



12-2022

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Mendenhall, Cutter (2022) "Fragments and Foreignness in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol15/iss2/7>

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Fragments and Foreignness in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*

Cutter Mendenhall

In the sixth section of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Rankine asks if the disappointments and failures of the black experience are "too foreign" for white citizens to understand (116). With this rhetorical question, Rankine takes the African American experience—an experience traditionally understood to be native to the United States—and redefines it as alien to the united white state that makes up mainstream American society. According to Rankine, African Americans are foreigners: as Americans unable to exist in the past or present, they are a group without a homeland, alien to white Americans and alien to themselves. For Rankine, this is not an idea to be taken lightly, and she extends and deepens her redefinition of what it means to be foreign through all seven sections of *Citizen*. Ultimately, she challenges the traditional understanding of foreignness itself and its relationship to the black identity.

Other scholars have recognized the emphasis that Claudia Rankine places on themes of foreignness and identity in *Citizen*. According to Bella Adams, *Citizen's* black American identity is "not human enough" to escape foreignness (57). African Americans are foreign because, according to Adams, they have yet to be accepted as humans. For Arthur Wang, *Citizen's* African American identity is foreign because it is "fractured and multiplicitous" in its addressability (534). According to Wang, African Americans need to

“code-switch” in order to be accepted into different echelons of society (534). This mechanism renders the black identity only partially accessible at any given moment and prevents the engenderment of familiarity that being native requires. Critics like Adams and Wang view this foreignness as a mark that was branded on black Americans in an enslaved past and is slowly fading from the white psyche. Their analysis explores both the tensions that are working against this fading process and attempts to rebrand African Americans as inhuman. It does not, however, explore the way that the rebranding process is interacting with old scars to create a new, unfamiliar black identity. The label of foreignness that is currently being applied by an oppressive system is not replacing previous labels like “slave” and “property” with modern equivalents but creating an unintelligible mix of past and present marks that nonetheless demands to be read. While scholars have not defined the nature of this new imposed identity of foreignness, they have begun to discuss the ways in which its effects are being seen in the white perspective of the black identity. They have not begun to discuss, however, the ways that this unfamiliar branding is changing the African American perspective of the black identity.

In *Citizen*, Rankine identifies the nature of white-imposed foreignness, and she intensely examines the way that it affects African Americans’ views of themselves. Rankine redefines foreignness not as a biological marker of location but a socially constructed form of oppression. This white-constructed label of foreignness fractures the African American identity into stereotypes that deny African Americans a sense of humanity. Rankine redefines black anger as an assertion of humanity that challenges these stereotypes, and she suggests that white anger rises in response, protecting white supremacy and forming the foundation of everyday microaggressions. African Americans are foreign to the white system of processing that creates this white anger because they are metaphysically located outside its scope of consideration. The white system of processing creates a sense of invalidation that makes blackness a state of cognitive dissonance for African Americans. This cognitive dissonance is an injury to the black psyche, but it also makes blackness a window into the imminent individual and a barrier to the union of that individual with the body. Ultimately, Rankine reveals that to be white is to be native and unable to make the distinction between what she calls the “self self” and the “historical self” (14). In other words, to be native is

to lack the power to distinguish between one's inherent identity and one's "American positioning" (14).

According to *Citizen*, foreignness is not always a biological or cultural marker of origin; it can also be a socially constructed label of subjugation. By placing the concept of foreignness in a racial context, Rankine suggests that foreignness is less about location and more about belonging. When white characters in *Citizen* compare time spent around African Americans to "watching a foreign film without translation," they are asserting that the black identity is not a native American identity (50). Instead, the black identity is a foreign entity that can be forced to undergo a naturalization process in which white Americans are allowed to educate and shape it before they consider it American. In this context, the white identity is what Kamran Javadizadeh calls the "unmediated identity," while the foreign black identity can exist only as it is filtered by the white power structure (476). This filtering makes foreignness a state of subjugation in which the white hegemony can crush and erase black dimensions of identity that do not fit the American likeness it intends to create. For African Americans, this subjugated state ultimately becomes a captivity of the subjective. The African American opinion is viewed as a foreign entity with un-American impulses, and it is disenfranchised. Rankine writes that African American perspectives are left "unsaid . . . duplicated, redacted here, [and] redacted there" to fit the citizenship requirements for the white American identity (69).

Rankine suggests that this label of foreignness is not a new identity of otherness but the fragmenting of existing identities into subhuman parts that replace the holistic individual. Rather than simply meaning alien in character, foreignness in *Citizen* is the separation of character traits into a multiplicity of caricatures that do not add up to a whole. This "broken-down . . . first person" is comprised of African American stereotypes that white characters use to guide their interactions with the black people of *Citizen*. In the end, however, "nobody's here" (72); the African American identity as a collection of stereotypes is an identity void of humanity. The black identity exists "in theory" (117), but it does not have the power to form real relationships that allow "one body to feel the injustice wheeled at another" (116). At the scene of Hurricane Katrina, responders and reporters discuss African American victims only in terms of manageable caricatures while Rankine repeatedly asks them, "Have you seen their faces?" (83). There is no reply to her plea for a recognition of black humanity. Kyle Frisina uses the terms "substantial

existence” and “racialized signifiers” to characterize the gap that foreignness creates between humanity and stereotypes (148). African Americans’ substantial existence, or their humanity, is dealt with only in terms of its one-dimensional, racially charged splinters: its racialized signifiers. These signifiers symbolize African Americans without actually recognizing them. Rankine’s concept of a fragmenting foreignness strips the African American identity of its humanity and redefines it in terms of simplistic symbols.

While Rankine presents the white foreignization of black Americans as a dehumanizing force in *Citizen*, she also sets forth black anger as a challenge to this label and an assertion of a “human identity” (128). Because foreignness is dehumanizing, a humanness-affirming response is needed to challenge the label; Rankine identifies black anger as this response. By placing black anger in the context of a battle for the humanness of African Americans, Rankine highlights the establishment of personhood as one of black anger’s central objectives. While it may seem like anger serves as evidence of the animalistic nature of humanity, it is actually a base human emotion that exemplifies humanity’s elevated state. Anger, according to Silvan Tomkins, is activated by “the absolute density level of stimulation,” meaning that it develops in response to a grave assault (76). In *Citizen*, Zinadine Zidane says that racist attacks touch “the deepest part” of someone (122). That something as complex as the denigration of one’s personhood due to race or ethnicity elicits this response reveals a sophisticated human nature; it is evidence of humanity. In responding to these attacks with anger, African Americans assert their personhood by “aris[ing] directly to the level” of an intellectually advanced attack instinctively (122). Their unplanned, innate, immediate biological response to the dehumanizing nature of racism presents immediate proof of biological equality to the aggressor. Rankine breaks down the video footage of Zidane’s headbutt frame-by-frame to show the speed and certainty with which he reacted (122–128). His response to Materazzi’s racial slur was not calculated; it was physiological. In this way, Rankine suggests that racially provoked anger is an affirmation of humanity because it is a subconscious response to an attack on a set of intellectually complex ideas that are deeply held by the victim.

While Rankine claims that black anger asserts black humanity in the face of foreignizing microaggressions, she reveals that white anger protects white supremacy and serves as the engine of those same microaggressions. When the trauma therapist yells at the African American speaker “at the top of

her lungs" to leave her property, she is not contending for personhood, she is declaring white supremacy (18). In the same way that racist comments touched the "deepest part" of Zidane, the speaker's assertion of equality is attacking the therapist's deeply held racist tenets (122). The speaker's approach to the porch leaves the therapist like a "wounded Doberman pinscher," howling against the assault on her racist convictions (18). These racist convictions are shared by almost all of the white characters in *Citizen*, and they are built into what Suzanne Lundquist calls the "One Story" that "the Western quest for truth" has created (264). White supremacy has been woven into the fabric of Western truth from its inception, and while systemic racism is not a pillar of truth that most white Americans would consciously defend, it is a permeating (if invisible) thread in almost every aspect of the Western narrative. White anger retaliates against perceived threats to systemic racism because striking the chord of systemic racism makes the entirety of Western truth vibrate, and Western truth is truth that white Americans will jump to defend. White Americans can consequently feel righteous anger as they defend systemic racism while under the impression that they are fighting for Western values. Rankine suggests that this righteous, white-supremacy-defending anger is the central feature of microaggressions. In *Citizen*, when the black speaker is late to meet a white friend, the friend calls her a "nappy-headed ho," asserting the racist idea that it is the white right to inflict pain on African Americans, not the other way around. The speaker responds angrily with the question, "What did you say?" and the friend is stunned into silence as she realizes the gravity of her comment (41). This exchange reveals that it is African American outbursts of anger, or assertions of humanity, that allow white Americans to begin to distinguish between white supremacy and the One Story. White anger is undiscerning on its own; it is dependent on outside perspectives to fix its faulty paradigm. Microaggressions, according to Rankine, then, become small eruptions of blind, white, racist anger that are dependent on the retaliation of black anger for reconciliation.

Just as Rankine reveals that white anger defends white supremacy as part of a larger Western narrative, she suggests that African Americans are foreign because they are located outside the purview of the white system of processing that develops this narrative. African Americans aren't physically living outside of their country of origin, but their lived experience exists outside the scope of white American consideration. Throughout *Citizen*, Rankine employs the dichotomy of the blue atmosphere and the black night

to assert that the foreignness of blackness is a foreignness of processing systems. The white American way of processing is represented by the blue atmosphere, and the black American system is symbolized by the night. Just as the realities of the day and night are perceived with different sets of awareness, blue-sky white Americans cannot find reality in the black perspective. The primary daytime sense is sight, and the white daytime senses that similarly privilege what can be seen fail to recognize the validity of other invisible forms of input, namely, African American emotions. African Americans “exhaust” themselves looking for recognition in the “blue light,” only to realize that they “will not be seen” (70). White society relegates the black experience to the nighttime—a place that is seen by whites as being governed by weaker, less accurate senses that are often distorted by irrational imagination and “strange reverie” (71).

This situation of African Americans outside of the white system of processing is not just a situation, however; Rankine’s day and night metaphor suggests that this location is the result of an intentional displacement by white Americans. White society is entirely concerned with superficial, visible metrics—“pure product” (94). The exclusion of African Americans from this realm of superficiality places them in the nighttime—a realm of nuance and emotion, in which the interplay of several senses leads to complex images of depth. For African Americans, the nighttime is a place where their experiences can be recognized, where they can “hold everything black and see” (70). The relegation of African Americans to this richer realm reveals an intentional element to the foreignizing of African Americans; white Americans are choosing to dismiss the relevance of African American emotions rather than listen to and develop the senses that would validate them. They are making a conscious choice not to develop the awareness that would allow them to see black experiences that go beyond the lines they drew to “create the black man” from their limited perspective (128). This falling short in accounting for black emotions ultimately prevents African American experiences from being validated. They can never solidify into what Andrea Long Chu describes as the “stable ontological crystal we call an event” (303). Because one of the essential components of a microaggression is the emotional pain experienced by the victim, white society’s biased, black-emotion-blind form of processing can write microaggressions off, in Chu’s words, as being “all in your head” (303). Rankine reveals that the true state of African American foreignness is

actually a white foreignness to African American emotions that fictionalizes African American experiences.

Rankine's portrayal of foreignness as a state of invalidation also suggests that blackness is a state of cognitive dissonance for African Americans. This state of cognitive dissonance means that African Americans lack what Elliot Aronson describes as the ability "to make sense of their environment and their behavior" (304). To be black is to be disoriented. African Americans have a lived experience that they cannot reconcile with the diametrically opposed reality of the prevailing society. Kate Clark's "Little Girl" sculpture, according to Rankine, embodies these feelings of incoherence that come from two competing interpretations vying for reality. For her, the sculpture is a fitting window into a lyric written about humans who have been treated as animals for centuries ("Claudia"). Clark's sculpture is not animal, nor is it human, but it is almost both, and it tricks the viewer into expending energy to create coherence out of something that cannot be reconciled. This attempt to reconcile the incoherent is a fitting window into the experience of African American cognitive dissonance. It is a state of chaos that demands a definition that is impossible without discarding one reality or the other, and yet it requires the use of both. By calling this state of distress an "injury" and not a "sickness" in *Citizen*, Rankine also reveals that this state of cognitive dissonance is not an inherited condition but an environmental lesion that is acquired by each successive generation (143). Clark's "Little Girl" was not born with the body of a caribou; it was stitched on. If cognitive dissonance is an injury created by an inconsistency, African Americans would have to surrender to one perspective or another to heal themselves, but they refuse to give up both their lived experience and their place in American society. In this way, *Citizen* shows that cognitive dissonance is an environmentally caused wound that is consciously accepted by African Americans in the refusal to surrender to the perspective of the white hegemony.

In *Citizen*, Rankine reveals that it is this state of cognitive dissonance that makes foreignness a window into an understanding of the African American immanent individual and historical self. Foreignness is a state of cognitive dissonance that places African Americans between realities; this state of dissonance is a feeling that "you don't belong so much to you," opening up possibilities of multiple versions of the self within an individual (146). This new understanding opens from the "immanent you," a place that Amy De'Ath defines as the self that "precedes civil society" (139, 129). From

this immanent self, the understanding expands to encompass what Rankine calls the socially defined “historical self” that carries community perceptions formed over time (14). For African Americans, this historical self is best described as the “weight of nonexistence” (139). The fact that foreignness brings African Americans out of the inherent, devoid-of-context self and into a reflection of the positioning of the self in history and society shows that foreignness is a mechanism that enlarges awareness of community ideologies. Foreignness is a powerful tool that allows foreigners to escape their own perspective and view themselves through the collective eye. At the same time, foreignness becomes a barrier to the re-entry of an individual perspective, and unity of the self is replaced with a conflicting “ache” that cannot be remedied without the surrender of either the individual or the historical self (139). The fact that African Americans deny white Americans’ calls to “move on” from the historical self and “let it go” suggests that the ambiguity and conflict of the self that is found through the lens of foreignness is not just a different perspective but an enlightening and even essential addition to the identity (151).

Just as Rankine observes that foreignness is a clarifying state that allows African Americans to recognize the difference between their immanent selves and their historical selves, she suggests that to be native is to lack the ability to make that distinction. The white hegemony that considers only white people to be native denies white Americans the ability to recognize a historical self that lives alongside an immanent self. African Americans, Rankine says, find it “difficult not to understand” their position as part of “a larger political and social dynamic” (“Art” 157). According to *Citizen*, however, “all our fevered history” will not have the power to turn white bodies “conscious” of their “American positioning” (142, 14). Foreignness, then, is a state of consciousness, and to be native is to be unconscious of one’s historical self. In America, this unconsciousness produces what Javadizadeh calls the state of “white innocence” (480). White Americans cannot recognize their own guilt because the problem of racism is tied directly to a historical self that they cannot see. African Americans call for justice, but, as Rankine writes, white Americans won’t “say yes” because in their minds “there is nothing to solve”—they cannot see the problem (142).

Ultimately, Rankine reveals that where nativeness blinds white Americans, foreignness becomes a state of recognition. It is foreignness that allows African Americans to see their historical self and the problem of

racism. Foreignness brings the questions that make foreigners conscious of knowledge that was previously hidden. As natives, white Americans “have the answers,” but “it is the questions [they] do not know” (115). Without the inquiry that a foreign perspective makes possible, they cannot separate the Western truth they have canonized from its white supremacist bindings. *Citizen*, then, becomes an attempt to make white Americans foreign in order to make them conscious of their own answers. History won’t do it, and so Rankine turns to the lyric because, as James Baldwin claims in *Citizen*, “the purpose of art is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers” (115). *Citizen* is not a match against white Americans but “a lesson” in foreignness that will give them the questions they need to see their own complicity in continuing inequality (159).

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