The Benefit of the Doubt: Rankine on being a Citizen & BEING 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 African American 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 black community. Rankine uses these “microaggressions” in her work to allow the reader a look into the everyday life as a member of the black community. Rankine refuses to remain dormant and allow the mistreatment of colored individuals to shrink her own voice and self-worth and in an effort to combat this mistreatment, she writes. She writes loudly, boldly and unapologetically. Rankine’s use of pathos resonates with the reader on a deeper level and wills the reader into understanding the vulnerabilities, pain and pigeon-holing that takes place in the everyday life of a member of the African American community; her words act as a catalyst for those who have suffered voicelessly—writers, critics, women and other members of the black community—to speak out against racism and emulate her use of pathos while incorporating their own experiences of “citizenship” as African American individuals in contrast with the experiences of “white individuals”.
“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 work has proven to be source for many literary critics and other writers alike to look towards as far larger than itself. Rankine’s writing of microaggressions has opened many doors for writers and readers to explore racisms that have become so frequent that a blind eye is often turned to them—even by the colored community itself. In her criticism, “Towards an Antiracist Ecopoetics: Waste and Wasting in the Poetry of Claudia Rankine”, Angela Hume explores other modes of racism that may be overlooked on a day to day basis. Hume argues that Rankine’s *Citizen* addresses biopolitical issues, critical race issues, and environmental justice theories through her use of strong and pointed diction as well as pathos (Hume). Hume also
discusses the idea of being “othered” by the dominant white society and how this leads to environmental risks for the African American society such as exposure to toxins and chemicals being that they live on the outskirts of towns and cities, whereas the white community lives closer to the center of the city where there are less pollutants and environmental risks (Hume). Hume also explores the idea of the “wasting” of the body in her writing by expressing that the biopolitical issues and environmental risks that the colored community faces is taking a toll on their mental health and stability. Being “othered” in every day interactions, as well as in location is not healthy for the individual to grow, and it inhibits the society from growing together and combatting the racism that remains prevalent (Hume). This source solidifies the idea that Rankine’s use of pathos is direct and pointed, with the objective of aiding in the understanding of the African American community’s pain. Hume also asserts that the use of microaggressions – which appeal directly to pathos— further assist the reader in grasping a firmer understanding of the “wasting” of the body, whether it be mentally, physically or emotionally.

Rankine’s work touches upon both the “wasting of the body” as aforementioned by Hume, while also incorporating a theme of the “social death” which is discussed by Academic Journalist, Fred Moten (Hume & Moten). In Moten’s work, “Blackness and Nothingness: Mysticism in the flesh”, Moten discusses the idea of the “social death” which goes hand in hand with the theme of a “wasting body” as discussed by Angela Hume. Moten discusses the idea of the “mappability of the space time” or “state of the social death”, as well as discussing the ideas of life and optimism in contrast with death and pessimism in what “citizens” call the real world (Moten). Moten examines the optimism and pessimism to connote life and death, while also describing the idea of the “social death” which is a way to discuss the manner in which African Americans are pigeon-holed into a certain “group” (Moten). A “group” which is perceived
pessimistically—Moten argues that this pessimism carries connotations of death, so if African Americans are discussed in a pessimistic light, this connotes with a theme of death, thereby tying into Hume’s argument on the “waste and wasting of the body”. This “social death” that results from the use of “pessimistic” language towards the African American individual supports the notion that Rankine’s use of pathos subconsciously wills the reader into understanding the criticisms felt by the African American community through the use of pointed language and imagery that connotes waste, death, sadness and despair. These African American “bodies” are being tossed aside and addressed pessimistically—according to Hume and Moten, they aren’t being given a chance (Hume & Moten).

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 *Citizen*. In one singular word the reader is met with the irony that saturates the lyric 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 man, 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.

Racism, as defined by dictionary.com is “prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior” (dictionary.com). Although this definition can categorize innumerable racist acts and instances, racism itself is far more complex than one individual thinking they are superior simply because their skin is of a lighter variety. In the book review “Negotiating the Body: Three New Books” on Rankine’s *Citizen*, Adam Day captures the idea that racism affects different people differently: it’s not just one big thing. Day avows that Rankine’s *Citizen* is a hybrid work that molds prose, poetry and visual image (Day). Day maintains that Rankine’s work is about different experiences of citizenship and the literal and figurative institutions that are tied to this citizenship, as well as how it is experienced by each individual in a race. In discussing “citizenship”, Day asserts that it’s considerably varied to the extent that it depends on race, backing the claim that the word “citizen” really does have different connotations depending on the individual and further solidifies the idea that Rankine’s use of pathos puts the reader directly
into each unsettling situation, thereby giving them a better understanding of the racism she speaks out against in a more personalized way (Day).

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, the literary critic Nick 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 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, but writers—especially poets—are strategic in their diction. Upon 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 African American 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 “black” community. In order to do so, she begins subtly and amplifies her messages ever so slightly as she goes along. As *Citizen* progresses, Rankine uses more pointed images to convey the hurt, anger and confusion that she and the African American 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 and careful 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 microagressions 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 giving the reader a more in depth understanding of the lack of equality between the races.

Works Cited


