is reproduced. The shoulder is part of Toyin Oduola's portrait from 2012, *Uncertain, yet Reserved*, which has spilled over from the opposite page. Oduola's portrait is of a disembodied black head, speckled with colour, against a white background. Rankine's addressee inside and beyond the Hurricane Katrina script is thus in a position where it is difficult not to see at least one face. Of her visual images, Rankine says she placed them in the text where 'silence was needed, but I wasn't interested in making the silence feel empty or effortless the way a blank page would' (quoted in Berlant, 2014). Visual images might lack words, just as a white page does, but this does not make either form meaningless. Indeed, the combination of black ink, white page, and visual image work together in the Hurricane Katrina script and throughout *Citizen* to promote colour-consciousness with regard to blackness and whiteness, and the relationship between them.

Rankine's questioning style, which is often directed towards the second person, in the Hurricane Katrina script, 'Did you see their faces?' makes it difficult for readers to distance themselves from the experiences she documents. In this way, *Citizen* exposes and unsettles the harmful aesthetic and political distancing strategies of white liberal subjectivity. Clearly, the mainstream white idea that race is elsewhere, in places and bodies where whites are not implicated, reproduces the racist binary opposition between them and us, and also removes blackness and whiteness from the historical scene. But repeatedly calling out to what 'you' (the reader) does not see can make visible the complicated history of the black/white dynamic. As Rankine

acknowledges, albeit in the form of a line she takes from one of Glenn Ligon's monochrome etchings from the early 1990s, which he appropriated from a 1928 essay by Zora Neale Hurston: 'I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background' (2014: 25).

Blackness, whiteness and colour-consciousness

Again, Rankine cites older texts from the 1920s and 1990s to challenge the assumption of racial progress in the contemporary colour-blind era. Whiteness remains 'sharp' across these histories. Hurston says, 'Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves' (1928). Hurston's successors, Ligon and Rankine, also confront white efforts to limit blackness, often in the form of microaggressions involving an utterance, an intonation, a look, a gesture and a stance. By definition, microaggressions are almost imperceptible in their attempts to render blacks inaudible and invisible. Ligon comments on 'the idea of saying something over and over and not being heard' (2011: 71), and Rankine, on the 'disappointment ... that no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived' (2014: 24). Often, disappointment turns to anger that is exacerbated by the fact that this response to microaggressions is proclaimed histrionic and even insane. *Citizen* challenges these proclamations and demonstrates how microaggressions add up, mainly because they have a long history of racism behind them. In short, microaggressions add up to racism and it is insane of its perpetrators to deny it, and, worse, to blame the victims.

Citizen is full of examples of microaggressions, including the misplacement of blame for black invisibility and hyper-visibility. For instance, in a short prose poem about a colleague who misidentifies Rankine's speaker in an "'all black people look the same' / moment' (2014: 7), blame is apportioned equally, but unfairly:

Yes, and in your mail the apology note appears referring to ‘our mistake.’ Apparently your own invisibility is the real problem causing her confusion. This is how the apparatus she propels you into begins to multiply its meaning.

What did you say? (2014: 43)

In fact, ‘the real problem’ is an ‘apparatus’ that assumes white innocence and black guilt, so that a mistake by a white colleague becomes the fault of her black colleague.

Rankine also discusses a more public example of blame in an essay about tennis player Serena Williams, whose seemingly over-the-top response to an umpire decision in the final of the 2009 women’s U.S. Open was generally condemned. Rankine places Williams’ anger in context, against ‘all the injustice she has played through all the years of her illustrious career’ (2014: 25). Here, Serena’s hyper-visibility is ‘the real problem’, were it not for the fact that she ‘exist[s] within a system. ... To understand is to see Serena as hemmed in as any other black body thrown against our American background’ (Rankine, 2014: 32). Differently illustrating Hurston’s line about what it feels like to be black in historically white places, these two examples serve to query black ‘insanity’ in the face of yet more microaggressions. They also help to shift attention to the insanity of an ‘apparatus’ or ‘system’ that is unable and unwilling to understand its own racism.

Although Hurston has been criticised for advocating a post-racial identity – for instance, when suggesting that ‘the cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time’ (1928) – her line, ‘I feel most colored when thrown against a sharp white

background' is nevertheless worthy of repetition because it emphasises, in Ligon's words, 'the idea of race as a concept that is structured by context rather than by essence' (2011: 76). Rankine's reproduction of Ligon's artwork in *Citizen* suggests she also regards race and racism as contextual. For all three artists, and, presumably, the other artists working in monochrome that Rankine selects for *Citizen*, colour-consciousness is about seeing race as black *and* white, even, if not especially, when whiteness is obscured by its colour and positioning. In the contemporary colour-blind era, white seems colourless or race-less and so far in the background that it is barely visible, if it even exists at all. As they are understood here, monochromatic texts help to make whiteness visible against efforts to obscure it.

Obscurantism marks the colour-blind racism of the contemporary era, and this is what helps to differentiate it from the earlier racism of Jim Crow—notwithstanding the fact that Jim Crow racism, which is typically associated with bigoted individuals, institutions, and backward American states, if not a long-gone past, and colour-blind racism differently maintain the same racial hierarchy. In *Untitled: Four Etchings* from 1992, Ligon represents this 'same difference' of racisms decades apart by smudging lines from writings by Hurston (**FIGURE 1**), Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin.

Figure 1, The fourth etching in Glenn Ligon's suite, *Untitled, Four Etchings* (1992). Courtesy of the Glenn Ligon Studio, New York.

words are so present because the reality about which she writes is still present, if a little smudged. Indeed, racism is still present, if perhaps not as starkly as it was in the Jim Crow era, because it is such an ordinary, everyday experience. For Rankine, the smudged line ‘descends into the ordinary day-to-day-ness of its truth’ (quoted in Asokan, 2014). In a different way from Rankine’s Hurricane Katrina script, Ligon’s Hurston-inspired etching also ‘calls out’ to what you ‘don’t see’, in this instance, a blackness struggling against erasure.

What you don’t see ‘In Memory’

Citizen makes quite regular reference to the murdered black teenager Trayvon Martin, most notably, in the situation video script, again, a co-production with Lucas, ‘February 26, 2012 / In Memory of Trayvon Martin.’ This script is followed by Lucas’ re-production of a photograph of the public lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, Marion, Indiana, 1930 (**FIGURE 2**). Martin’s name is mentioned for the last time in the prose poem set on the day his killer, George Zimmerman, was acquitted, ‘July 13, 2013.’ This collection of texts proposes a strong link between the white racial imaginary of the 1930s and the 2010s, of how ‘We’re still there—there differently than those before us, but there, otherwise known as here’ (Loffreda and Rankine, 2015: 13).

Figure 2, *Public Lynching*, August 30, 1930, from the Hulton Archives. Courtesy Getty Images (Image alteration with permission: John Lucas).



Importantly, this sense of repetition is disturbed. Lucas articulates this point visually when his photograph retains the white crowd gathered at the public lynching site, but removes the lynched black men. In the crowd is the figure of a white man pointing to the now empty space where Shipp and Smith once hung. Even though the black men are blacked out of Lucas' altered image so that we cannot see them, they, like Ligon's increasingly smudged etching, still remain visible—to the white crowd and in our memory (of the unaltered photograph). The whites in this scene help to make the black men visible, not least because whiteness is the reason they are simultaneously there (in a public lynching scene) and not there (dead) in the first place.

Citizen helps to ‘bring the [black] dead forward’ (Rankine quoted in Asokan, 2014), sometimes by focusing on details, as in Turner’s easily overlooked yoked black limb, but most often, by establishing close relations between ‘classic binaries’: there/here, word/image, presence/absence, visible/invisible, silence/speech, and black/white. Such relations help to ensure that questions emerge as to the whereabouts of black people in American history, most powerfully in images of black disembodiment and dismemberment. Rankine’s work asks: where is the rest of the slave’s body in Turner’s painting, or the lynched bodies in Lucas’ photograph, or the face in Hammons’ hoodie? Where have they gone? Why can they not be seen? These absences are significant because if it were not for the ‘sharp’ whiteness of U.S. racial formations, against which they are ‘thrown’ to the point erasure, none of these black people would be dead.

In ‘February 26, 2012 / In Memory of Trayvon Martin’, Rankine’s speaker focuses on the quotidian nature of this ‘throwing’ or erasure of identity, of how when doing ‘regular things, like wait[ing]’ (2014: 89), young black men and boys are routinely positioned as criminal and so end up in prison or, worse, as in Martin’s case, dead. Rankine’s script documents the dangers of waiting: ‘Wait with me’, the speaker says, ‘though the waiting might be / the call of good-byes’ (2014: 90). Positioned at the end of the script, these lines suggest that this call might be the final farewell to a young male addressee, an interpretation reinforced by Rankine’s inclusion of Lucas’ altered *Public Lynching* photograph on the opposite page. In these historical contexts, an untimely death is increasingly likely, shifting from the possible to the certain, if not the inevitable.

Rankine’s Trayvon Martin script works with different forms of regularity, specifically ‘regular’ behaviours in order to query the assumptions regularly made

about young, black men. For them, waiting and talking, or hanging around and hanging on the telephone are dangerous and deadly activities, as is made clear by the verbal link between hanging and lynching. Rankine shows how an everyday telephone conversation between black family members, although dysfunctional in its repetitiveness and one-sidedness, remains regular, nonetheless—in word and rhythm. Rankine’s speaker does all the talking to a brother whose speech is not quoted, at least, not in quotation marks, and who is in the process of hanging up before she can say goodbye:

... I

say good-bye before anyone can hang up. Don’t hang up.

My brother hangs up though he is there (90).

All these repeated references to ‘hanging up’ give a routine telephone conversation a sense of murderous foreboding.

The Trayvon Martin script further emphasises how ordinary the black brothers are, the repetition of ‘brother’ exceeding its racialisation to make the point that these young men share a common humanity. They have hearts. They feel heat and cold. They call their families on the telephone. They are our brothers, sons, and nephews. In this way, Rankine constructs a ‘relational moment’ so that a person can understand that ‘the other person in front of them is just another human being. We know that if you shoot that person, that person is going to die. ... We are the same in this way’ (Rankine quoted in Asokan, 2014). Too often, however, this sameness is not accorded to black brothers, definitely not to Martin, in spite of the fact that he was shot and he

did die. In the white racial imaginary, Martin and his brothers are positioned or stereotyped as hoodie-wearing thugs.

For Rankine's speaker, this positioning is a form of imprisonment, but, she adds, the 'prison is not a place / you enter. It is no place' (2014: 89). You do not enter it because you are entered into it, regardless of behaviour: 'They have not been to prison. / They have been imprisoned' (2014: 89). This a priori experience of imprisonment is understood historically when the speaker comments on

... 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 (2014: 89).

The speaker and her brothers are born into this history, with Rankine's lines again undermining the assumption of black criminality by emphasising that each part of this racist history is 'a felony' (2014: 89) by whites against blacks. As the brothers are labelled 'boys' so these parts build up or

... 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 (89-90).

This understanding of slavery and Jim Crow histories as shared legacies, or the there/here dynamic is reinforced when the speaker says of the brother, ‘He’s there, he’s there but he’s hung up though / he is there’ (2014: 90) and in Lucas’ altered *Public Lynching* photograph. This close historical relationship is conveyed formally, by the proximity of the script and the image, and thematically when Rankine’s speaker describes the sky, presumably, to which the white man in Lucas’ photograph now points, as empty or silent. In Lucas’ photograph the sky is black, in Rankine’s script, blue, but the suggestion is that it becomes darker when the rain starts. The speaker says, ‘My brother is completed by sky. The sky is his silence’, although it still manages to convey his presence: ‘he’s hung up though / he is there’ (2014: 90). These men might be forcibly removed from the historical scene, their faces and bodies blacked out, but the script and the photograph together promote colour-consciousness of blackness. In both texts, blackness still manages to signify a white felonious history, to which Lucas’ white man, in fact, points.

Colour-consciousness of whiteness is promoted in an untitled poem from *Citizen*, which begins,

In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis

In Memory of Eric Garner

In Memory of John Crawford

In Memory of Michael Brown (2014: 134).

These lines refer to two men and two teenagers who were murdered between November 2012 and August 2014 ‘for’ playing loud music (Davis), carrying an air rifle (Crawford), selling (Garner) and stealing (Brown) cigarettes. Less than a month

apart, Garner's and Brown's deaths at the hands of police officers sparked local protests, supported by the Black Lives Matter movement, and attracted international attention.

After the four opening lines come twenty-five lines, all of them the same, but for their colour, which fades from black to grey to almost white, as the line, 'In Memory' is repeated down the page to near-invisibility. The fact that 'In Memory' is capitalised and repeated suggests that these murdered black men are in memory; their lives and deaths are neither forgotten nor wasted, the poem's chiaroscuro wording perhaps pointing towards a just future when such acts of remembrance are unnecessary. More probable, however, is a future of further racial injustices, as the whiteness of every unfinished line on an unfinished page suggests a continuing need for remembrance, without reprieve, because the white racial imaginary is incapable of policing and indicting itself. Rankine's speaker confirms this future:

because white men can't
 police their imagination
 black men are dying (2014: 135).

In 'July 13, 2013' Rankine mentions Martin's name for the last time. On this day, the criminal justice system acquitted his killer of murder and manslaughter. As far as Rankine's speaker is concerned, 'the / justice system has other plans' when it comes to black lives (2014: 151). These other plans are newsworthy, as is suggested by the fact that 'Trayvon Martin's name sounds from the car radio a dozen / times each half hour' (2014: 15). The repetition of his name generates a response: 'You pull your love back into the seat' (2014: 151) because it is too emotionally demanding to

feel racial injustices (Martin's murder and Zimmerman's acquittal) over and over again. The fact that this love needs to be 'pulled back' is reinforced by the lines, 'Come on. Let it go. / Move on' (2014: 151). Arguably, Rankine's speaker has few alternatives in this regard, not if she wants to survive the day. In this instance, the act of letting it go seems to be the best way to deal with racism because 'who knows what handheld objects [for instance, a gun] / the other vehicle carries' (2014: 151).

At the same time, Rankine's use of the second person, alongside her speaker's appeal to 'how you are a citizen' (2014: 151) unsettles a response to racism that involves a simple letting go. How is it possible to set aside racial aggressions and confine them to the past given that they are so frequent as to become ordinary? Are 'you' so far removed from racial injustice that it seems not to touch you, or do you recognise your part in this historical scene as a citizen? Rankine encourages the latter response, albeit with a light, lyrical touch as 'you' move on in your car enjoying your air-conditioning and open window: 'A breeze / touches your cheek. As something should' (2014: 151). In this way, 'July 13, 2013' establishes intimacy between breeze and cheek, addresser and addressee, Martin, her and you, arguably as it 'should.' You cannot remain untouched. Similar to Rankine's other elegies about murdered black men, this prose poem compels readers to hear Martin's name, at the very least, even see his face, if they have not done so already *In the Hood* on *Citizen's* front cover.

In *Citizen*, the blank and typically white backgrounds on which Rankine's words and images appear say something without seeming to say anything, arguably similar to the way colour-blind racism says something about race without seeming to

say anything about it at all. These backgrounds become visible, if not hyper-visible, helped in good part by ‘the shocking whiteness of the paper [Rankine] printed the book on’ (Berlant, 2014). Whiteness is shocking, particularly for the young black men who are persistently caught on its sharp end. Rankine describes how these men are a priori imprisoned in and by a history of racism that structures American life, the dead among them literalising Derrick Bell’s point about the permanence of racism. No aspect of American life is free of this structure. It works at macro and micro levels: from recent racist murders in which clothes and behaviours are routinely profiled as criminal, if only on the bodies of black men and boys, to more everyday encounters involving microaggressions whereby social pathologies are assumed black.

In response to the assumption of angry, lazy, poor and criminal black people by whites of differing political viewpoints, Rankine’s speaker is routinely left in a position where all she can do is ask, often repeatedly so:

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? (2014: 9)

Typically, these questions are met with the silence of the blank white page. As it is read here, however, the whiteness of the page allows for the emergence of colour-consciousness about the political and aesthetic processes by which blackness and whiteness are differently removed from the historical scene. No effort to render invisible the continuing fact of racism by making a ‘fiction of the facts’, whether by racists blaming the victims of racism themselves, or by liberals assuming ‘innocence,

ignorance, / lack of intention, misdirection; the necessary conditions' can obscure this historical reality (Rankine, 2014: 83).

Indeed, all obscurantist acts, even those that involve silence undo themselves because the non-recognition of race and racism is self-contradictory, if not impossible. Rankine's images of dismemberment and disembodiment help to demonstrate this impossibility, the missing limbs in her Hurricane Katrina script and Turner's *Slave Ship* making it impossible not to think about the absent black bodies marginalised by the history and legacies of slavery. Rankine further demonstrates the impossibility of non-recognition by way of her introduction of racially unmarked speakers and characters who are racialised by their positioning, for example, the driver's blackness in 'Stop-and-Frisk' is the reason for police officer's behaviour, 'not that a reason was needed' (2014: 107). His blackness is assumed reason enough for racial profiling. This scene demonstrates that American non-recognition of race and by extension racism is neither colour-blind nor race neutral, but impossible and unjust. *Citizen* reinforces this conclusion by 'calling out' to what you 'don't see', to blackness, whiteness, and the sharp relationship between them. In so doing, it promotes colour-consciousness and an antiracist critique, ultimately demonstrating that 'how you are a citizen' (Rankine, 2014: 151) intimately relates to how you respond to racial injustice and *'the war on black people, in the United States and around the world'* (Black Lives Matter quoted in Morrison, 2016).

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Professor Dick Ellis for his detailed comments on an earlier version of this essay, and to Ross Dawson, Colin Harrison, Joanna Price and other colleagues at LJMU for their feedback on my seminar paper on Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An*

American Lyric. Thanks also to Professor Nick Selby and his team at *Comparative American Studies* for their expert advice on my essay.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Michelle. 2012. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration on the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.
- Asokan, Ratik. 10 Dec. 2014. 'An Interview with Claudia Rankine' [accessed 9 November 2017]. Available at: <https://logger.believmag.com/post/2014/12/10/i-am-invested-in-keeping-present-the-forgotten>
- Baucom, Ian. 2005. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Bell, Derrick. 1992. *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. New York: Basic Books.
- 1994. *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Berlant, Lauren. Fall 2014. 'Claudia Rankine' [accessed 9 November 2017]. Available at: <http://bombmagazine.org/articles/claudia-rankine/>
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2010. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- 'The Counted: People Killed by Police in the US. 2016 [accessed 9 November 2017]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/series/counted-us-police-killings>

- Delgado, Richard. 1989. 'Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative.' *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*. Eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2013. 71-80.
- Döring, Tobias. 1997. 'Turning the Colonial Gaze.' *Third Text*. 11.38: 3-14.
- Garza, Alicia. 2014. 'A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement' (accessed 11 November 2017). Available at:
<http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>
- Hurston, Zora Neale. 1928. 'How it Feels to Be Colored Me' [accessed 9 November 2017]. Available at: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/grand-jean/hurston/chapters/how.html>
- Ligon, Glenn. 2011. *Yourself in the World: Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. Scott Rothkopf. New Haven: Yale UP.
- Loffreda, Beth and Claudia Rankine. 2015. 'Introduction.' *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*. Eds. Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King. Albany: Fence Books. 13-22.
- Morrison, Aaron. 2016. 'Exclusive: Black Lives Matter Issues a Statement on Trump's Election' [accessed 9 November 2017]. Available at
<https://mic.com/articles/159496/exclusive-black-lives-matter-issues-a-statement-on-trump-s-election#.9V9SeZif0>
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 2015. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York: Routledge.
- 'On African-Americans: 30 of Donald Trump's Wildest Quotes.' 2017 [accessed 9 November 2017]. Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/wild-donald-trump-quotes/12/>
- Rankine, Claudia. 2014. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.

Richard, Brad. 2010. 'A Poetics of Disaster: Katrina in Poetry, Poetry in Katrina.'

New Orleans Review: 162-181.

Schwartz, Alexandra. 2014. 'On Being Seen: An Interview with Claudia Rankine

from Ferguson' [accessed 9 November 2017]. Available at:

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/seen-interview-claudia-rankine-ferguson>

Sharma, Meara. 2014. 'Blackness as the Second Person' [accessed 9 November

2017]. Available at: <https://www.guernicamag.com/blackness-as-the-second-person/>

Smiley, Tavis. 2014. 'Interview with Claudia Rankine' [accessed 9 November 2017].

Available at: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/interviews/claudia-rankine/>

Tuana, Nancy. 2007. 'Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina.' *Material Feminisms*.

Eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Bloomington: Indiana UP. 188-213.