

# Citizen: a discourse on our post-racial society



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The subject of modern day racism is sensitive, loaded, and very real.

Whether present in public realms, such as news headlines of injustice, or private spaces, like the hearts of those who burden bitter perspectives, the topic of race is a meaningful problem that merits disclosure and awareness.

In this essay, we will examine the quality and value of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* as an artistic discourse that aims to outline prejudice and injustice in our so-called post-racial America. Alongside *Citizen*, we will compare Rankine's overhead message with the idea of double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois to further analyze its significance.

Rankine laces *Citizen* with loaded anecdotes of subtle racism in the second-person on how they cause uneasiness. In 2018, we live in a country a century and a half removed from slavery, a half century removed from the civil rights movement, but what still remains is the ramifications of racism. "Microaggressions," or subtle slights of racism that communicate hostility, condescending thoughts, or derogatory attitudes that the narrator encounter reign through anecdotes in her work. The narrator experiences these slights from all kinds of people, ranging from strangers to friends, from the ignorant to the educated. Whether these people committed these microaggressions intentionally or unintentionally—the bottom line is that the narrator feels the discomfort and frustration of being subject to disrespect. The opening anecdote in *Citizen* describes a flashback where the narrator's experiences this first hand as a child. A classmate in Catholic school copies her test answers and comments that the narrator " smells good and has features more like a white person" (Rankine, 5). Upon future reflection, the narrator realizes that her classmate might have said this comment in thanks, but also

to make herself feel better, as a white person, for copying from an “almost-white person.” In another instance, the narrator is situated in the window seat of an airplane. A young girl and her mother arrives at the row, and upon seeing the narrator, remarks to her mother that “these are our seats” (12). Her mother responded under her breath, barely audible that she would “sit in the middle” implying that she would take the undesirable seat next to the narrator so her daughter would not have to.

These vivid episodes portray that microaggressions are not limited to those meaning harm—they can even affect the innocent and unknowing. With these quick and ugly examples, Rankine builds *Citizen's* quality in providing realistic and relatable experiences. She also establishes value in engaging her reader in her struggles in the second-person. By portraying potential antagonizers as children, she elucidates the angst she encounters in recognizing that simple and wide-eyed kids can be bred into this culture of viewing people with contrasting skin tones as simply different. While children speaking with racist undertones may not be completely a surprise to her, experiencing this first hand is a haunting wake-up call to her reality.

Through confronting microaggressions in her life, the narrator represents much of her angst through a “double-consciousness,” a term coined by W. E. B. Du Bois in his essay *The Souls of Black Folk*. This theory of a double-consciousness is a “sensation where one is always looking at oneself from the perspective of others” (Du Bois 1903). This is a helpless feeling, a hyperconsciousness of being prejudged, or “seen before one is actually seen” (Page, 2006). In one anecdote, the narrator is paying for her sandwich and drink with her debit when the cashier asks her if she believes her card

would work. She is stunned, realizing that she was only asked this because she was black, and that her white friend who paid before her was not harassed such a condescending question. She looks over to her friend, who only watches the scene in silence. Not only are the perpetrators of microaggressions not aware of the double consciousness that the narrator experiences, but even the bystanders who do not address the wrong. In another instance, the narrator describes finishing a phone conversation with her boss, then meets in person to sign for her new job. Upon encountering her, the boss exclaims " I didn't know you were black!" but his profuse apologies following his remark did not assuage the narrator at all (Rankine, 44). Whether ill-intended or the result of honest mistakes, these episodes torment the narrator and only serve to amplify her double-consciousness. When someone says something with an intentional or unintentional racist leaning upon seeing a different skin-tone, that person is not uncomfortable: " only the listener is" (Runyowa 2015). Rankine expands Du Bois's theory into real-life experiences, exemplifying it as a substantial and very real ordeal that minorities that go through.

It seems easy to tell people to ignore these small occurrences, to let it go. It seems easy to ask, " What can one singular voice do?" However, " if these anomalies occur again" and again, an existential crisis may bloom (Dastagir, 2018). The narrator ponders about why language is hurtful, considering that racist language and implications was intended to denigrate and erase someone as a person. However, it is actually intended to " exploit all the ways that you are present" (Rankine, 49). Rather than used as erasure, it is actually used to make the target hypervisible. Nothing screams louder than a

light in the dark than stereotypes, which highlight vulnerability.

Microaggressions, though subtle in nature, are amplifiers contributing to an existential crisis in identity. Racism is intrinsically an obstacle to individual identity, as double-consciousness keeps one on edge. As people, attempt to order the world and our thoughts. However, this natural inclination is hindered in the chaos experienced in jabs of microaggressions and headaches of double-consciousness. Citizen is abstractedly demonstrating this chaos through language and relatable experiences of the narrator.

Alongside the chaos that accompanies double-consciousness, Citizen addresses issues of the public image of the black body. Serena Williams, one of the few black figures in tennis, dealt with different treatment in her sport since the beginning of her career. As described in Citizen, tennis umpire Hunter Alves made five bad calls on Serena Williams in the 2004 US Open that consequently costed Williams the quarter-final match. These controversial calls act in a similar way to microaggressions. In the 2009 US Open, another official made bad calls where she lost her cool. She explodes at the referee even when most people would have shied away from the prospect of being black on a sharp white background. Consequently, she faced an \$82, 500 fine and a two-year probationary period. Her anger, though extreme, can be justified as the unsaid rules of officiating in fairness become broken in the face of black imagery. The narrator ponders if the treatment against Serena Williams is how racism feels no matter the context—a game where the rules that everybody else plays by no longer apply to you.

Lastly, Rankine employs a seemingly ambiguous ending passage to Citizen. A woman pulls up next to the narrator in the parking lot, who happens to be getting ready in her car to play tennis. The lady sees the narrator, then goes on to park at another spot. The narrator did not have time to ask the lady why she decided to move away—she was expected on the tennis court, so she went on ahead. This ending connotes the underlying message that for modern racism, there is no end. Adversity is inevitable. But like the narrator's sport, there is only room for one to bear through gruesome practices, be there for games, and continue to play. Applying this to her life, there is only room for her to boldly face microaggressions, lead her life as normally as possible, and continue on without allowing her double-consciousness to hinder her. Even in this world of infinite possibilities, this post-racial society, one would have to live with this division between black and white. Citizen as a whole, behind it being an insight and evaluation of post-modern racism, is an effective artistic representation of this tragic truth. With her anecdotes and prose, Rankine provides a disarming exposure to the predicaments black people face in our " post-racial society." Even so, Rankine never specified a deep hopelessness in her work. In the last century, even in the last decade, despite the bumps in the road the black community has faced, we have come a long way in addressing racist attitudes. Society can change in time, and hopefully only for the better. But the fact of the matter remains: this is the brutal present black people must face today.