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# “Boys Will Be Boys”

Antithetical Boyhood in Claudia Rankine’s  
*Citizen*

Madilyn Abbe

In *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine examines the idea of boyhood in the context of 21<sup>st</sup>-century racism. Rankine questions our initial perceptions of the meaning of the term “boy” through contradictory uses in her lyrics. While we normally use “boy” to refer to a pre-pubescent male, whether white or black, Rankine’s flexible use challenges our preconceived associations of “boy” applied to both age and race. In one instance, a racist beating elicits the explanation, “Boys will be boys being boys feeling their butting heads righting their wrongs in the violence of aggravated adolescence” (101). Here, the application of “boy” on white men deemphasizes their violence by portraying the physical encounter as nothing more than a childish fistfight. Already, this application challenges our association of “boy” with age. Yet Rankine takes it a step further to complicate our understanding of “boy” by including a white man’s jeer of “boy, hey boy” on a black man (89). When applied to a black man, the belittling use of “boy” intentionally infantilizes black men thereby neutralizing them as a threat. However, the application of “boy” on white men excuses and encourages their violent damage. Throughout the text of *Citizen*, Rankine

explores the intersection of boyhood, maturation, and childhood to consider how symbolic mothering can mitigate such violent child's play.

The characterization of "boy" to black men has a long history, originating with slavery and percolating into postbellum vernacular. Just as Martin Luther King Jr. points out, a black man's "name becomes 'boy' (however old you are)" to subvert African American men in favor of white authority (1). As white authority metaphorically confines black men to a childlike state, critical commentary surrounds *Citizen* that asserts the occurrence of early maturity in black adolescents; a tragic occurrence that Bella Adams calls "the assumption of criminality" on "young black men" (69). Critics such as Katherine Johnston categorize these preconceived presumptions of guilt as "abuses of power" (344). The focus of critical attention on prejudice as an abuse of power leaves room to consider the flexible nature of childhood and the reversal of boyhood as weaponized tactics. Further critical commentary involving the black bildungsroman notes the complexity that accompanies the racially induced maturation of black boys out of childhood. Self-fragmentation from white influence, as identified by Adam Dawson, splits the protagonist's identity into his older self and his younger self, the "other boy" (364). Comparing this idea of the younger black self as the "other boy" to Rankine's designation of "boy," I intend to examine "boy" as a volatile categorization of childhood to advance white authority.

As Rankine uses the text to dismantle our typical understanding of boyhood, I argue that Rankine identifies racism as the catalyst for the maturation of a black boy. Rankine's discourse unveils boyhood as a flexible categorization to advance white male interests. The category of boyhood excuses the violent actions of white men under the pretense of schoolboy rowdiness and simultaneously diminishes black men through infantilization. Due to the disjointedness of these reverse age categorizations, Rankine uses a black bildungsroman to typify a narrative of survival as opposed to a narrative of formation. With no narrative of formation, the reversed age categorization imposed by white authority causes self-fragmentation for African Americans. *Citizen* seeks to assuage self-fragmentation through storytelling characterized by symbolic mothering. As symbolic mothering expands to include non-related individuals in familial relationships, Rankine redefines parenting in terms of fictive kin. I maintain that parenting by fictive kin functions differently than the parenting of biological parents to instill heightened perception in the rising generation. As parenting by fictive kin

addresses the effects of racism, race-induced and early maturation for black children is prevented.

Because Rankine uses messages in *Citizen* to disassemble our understanding of boyhood's connection to actual age, Rankine avouches that racist encounters accelerate unnatural maturation for black boys. In the subway, an encounter where a black boy is knocked to the ground by a white man matures this black boy into the realm of black men. At the beginning of this lyric, Rankine supports our initial association of boyhood to young age by repeatedly emphasizing the boy's youth as she refers to him as "her son," "the boy," and "the child" (17). Yet, *Citizen's* following image rebuts our association of boyhood to young age. When the black boy is knocked down, "a group of men began to stand behind me like newly found uncles and brothers" (17). After this racist micro-aggression, the black boy gains a new group of peers. He is no longer a boy; his maturation initiates him into the circle of black manhood. Rankine purposely uses the physicality of the encounter to accentuate how racist encounters mature a black boy physically as well as emotionally. The "weathering hypothesis," as Cynthia Dobbs expresses, draws a connection between "the structural and systemic forces of racism" to the bodily damage "wrought on the individual body/mind" for African Americans (173). As a continuation of Dobbs' commentary on infirmity in the "weathering" of a black body, I extend her idea by focusing on the aging factor of "weathering" as a form of physical maturation. In the black boy's physical collision with the white man, the "weathering" of the negative experience physically matures him to reinforce Rankine's deconstruction of boyhood. The physical and emotional maturation caused by racism paradoxically detaches a black boy from his age, making him a man.

As Rankine detaches the association of boyhood from age, she notes how "boy" attached to white men categorizes them as rakish, adolescent schoolboys to free them from responsibility. As Rankine reflects on a lynching tree, she refers to the white men who tie the noose as "boys" (99). She theorizes that these white men who, like schoolboys, find "themselves at the center of the schoolyard" will learn through "history books" that they can repeatedly commit heinous crimes and escape punishment (99). For teenage schoolboys, behaving in rough or immature ways is exasperatedly dismissed as an uncontrollable part of their nature; raging hormones account for and excuse their aggression. Because responsibility is associated with

adulthood, recasting an adult white man as an adolescent detaches him from the responsibility of his actions. With a different level of ascribed accountability, white men can act however they please knowing they will receive no more than a rap on their knuckles as a reprimand. According to Erin Mackie, such masculine “privilege above the law generates both the criminality and the glamour” in male behavior (130). But while Mackie limits her analysis of male behavior to the literary trope in 18th century texts, I assert that these same masculine perpetuations of criminality and glamour exist in modern society among white men. The privilege above the law that men receive when it comes to white supremacist violence adds a schoolboy glamour to criminality. Almost like the excitement of getting away with an immature prank, there is an atmosphere of competition and boasting among peers. When white men commit atrocities against African Americans and repeatedly get away with them, it imbues an arrogant, untouchable mindset for white men. The alpha male game of one-upping each other frees men from responsibility and intensifies racist criminality for the glamorous bragging rights of “look what I can do.”

Given that white men carry a competitive schoolboy complex, Rankine reveals that such an escalated alpha male mentality causes white men to compensate physically to preserve manhood. As black men present competition in regard to dominant social status and authority over territory, they become perceived as a threat to white masculinity. Because dominant status and territory are aspects closely related to manhood, black men become what James Baldwin calls “a kind of walking phallic symbol” (270). Perceiving black men as a threat exacerbates white men’s insecurity of their own manhood, and black men end up paying “for the sexual insecurity of others” (282). As a result of what Baldwin recognizes as white men’s “necessity of never letting another guy get the better of you,” the perception of black men as a phallic symbol imbues physicality into racial conflict (282). In *Citizen*, Rankine’s depiction of an arrest paints the white officer’s behavior as an attempt to assert sexual dominance. When arrested, the black man is “pushed into the police vehicle’s backseat” (107). He feels “the officer’s warm breath” and “the officer’s knee pressing into [his] collarbone” (107). The roughness in the tangle of bodies with the context of debated authority reifies how white men preserve their manhood by eliminating black men as a phallic symbol. Sexual insecurity makes a white man want to perform physically to showcase his masculinity. This desire to perform

physically adds a layer of physicality to racial conflict, motivating white men to violently attack the bodies of black men. The drive to exert masculine authority causes repeated interactions that are both physical and abusive. In racially motivated clashes, the brutal physical violence on the part of white men is an attempt to compensate for the insecurity that arises as black men are perceived as an intimidating phallic symbol.

Just as white authority attempts to assert masculine dominance through physical means, black men are also kept in submission through verbal means which are intended to infantilize them. Infantilization attempts to diminish black men as a threat through intentionally reversed maturation. Attaching the label “boy” to black men is one form of infantilization employed by white authority. Rankine’s *Stop-and-Frisk* lyric captures the process of infantilization in an encounter between a black man and the police. The police unjustly arrest a black man, telling him “after the fingerprinting to stand naked” and then go “back home” (109). Here, *Citizen’s* infant imagery poignantly degenerates this man back into a baby boy; the black man is nude like a baby, fingerprinted as if for a birth certificate, and then sent home. Through the juxtaposition of man and infant, Rankine urges readers to consider how infantilization draws a distinct status dichotomy between white authority and black men. White authority are the adults and therefore are the ones in control. Black men are children and so should act submissively. In a similar vein, the infantile pictorial depictions of African Americans in consumerism reflect the power struggles between whites and blacks. In the 19th century, advertisements for foods such as chicken or watermelon frequently included cartoons of black men misbehaving either by stealing the commodities or mischievously overeating. These repeated insinuations of childlike misbehavior of black men in white consumer culture, according to Carolyn Dean, establish “a conceptual equation between adults and children that then tacitly cast the EuroAmerican consumer as superior and a de facto parent” (25). The age disparity, fabricated from infantilization, serves as a weaponized power tool for white authority. Once a black man is infantilized, white authority can then claim the role of protector and supervisor, maintaining the right to restrict and punish.

Although infantilization stipulates childlike submission, Rankine invites readers to consider how black children are denied the protection of childhood innocence by redefining the concept of childhood innocence as hazardous. Childhood innocence normally carries the idea of a charming



sort of ignorance that frees children from social norms. The excuse “they’re just a child” allows a child to unapologetically do what they want without responsibility or fear of serious consequence. But Rankine demonstrates how childhood innocence changes from carefree to dangerous for black children through her incorporation of “Blue Black Boy” (102-103). The straightforward camera angle on the African American boy’s face is reminiscent of a mugshot. The triptych mugshot preemptively anticipates the African American child as a threat, ascribing early guilt to the boy. The blue overtone and the way the audience assumes the viewpoint of a policeman taking this child’s mugshot reifies how white authority, in the form of police, see black children through a lens of assumed criminality. Houston Baker’s African American bildungsroman introduces the only monster black children are allowed to fear: a policeman, or in other words, “the Blue Man . . . fanged and vicious in pursuit of young black men” (12). The Blue Man preys on young African Americans, targeting them as easy victims because of their innocence to their inherited birthright of guilt. As a result, it’s dangerous for black children to act like a child. Black children don’t get the same protective excuse of childhood innocence as white children do. Instead, if a black child

acts out of turn, they'll become a "Blue Black Boy" with a welcome invitation for the Blue Man to execute punishment on them.

Because black children lack the protection of childhood innocence as they grow up, *Citizen* designates the black bildungsroman as a journey of survival rather than a journey of formation. While we normally characterize the narrative arc of a white bildungsroman as a child's arrival at adulthood through a series of learning experiences combined with naivety, the black bildungsroman is what Joy Priest describes as "a collection of preservation or a collection of survival" as opposed to a "novel of formation" (1). Rankine's inclusion of the sculpture "Little Girl" represents the unpredictability of a black child's preservation and survival by pasting a black child's face on the body of a deer (19). The construction of a black child as prey expresses the precariousness of survival for black children in a world where they are a hunted species. *Citizen's* lyric depicts a white driver killing a black person in a fatal hit-and-run using imagery that invokes the idea of roadkill such as "tire marks," "crushed organs," and a "pickup truck" (94). Rankine's portrayal of the murdered black person as a trampled deer visualizes the reality of the black bildungsroman; for a black person, making it into adulthood is a matter of survival rather than a safe journey of self-discovery.

Given that African Americans don't receive a narrative of continued formation from childhood into adulthood, Rankine elucidates how the ontology of "I" for African American men splits due to the disjointedness of actual age and its reversed categorization. According to Amy De'Ath, *Citizen's* fractured poetic voice relooks at "the ontological status of the black subject" (115). While De'Ath primarily grounds African American fragmentation in the unresolved nature of the historical African American and the present, individual self, I insist that Rankine also recognizes fragmentation for the African American man between his own personal history and his present, individual self. Normally, the ontological status of "I" encapsulates a singular human being throughout their whole lifetime; "I" remains the same for the past, present, and future self. But Rankine contradicts our notion of "I" by acknowledging a breach between an African American's self of man and child, disrupting the continuous application of "I" for the lifespan of the black subject. For African American men who now face infantilization after having been treated as men since childhood, Rankine notes how the concept of "I" fractures into two different people: "the histories of you and you" (140). To internally resolve their "own dead child," African American



men must disassociate themselves from their selves of the past (84). With the heaviness of such imposed antithetical categorizations throughout a lifetime, “I” becomes “the pronoun barely holding the person together” (71). Instead, “I” for African American men fragments into two different personae: “boy” of their current adulthood and the “other boy” of their dead childhood.

To heal the self-fragmentation between the time gap of “boy” and the “other boy,” Rankine, through *Citizen*, advocates for storytelling defined as symbolic mothering as opposed to historicity. Rankine differentiates between retelling a history and storytelling; retelling a history impersonally relates the facts of events, while storytelling infuses emotion and self-reflection into past experience. This personal engagement and level of nurturing turns storytelling into, in the words of Charlotte Beyer, “a form of symbolic mothering” (129). Often, the purpose of retelling a history is to convey facts. But storytelling as symbolic mothering not only comforts the individual but teaches a moral and an application. *Citizen* ends with a young black boy urging his mother to “tell me a story” (159). In response to her son’s request, the mother chooses to recount the events of that day as a story instead of sharing a fairytale or traditional bedtime story. Framing the micro-aggressive encounter as a story shifts her experience from an impersonal history to an impactful teaching moment. Storytelling as symbolic mothering teaches the individual “a lesson” of the importance of maintaining self-autonomy by expressing your own narrative and choosing your own labels (159). The ability to assert control over the telling of a story can remedy self-fragmentation as the speaker gets to reclaim the pronoun “I” and reflect on the narrative’s lasting moral. The text of *Citizen* itself serves as symbolic mothering to its readers. Rankine details historical accounts such as Hurricane Katrina and Serena Williams’ career to repackage them and poetically tell them as a story, not a history. In doing so, Rankine becomes the mother and the reader becomes the child as Rankine teaches the salient lesson to speak about first-person experiences with racism unashamedly.

Rankine expands the scope of symbolic mothering to non-related individuals to redefine parenting in terms of fictive kin. Oftentimes, parenting refers to the stewardship a blood-related mother or father possesses over their child’s emotional, social, and intellectual development. Yet, through *Citizen*, Rankine applies stewardship over the rising generation’s development to the community as a whole, not just biological parents. In the antebellum south, because mothers were forced to labor in the fields,

the slave community assumed the collective responsibility of childcare. The concept of family augmented to include these non-related caretakers in what Loren Schweninger calls “fictive kin” (3). One of Rankine’s lyrics witnesses the widening of parenting through fictive kin. After dropping off his child at school, one father “stands on the steps of a building and watches” (149). When trying to identify which child belongs to the father, the poetic speaker “can’t tell which child is his” as the father’s “scope of vigilance” transcends “to belong to all the children” (149). Not only does this lyric set up the familial relationship of fictive kin by blurring the lines between the biological parents and children, but Rankine’s inclusion of the phrase “scope of vigilance” distinguishes the practicum of parenting for fictive kin. While the word “scope” typically refers to a particular subject matter’s range of extent, this phrasing also invokes the idea of a tool for heightened perception such as a microscope or telescope. Additionally, as the assonance of “vigilance” consociates with “vigilante,” Rankine sets up fictive kin as a way to compensate for the inadequacies of institutions. As presented by Rankine, parenting for fictive kin is a heightened perception of the danger of institutional fallacies and a willingness to act when needed to protect children and childhood innocence.

Mothering through storytelling, by an all-inclusive fictive kin that exceeds biological relationships, can address the consequence of imposed reverse age categorizations. As honest stories are told about personal experiences with racism, self-reflection is induced. As the listener recognizes the moral rights and wrongs of specific interracial experiences, the listener walks away with the gentle but stern motherly reminders: “behave” and “act your age.” This admonition of proper age behavior will halt early maturation for black boys, allowing them to stay children. Similarly, it will release black men from the suffocating bonds of the swaddling clothes of infantilization. Moreover, white men will not be excused from childlike violence.

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