English A: Language and Literature

Body of Work: *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine

Higher Level Essay  
Line of Inquiry: How does Claudia Rankine use the second person in *Citizen* to provide insight into the lives of black Americans and give voice to the effect of microaggressions from their perspective?

Word Count: 1490

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Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* is a long form poem in which she tells stories, both her own and others’, in a series of essays focusing on the experiences of black Americans. Throughout the work, Rankine focuses on microaggressions (small, unintentional discrimination against a marginalized group), how they affect those that experience them, how American society invalidates those effects, and through that how they are perpetuated. This raises the line of inquiry: In what ways does Claudia Rankine use the second person in *Citizen* to provide insight into the lives of black Americans and give voice to the effect of microaggressions from their perspective? This essay will explore how Claudia Rankine uses the second person in *Citizen* to discuss and personalize the feelings of exhaustion, ostracization, and invisibility that black Americans experience as a result of microaggressions, as well has how the world’s response to these feelings perpetuate and exacerbate them.

To begin, Rankine uses the second person to convey how seemingly inconsequential actions by white Americans result in feelings of ostracization from black Americans. On page 48, Rankine describes her experience at a comedy show, where the comedian is explaining what makes a joke funny, “but if they said [the joke] out in public where black people could hear what was said, you might not [laugh], probably would not. Only then do you realize you are among ‘the others out in public’ and not among ‘friends’.” Rankine’s use of diction with the word “black” creates a dramatic mood change from comfort to discomfort as the reader realizes the racist undertones that were previously difficult to recognize. Whereas before the scope of conversation was broad, and could have related to many different situations, the simple addition of the word “black” narrows the scope drastically to almost lazer focus on Rankine, and through her use of the second person, the reader. The combination of the second person, and the mood change makes apparent to the reader the impact that a single word, or moment, can have on black americans. Later, on page 79, Rankine describes what she does when she gets home at the end of a different day, after having experienced a microaggression, “you close the door behind you and pour a bowl of cereal, then another, and would a third if you didn’t interrupt yourself with the statement - you aren’t hungry. Appetite won’t attach you to anything no matter how depleted you feel.” Here Rankine uses an allegory to tie the abstract concept of connection to society or the world to the physical action of appetite and eating food. This, combined with the second person, makes the reader feel detached, or ostracized, from society. In that they are trying to attach themselves to it through eating. This mood of detachment and ostracization is deepened within the reader themselves as well when Rankine writes “interrupting yourself”, as if they are on autopilot. Throughout this work, Rankine conveys the feelings of ostracization from society, and from themselves, that black Americans experience as a result of microaggressions, and their effects.

Additionally, Rankine uses the second person to show the relative invisibility that African Americans have in the eyes of white Americans. At the beginning of the work, Rankine describes an experience from her childhood, where Rankine’s friend called her by the wrong name, “Haven’t you said this to yourself? Haven’t you said this to a close friend who early in your friendship, when distracted, would call you by the name of her black housekeeper?” (Rankine 7) By making these questions rhetorical, Rankine focuses the reader to stop, and fully consider the question being asked. Through this focus, the reader realizes the absurdity of the overall situation. This creates a strong contrast in mood for the reader. The words “close friend” imply someone with whom you’ve built trust, and a strong relationship with. And the fact that they could violate that trust by calling you by the wrong name creates the contrasting mood between comfort and discomfort. From this mood, the reader feels betrayed, and understands how, to Rankine’s friend, she is no different than any other black person, simply blending in with all the other black people in her friend’s life. Later, on page 43, Rankine describes a similar incident, where a woman calls her by the name of another black person in the office. Rankine comments on the response from the human resources department, “Apparently your own invisibility is the real problem causing her confusion. This is how the apparatus she propels you into begins to multiply its meaning.” Rankine utilizes a metaphor to compare the world, more specifically American society, to an “apparatus”, and proceeds to personify it as being able to “propel” her into itself. The combination of these two choices highlights how the reader loses control over their life when put into these positions, and how society unwillingly forces them into negative experiences. How the reader is shoved into a societal system that barely notices they exist, and that pushes people of color to the side, putting them out of sight, and making them invisible. On top of this, Rankine’s use of alliteration with “multiply its meaning” further personifies the apparatus, and emphasizes the cyclic nature of society’s treatment of people of color, and how the system perpetuates itself. All of this combined speaks to how black Americans’ feelings of invisibility are developed as a result of microaggressions, and the world’s response to those microaggressions.

Finally, Rankine uses the second person to discuss how the accumulation of microaggressions leads to extreme and constant exhaustion on those receiving them. Rankine describes the world’s response to her, and through the second person the reader, expressing their emotions from experiencing microaggressions, “Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets.” (Rankine 59) Rankine uses repetition, writing “ stop that … another sigh … another stop that”, to convey how the world simply dismisses these feelings of anger and exasperation, and through that, misunderstands them. Rather than attempting to understand where they come from, and through that undergo meaningful change and reform, the system perpetuates itself, and those experiencing microaggressions continue to be misunderstood. Additionally, Rankine anthropomorphizes the world itself and society as a whole when she describes the world as saying “stop that” instead of a single person or group. This speaks to the all encompassing nature of the treatment, in that everyone is contributing to the perpetuation of this problem. Which, when combined with the repetition of the world’s treatment of these emotions leads back to the sighing that happened in the first place, creating a cycle. And, while the sighing of Rankine / the reader speaks to the feelings of exhaustion directly, this depiction of the cyclical nature of the exhaustion highlights how these feelings compound, and exacerbate their effects.

On page 151, towards the end of the work, Rankine reflects on the experiences she has detailed while reading a note from a friend about processing emotions through humming. Rankine writes, “A friend writes of the numbing effects of humming and it returns you to your own sigh. It’s no longer audible - you’ve grown into it. Some call it aging - an internalized liquid smoke blurring an ordinary ache.” Rankine utilizes a metaphor when she describes the idea of growing into a sigh, to show how the reader has been worn down by the exhaustion that comes from dealing with microaggressions, and has given up, and simply accepted that reality. On top of that, Rankine creates a numbing mood throughout the excerpt with the inclusion of the comparison of the process of aging to a blurring, or dulling of emotions. All of this together speaks to the feelings of exhaustion that come from society’s response to expressions of emotion, and the pressure put on black people to simply accept the status quo.

In conclusion, throughout her writing in *Citizen: An American Lyric,* Claudia Rankine, portrays the feelings that come from experiencing microaggressions from the perspective of African Americans. The feelings of ostracization that come from the inherent bias and stereotyping on the part of white Americans, the invisibility that they experience as society dismisses uniqueness and personality and lumps all black people into one concept, and the exhaustion that comes from the constant bombardment on all sides from the world. On top of this, though, Rankine also focuses on how the systems that create these feelings perpetuate themselves, and become cycles that exponentially worsen their effects. Throughout this work, Rankine presents a unique viewpoint, and attempts to build an understanding of why African Americans feel the ways that they do, giving voice to the effects of microaggressions from their perspective. This understanding, combined with her use of the second person, pushes the reader to develop a more nuanced view of the world, calling them to be proactive in recognizing and stopping microaggressions for the benefit of all.

Work Cited

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2014.