The Many Sides of “You”

Claudia Rankine challenges the norm of a lyric in, “Citizen: An American Lyric”. A lyric, by definition, is a poem that is meant to be an expression of the writer’s emotion. Rankine challenges this norm in more than one way. Rather than her book being one whole lyric, it can be read as a collage of lyrics. Each lyric has its own story and meaning but when pieced together with the others it creates one message. This lyric expresses an emotion of yearning for empathy.

Rankine wants her readers to understand the stress and inequality that many Americans are experiencing. Rankine published her lyric in 2014, a time of intense social advocacy in America. That year Eric Garner, a 43 year old Staten Island, NY resident, was killed during an altercation with the NYPD. Eric Garner’s death was ruled a homicide by the medical examiner but the police officer who performed the chokehold on Garner was not indicted. Many Americans expressed outrage by this incident and took the streets in protests across numerous states. They claimed that Eric Garner’s death was another example of the police brutality that black Americans experienced due to the racial prejudices against them. Just two years prior to Eric Garner’s death was the shooting of Trayvon Martin, a 17 year old year Florida resident. Trayvon had been coming from a local deli when he was shot in “self-defense” by a neighborhood watch captain after he approached Trayvon for “looking suspicious” (CNN). It was Trayvon’s case that led to the creation of the now popular hashtag ‘BlackLivesMatter’. Both of these cases made headliners in the news and media in America at the time it occurred and well afterwards and brought attention to the social injustices experienced by black Americans. Talk of gun reform, racism, and a variety of social injustices began to become more vocal across many mediums of communication. Rankine utilizes the medium of writing to have a similar conversation.
Rankine’s lyric describes a variety of events where racism against black Americans occurs. Rankine uses second person perspective to describe such events. Rankine’s use of the second person pronoun “you” shifts constantly throughout the lyric. This shift emphasizes Rankine’s challenge to the lyric norm by seemingly disconnecting herself and the emotion tied into the events being written about. Rather she leaves the “you” as ambiguous with the possible intentions of readers, regardless of race or gender, coming to a realization of the reality and effects of these microaggressions. Rankine shifts between pronouns using “you” done intentionally to suggest that the audience is not just one demographic of people, but rather multiple. This is done to create a range of emotional experiences such as anger, embarrassment, invisibility, and discomfort within the reader towards the events being written about.

In section one Rankine’s use of the “you” seems to be directed towards the african american race. In the first two pages the “you” is addressed as a 12 year old African American female. She clearly states “you are twelve attending Sts. Philip and James School…”, which sets the scene to be in a school setting and the age of the given “you”. Sts. Philip and James is a private Catholic school. Rankine alludes to the race of the “you” when she writes “You never really speak except for the time she […] tells you you […] have features more like a white person.” (5) The words “features more like a white person” implies that the person being spoken to is not of the white race. The event that this young girl is described in can invoke an emotion of frustration. “Sister Evelyn must think these two girls think a lot alike […] or she never actually saw you sitting there.” (Rankine 6) Although there are two females involved in this incident, the teacher does not acknowledge the female that is of a non-white race. This young girl is considered invisible to this sister and subjected to critique of her race by her peer(s). Rankine
emphasizes this feeling of invisibility when she describes an encounter in a drugstore. A male unknowingly cuts the line in front of a female and upon realization exclaims, “Oh my god, I didn’t see you [...] No, no, no, I really didn’t see you” (Rankine 77). The individual being addressed is not specified nor is any details of the said individual given, yet the feeling of invisibility is undeniable. Regardless of the individual’s demographics they are being regarded as nothing to the other. Their presence was not acknowledged.

Within this first section the “you” shifts once to what could be considered to be a white person’s perspective. Rankine sets the stage for this encounter as “You and your partner going out to see the film [...]” and then receiving a phone call that your neighbor is “watching a menacing black guy casing both your homes” (Rankine 15). The mentioning of the race of this said menacing individual suggests that both the neighbor and this individual are not colored people. This interpretation is based on the assumption that black Americans would not discriminate or harshly identify other black Americans. This very assumption emphasizes yet another stereotype, and microaggression, towards the black American community. After the police that was called on this friend for looking “menacing” has left, the person Rankine addresses in this event tells their friend that “the next time he wants to talk on the phone he should just go in the backyard” (Rankine 15). The rest of this encounter is described as follows: “He looks at you a long minute before saying he can speak on the wherever he wants. Yes, of course, you say. Yes, of course.” (Rankine 15) The use of the words “long minute” indicates a sense of astonishment felt by the friend. His own friend is trying to delegate where he can talk on the phone, similar to the Jim Crow laws of the late 20th century even though it is now more than a decade into the 21st century. The repetition of the phrase “yes, of course” to the friend’s
offended response expresses uncomfortableness as they realize what they had just said. Reading about this tense interaction between two, supposedly, friends could cause the reader to think back to a possible similar encounter in their own lives and reflect on the parallels.

There are moments in the lyric when the “you” is so ambiguous that it could be applied to anyone. Rankine writes about the stress felt by one individual when it comes to coping with the hurt of social injustices:

“You can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard. [...] Did she really just say that? He said what? What did she do? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? Do you remember when you sighed?” (Rankine 63)

The metaphor of the flesh being a cupboard emphasizes how much is being held by this one individual. They are storing all of the hurt they have experienced in their past with them. The excess of questions that follow this metaphor could be suggesting that it is an event that triggered these questions and has created the hurt that is now stored within them. A cupboard is meant to hold a large quantity of objects and so if their flesh is a cupboard, these questions and hurt has occurred more than once in their past. Having to carry this pain inside for so long is no easy nor enjoyable chore. Rankine possibly leaves the “you” ambiguous in this passage so that the reader could think about what it feels harness these feelings for so long. Thinking about this could cause an individual to be more thoughtful when they are speaking about others. Another lyric where the “you” is ambiguous is when a bystander is described observing a man knocking over a woman’s child in the subway and failing to stop to apologize. The bystander is appalled by this man’s actions but understands. “Yes, and you want it to stop, you want the child pushed to the ground to be seen, to be helped to his feet, to be brushed off by the person that did not see him, has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself.” (Rankine
17) This bystander realizes that there are people in this world that are oblivious to others unlike themselves. Details of this bystander’s race, gender, and socioeconomic background are not given but regardless he is in support of wanting to help the child. This bystander could be white, black, male, or female and yet he is able to see the wrong that was done to this child and even indicates that this incident is most likely not the first to occur. They may or may not be able to identify directly with the child his mother, or the bystander but they are able to identify wrong when seen despite any differences.

The constant shifting of the “you” becomes representative of America as a whole. This represents that the American is more than one person and not one ideal American. To be a citizen of America is not defined by one attribute, but rather many. For an American, the struggles felt by one should be felt by many. This is not to say that white Americans can or cannot fully understand the struggle felt by black Americans, but rather that we all experience this struggle just through different perspectives. The change in “you” throughout the lyric is meant to bring these struggles into focus for all Americans on either side of the struggle. Not focusing on one race, gender, or sub-group (i.e. police, adolescents, etc.) in this lyric, indicates that it is not one demographic that needs to be addressed. Each group plays a role in the inequality occurring in America. Each group consists of Americans and therefore each group is crying out for a struggle that the other cannot understand. Rankine’s goal seems to be to create an experience where anybody from any group can read and be able to relate and therefore reflect on their own experiences and roles in them. Rankine not explicitly indicating who the “you” is and how it changes throughout sections allows this experience to occur unconsciously. The reader would be empathizing with the events in that section without realizing that it is not directed towards them.
Once the reader realizes they are empathizing with an experience that they have never, or could never, experience it then causes them to consider what is being done to the people within that group. If they can feel the frustration through only reading about such experiences, actually going through it could cause that frustration to increase exponentially.
Works Cited