The Benefit of the Doubt: What is it to Really be a Citizen?

Claudia Rankine’s novel, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, was published in October of 2014 as a response to the Trayvon Martin case, in which neighborhood watch coordinator, George Zimmerman, fatally shot the unarmed African American teenager Trayvon Martin without provocation. Rankine wrote *Citizen* as a tribute to Martin, and in an effort to shed light on other instances in which the colored community is mistreated on a day to day basis. *Citizen* utilizes a series of “microaggressions”—a term coined by Harvard professor Chester M. Pierce in 1970—to describe the insults and dismissals he regularly witnessed towards the colored community. Rankine uses these “microaggressions” in her work to allow the reader a look into the everyday life as a member of the colored community. Rankine refuses to remain dormant and allow the mistreatment of colored individuals to shrink her own voice and self-worth. In an effort to combat this mistreatment, she writes. She writes loudly, boldly and unapologetically. Rankine’s work, *Citizen*, relies heavily on the use of pathos in such a way that the reader is subconsciously willed into understanding the pain and vulnerabilities that the African American community suffers at the hand of these microaggressions.

“Pathos” is defined as “a quality that evokes pity or sadness” (dictionary.com). Rankine’s stylistic approach in her novel *Citizen*, appeals directly to pathos in a multitude of ways. Rankine’s style in this novel includes the use of disturbing/multifaceted images, irony and
pointed diction in an effort to grip the reader visually, mentally and emotionally, all at once. Rankine does this in an effort to accomplish a goal larger than she—or the racism she speaks out against—is. A goal of providing her readers with a better understanding of what racism really is; which isn’t as cut and dry or “black” and “white” as many would like to believe. There is in fact a plethora of unaddressed grey area surrounding the whole concept of “racism”. This grey area lies somewhere in the subconscious of every individual, whether they’re aware of it or not. Rankine uses this to her advantage and plays on the parts that the reader isn’t aware of, while also stating the obvious; thereby bringing her argument full circle in an effort to resonate with the reader on a deeper level. In her use of pathos, Rankine appeals to the reader’s subconscious mind by playing on the reader’s emotions and forcing them to address these feelings, being that she throws them directly into each situation (through the use of microaggressions). Essentially, Rankine is addressing the idea that the “grey” area consists of both black and white.

Rankine’s text is carefully crafted, with each word carrying a substantial amount of weight. Evidence of this does not even require the reader to open the novel. In one singular word the reader is met with the irony that saturates the novel in its entirety—an irony Rankine is more than aware of. This irony serves as a precursor to begin her carefully pointed and stylized approach, with a final goal of gripping the reader’s subconscious. She titles her novel, Citizen. The word “citizen” is defined as, “a legally recognized subject or national of a state or commonwealth, either native or neutralized”, while also being defined as, “an inhabitant of a particular town or city” (dictionary.com). These two definitions are strikingly different in that the first definition carries connotations of freedom; it describes a “citizen” as someone who is “[a] native”, whereas the second definition describes a “citizen” as someone who is merely an “inhabitant” of a town or city. A true “citizen” is allotted rights and privileges in the particular
town or city which they inhabit, and they are—the white citizens that is. African American “citizens” are technically allowed the same privileges and rights of passage as these white “citizens”, but under closer observation, they aren’t. Take Trayvon Martin for example: it could be argued by many that, had he been a white individual, he may still be alive today. Martin may have been granted the benefit of the doubt, had his skin tone been a few shades lighter. But it wasn’t and he wasn’t and today there is no way to know because Martin was shot dead at the age of seventeen. The two contrasting definitions of the word “citizen” are crucial being that Rankine harps on the idea that the perceptions of the white community lay parallel with the former definition—a legally recognized subject of a state or commonwealth—someone who just might have been granted the benefit of the doubt, while the perceptions of the colored community lay parallel with the latter definition—an inhabitant of a particular city or town—someone who just might have been less likely to be granted the benefit of the doubt.

In a review of Citizen, Rankine’s use of language is said to be “[P]rose, plain, direct, conversational, though simultaneously uncanny and reverberant, continually wrong-footing the reader, swapping referents, mixing the physical and metaphysical at will” (Laird). In writing this, Laird is describing Rankine’s pointed style of writing. Rankine’s every page uses a combination of different writing styles in an effort to continuously approach the reader from a different angle with every sentence, and keep the reader on his/her toes. The reader may initially take Rankine at face value, but the next sentence proves to the reader that they have been “wrong footed” and they continue to read more and process more. Laird’s assessment of Rankine’s diction is parallel with the idea that her word choice is pointed, careful and slightly unexpected at times. On the very first page, Rankine opens with a simple phrase, “When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows” (5). In
this concise opening sentence, Rankine is tying together both past and present. The reader, at first glance, may very well be “wrong-footed”, as Laird believes. Rankine’s pointed and careful word selection puts the reader into a situation that most everyone has experienced—you’re tired and don’t want to move: physically that is. Rankine artfully molded this text so that, at first glance, that is what the reader is able to gather. At closer examination, Rankine is tying this very relatable feeling to the idea that, “It’s not just “you” “stacked among your pillows” but the past itself”, making her allusion to being physically tired have far deeper connotations that the reader is forced to come face to face with as the novel continues, and make connection after connection with the turn of each page (Laird).

Rankine’s uncanny ability to craft seemingly simple sentences, phrases and words into—larger than life—thought provoking and overtly complex ideas without the reader’s knowledge (or permission) does not stop at the use of language. Rankine also integrates pictures into her text to further solidify her ideas and drive her point across. On page 18 of her novel *Citizen*, Rankine writes of an unexpected first meeting with a therapist who her speaker has been in contact with for an extended period of time, but has yet to meet. The therapist, essentially, sees an African American individual on her porch and reacts as if this individual is vermin on her property who’d been a forewarned to, “Get away from [her] house” (Rankine, 18). This dialogue is followed by a picture of, what can only really be described as, a wounded animal with some sort of disheveled human face in place of its own. This picture is by artist, Kate Clark, and is titled “Little Girl”. At first glance, the reader may be confused as to what purpose Rankine was trying to serve incorporating this eerie image. Even at second glance, the reader may still be “wrong footed” in believing it was placed there carelessly. At closer examination, the reader is able to obtain the name of the image, “Little Girl”. Now, upon even closer examination, the reader may be able to
draw a couple of conclusions based on the title of the piece. Animals are not able to speak for themselves, “little” children often struggle to find the words to get their point across, and even grown women still struggle for validation; so, a little girl? Someone who is literally at the bottom of the food chain? What validation will she find? And where? Rankine is so blatantly, and at the same time so inconspicuously telling the reader in plain English that the colored community is helplessly agonized over these wrongfully biased preconceived notions about them, which are based solely on the pigment of their skin. In incorporating this image into this particular portion of the text, a picture that—at first glance—was merely a wounded animal with an eerie human-like face in place of its own, becomes one that has certainly “wrong footed” the reader. The reader, only upon careful thought and consideration is able to draw the conclusion Rankine intended from the eerie image, and yet again Rankine has effectively slipped into the reader’s subconscious and is just beginning to smudge the lines between black and white with her feet.

Rankine’s objective is indeed to educate the reader, but at the same time, she wants to begin chiseling away at the preconceived notions of the colored community. In order to do so, she begins subtly and amplifies her messages ever so slightly as she goes along. As the novel progresses, Rankine uses more pointed images to convey the hurt, anger and confusion that she and the colored community feels. For instance, on page 53, an image of a stark white wall is displayed with the words, “I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background” written on it over and over again (Rankine). The image begins with the words printed across the wall clearly, but with repetition, the words become sloppier and less legible. This image is untitled, but a title for this image isn’t necessary to draw meaning. What Rankine is asserting here is that the colored community is growing tired and impatient with feeling neglected and overlooked. Laird asserts, “A recurring theme is the paradox of being seen but not
seen, of being both overly visible and completely invisible” (Laird). This assertion ties into the image on page 53 in that the colored community is being neglected—whether it be for their thoughts, feelings, or emotions. The words “seen”, “overly visible” and “completely invisible” can be exchanged for, “heard”, “overly scrutinized” and “completely ignored” and connote the same general idea: that the colored community is being neglected as though they are invisible yet simultaneously hyper-visible. The invisibility is in conjunction with being overlooked, while the hypervisibility is in conjunction with being OVERLY looked [at]—or scrutinized.

Rankine does not need to be loud in order to be direct, and although at times she is both loud and direct, there are certain instances in which her concise and silent affirmations speak volumes. An example of this is found on pages 134-135 in which three dates are listed, with a short 3-6 word synopsis for each date. They read:

“November 23, 2012 / In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis

February 15, 2014 / The Justice System

August 9, 2014 / In Memory of Michael Brown”

In three short lines – that could be considered fragments—Rankine has essentially summed up the essence of the entire novel. Her novel was written in response to the 2012 Trayvon Martin case in which an unarmed seventeen year old “black” boy was shot to death by a neighborhood watch volunteer in Sanford, Florida (CNN). The case was saturated with passion and tensions were running immeasurably high. Rankine put a picture of a torn up black hoodie on the cover of the novel in remembrance of Trayvon Martin. Both the torn up hoodie and the three dates above relay the same message to the reader; one in which reading between the lines is no longer
necessary because Rankine has blatantly said it now: the justice system is failing, and the attempts at correcting it aren’t effective enough to achieve equality yet.

In her refusal to remain silent, Rankine’s pointed diction, use of powerful images, and strong and unwavering voice in her novel *Citizen* has given a bold face to the colored community. Rankine writes of the microaggressions they face unapologetically, and in relying heavily on the use of pathos, she is able to effectively will the reader into understanding the frustrations, hurt and vulnerabilities of the colored community on a much deeper level, thereby eloquently relaying her message while simultaneously making their voices heard.
Works Cited:


