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Claudia Rankine's American Lyrics

"If you see something say something." This popular tagline stands out midway through Claudia Rankine's poem *Public Trust: Script for Situation Video*. It was coined by an advertisement agency in post-9/11 America for the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority to launch a security campaign among riders. Since then, the slogan has been licensed to numerous organizations around the world, including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, for use in public safety programs – a friendly reminder of the importance of staying vigilant and, ultimately, suspecting everyone and constantly keeping an eye on each other's behavior. Claudia Rankine's poem critically addresses the ambiguity of this simple and ravishing phrase with its alliterative ascending rhythm that soothingly aims at involving people in anti-terrorism actions on their way to work or back.

The poem begins with a statement that expands on the theme introduced by the title, that is, the "implicit trust," "our unspoken agreement," "our civic contract" laying at the basis of a democratic society, a principle that has its origins in the Roman law and that makes all public spaces ("elevators, streets, corridors, / stairways, sidewalks, highways, arenas, restrooms, / lobbies, subways…") a shared property whose safety is taken for granted. Even when "access is gained by a ticket, / the true price of the ticket is dependent on an implicit trust," Rankine writes. Even when we cross a street or change lanes on the freeways, she continues, "[w]e depend on those around us to keep safe," acting "in each other's best interest / for no other reason than we are here together." The first part of the poem is then a reminder of what citizenry means through a series of variations on the title's topic, hinging on notions of allegiance, assurance, and pledge.

Yet, interspersed among these lines of common knowledge, a question – "Can I trust you?" – begins to be asked "deep within us," insinuating doubt about taking "a leap of faith" in one's fellow citizens. Rankine's

you is a comprehensive addressee, any person one encounters or interacts with on a daily basis, just as her *we* is the voice of the American body politic. The second-person strategy and the conversational, plain, direct tone implicate the reader, asking us to focus on the irreconcilable poles of having to put trust in others and the "illusory control / of the world around us." The question then turns into "a gentle nudge / against an unconscious reliance on public trust" when, in the second part of the poem, Rankine raises the issue of our "loss of comfort" and safety, "when something happens, / when that thing happens." "That thing": violence, murder, micro and major aggressions, injustice, racial offence, civil rights violations. Once the civic contract is broken, the question turns out to be, "Would you, could you, should you trust?" In the final lines, personal interaction shrinks to suspicion and fear, to an altered way of seeing and looking at each other, and to a threat to the very foundations of human coexistence. Like riffs in jazz, the line "We drift off in waiting areas. We are dreaming on planes" is repeated throughout the poem to highlight human vulnerability. Repetitions with variations, echoing from beginning to end, control the pace and the rhythm of this composition, and make the text sound like a ceremonial form of prayer or a litany.

Public Trust: Script for Situazion Video is civil poetry written by a poet who has developed original forms of writing attuned to this specific historical moment in the United States from the standpoint of a black citizen. Born in Jamaica in 1963, Claudia Rankine was raised in New York City where she received her MFA in poetry from Columbia University. She had previously studied at Williams College under the guidance of Louise Glück, a poet who exerted a strong influence on her writing and who, in Rankine's words, taught her how to work a subject over the course of a book, rather than in a single poem. Rankine is the author of five collections of poems, two plays, and numerous videos made with her husband, filmmaker and photographer John Lucas. She has also co-edited anthologies, including *American Women Poets in the Twenty-First Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2002), *American Poets in the Twenty-First Century: The New Poetics* (2007), and *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* (2014). The recipient of many awards, she is a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and teaches English at Pomona College in California, where she lives.

Rankine's most recent and much acclaimed books of poetry, *Citizen* (2014) and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), bear the same subtitle, *An American Lyric*. In modern poetry, a lyric is a poem that expresses a poet's emotions and personal experiences in a highly subjective mode – a sort of intimate autobiography spoken in the first person and usually conveyed in short texts to capture the speaker's inner life with immediacy and authenticity. But what is "an American lyric"? Rankine's subtitle implicitly links her work to the great variety of uniquely American lyrical forms that have voiced political and social issues at specific moments in the history of the United States, blurring the boundaries between public and private, prose and poetry – from Walt Whitman to Williams Carlos Williams, to Gwedolyn Brooks, Robert Duncan and Yusef Komunyakaa. Her book-length lyrics, however, further expand the possibilities of the form, turning it into a mixed genre that, besides poetry, essays, and fiction, also includes visual arts, videos, and graphic writing. In her words, the aim is "to pull the lyric back to its realities," undermining conventions and making genres work in collaboration. Yet, the lyrical tradition looms large behind her multimedia projects and can be seen in the beautiful transparency of her prose, in her careful arrangement of words in sound patterns, in the repetition of certain images and phrases that echo the rhyme scheme, and even in the layout of the language on the page. The adjective *American* also highlights the specific milieu within which Rankine's *I*, *we*, *you* interact, giving her work an anthropological scope mainly concerned with the public space a black body occupies. As a witness of American society, Rankine stages the moments in daily life when communication and interaction are broken and racial violence explodes, turning the personal into a collective story. "I see myself as a citizen, walking around collecting stories and using those stories to reflect our lives," she says in an interview, "I want to track the moments that interrupt interaction … It's my mission to keep these stories alive." Her lyrics are therefore to be intended as sequences of emotionally charged moments drawn from the news, media, street signs, as well as personal experiences – a visual and verbal *Guernica* of today's America and a manifesto of social disruption in the United States and elsewhere.

Don't Let Me Be Lonely is a long poem divided into several sections, each introduced by the image of a fuzzy TV screen's static on a white page. This

figure is reproduced in many of the chapters, but the fuzziness is replaced by scenes, people and words taken from real life and related to various forms of disruption and death – war, violence, diseases, the death penalty, political manipulation, racial violence, drugs. The speaking voice in this internal monologue is that of a narrator seemingly overwhelmed by private and public events who tries to make sense of it all inserting her views, quotes from writers and philosophers, her feelings and moods. A long set of endnotes offers supplementary information and an additional space to help us gain insight into the facts and issues. Let's call it a *combine* poem *à la* Rauschenberg. The reader is called to confront this immense amount of heterogeneous material and to consider the condition of contemporary life. For Rankine, this complexity cannot be captured by traditional lyrical forms. It is a time, Rankine writes, when "salvation narratives are passé." Or, speaking of the 9/11 attack, it is a time when the "language of description competes with the dead in the air." The writing of poetry in the 21st century requires new strategies. "I tried to fit the language into the shape of usefulness," we read in the final pages of this book: "The world moves through the words as if the bodies the words reflect did not exist, The world, like a giant liver, receives everyone and everything, including these words: Is he dead? Is she dead? The words remain an inscription on the surface of my loneliness. This loneliness stems from a feeling of uselessness."

Citizen is another long poem and focuses on the public life of the black body. It is primarily a book of memories – the memory of small gestures and words that have made the narrator feel discriminated against in school or among friends in daily life, and the memory of victims of racism. The poem opens with the following lines: "When you are alone and too tired to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows…" The question "What did you say?" is repeated throughout as a textual device to pretend that the offence has not been heard. "Words work as release – well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture … words encoding the bodies they cover. And despite everything the body remains," Rankine writes. Black bodies are also those of public figures like tennis player Serena Williams and soccer champion Zinedine Zidane, whose reactions to racial offence are here re-contextualized in

what Rankine, in her chronicle of black identity in the 21st century, calls *situations*. In *Citizen* as well she moves from essay and news report to lyrical prose and loose verse. Although mixed genres are not unusual in contemporary poetry (from Anne Carson to Charles Bernstein and Susan Howe), Rankine's determination to bring the lyric "back into its realities" creates texts that are narrations in real time by accompanying her subject matters with visual arts, films, and YouTube material. Works by major artists are featured in *Citizen* while several poems are also scripts for videos that can be viewed on her website http://claudiarankine.com. Thus, her stories bring readers inside the events they narrate making literary writing a fluid, hybrid, and vivid activity in dialogue with external sources.

Public Trust, as its title states, is such a poem. Though it has never appeared in print, it is the script for the film *Situation 8* on Rankine's site. Her low-pitched, enthralling reading of the text is here associated with images that illustrate moments when the "unspoken agreement" among citizens is broken. Images of people sharing public spaces with trust in each other are alternated with scenes of violence and fear and with scenes of black men shot by the police. The words, here, become visually connoted and linked to recent racial episodes in the United States. It is a fascinating technique that forces the reader to come face to face with their intended meaning. But where does one draw the line between poetry and political activism? Jorie Graham says in an interview that,

> [t]here are many ways to be 'political' in a culture. The way poetry uses language, for example, is … by nature political. Poets, throughout cultures, have felt the most basic obligation to revivify their language, rid it of stale metaphors, clichés, ready-made phrases – which are of course ready-made ideas – as well as prior uses which attach to words systems of belief that need to be jostled.

Rankine attempts such a goal in her poetry, striving to keep a balance between lyricism and historical facts, and by working on the edge of two ways of being 'political' in the American culture – as a poet and as a black citizen. The risk is that poetry might become a form of propaganda. The gain is that poetry gets rid of all its traditional paraphernalia and

predictable modes, forging a language that is truly contemporary, engaging and useful.

Works cited

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