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Punishing 'Presence': Analysing the Prose Blocks of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*

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Abstract
This essay examines how the prose blocks in *Citizen: An American Lyric* formally enact the dynamics of racialised visibility and erasure. Rather than merely documenting micro-aggressions, these blocks function as material structures that embody the tension between presence and marginalisation. By reconfiguring the lyric as a collective, plural mode, Rankine expands its capacity to hold dispersed narratives of racial experience. The second-person address destabilises readerly distance, implicating the reader within moments of linguistic violence. The prose block's narrative openness allows for the accumulation of injury without resolution, mirroring the repetitive and systemic nature of racism. Visually, the block appears as black text against the white page, symbolically aligning with the racialised body positioned within dominant structures of whiteness. Ultimately, the essay argues that Rankine's formal strategies transform the prose poem into a site where presence is asserted.

Keywords: Claudia Rankine, Prose poetry, Lyric form, Racial micro-aggression, Visibility and erasure, Second-person address, Formal experimentation, Visual poetics, Racialised body

> …a friend once told you there exists the medical term—John Henryism—for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure. (Rankine 11)

In moments of revelation like this, Claudia Rankine's exhaustive retelling of racial micro-aggressions transcends domesticity and achieves a rare universality. It is in unearthing a collective testimony of racism that *Citizen* succeeds. What accumulates across *Citizen: An American Lyric* is not merely a catalogue of personal affronts but a sustained meditation on presence: who is permitted to inhabit space without friction, and who must repeatedly assert their right to be seen. For some, presence is assumed. For others, it is a daily labour.

Rankine shows how systemic racism sustains itself by provoking a struggle for visibility and punishing that visibility once it is achieved. She talks about how 'language acts,' linguistic manifestations of racist ideology, when used as a means of address, become weapons. The violence does not always announce itself spectacularly. It appears in slips of the tongue, in empty seats beside you, in expected performances of blackness, in baffling moments that have now become "an unacknowledged norm; a hate that is in fact heritage" (Windell). As Rankine recounts, it is all so momentary, so in the present that often 'you' are only left with enough time to react in bafflement to what has just been said or done: "the energy required to present, to react, to assert is accompanied by visceral disappointment: a disappointment in the sense that no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived" (Rankine 24).

This essay argues that the prose blocks of Citizen do not merely narrate racial micro-aggression; they formally enact the tension between visibility and erasure. Through their reconfiguration of the lyric mode, their capacity to absorb plural narratives, and their stark visual presence against the white of the page, the prose blocks come to embody the racialised body itself. They stage presence as something both asserted and disciplined. The prose block becomes the structure through which violence is made materially visible.

I. Refiguring the Lyric

Citizen is a complex interweaving of genres. Prose, poetry, essays, visual art, and photographs interact with and play off each other. Ben Lerner notes that Rankine's book is indexed as "Essay/Poetry" for sales purposes while being subtitled "An American Lyric". Lerner asks how the lyric, "traditionally understood as denoting short, musical, and expressive verse", can translate into the long passages of "tonally flat" prose that mark *Citizen*. Rather than treating this as simple subversion of genre, it is more productive to ask what happens to the lyric when it inhabits the prose block.

The 'lyric,' like any other semantic object, has undergone a multitude of shifts in meaning over the years. Stephen Burt, investigating the epistemology of the lyric suggests, that owing to the diverse ways in which the lyric seems to manifest itself, it is no more a genre but rather a mode of writing: "Lyric escapes from prose meaning almost as the soul, or the spirit, escapes from the body" (Burt 428). According to Burt, the lyric and the prose poem should be at odds with each other. It is despite this supposed hostility that *Citizen* seems to function.

In an interview with Kayo Chingonyi, answering a question about the relationship between form and matter in her poetry, Rankine insists she has nothing against traditional form. "It's just that in thinking about race you're thinking about people's lives. A book like *Citizen* was dependent on stories of people, and so one wanted to find a form that could hold that" (qtd. in Chingonyi). In interviews, she describes the lyric as an "internal song" of American voices in their multiplicity. Considering Rankine's insistence on this plurality, we can draw a new understanding of Helen Vendler's definition of the lyric as a form that makes available "an utterance for us to utter as ours" (qtd. in Burt 425).

Hence, we arrive at the framing of Rankine's prose poetry as lyric, not only as a means of subversion but also as a form that can "hold" the "stories of people." Rankine's insistence on the subtitle "An American Lyric" is therefore not ironic but strategic. The lyric here does not isolate a private consciousness. It absorbs collective experience. If lyric traditionally privileges interior feeling, Rankine expands that interior into a shared social condition: "That escape and entering widens our humanity." (Jackson 21)

The second-person address is crucial to this expansion.

> You are rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood of Santa Monica. This friend says, as you walk toward her. You are late, you nappy-headed ho. What did you say? you ask, though you have heard every word (Rankine 41).

The repeated "you" unsettles stable positions of speaker and addressee. In a scene where a friend greets you with a racial slur, the reader cannot remain comfortably outside the exchange. The lyric "you" renders the reader both implicated and exposed. Identification becomes unavoidable. For readers who have experienced racialised address, the "you" may feel painfully recognisable. For everyone else, the options are either to align with the addressee of the slur, or to be complacent in its utterance. Either way, the language cannot be consumed passively.

In a traditional lyric, second person might encourage empathetic spectatorship. In *Citizen,* it destabilises spectatorship. As Lauren Berlant observes, the space constructed is not a protected interior projected outward, but an intimate distance that is at once singular and collective. The prose block allows this intimacy to unfold without the compression of lineated verse. It gives lyric horizontal room. It becomes a container for voices that do not resolve into a single coherent "I." Instead of a unified subjectivity, we encounter a chorus of lived moments, bound together by repetition. Thus, the lyric in *Citizen* is not abandoned but refigured. It becomes a mode capable of carrying the weight of social history.

II. Narrative Expansiveness and the Accumulation of Injury

Prose poetry, even historically, unsettles formal expectations. It absorbs narrative, dialogue, intertextual reference, and contemporary speech. It often feels fragmented or open-ended, a characteristic of prose poetry as a form (Noel-Tod). In *Citizen*, these qualities are not merely aesthetic; they mirror the structure of racial experience.

Let us consider *Citizen*'s fragmented voices. Though Rankine's speaker recounts individual experiences, they come from varied people and places, that all seem to blend into one. The prose block reflects this dynamic. It unfolds narratively, yet without tidy resolution. Stories bleed into one another. The same injury recurs in altered settings. Individual incidents seem interchangeable because the structure that produces them remains intact.

Fragmentation here does not signal experimental abstraction. It registers the way racism manifests in public life: sudden, banal, often deniable. You are mistaken for another because there is "only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description" (Rankine 105). The prose block absorbs these moments into a cumulative field. Its expansiveness, unchecked by meter or rhyme, allows micro-aggressions to accumulate rather than resolve. However, as clarified earlier, the prose form welcomes narrative, regardless of how incomplete or fragmented it is. The mystery of the prose poem is its affinity for narrative, despite Ali Smith's definition of it as "a home to the sentence that refuses to make sense and the paragraph that refuses to progress" (qtd. in Herrington and Atherton 11). In an interview with Ratik Asokan in 2014, Rankine talks about how the more lyrical verse sections towards the end of the book differs from the prose poems. Where the prose carries the narrative, the verse is more internal, creating "the lines to sit inside the feeling that the stories had blurred out" (qtd. in Asokan).

According to Emma Kimberly, the message that Rankine seems to be preaching is that only an "awareness of our position as interpreters, rather than passive consumers", entertaining the possibilities of multiple interpretations, "can lead us to connect in a genuine and compassionate way with the world around us and the other people who inhabit it" (Kimberly 791). The prose poem opens up these venues of interpretation, triggering, what Jackson remarked as, a 'widening of humanity'. This is unsurprising, since, according to Jeremy Noel-Tod, Charles

Baudelaire, who is credited with the popularisation of the prose poem, envisioned the form as "a record of (a) historical moment; a private journal made public".

Beyond the structural nuances of the prose poem, Rankine is also cognizant of ways in which to utilize its linguistic techniques. Addressing American poet Cole Swensen's remarks on her previous poetry book, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine expresses her surprise at Swensen's suggestion that the language she used was simple and direct, in order to facilitate truth-telling. "I worked hard for simplicity in order to allow for projection and open-endedness in the text, for a sort of blankness and transparency that would lose the specificity of the "truth"", she corrects. For Rankine, simplicity of language does not suggest truth, but makes its failure transparent (Rankine and Berlant 49).

Even in those situations where the micro-aggressions are more public and visible, as in the case of Serena Williams and her history of being wronged, as Rankine points out, time and time again, by tennis chair umpires making bad calls, costing her games and titles, what baffles is the consistency of these offences. Predicaments that span years to the extent, they become expected, until the body cannot hold any more transgressions. It is thus, that the prose blocks of *Citizen* come to represent the coloured body itself. Maria A. Windell opines that the success of the book can be traced back to its ability to make "one body […] feel the injustice wheeled at another". *Citizen* is constantly in conversation with the reader, tracing the pathways of violence through the body of the prose poem into historically coloured bodies.

In an instance in the book, the speaker remembers Judith Butler answering a question about what makes language hurtful. She answers that it is our "condition of being addressable" (Rankine, 48). Hurtful language, the speaker realises, is meant to attack the ways in which we are present. Language itself emerges as a site of injury. Judith Butler's notion that our vulnerability stems from being addressable resonates throughout. Hurtful language attacks the condition of being present in the world. To be hailed is to be exposed. To object risks being labelled excessive. To remain silent risks internalising erasure. The prose block captures this feedback loop. It carries the story forward while refusing catharsis.

III. The Visual Field: Black Text Against White Page

"I think if there is one thing my work does, one thing it's invested in, it's seeing" (qtd. in Chingonyi). *Citizen* is interspersed with images and photographs: uncaptioned, contextually vague pauses in the text. The visual effect of text and images on paper seems to be an area of focus for Rankine. She talks at length about the different ways in which the images, art, and photographs in the book function, both as individual entities and as a textual whole. "I wanted to create an aesthetic form for myself, where the text was trembling and doubling and wandering in its negotiation and renegotiation of the image, a form where the text's stated claims and interests would reverberate off the included visuals," says Rankine, in conversation with Lauren Berlant. The visual elements of the book are not intended to be understood individually, hence the lack of context for why, when and where they appear. Instead, they are meant to interrupt the text, actively interact, expand, and disrupt the narrative. However, this incorporation of the visual aspect into the poetry is not limited to photographs and images but extends to the way in which the prose poem appears on the page.

Consider Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton describing its appearance in *Prose Poem: An Introduction*:

> Each block of text is neatly rectangular and has a sense of being "made," much as many lineated poems do, because the form has the hallmarks of having been closely composed, with an outward appearance of regularity. These works are

> reminiscent of rooms viewed from above, suggesting the original meaning of the word "stanza" or "room." (15)

Dan Chiasson notes the visual similarity between the prose block and a tennis court: a marked rectangle within which all action unfolds. The association is apt. In the sections devoted to Serena Williams, Rankine observes the mounting frustration that accompanies repeated bad calls. Watching tennis with the sound off becomes "a clean displacement of effort, will, and disappointment." The tennis court is a bounded field of contest. So is the prose block— "the marked rectangle within which all the action happens, the quick back and forth of the ball like a line breaking and returning to the left-hand margin."

Against the white of the page, the black text becomes charged. Zora Neale Hurston's famous line, "I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background," appears in Glenn Ligon's stencilled adaptation within the book (Ch. II). The visual echo between that image and the prose block is unmistakable. Both render blackness visible through contrast. The block becomes analogous to the racialised body. The white page becomes the field that defines and disciplines it.

"In *Citizen*, the blank and typically white backgrounds on which Rankine's words and images appear say something without seeming to say anything" (Adams 27). The shock of being thrown against this background, of having to be suddenly visible and having to face its consequences often manifests itself in the form of excessive, repeated questions.

> Who did what to whom on which day? Who said that? She said what? What did he just do? 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 62)

Existing within the margins of the prose paragraph, these questions almost always lead up to a blank white page at the end of them, similar to a historical silence, in answer to questions of racial discrimination and violence. In spite of efforts to assert presence, there is only disappointment waiting at the end, only silence. This is the purpose of the prose poem; to be present, to combat the expanding 'void' of white.

Homi K. Bhabha, in his essay "Writing the Void," defines the void as "the empty space of erasure and extermination – of missing persons, destroyed things, hidden histories, lost records, expropriated lands, murdered minorities." He insists that writers who speak from and about the void must evoke this emptiness and erasure without filling the absences. The prose poem maintains this ideal by simply calling attention to the black text on the white page. The act of filling space becomes itself meaningful. In a book invested in seeing, the visual insistence of the block is not incidental. It is structural.

Conclusion: The Enactment of Punished Presence

Throughout *Citizen*, presence emerges as both necessity and liability. To be visible is to risk misrecognition. To protest is to invite discipline. To withdraw is to participate in erasure. The struggle is cyclical.

The long, leading lines that form the prose poem, cutting off at the edge of the void, becomes symbolic of an ongoing struggle against erasure and systemic hierarchies. "The body has memory", notes Rankine. "All the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through, even as we are eternally stupid or everlastingly optimistic" (Rankine 26). It is in the face of this lasting physical impact of racism, that the traditional lyric, centred on singular interior expression, proves insufficient. Rankine expands lyric into a collective mode capable of holding narrative, plurality, and historical accumulation.

More importantly, the prose blocks do not simply describe racial injury; they enact the conditions under which it occurs.

It achieves what Homi K. Bhabha wishes for, in writing that can openly speak about matters of race and gender without barriers or gaps in discourse: "a way of writing that makes black and white come alive in a shared text", in order to transpose language to a space "that is never simply white and never singly black". As black rectangles against white pages, they materialise the racialised body thrown against a field of whiteness. They occupy space without apology. They advance horizontally, pressing against margins that signify both limit and exposure. They stage presence as something continually asserted and continually challenged.

The prose block makes that tension visible. It insists on occupying the page even when confronted with silence. In doing so, it transforms the book into a site where black and white confront one another materially, within the shared space of text. The violence against presence persists. Yet the block remains, refusing erasure.

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