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# Racial Spatial Relationships in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*

Thomas Jenson

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* describes the experience of African Americans with microaggressions, or the minute, racially-charged interactions that marginalize people of color. *Citizen* considers the spatial dimension of this subtle, yet potent, form of racism, calling attention to how microaggressions use location to disadvantage African Americans to the benefit of white individuals. Part of the system of racist geography that Rankine exposes is the extreme closeness and distance between racial groups. When a white woman avoids sitting next to a black man on a train, Rankine meditates on "the unoccupied seat" the man carries wherever he goes serves as a protective buffer for white people (131). Conversely, African Americans—subject to police brutality—experience intense "proximity" with white Americans (131).

Rankine challenges a one-dimensional understanding of how space relates to race by contrasting encounters of distancing and proximity—encounters

which belie a contradictory system of (dis)location. African Americans grapple with isolating confinement to certain locations as well as the violent coercion to share space with their white counterparts.

According to Henri Lefebvre, spatial theory views space as “a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (26). Recognizing *Citizen's* nuancing of racial spatiality, my analysis of *Citizen* draws upon spatial theory to illuminate how geography reinforces white physical and linguistic power.

Many critics have touched on Rankine's exploration of space by focusing on the narrower concept of visibility. Just as Margaret Cox emphasizes the ocularity of the self in the context of the white eye's hegemony, Elisabeth A. Frost reads *Citizen* as a comment on how black individuals are both “overexposed” and “rendered invisible” (177). Simone Browne also approaches the topic of geography subtly, writing that racial profiling works to “zone spaces, draw lines, and shape looking relations” (72). Although the lines she mentions hints at location, the emphasis on profiling restricts her argument's scope to looking relations. A study of visibility simultaneously implies and ignores spatiality: ocularity, exposure, and profiling suggest a distance between racial groups, as if they were permanently separated. Even if critics explicitly articulated that separation, they would miss the wealth of *Citizen's* spatial relationships—since questions of who observes and how overlook which locations are visible in the first place. Thus, spatial studies undergird a study of visibility. I argue that the gap in the conversation about *Citizen* involves not just the implied gap between racial groups but also their closeness. My analysis moves beyond racial observation into domination.

The first section of my analysis considers the concept of positioning, which Rankine describes as the unstable lines that govern the location of racial bodies to the disadvantage of African Americans. The lines of positioning regarding where black people can exist often prescribe distancing, a concept that *Citizen* equates with segregation. If positioning separates racial groups, Rankine claims it also rams them together through proximity (or the violent) line-driven opposite of distancing.

In the second section of my analysis, Rankine complicates the ideas of positioning, distancing, and proximity by identifying three spatial relationships—reconstruction, addressability, and translation—that involve not just location but also language. *Citizen* treats reconstruction not as the postbellum America that improved conditions for its black citizens, but as a spatial relationship that uses language to distance white aggressors from

their proximate violence. If physical proximity and linguistic distancing characterize reconstruction, Rankine argues that addressability, another spatial relationship, inflicts violence through language while maintaining physical distance. While reconstruction and addressability weaponize either language or physical space, *Citizen's* final spatial relationship—translation—simultaneously engages both by objectifying and positioning black individuals through anonymous white individuals. Rankine considers both the linguistic and physical implications of the word translation, a force in which her other spatial relationships culminate, to reveal the double-edged damage it inflicts on African Americans. Rankine's concept of translation demonstrates how the pressures of language and geography work together to marginalize people of color as well as make it a central target of violence.

## Physical Location

According to Rankine, positioning refers to the unstable lines that govern the location of African Americans to their disadvantage. Rankine uses the game of tennis, and specifically the racism Serena Williams has experienced during her career, as a concrete demonstration of what Browne calls the “boundaries and borders” that exist for the purpose of “discriminatory treatment” (72). As *Citizen* details, Williams encounters the strict limits of tennis's boundaries and borders when a line judge faults “the so-called wrongness of her body's positioning at the service line” (29). Her positioning is wrong because the lines of the tennis court are not fixed markers; they shift according to the player's skin color, according to whether their body belongs on the tennis court in the first place. Positioning treats its boundaries as dynamic constructions, redrawing them as needed to exclude the inherent wrongness of blackness. The paint on the court is able to be corrected even while the paint, as it were, on black people is unchangeably incorrect. Positioning's revised borders add a physical dimension to justice; according to Edward W. Soja, social processes shape “the spatiality of (in)justice,” which then reinforces those social processes (5). Social processes, like the practice of stop-and-frisks, make justice dependent on geography by disproportionately monitoring and harassing lower-income neighborhoods. The harassment of those areas, a manifestation of justice's spatiality, encourages further harassment if any criminal activity is discovered. Similarly, positioning (a social process)

defines the spatial limits of justice—the lines that black individuals cross at the risk of forfeiting their right to indiscriminate treatment. Positioning thereby keeps many black players from stepping, let alone succeeding, on the court—a space where justice is racialized. The absence of black players renders tennis, as FoxSports calls it, “the most lily-white place in the world.” That characterization of the sport justifies the exclusion of future black players and reinforces the system of positioning that created it. Through its inconsistent boundaries, positioning makes advantage consistently ad-out for African Americans. Rankine reveals how the permissibility of African Americans changes underneath their feet as physical borders redraw themselves.

If there are lines establishing where people of color can exist, they often prescribe distancing: a concept that Rankine equates with segregation. Distancing first has to identify who belongs in what groups before it can separate them, which is a process that David Theo Goldberg describes as “classification” into “discrete containers” (94). Rankine clarifies the logic of social classification through the phrase “aestheticized distancing” (85). What must be distanced and contained depends on aesthetics, on the visual, on skin color: race is the primary factor in classification. Rankine nuances the reader’s understanding of distancing by connecting it to racial classification and separation, a system akin to segregation. The word “aestheticized” recalls how the mantra “separate but equal” justified segregation by idealizing it, making a practice that marginalized black Americans seem natural or even beautiful. Distancing protects white spaces from “adverse influences” which include, according to Depression-era policy of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), “inharmonious racial groups” (point 935). Llewellyn M. Smith’s documentary captures the harmonious and aestheticized scenario that the federal government envisioned for its citizens post-World War II: a white veteran, his wife in heels and babe in arms, beaming at their new home (2:30). Black people, not fitting the aesthetic, constituted one of the “peculiarities of topography” that FHA homeowners would want to neatly trim out of their communities—like a misplaced shrub that must be plucked out (point 935). Distancing (the driving force behind residential spatial injustice) contains the disharmony of the blackness to ghettos by contending that dark skin is a peculiar and therefore adverse feature in white neighborhoods. Rankine unsettles the reader’s belief that redlining does not exist today by pointing out the imbalanced topography of society, and

the aesthetic lines of distancing that continue to classify and contain racial groups in everyday places like tennis courts and neighborhoods.

If distancing segregates racial groups, *Citizen* claims proximity—the violent, line-driven overthrow of distancing—rams them together. The tennis court of race relations features lines that separate players as well as lines that box them into the same space, where their closeness breeds violence. Rankine gestures toward her definition of “proximity” (which sheds any relation to the word intimacy) when she describes a stop-and-frisk procedure: the police cars that approached the black narrator “came to a screeching halt . . . like they were setting up a blockade” (131, 105). Just as the word “blockade” echoes the boundaries and borders that hem in African Americans, the phrase “screeching halt” signals how an urgent breach of boundaries portends physical force. Far from being distanced, the African American target “handcuffed and pushed” feels an “officer’s knee pressing into [their] collarbone” (106). The aggression that pervades interracial spaces exemplifies Lauren Berlant’s concept of “the too closeness of the world” (12). While the injured black person knows the danger of “too closeness,” Rankine notes that a white man guilty of knocking over a black boy on the subway “kept walking,” as if their physical contact never happened (17). The proximity that hurts African Americans has little effect on white people (who can afford to invade black bodies and keep walking because closeness leaves them with sore knees) not bruised collarbones. Positioning’s lines serve to not only exclude and disadvantage African Americans but also, according to a rap by Main Source, facilitate incidents of brutality against them as if it were sport. Comparing relations between police and the African American community to baseball, Main Source’s language—“batter’s box,” “dugout,” and “bases”—reveal proximity to be a manifestation of injustice’s spatiality as systematic as distancing. The way African Americans and an adverse white police force interact with each other in space is choreographed like baseball, in which players maintain certain positions for the game to work. Moments of closeness that seem like pure chaos such as a screeching halt against normal life and the natural result of players’ calculated moves in a game, to which Rankine asserts that only one team walks away from with their bodies intact.

# Physical and Linguistic Spatiality

Rankine complicates the ideas of positioning, distancing, and proximity by describing three types of spatial relationships that negotiate not only location but also language. Because of its ability to racialize space, language shapes the spatiality of injustice as much as physical geography. If history defines reconstruction as an era that saw legal gains for African Americans after the Civil War, *Citizen* understands it differently; reconstruction, to Rankine, is a spatial relationship characterized by physical proximity and linguistic distancing. Reconstruction exploits language as a tool to distance or excuse white aggressors from their proximate violence. Describing someone who falls “back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor,” Rankine mixes the physical action of falling and the immateriality of metaphor in order to blur the line between experience and language’s conception of experience (5). By the same token, reconstruction challenges the idea that the narration of an event differs from the event itself by pushing a racist narration to be reality. While addressing the death of James Craig Anderson at the hands of Deryl Dedmon, Rankine, assuming the voice of a news announcer, refers to the murder weapon (a pick-up truck) as “a figure of speech” (95). There can be no driver in a truck that gets reconstructed as a rhetorical device. Considering Berlant’s claim that “the singular becomes delaminated from its location in someone’s story,” reconstruction absolves the actors of racial violence by obscuring their location (12). Rankine reveals the lack of accountability, the avoidance of a person’s singular identity, that storytelling facilitates when she writes that “the pickup,” not Dedmon, brutalizes Anderson’s body (95). Reconstruction creates a linguistic buffer between the bodies that lacked any physical buffer. Rankine’s understanding of reconstruction adds a new layer of meaning to its historical use, defining that period in American history as a linguistic removal from the proximity of the Civil War. The laws that were meant to grant African Americans new rights really served as symbolic lip-service that quickly distanced America from its violent history. Slavery became a figure of speech, part of someone’s story—a concept that a clause in a document could stamp out even while it remained residually for countless African Americans.

While reconstruction uses language to distance white aggressors from their proximate violence, *Citizen* understands addressability as the distance-defying weaponization of language. If reconstruction is premised on physical proximity and linguistic distancing, addressability works through physical distancing and linguistic proximity. The list of prepositions in Rankine's line "you put your body there in proximity to, adjacent to, alongside, within" suggests according to Frost that "language can never exhaust all proximate relations" (131; 189). Despite Frost's assumption that Rankine uses language as a benign tool to delineate physical location and not as a fundamental mechanism of positioning, Rankine casts language in a much different light through her definition of addressability. Rankine's diction while describing addressability—"suffer," "hurtful," "exploit"—implies the damage language can inflict (49). The physical distance between racial containers does not concern addressability, which capitalizes on language's mobility; Rankine writes that "because words hang in the air like pollen, the throat closes" (156). The ubiquity of racial slurs—*Citizen* uses the word "nigger" eight times—suffocates African Americans, an injury reminiscent of the knee-to-collarbone tactic even while the comparison to pollen downplays their suffocation as if it were a stuffy nose from allergies. The same language that addressability uses to wreak emotional violence on African Americans excuses itself in the same breath—breath that it steals from black throats. It is true that language cannot exhaust all proximal relations because addressability is a type of proximity, a type of violent closeness, a closedness of the airway. Language does not serve as the vehicle for expressing the ways bodies relate to each other; its weaponization constitutes another way besides reconstruction that bodies violently relate to each other. Rankine's list of prepositions represents her preoccupation with the multiplicity of ways that addressability can collapse space without breaching physical boundaries. Whereas reconstruction requires geographic closeness, addressability exploits the damage words—persisting in the air like pollen—can cause across the distance between segregated containers. Rankine's notion of addressability expands the bounds of spatial theory by implicating physical and linguistic planes.

Rankine understands translation (another spatial relationship besides reconstruction and addressability) as the objectification and positioning of people of color by anonymous white individuals. While reconstruction and addressability use language and location oppositely, restraining one while weaponizing the other, translation simultaneously engages both.

Caitlin E. Newcomer's dual definition of the body as "the body made of flesh and the textual body" complicates *Citizen's* statement that "a body translates its you . . . even as it loses the location of its mouth" (374; 143-144). In *Citizen*, the white textual body, or the sum of addressability's hate speech, translates its you, or the black body it maligns, by reducing it to "a black object" (93). Translation, then, is objectification of the black body by the body of racist texts. Just as reconstruction obscures the identity of the white perpetrator through language, translation loses the location of its mouth: so that the individual speakers objectifying the black body synthesize into an anonymous, polyphonic attack on their victim. Rankine also employs the physical definition of translation, claiming that white bodies made of flesh position their racial counterpart according to the concepts of proximity and distancing. Like positioning, translation activates the boundaries and borders that separate and violently join racial bodies, but with the qualification that the white body enforcing those boundaries remains unidentifiable, the location of its mouth intentionally redacted. Ironically, translation robs both black and white people of their identities—to dehumanize the former into objects worthy of violence and protect the latter from the consequences. Rankine's concept of translation demonstrates how the pressures of language and geography work together to marginalize individuals of color, as well as make it a central target of violence. Usually understood as an act of reinterpretation, translation moves and removes African Americans through physical and linguistic space by reinterpreting their proper location. If positioning refers broadly to the physical manipulation of African Americans, Rankine's definition of translation encapsulates how spatial injustice manifests itself through location and language.

## Conclusion

A spatial reading of *Citizen: An American Lyric* that considers language and location illuminates the myriad ways geography damages black citizens. *Citizen's* prickly spatiality holds certain resonances for readers today in the era of social distancing. Like a disease that cannot be contained as long as two people are interacting, beliefs about where African Americans can and cannot exist threaten to infect the tenuous relationships between racial groups. A white woman who avoids sitting next to a black man on a train

perpetuates a system of positioning as subtle and transmissive as a virus. Thanks to white people who avoid closeness with people of color unless it is to attack it, the black man and the unoccupied seat that follows him understood social distancing even before a global pandemic. Barred from experiencing a closeness not characterized by harm, African Americans forfeit their right to coexist with other racial groups. *Citizen* captures the battle people of color have between violent contact and isolating distance, stating that their “only wish” is to “be left, not alone” (145). Although African Americans desire freedom from hurt but not all humans, to remove them from violence is to deprive them of all company just as to protect a person from injurious germs is to deprive them of all social contact. COVID-19 and spatial injustice put their victims in the same bind: inhabit the same space as others at the risk of your life. If racist geography negotiates public spaces to the detriment of black citizens’ health, the isolating coronavirus is also a social phenomenon with medical consequences—only it has a foreseeable end. *Citizen* leaves readers to imagine how a world vaccinated against the coronavirus will still not be immune to the effects of spatial injustice, how African Americans will always be alone and never left alone.

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