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Race, Space, and the Black Body in *Citizen: American Lyric*

Race, Espace, et le Corps noir dans *Citizen: American Lyric*

Fethia BRAIK
Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef / ALGERIA
E-mail f.braik@univ-chlef.dz

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Abstract

Twenty-first-century African American female writers articulate gendered voice and agency through representations of body politics and femininity within political and institutional spaces. The Jamaican American poet, playwright, and educator Claudia Rankine stands as an influential voice of American contemporary society. Through her book-length poem *Citizen: American Lyric (2014),* Rankine blends genres to unveil the hidden racism in the American society. She advocates for empathy with victims of social malaise, micro-aggression, and police brutality on account of race, colour, and/or gender. Rankine often delves into social issues and matters related to race highlighting the complexities of identities and societies as well. This paper explores how body politics, representation, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and spatial theory are mobilized to disclose the daily man0ifestations of racism. Rankine announces how the Black body in the contemporary American society is exploited. The paper further examines how African American women writers transform the body into a narrative archive, inscribing histories of racialized sexism, political exclusion, labor, and resistance onto lived experience.
Keywords: Body politics- Citizen: American Lyric- Critical Race Theory -Rankine Claudia-spatial theory
Résumé

Cette recherche analyse comment les écrivaines afro-américaines du XXIe siècle articulent une voix et une agentivité genrées à travers des représentations de la politique du corps et de la féminité au sein des espaces politiques et institutionnels. La poétesse, dramaturge et pédagogue Afro-Américaine Claudia Rankine, d'origine jamaïcaine, s'impose comme une voix influente de la société américaine contemporaine. Dans son poème sous forme de livre *Citizen : American Lyric* (2014), Rankine mêle les genres littéraires pour révéler le racisme caché dans la société américaine. Elle plaide en faveur de l'empathie envers les victimes de malaise social, de micro-agressions et de violences policières liées à la race, à la couleur de peau et/ou au genre. Rankine explore fréquemment les questions sociales et les problématiques liées à la race, mettant en lumière la complexité des identités et des sociétés. Cette étude examine comment la politique du corps, la représentation, la théorie critique de la race (Critical Race Theory, (CRT) et la théorie spatiale sont mobilisées pour dévoiler les manifestations quotidiennes du racisme. Rankine révèle comment le corps noir est exploité dans la société américaine contemporaine. L'objectif de cet article vise à explorer en outre comment les écrivaines afro-américaines transforment le corps en une archive narrative, inscrivant dans l'expérience vécue les histoires du sexisme racialisé, de l'exclusion politique, du travail et de la résistance.

Mots-clés :
Politique du corps- *Citizen: American Lyric*- théorie critique de la race (CRT)- Claudia Rankine- théorie spatiale

* Corresponding author: Fethia BRAIK
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Introduction

The New York Times bestseller *Citizen: American Lyric* gained the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry. The book innovatively employs a combination of poetry, prose, dialogues, essays, and visual elements challenging not only traditional literary norms but also societal boundaries. Readers invariably discern the persistent employment of the second person pronoun "you" whereby Rankine systemically invokes the abandonment of the Black citizens. Readers 'engagement is highly recommended. Throughout the text, the writer repeatedly narrates incidents that Black people encounter in their daily lives. The paper aims to answer the following research question: how does the writer portray race, space, and the black body in the contemporary American society? Several sub questions can be raised: how does *Citizen* expose racism? How can the black body serve as a narrative archive of oppression and micro-aggression? To answer these questions, the researcher relies on a critical examination of the literary corpus employing a descriptive-analytical approach. In addition, the paper foregrounds Critical Race Theory and spatial theory, as methodological framework, to scrutinize democratic principles and social equities; and expose racial dynamics reflected within *Citizen*. Rankine traces the notion of citizenship to question belonging. For her, race and gender shape lived experiences. Scholars like Michel Foucault, Kimerble Crenshaw, among many others, suggest that the body is *produced* by power and "structural and political dimensions of race"

I- Black Bodies and Citizenship in *Citizen: American Lyric*

Human bodies display similarities and differences between and among human beings in language use, communication styles, use of space, gestures, and eye contact. More importantly, the bodies are vehicles whereby knowledge, understanding, misconceptions, and prejudices about other cultures are exchanged. As a matter of fact, the appearances of human bodies establish hierarchies of social differences based on skin color, hairstyles, facial features, expressions, gestures, and clothing. Body politics refers to "the policies whereby power is marked, regulated, and negotiated through the body"

Certain bodies, which stand as citizens, are deprived from their rights. "*This foregrounds the fact that despite the alleged neutrality and color-blindness of the citizenship, being considered a full citizen, drawn from the notion of being a full subject, is not neutral*." (S.Wynter, 2015, p.108)

Thinkers like Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Audre Lorde, to name only these, championed body politics. The concept of "biopower" coined by Foucault describes how policies and governmental institutions manage populations through regulating life. Foucault

argues that states teach human beings to adapt their bodies to societal standards. Lorde provides rather a crucial intersectional perspective by shedding light on how Black women, being "different bodies", are treated and devalued.

In *Citizen: American Lyric,* the Black body is portrayed as a site of oppression and resistance. It is paradoxically hypervisible and erased; and put under ongoing scrutiny and constant surveillance in a country "*where White stands for the unmarked norm, Black stands for criminal*" (M. Cantero-Sánchez, 2019, pp 91).

> "**I knew whatever was in front of me was happening and then the police vehicle came to a screeching halt in front of me like they were setting up a blockade. Everywhere were flashes, a siren sounding and a stretched-out roar. Get on the ground. Get on the ground now. Then I just knew. And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description.**" (Rankine 97)

The passage highlights the hypervisibilty of the Black body. Being Black in contemporary America leads axiomatically to being arrested, checked, and suspected. The black body stands as an evidence to illustrate that citizenship is encroached upon in cases revolving around law enforcement.

On page 16, Rankine describes a situation where white children were supervised by a Black person; a white neighbor called the police out of fear: "*Your neighbor tells you he is standing at his window watching a menacing black guy casing both your homes. The guy is walking back and forth talking to himself and seems disturbed*."

Actually, *Citizen* reminds us that justice and democracy are embedded in racism in a country overwhelmed by the aftermaths of slavery. In a post- racial America Black bodies are still unwillingly engaged in criminal cases, being murdered, and detained for racial issues.

Rankine reminds her readers with the names of Blacks who were killed on account of race. She writes:

> "In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis
> In Memory of Eric Garner
> In Memory of John Crawford
> In Memory of Michael Brown
> In Memory of Akai Gurley
> In Memory of Tamir Rice
> In Memory of Walter Schott
> [….] In Memory
> In Memory"

This collective memory serves as perpetual shared archive between and among black bodies. The victims of racial violence are vivid elements of a continuous historical pattern revealing citizenship's vulnerability to state violence.

In another passage when a narrator goes to see their therapist, Rankine elucidates a clear exploitation and disavowal of humanity. Past events and regimes which systemically negated black lives furnished an arsenal for modern necropolises.

> **"When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard? It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry". (Rankine 18)**

In this passage, the therapist's initial reaction reveals how black bodies are perceived. Even in safe and private settings, racial perceptions are unavoidable. The therapist's apology exposes misunderstanding rather than systemic racism. This scene best describes how citizenship is willingly violated in different contexts.

Being exposed to the white gaze enables blacks to phenomenoligically be aware of differences of race. Race-based and/or gender-based differences crystallized once put in a space where the differences are enacted. However, such racial interactions are conceived as "misunderstandings" disconnected from political dimensions that foreground for democracy, freedom, and justice.

II- The Representation of the Black Body

History and habits establish orientations towards race, and control citizens' interactions towards blacks. In another poem on page 44, Rankine develops the concept of everyday micro aggressions. She faithfully describes a white bank manager when he sees a rich black woman. She writes:

> **"When you arrive and announce yourself, he blurts out, I didn't know you were black!**
> **I didn't mean to say that, he then says.**
> **Aloud, you say.**
> **What? he asks.**
> **You didn't mean to say that aloud."** (Rankine 44)

Through this statement, the author illustrates how prior racial assumptions shape professional interactions; as it strengthens the impossibility of expecting blackness in positions of wealth and authority. Cantero Sanchez believes: "*the domesticity that white bodies share, which sets white bodies as the norm, the home, produces whiteness as a dwelling and blackness a suspicious or invisible category*" (pp 92)

While body politics elucidates how bodies are regulated, constrained, and affected, Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a critical framework to explain the underlying structures accountable for.

III- Serena Williams: a Black Body in a White Space

By the 1970s and 80s American law scholars and civil rights activists challenged civil rights and ethnic studies by placing them in a broader perspective to encompass economics and history; and reshape the relationship between race and power. Critical Race Theory provides an understanding of societal structures responsible of racial hierarchy. The theory was stemmed from critical legal studies and radical feminism; as it modeled the emergence of different

subgroups like Asian American jurisprudence and Latin critical studies. (Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 2017, p 6)

CRT theorists come to state that racism is ordinary and embedded in society to serve the interests of the white elite and the working class. The theory views race as a social construct and explores concepts like differential racialization, intersectionality, and anti-essentialism. Derrick Bell further posits that minorities 'civil rights initiatives remain at the mercy of the dominant group's self-interests. As a paradigmatic case, CRT scholars believe that the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown Vs Board of Education* (1954) whereby segregation in public schools was declared unconstitutional served the white majority more than Blacks.

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term of intersectionality to emphasize how multiple layers of oppression like racism, sexism, and classism intersect to marginalize individuals. Ignoring race simply means ignoring existent systematic disadvantages. Colorblindness and law's neutrality are notwithstanding for CRT theorists.

Although the notion of race as biological concept has been empirically discredited, race stands, in the twenty-first century, inadequate to debunk the persistent common myths about it that continue to impact people's lives. Actually, discrimination, and exclusion on account of race still exist in contemporary American society.

In her article, Bella Adams offers a sustained reading of *Citizen* through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), foregrounding the structural and institutional dimensions of racism embedded within the text. Adams situates *Citizen* within the intellectual tradition of CRT, particularly its emphasis on the ordinariness of racism, the social construction of race, and the persistence of white privilege within ostensibly liberal democracies. Rather than treating racism as episodic or exceptional, Adams argues that Rankine's work exposes it as systemic and normalized, embedded in everyday interactions and institutional frameworks. In this sense, *Citizen* exemplifies CRT's claim that racism is not aberrational but constitutive of American social life.

Adams believes that: "*Beyond such explicit acts of racism are racial aggressions that go by almost unnoticed because they are built into institutions and everyday life, to the extent that they have become commonplace*" (pp 2)

In the second part of *Citizen,* the author analyses the case of the famous tennis player Serena Williams. Rankine demonstrates how physical location promotes for discriminatory treatments. In tennis, the lines are not fixed markers; they are rather determined according to the player's skin color. Therefore, many black players are excluded from the game; tennis is then "lily- white place in the world". Positioning discard future black players since borders redraw themselves as needed. Rankine reveals that distancing equates with segregation and discrimination so long as it first highlights social classification on account of skin color.

In this regard, it is highly recommended to bring back to the surface the catchphrase "*separate but equal*" which was used to protect unequally white spaces from wrongness of blackness. Williams' achievements are diminished because of her skin color. Along with her sister, Serena represents "the angry black woman" who, aware of her body, outbursts the unfair treatment of the umpires. Rankine writes:

> **"What does a victorious or defeated black woman's body in a historically white space look like? Serena and her big sister Venus Williams brought to mind Zora Neale Hurston's "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." This appropriated line, stenciled on canvas by Glenn Ligon, who used plastic letter stencils, smudging oil sticks, and graphite to transform the words into abstractions, seemed to be ad copy for some aspect of life for all black bodies."** (Rankine 26)



(AI generated image)

While Serena's body was unseen and her achievement was overshadowed, her "disruptive" act became hypervisible, aggressive, and undismissable at once. Rankine writes

> **"Serena's frustrations, her disappointments, exist within a system you understand not to try to understand in any fair-minded way because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systemic, as ordinary. For Serena, the daily diminishment is a low flame, a constant drip. . Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you. To understand is to see Serena as hemmed in as any other black body thrown against our American background." (p.32)**

Rankine blends present experiences to historical structures to demonstrate how past injustices heavily burden black bodies in contemporary spaces. The passage illustrates the power of the space in regulating the body. Once again, citizenship excludes black embodiment.

On September 11th, 2011, Williams won the Grand Slam after defeating the number one player the Dane Caroline Wozniacki. She believed she "will prove her red-blooded American patriotism and will once and for all become beloved by the tennis world" (Rankine 30)

Central to Adams's analysis is the metaphor of "white backgrounds." She interprets Rankine's depiction of microaggressions and racialized encounters as occurring against a pervasive, often invisible backdrop of whiteness that structures perception and social relations. This "background" operates as a normative frame that renders Black experience hypervisible yet simultaneously marginalized, addressing the notion of the seen and the unseen. By invoking this visual and spatial metaphor, Adams connects Rankine's formal strategies—including her use of blank space, visual imagery, and fragmented lyric address—to the broader racial architecture that sustains inequality.

Henri Lefebvre states that space is a means of control, dominance, and thus of power. While many scholars studied *Citizen* referring to the concept of visibility, Thomas Jenson (2021) believes that the focus on visibility ignores spatiality. He states: "spatial studies undergird a study of visibility. I argue that the gap in the conversation about *Citizen* involves not just the implied gap between racial groups but also their closeness." (pp 67) Rankine provides a lens to see domination rather than a humble racial observation. Rankine believes that every space is racialized. Race is structured through spaces like streets, homes, workplaces, governmental institutions, and sports arenas; and experienced through the body.

In contemporary American society, blacks and whites often share the same spaces. Their experiences, however, differ dramatically. Just like space, language embodies injustice, and thus racial experiences. Through a performative language, *Citizen* provides an interpretation of *Reconstruction*, which formally mirrored social and political gains for African Americans in the post Civil War era. Rankine believes that reconstruction uses language to justify white violence. Jenson T. believes that:

> **"If physical proximity and linguistic distancing characterize reconstruction, Rankine argues that addressability, another spatial relationship, inflicts violence through language while maintainingphysical distance. While reconstruction and addressability weaponize either language or physical space, *Citizen*'s final spatial relationship—translation—simultaneously engages both by objectifying and positioning black individuals through anonymous white individuals."** (Jenson 68 2021)

The "promise" of social equality undermines black citizenship. Throughout the book, the author metaphorically describes actions linking past to present biased violence.

Conclusion

In contemporary American society, body politics and citizenship still shape everyday life. Claudia Rankine, through her innovative text *Citizen: American Lyric* demonstrates how racism is displayed through microagression, misrecognition, and social and political exclusion. The black body is manipulated, scrutinized, and subtly erased. It, hence, serves as a narrative archive whereby systemic racism is recorded. Moreover, the employment of critical race theory and spatial theory elucidate how racism is embedded in space and language. Rankine challenges spaces' neutrality, citizenship, and belonging. This paper has shed light on the role of twenty-first African American female writers in articulating gendered voice and agency.

Citizen does not only challenge existing literary techniques and devices but also scrutinize structural social and political norms that reflect systemic inequalities. Public spaces particularly coded as whites' witness daily sufferings of black bodies in a society universally known for its support of democracy and justices. Rankine makes of the black body a narrative archive to articulate and preserve human experiences of oppression and resistance. *Citizen* brings on the surface segregation and biased violence traced back to the legacy of slavery for the end of raising awareness and fostering empathy. This length-book poem reinforces the functionality of literature as a catalyst of change. Literature stands as a strong device to prompt societies to reconsider "standards" of democracy and strive for social equalities.

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