

NOTE: I am currently in the process of using parts of this senior seminar paper for my M.A. thesis.

Evocation of Empathy, Compassion, and Pity in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*
Through Avant-garde Multimodality and Second Person Point of View

Zuzanna Koziatek

Claudia Rankine's experimental work *Citizen* deeply situates its audience in the psyche of her black female narrator experiencing various acts of microaggressions; subtle, covert, perhaps unintentional acts of racism. Using second person point of view throughout the piece, Rankine strategically forces the readers, regardless of race or gender, to locate themselves within the situations presented, piece by piece and page by page. By immersing us in the psychology of microaggressions in an unwoven sequence, *Citizen* successfully embodies racism's incessant, never stopping, and always looming nature. Rankine's experimental mix of stylistic and poetic choices are designed to embody that context as well. Going back and forth between verse and prose, hypothetical situations and fact, abstract art and photography, the author reveals the prevalence of microaggressions, not only collectively stressing their existence, but stressing their almost omnipresent existence. Works like Rankine's *Citizen* are typically categorized by scholars as exhibiting "multimodality." In terms of literary style, "multimodality" refers to the utilization of more than one semiotic mode when articulating meaning and is far from a contemporary phenomenon. Poets preceding our era, like William Blake, have often coupled verbal and visual stimuli (Gibbons 1). Rankine ultimately deviates from the norm stylistically to energize the empathy evoked by the speaker's second person point of view. Despite the unwoven fragmentation of the situations presented, Rankine tactically moves from the everyday, perhaps familiar, interracial interactions to the more injurious violence that commemorated African Americans in the latter portion of the work have suffered. Creating such flow, in the very least, efficaciously produces an invitation to listen, if not fully feel for the necessity of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Various criticisms have been written on Rankine's *Citizen*, especially pertaining to the ways in which Rankine's stylistic form embodies present injury in the lives of African

Americans, led up to by years of oppression in the past. Examining the piece through the lens of trauma theory, Dr. Michael Richardson theorizes that it heavily relies on aporia to convey and reimagine the traumas of blackness in America, defining “aporia” as the “unrepresentable, unknowable event that enters into literary language through its fracturing, its falling short of meaning making” (1). He then adds that the resonances of negative space in relation to the written language extract traumatic effect in works that “embrace the absence of text” (2). Essentially, Richardson’s contribution is that of a keen analysis of trauma through the poet’s verbal and nonverbal strategies. As Schlosser notes in “A Poetics of American Citizenship,” current metaphors for contextualizing citizenship, and more specifically “standing,” fail to consider the injuries in which black citizens living outside of the white dominant society have suffered and continue to suffer. “Standing” then implies that all legally born American citizens are born to the same circumstantial social position and are given the same set of opportunities. In his analysis of *Citizen*, Schlosser contrasts “standing” with the metaphor of “injury,” arguing that the lyric sheds light on the presence of citizen “injury” preventing many African Americans from “standing.” Therefore, Richardson’s “trauma” and Schlosser’s “injury” seem to be interrelated, but Schlosser’s assessment proves to be more encompassing of Rankine’s effect on the audience, arguing that “injury” as a counterimage to “standing” in *Citizen*, “[elicits] an alternative poetics of citizenship and thus a different imaginary to democratic practice” (2). Furthermore, Bella Adams poses the question, “How do you criticize a hierarchical racial formation that is rendered nearly invisible by its color (white) and positioning (background) in the contemporary, so-called color-blind or post-racial United States?” (55). In her critique, she argues that the second person point of view destabilizes the interracial relationships “which seem to be going nowhere,” simultaneously placing “us” in the position of the speaker and the racist (58) and that the

repetitive nature of situational racism in *Citizen* provokes its persistence (56). Adams concludes by asserting that the lyric promotes color consciousness, ultimately questioning the readers' own view of their citizenship and the extent to which they respond to racial injustice (69).

Whereas most critics address *Citizen's* style and the rhetorical conventions Rankine utilizes to alert the audience of the contemporary black struggles amidst a colorblind culture, none consider the impact of the lyric's second person point of view and multimodality. Richardson's research highlights Rankine's form as a precursor to conveying trauma, but it does not contemplate the interrelated effect of the lyric's various modes. Moreover, whereas Schlosser argues against the metaphor of "standing" surrounding citizenship and counteracts it with the meaning of present "injury" in *Citizen*, he is only precise in verbalizing Rankine's diagnosis of contemporary racism, but vague in establishing the purpose behind the lyric's experimental form. Unlike the other critics, Adams provides vital analyses of the second person point of view, but not in actual combination with Rankine's other experimental strategies like negative space or art. None of the critics focus on the ways in which empathy in *Citizen* is built upon its experimental form—the intertwining of the second person point of view with multimodal lyric.

Rankine activates the imagination and empathy by strategically combining second person point of view with an adroit, cohesive interplay of prose and poetry, visual art, and suggestive negative space. Her stylistic selection for the multimodality in *Citizen* first immerses the audience in the omnipresent nature of microaggressions, then progresses to situating the established "you" within the omnipresent dangers of racial police bias against black Americans. With this progression, the success of evoking empathy in the latter part of *Citizen* is intensified by the already established pathos, leading to an understanding of the sociopolitical atmosphere concerning color blind racism presently acting as a silencing agent for the continual injury in

African American communities. As a result, the lyric propels the imagination to a deeply empathetic experience, which arguably, would not be as powerful without the experimental form Rankine employs.

Rankine's situations depicting microaggressions exemplify the avantgarde process through which the poet fosters empathy. In one of her poems, Rankine combines the influential second person point of view prose with a powerful image depicting what she wants the audience to feel by placing themselves in the "you." The speaker is going to see a new therapist that she has only spoken to over the phone. Their appointment is at the therapist's house and as the speaker rings the doorbell, the therapist yells, "Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?" (Rankine 18). The speaker follows with, "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." The second person pronoun directly places the audience in the psyche of the speaker. This, in turn, promotes the reader's ability to read the text as if experiencing the situation for themselves.

. On the contrary to immersing the audience in psyche of the "you" alone, Rankine also provokes the audience to consider the psychology of the person creating the microaggression. The therapist then questions the validity of "our" statement, pausing to catch herself in the act of being unintentionally racist. Reading *Citizen* through the lens of the Critical Race Theory, Adams suggests that "the second person breaks down subject/object separations" and that "*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" (58). Although the trauma counselor apologizes a few times over for an unspoken violation, it is perhaps her admission of guilt that should disturb "us" the most. Would a spoken acknowledgement of the

microaggression make things worse or better for the speaker? Would a believable, elaborate story of how the counselor is very forgetful and not seeing many patients lately, make things worse or better for the speaker? Would it have been better or worse for the therapist to say that she forgot to take her anxiety medication on top of forgetting she had any appointments? Does she forget, or is it the color of the speaker's skin that is making her yell in fear for her life? These open-ended questions are the hallmark of the loaded white spaces Rankine leaves for her readers, allowing them to ponder the questions that come to mind. Richardson argues that this negative space in Rankine's work "demands that the paper's whiteness not be allowed to become mere unremarked background, the natural normal upon which language rests" because so many "blocks of poetry in *Citizen* halt abruptly, black text populating only part of the page." Furthermore, he explains that it "produces a present-tense of experience that can only reside beyond the words themselves" (8). As the speaker remains taciturn and composed, refusing to comment upon what just transpired, the negative space is a place for the audience to filter what the "you" is holding in. This situation is tendentious as the second person pronoun, the speaker's silence, and the negative space come together to elicit a complex sense of empathy for the speaker and the therapist alike.

In accordance with Adams's suggestion of the "you" as situating the audience in the mind of the racist and the recipient of racism, the reading is two-fold as the shock of the occurrence leaves the "you" with inquiries regarding the therapist's state of mind. The speaker does not make it completely clear who the "wounded German shepherd or Doberman pinscher gaining the power of speech" is referring to. Although it is most likely referring to the "you," it also fits the reaction of the therapist as she "protects" her home, loyal like a guard dog and protecting the color blind white dominant society. Ultimately realizing her unconscious process, the therapist

apologizes with “I am so sorry, so, so sorry,” underlining her own shock in discovering herself as racist. She is not only apologizing to the speaker, but herself as well. How could she? The prose in this specific microaggression is accompanied by negative space to filter the occurrence, ending in a single image of a deer with human features that further incites the audience to feel the speaker’s reduction to something other and less than human.

Rankine’s use of second person directly confines us within the speaker’s psyche, the art amplifying the image that the readers have already conjured up in their imaginations. The art propels empathy in the audience as it ensures that the confusion, the hurt, and the debasement is truly felt by “you.” Simultaneously, the choice of art is strategic, spurring the imagination to the “deer in the headlights” expression, which here, also encompasses the speaker and the therapist. The therapist, hesitating between realization and her admission of guilt, reduces herself to something other and less than human as well. She finds herself in the act and does not try to cover up her tracks to save her reputation as a trauma counselor. Here, the racist seems to be sincere when she apologizes in shock, indicating that she is also feeling confused like the depicted deer and hurt by her own ignorance as she just imposed trauma on another human being. Rankine’s empathy relies on the cohesion of formats she employs. In this poem, the empathy Rankine evokes is rather complicated. First and foremost, the empathy elicited is for the patient, the recipient of racism. However, there is also an underlying attunement to the racist that Rankine promotes by placing the audience in the “you” rather than the “I.” As Rankine’s speaker locates the audience in the “you,” the art following the microaggression creates ambiguity as it is applicable to the reading of the speaker and the racist in this ironic occurrence.

Similarly, in another poem depicting microaggression, Rankine effectively compels the audience to empathy for the speaker and simultaneously attunes it to the ignorance of the racist.

The speaker is at the bar waiting for a friend and a man designedly shows the “you” a picture of his black wife. The man’s words following this happening congeal the disconcerting microaggression. Upon seeing the picture of the man’s wife, the speaker remarks, “You say, the bridge that she is, she is beautiful.” To this response, the man replies, “She is ... beautiful and black, like you” (78). Although the man’s eagerness to show off the picture of his black wife is not unintentional, his inability to grasp that he is throwing the speaker “against a sharp white background” is (53). If the man produced a photo of his wife, then of course, the speaker already knows that his wife is black. Rankine maximizes the power of verbal irony as their short encounter produces the underlying microaggression in which what the man is really saying is that despite being black, the speaker, and his wife, are both beautiful. A sense of uneasiness enters the audience as what the man intends to be a compliment stemming from his pride for being married to a black woman, turns to “our” objectification. It is his pride for being married to a woman that is black and synchronously beautiful that Rankine highlights here as inadvertently racist and marked with ignorance. Rankine’s “you” evokes empathy for the speaker as the man’s unconscious racism results in the speaker’s silence.

The instance between the speaker and the man at the bar is acutely prompting for women since living in a society which constantly objectifies their gender, comparing them to an impossible ideal, makes every woman, regardless of race or nationality, targets of objectification to some degree. Rankine’s strategic minimalization of the exchange between the speaker and the man at the bar accentuates that very common comparison to a Dane Caroline Wozniacki “smiling blonde goddess” image (Rankine 36) With the feminine perception of beauty universally skewed by societal stereotypes, Rankine is appealing to an emotion most women know all too well because most of them do not fit the “smiling blonde goddess” stereotype.

Therefore, having experienced the dilemma of being measured to something other than themselves, it propels them to relate to the speaker whose beauty is being racially objectified. *Citizen*, fragmented and unwoven, projects a cohesive sense of what it means to be black and attuned to the omnipresence of microaggressions in modern America. The fragments, situational microaggressions, art, photograph, and all other form mediums that Rankine inserts into her work unite and empower for the same common purpose; empathy, understanding, and reflection.

Critics of African American experimental literature typically acknowledge the long-lasting effects of history on the contemporary era of color blind racism, which Rankine actively pursues to uncover through her multimodality in *Citizen*. According to Anthony Reed in *Freedom Time*, the “regime of multiple governmentalities ... has proven adept at organizing power along ethno-patriarchal lines within an officially ‘color blind’ framework while redefining the past to authorize the negation of civil gains and the reorganization of public institutions to achieve analogous effects.” Reed also asserts that, “official narratives of success, in turn, make the repetition of that success unlikely, even anomalous, while making larger transformations more difficult, if not impossible to articulate” (2). Rankine’s lyric calls for such a larger transformation by attuning the audience to the façade these “official narratives of success” have inspired. In Phillip Brian Harper’s argument against another critic about black-white interaction at the turn of the twentieth century, Harper points out that, “we should by no means forget that legal and political developments are themselves facts that condition the moral and psychic existences of those who live in their shadow, even without governing their every interaction” (364). Harper continues to say that the enactment of Jim Crow specifically highlights the ways in which legal and political developments lurk into the psyche of citizens living underneath that body politic. Interestingly, Rankine’s *Citizen* contemporarily exposes the psyches of those

citizens living underneath what Reed calls “a color blind framework.” In her experimentation with form, Rankine endeavors to subdue the aforesaid “official narratives of success” as she conceives novel thinking conduits that facilitate the reader’s imagination to a production of empathy.

Moreover, in the Introduction to *Compassion: The Culture and Poetics of an Emotion*, Lauren Berlant outlines the current state of compassion in the sociopolitical arena, helping shed light on Rankine’s effectuation of empathy in *Citizen’s* audience. She argues that “the national dispute about compassion ... has been organized by the gap between its democratic promise and its historic class hierarchies” (1). Berlant describes “compassionate conservatism” as promoting the idea that “society’s poorest members can achieve the good life through work, family, and community participation,” therefore “rephrasing the embodied indignities of structural inequality as opportunities for individuals to reach out to each other” (4). Berlant offers an insightful view of compassion to the reading of Rankine’s *Citizen* asserting that “compassion is a term denoting privilege: the suffer is *over there*” (4). Rather than prompting compassion in the audience, Rankine’s second person point of view positions the audience directly in the “you,” shortening the distance between the reader and the sufferer. Berlant’s characterization of compassion helps crystallize the notion of Rankine’s *Citizen* inducing empathy.

Indeed, if Rankine chose to write the lyric in the first person point of view, it is likely that compassion would be elicited in the audience instead. Whereas the noun “Compassion” is defined as “sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it,” the related noun “Empathy” is defined as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully

communicated in an objectively explicit manner,” as well as “the imaginative projection of a subjective state into an object so that the object appears to be infused with it.” Rankine’s approach in retaining the second person point of view throughout the lyric fuses the audience with the “you” and therefore, forces the audience to feelings of empathy, rather than compassion. The latter definition of empathy as “imaginative projection” promotes the idea that *Citizen’s* multimodal style intensifies the effectiveness of generating empathy because Rankine’s various stylistic forms activate different senses and expand the dynamism of the reader’s imagination.

On multimodality, Alison Gibbons provides insight which aids in understanding *Citizen’s* format and the ways in which Rankine’s style is more enriching for eliciting empathy in the audience. Gibbons explains, “The different modes of expression are located on the page not in an autonomous or separate fashion, but in such a way that, while these modes have distinct means of communicating their narrative voice, they constantly interact in the production of textual meaning” (108). Gibbons further explicates on the importance of cognitive poetics in the study of multimodal texts, arguing that because cognitive poetics is a discipline in which creativity and reception are both crucial parts of meaning making, multimodal texts complicate such analyses of literature. In her own analysis of *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*, Gibbons concludes that multimodal works provide readers with extra cognitive demands in comparison with the conventional novel because “multiple forms work in synchronicity to communicate narrative meaning” and because such synchronicity allows for the audience to heighten its cognitive perception (120). Therefore, cognitive poetics can similarly elucidate an intriguing edge to the reading of empathy in Rankine’s *Citizen*. Based on this literary theory and the meaning of “Empathy,” *Citizen’s* multimodality urges the audience to access sources of imagination

otherwise untapped. Gibbons's research in cognitive poetics helps prove that Rankine's amalgamation of semiotic modes in *Citizen* is profoundly responsible for triggering empathy.

If the second person point of view "destabilizes subject/object pronouns" and positions the reader in the racist and recipient of racism alike (Adams 58), then it is possible that instead of inducing compassion for the recipient of racism, Rankine's speaker induces it for the colorblind racist instead. "Pity," is like "Compassion," but refers to "a sympathetic or kindly sorrow evoked by the suffering, distress, or misfortune of another, often leading one to give relief or aid or to show mercy." Unlike "Compassion," the noun "Pity" embraces mercy, signifying a kind of forgiveness. At the very least, some degree of pity underlies the reading of the therapist and the man at the bar. Based on the empathy produced by being situated in the "you," the pity branches from the very ignorance in the behaviors of these two characters. Despite the microaggression they are instigating, Rankine communicates the characters as oblivious actors in the culture of colorblind racism. In effect, Rankine's speaker propels the audience to feelings of pity and mercy for their lack of awareness since both characters seem to mean other people well and their intention is not to hurt the speaker. The irony in the therapist specializing in trauma counseling and causing trauma to another person is enough to induce pity, perhaps even compassion, in the "you" because the therapist's apology suggests her unawareness and disappointment in herself as someone who is supposed to help others with their mental health. Due to the unrealized ignorance and the irony portrayed in *Citizen*, Rankine's speaker evokes feelings of pity and compassion for the covert racists.

Whereas the microaggression may possibly lead the therapist to a novel discovery of her own colorblind racism and the idea of color consciousness, hopes for such a revelation are bleak for the man at the bar. In his skewed perception, he is not a racist; he has a beautiful black wife.

However, in his view, his wife and the speaker are only beautiful despite being black. The portrayal of the man's ignorance deepens with the notion of him "nursing something" before showing the speaker the photograph (78). Rather than a spontaneous action, the man first ponders about the way to inform the "you" that he has a black wife. In the sense of Berlant's theories on compassion, the man explicitly "denotes privilege," (4) assuming all black women must feel underappreciated in terms of their physical appearance in comparison to white women. As Berlant explains, "You, the compassionate one, have a resource that would alleviate someone else's suffering" (4). In this case, the resources available to the man are the notion that white men do marry black women and the compliment which follows shortly after. On the contrary to his compassionate intent, the man unintentionally creates a demeaning comparison and the microaggression. Furthermore, the man's behavior in purposefully showing the photograph also "denotes privilege." There is no other reason for it aside from the man propelling his own ego as a non-racist, forcing to show off his compassion. This short, yet complex, situation may lead the audience to assume that the man marries a beautiful black woman out of racial compassion to feed his ego. In turn, such a portrayal of the man's ignorance and unaware process evokes pity in the reader. If not compassion, the audience is at the least meant to feel pity for the man, questioning how one could be so out of touch with their own intent. In addition to the empathy that the speaker elicits, Rankine's "you" and the irony of the situation propels the audience to feelings of pity for the man.

Rankine's ironic pieces on microaggressions portray the extremity of ignorance with which the colorblind racists operate. In one instance, the speaker describes a conversation with a woman that holds multiple degrees. Automatically, the audience can safely assume this person is "educated" enough, aware enough not to cause a microaggression, but ironically, the "educated"

woman tells “you,” that she “didn’t know black women could get cancer” (45). Rankine’s speaker continues: “instinctively, you take two steps back though all urgency leaves the possibility of any kind of relationship as you realize nowhere is where you will get from here.” In instances like this one, Rankine establishes the audience in the “you,” evoking empathy for the speaker’s resignation in not trying to enlighten the racist with multiple degrees. What possible avenue could the speaker, the “you” take to make a supposedly “educated” white woman reconsider her colorblind remark? Would she listen? Would she care to listen? Pity is once more evoked for the racist. Although the woman holds multiple degrees, she is so out of touch, that “you” don’t even bother to correct her. Why even try? There seems to be nothing “you” feel one could say to improve her ignorant condition, and so the woman with multiple degrees will continue her unenlightened existence.

On this specific situation, Adams speculates that “the fact that interracial relationships are going nowhere makes racism a problem for everyone” (58). Indeed, the speaker’s second person point of view, interwoven with situational irony, encapsulates this idea as it forces readers to position themselves in the psyches of the racist and the recipient of racism. The speaker propels feelings of empathy and compassion, pity for each respectively. Arguably, it is often the situational irony in Rankine’s pieces that allows for feelings of compassion and pity to emerge in the audience. The man at the bar is married to a beautiful black woman and the therapist specializes in trauma counseling. The woman who did not know black women could get cancer holds multiple degrees and should certainly know that black women can get cancer too. Most of the time, Rankine’s speaker feels no resolve and provides no resolution to the conflict that has just transpired. Instead, the speaker bottles up the microaggressions one after another. If someone holds multiple degrees and has yet to figure out that all human beings can get cancer, then what

could the speaker say to make one color conscious, to see their own ignorance? This lack of resolution along with each piece standing as its own short narrative enhances the feelings of empathy for the speaker because evidently color blind racists are omnipresent and lurking at every corner of life. They all operate with the same sort of ignorance and they are everywhere: at the bar, at the store, in the parking lot, at work, on a plane. Instead of providing an anger filled resolution, the speaker's silence creates pity for the unenlightened racist. His/her ignorance stems from simple mindedness, stupidity, lack of awareness and so the speaker feels it is futile to correct the racist. The speaker's relationship with the racist is "going nowhere" and there is not much that can be done to prove them wrong.

When the speaker does attempt to address the microaggression, a brick wall of ignorance is hit. In an instance preceding the situation with the woman who holds multiple degrees, the speaker describes speaking to a manager over the phone and letting him know that "you will come by his office to sign the form" (44). Once the speaker arrives in the manager's office and announces "yourself," the manager exclaims, "I didn't know you were black!" Immediately, he follows with, "I didn't mean to say that." Here, the "you" responds to the microaggression by implying that the manager typically hides his racial bias. All that the speaker retorts with is "aloud," resulting in the manager being caught off guard as he asks, "What?" The speaker then repeats, "You didn't mean to say that aloud." The piece ends by informing the readers that the transaction goes smoothly thereafter. Despite the speaker's effort to address what has just come out of the manager's mouth, the manager does not apologize to the speaker or make any further remarks. Perhaps this will help the manager think twice about expressing his thoughts next time, but nonetheless, the manager's racial bias will continue. This idea seems to account for the

speaker's repetitive silence followed by negative space as "you" realize that "nowhere is where you will get from here" (Rankine 45).

Each of these separate microaggressions is followed by loaded negative space in *Citizen*, grounding the audience in the prevalence of racism the speaker faces. Each separate microaggression positions readers in a new location with new characters and with a new form of racism. The negative space causes for a thorough fragmentation of Rankine's situations, which permits readers time to immerse themselves in the "you," provoking their imaginations to reflect upon each one of the pieces. Although Rankine's speaker could easily change from situation to situation, the pronoun "you" remains the same in each and it is the pronoun "you" that the audience remains situated in. If the pronoun amplifies the empathy readers feel for the speaker in each microaggression, then the fragmented pieces collaborate to kindle an entrenched emotional response in the audience.

However, the negative space functions as more than a mere divider between the microaggressions in *Citizen*. It also serves as an embodiment of Rankine's references to Zora Neale Hurston's essay *How It Feels to be Colored Me*, and more specifically the quote, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" (Rankine 25). This quote appears more than once in Rankine's work and singlehandedly evinces the speaker's discomfort caused by the prevalence of microaggressions. The negative space is the sharp white background in question and the speaker's words bear its blindness beyond the physicality of the page. According to Schlosser, "blocks of poetry in *Citizen* ... halt abruptly, black text populating only part of the page, as if demanding that the paper's whiteness not be allowed to become mere unremarked background, the natural normal upon which language rests." Moreover, Schlosser conjectures that the negative space bolsters the speaker's silences since "what this

[microaggression] does to a body looms in the force of the unsaid, in what need not be said, yet is affectively present – an absence that produces a present-tense of experience that can only reside beyond the words themselves” (8). In addition to Schlosser’s argument that the negative space epitomizes “the force of the unsaid” and traumatic affect, Rankine’s negative space highlights what must be the passive aggressive in the speaker’s silences.

Rankine contemplates black anger using Serena Williams as an example of being “thrown against a sharp white background” in an essay which sets precedent for the silences following each microaggression. Interestingly, the “you” explicitly imparts feelings of empathy for Williams, and in turn, those feelings of empathy are also elicited for the speaker. The speaker initially explains, “For years you attribute to Serena Williams the kind of resilience appropriate only for those who exist in celluloid. Neither her father nor her mother nor her sister nor Jehovah her God nor NIKE camp could shield her ultimately from people who felt her black body didn’t belong on their court, in their world” (Rankine 26). At the US Open in 2004, Williams lost due to five bad calls by Mariana Alves, “the distinguished tennis chair umpire.” Despite the injustice many felt occurred based on Alves’s racial prejudice against Williams, the tennis star contains her composure. When a similar incident happens five years later, Williams finally outbursts in rage against the umpire. The media, as well as the Grand Slam Committee, penalize Williams for it. However, as Rankine’s speaker asserts, “the body has a memory ... all the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through” (30).

Therefore, the negative space and the speaker’s silences denote a passive aggressiveness that could only boil for so long. Williams, much like everyone else, has a breaking point. Each microaggression separated by negative space serves as an individual present memory in the “you,” a filing cabinet of occurrences marked with prejudice, racism, and an overwhelming

silence necessary for the world not to label “you” as an “angry black woman” like it did Williams.

Instead of anger, though more than rightfully felt, Rankine’s speaker time and time again initiates the audience to feel pity for the racist by creating situations which rely on irony. In theory, if a human being is embarrassing themselves, it is a normal reaction for a bystander to look away as they themselves are feeling the embarrassment just by watching it happen. Following the same logic, the ironic extremity of the racist characters in *Citizen* is embarrassing and allows the “you” a sort of victory over the microaggression in the form of pity.

As the lyric continues into the more politically driven areas, police brutality, and the Black Lives Matter movement, the “you” cannot escape adding more memories to the filing cabinet, except that in the latter portion of Rankine’s work, those occurrences commemorate people who are no longer with us. Moving through the scripts from situation videos readers can easily access online, Rankine continues adding human losses to the abstract collection of empathy inducing memories in the “you.” If the poet’s strategies are affective, then the vast array of microaggressions builds up anger in the speaker by retaining the 2004 Serena Williams composure. With each microaggression and situation video acting as a separate memory of racial bias in the speaker’s psyche, Rankine forces her audience to reconsider the moments which lead to racism. In many ways, those moments resemble the microaggressions, except that the “unintentional” racist is the police officer, or the self-proclaimed vigilante. One of the most important quotes from *Citizen*, and one that Rankine explicitly reminds us of in an interview with PBS, encompasses the role of perception in racially inspired violence:

“because white men
can’t police their imaginations

black men are dying” (135).

As proven by Rankine’s experimental multimodal lyric, human imagination is bendable, expansive, alterable and the mind acts as a filing cabinet of memories that builds and builds until it can no longer resist outpouring the piling layers of the emotional intake, the traumatic affect of being dehumanized by the dominant society. Rankine’s repetition of abuse via various semiotic modes activates the reader’s imagination to processing all the occurrences as one’s own memories and therefore heightening the intensity of the empathy produced.

Rankine’s experimental work *Citizen* revolutionizes the world of poetics as it implements multimodality and second person point of view to heighten the imagination of the audience and evoke feelings of empathy for the “you.” With the Williams essay on black anger setting precedent for the lyric, Rankine implicitly expresses the need for the speaker’s composed silence and the loaded negative space following one microaggression to the next. Interestingly, the situational irony and second person point of view contained in the depicted occurrences also evokes pity and, sometimes, even empathy for the unintentional racist. In a sense, this idea aids the “you” and the audience in transforming the traumatic negative space into a more merciful view of color-blind racists. More importantly, with the progression to police violence, the lyric raises the societal question of how to promote color consciousness and perhaps, Rankine’s *Citizen* suggests that our imagination which leads to empathy is the key. As the work switches back and forth between different forms, *Citizen* mimics memory, effectively intertwining the audience with the psyche of the speaker. Although there is yet much to be considered concerning *Citizen*’s complex use of multimodality, Rankine’s one of a kind experimental work nonetheless contemplates the moments that lead to racism, while providing a coherent sense of what it feels like to be black in color blind America.

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