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Claudia Rankine by Lauren Berlant



Jeff Wall, *Mimic*, 1982, transparency in light box, 78 x 90 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

I met Claudia Rankine in a parking lot after a reading, where I said crazy fan things like, "I think we see the same thing." She read a book of mine and wrote me, "Reading it was like weirdly hearing myself think." This exchange is different from a celebration of intersubjectivity: neither of us believes in *that*. Too much noise of racism, misogyny, impatience, and fantasy to weed out. Too much unshared lifeworld—not just from the difference that racial

experience makes but also in our relations to queerness, to family, to sickness and to health, to poverty and wealth—while all along wondering in sympathetic ways about the impact of citizenship’s embodiment. Plus, it takes forever to get to know someone and, even then, we are often surprised—by ourselves, by each other. Claudia and I have built a friendship through consultation about whether our tones are crazy, wrong, off, or right; about whether or not our observations show something, and what. And, through frankness: a form of being reliable that we can trust, hard-edged as it can be, loving as it can be (and sometimes the former is easier to take than the latter). We are both interested in how writing can allow us to amplify overwhelming scenes of ordinary violence while interrupting the sense of a fated stuckness. This interview, conducted via email, walks around how we think with and against the convenience of conventionally immiserated forms of life and art.

Experimental work always forces us to imagine analogous genres around it: *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Rankine’s new book, has the same subtitle as her previous book, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* (2004). That’s one route to take. Each is like a commentary track on the bottom of a collective television screen where the ordinary of racism meets a collective nervous system’s desire for events to be profoundly transformative. Both books have tender, sustaining intimacies. *Citizen* also acts as a kind of art gallery playing out the aesthetics of supremacist sterility, each segment being like a long, painfully white hall we’re walking down, punctuated by stunning images of black intensity and alterity. And then come some moments of relieving care, not just with people but also in the very fact that an aesthetic encounter can make you feel that you have a world to breathe in, after all. Or that you don’t. In the director’s cut of *Citizen*, many pages ended with the forward slash (/) we associate with the end of the line in a cited poem. On Rankine’s page this / designated the previous writing as a line of poetry embedded in a history captured through citation. These slashes were deleted at the end of the process, but do not forget to read for the breathless cut and join of enjambment, as it figures the core intimate fact of relation in Rankine’s *Citizen*.

Lauren Berlant

What kind of tone do you associate with the word *citizen*? I ask this because the book *Citizen* is so much about tone—of voice, atmosphere, history—the unsaid (James Baldwin’s “questions hidden by the answers”), the saids, the spaces within a conversation holding up the encounter both in the sense of sustaining it and of blocking it ...

Claudia Rankine

Tone is an everyday kind of maneuver. It disrupts and communicates aggression, disgust, disrespect, and humor, among a myriad of possibilities, thereby allowing language to morph into a blanket or a gun. It helps me know how to read the spaces between things. One has an ear out for it always. It’s a thing to be translated. Yours is a good question because it presupposes certain expectations for tone in public encounters, places where equality and sharing are legislated to happen, places where one has expectations for justice, for evenhandedness, and for “we are all just people here” indifference. I don’t exactly expect disdain when paying for my bagel. Not at 9 AM in a café, anyway!

LB

“A blanket or a gun”! What a narrow margin. There’s not a lot of laughter in *Citizen*. No doubt, that sense motivates your use of the word *maneuver*—it means, etymologically, “to work with one’s hands,” but it’s usually a way of talking about unsticking something, getting around an impasse or an obstacle course, or dealing with *touchy* subjects. It’s a word for the delicacy of manner that people develop while trying not to incite unwanted violence.

So yes, tone maneuvers. I might have said alternatively that tone adjusts, pointing to arcs of implied communication and to the spontaneous action of shaping the event while losing and regaining our footing. Your view of it is more intentional. For sure to *notice* tone is to experience it as a pressure on consciousness. You are very interested in what tone *does*. The action of the mind’s hands as they move through the air of the encounter. (Thoreau: “My head is hands and feet.”)

This must be what ballasts *Citizen*’s great phrase about your being “too tired even to turn on any of your devices,” which is metapoetic but also implies that the maneuver of tone is one of your citizen-actions, a weapon for resisting defeat and depletion in the face of the supremacist ordinary. The *you* that you use that also sometimes means *I* and *we*, needs such devices to defend, refuse, and reinvent the ordinary, despite, as you say, being sick with John Henryism and other maladies of the racially subordinated. The more devices the better—*Citizen* meditates on counter-uses of the pronoun, the metaphor, the catastrophic event, and the wedding phrase. Take the repeated tag, “What did you say?” It’s *tone* that reroutes the damaging verbal exchange from its target into the shared space of a disowned violence.

This leads me to the next question, about how *Citizen* works with spectatorship. For we are not only inside of the tennis match of social exchange, but at the same time, Möbiusly, outside, and precipitously, on the hinge. To me, your emphasis on the encounter (with people, events, memories, tropes, art) transforms what the action of the mass subject is. Your form of spectatorship is not from a protected space that gets projected into a public, but from an intimate distance that’s both singular and collective, overwhelming and alienated, crowded and lonely. “Mind the Gap”; make a gap, describe “with the patience of a stethoscope” what is and also what might be interrupted in the reproduction of violence. Citizenship involves metabolizing in the language of your flesh what you call the “ordinary” injury of racist encounter, which is partly an effect of your stated desire to be happy, to have a good experience, to enjoy the game of sociality—or a bagel. Commentary is the genre you use and record as a signature across your

body of work to register the fate of your optimism. In *Citizen*, you demonstrate the racist work of commentary itself (Serena Williams is blamed for her anger *and* her pleasure in her body and her skill, for example): you figure via the “bad call” how supremacist captioning sucks the oxygen out of the air and the optimism out of the black attachment to life. Documenting painful outrages *within* verbal exchange from an infinite, yet overclose, outside; pulled in out of desire and punched back by so much white aggression, stupidity, and permission to be exceptional, the work stages the gut-punch as a potential genre of every racialized moment of the social.

But there are two other kinds of embedded works here that are not about the violent genres of estimate exchange, and I'd like to ask about these. The first is the “Script for Situation videos” of chapter six—consisting mainly of collaborations with John Lucas, himself a video artist. How did you (individually, together) conceive of this experiment in immanence, an experiment at being inside of an event rather than spectating it? How did the media/genres of the situation and the video change your relation to the writing?

CR

I believe we all want to keep enacting our necessary adjustments in response to the pressures we experience when we are awake to the world, but sometimes I find I come to a stand-still. Yesterday, with friends, I went to see Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* at the Domino Sugar Factory in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and was surrounded by people saying things like, “I am not into the slavery thing right now” and taking selfies in front of the sculpture of the black Mammy sphinx, posing in ways to appear to be touching her breasts or cupping her buttocks. When we asked a group if they understood the significance and resonance of the piece, as it relates to slavery and the black body, they told us they were immature. Good answer, and yet, my group felt injured and exhausted by the spectacle. I sometimes wonder if Walker's intention is to redirect the black gaze away from the pieces themselves and onto their white consumption? On the street outside the show, my group got in an argument with a lady about a cab. Another cab would have come along; clearly some maneuvering, some slight adjustments that needed to be made, were beyond us. Our curating abilities were exhausted suddenly. Lunch was a subdued affair.

The scripts in chapter six seemed necessary to *Citizen* because one of the questions I often hear is “How did that happen?” as it relates to mind-numbing moments of injustice—the aftermath of Katrina, for example, or juries letting supremacists off with a slap on the wrist for killing black men. It seems obvious, but I don't think we connect micro-aggressions that indicate the lack of recognition of the black body as a body to the creation and enforcement of laws. Everyone is cool with seeing micro-aggressions as misunderstandings until the same misunderstood person ends up on a jury or running national response teams after a hurricane.

The decision to exist within the events of the “Situation videos” came about because the use of video manipulation by John Lucas allowed me to slow down and enter the event, in moments, as if I were there in real time rather than as a spectator considering it in retrospect. As a writer working with someone with a different skill set, I was given access to a kind of seeing that is highly developed in the visual artist, and that I don't rely on as intuitively. My search for meaning—“What do you think that means?”—is often countered with a “Did you see that?” from John. That kind of close looking, the ability to freeze the frame, challenges the language of the script to meet the moment literally second by second—in the Zidane World Cup piece, for example—to know as the moment knows, and not from outside. The indwelling of those Situation pieces becomes a performance of switching your body out with the body in the frame and moving methodically through pathways of thought and positionings.

The photographer Jeff Wall writes about moving into moments of eroding freedoms. He describes racism as “determined by social totality” that “has to come out of an individual body.” In his photographs he brings his lens to existing “unfreedoms.” I am interested in his decision to reenact, to stage moments that happen too fast for the camera to capture. On some level he can't let what he saw go: “Did you see that?”

The difficult thing about this “immanence” or indwelling is that it holds and prolongs the violence of supremacist spectacle in a body and shuts it down in other participatory ways. The reality, moment, narrative, or photo locks down its players and gets read as a single gesture.

LB

The story about white supremacist playfulness at the Kara Walker installation was a kick in my (white) stomach for so many reasons. Such privilege of unknowing, such supremacist play, such banal and blasé exceptionalism. On the positive side, the rage/ helplessness/murderous ideation plus pleasure-in-thinking-with-you the anecdote produced made me run faster in the heat. Metabolizing outrage while maintaining a sense of it is one of our common tendencies, isn't it? Keep moving even when we're still. Find stillness when we're jolted. Learn from unwanted ideation about being with the unbearable. Create a disturbing (ironic, comic, dystonic) echo chamber. Speculate. “Indwelling” is a great way to describe preserving the resonance of the event in the sensorium affected by it. Is this what you were performing in the train incident you include in *Citizen*?

You sit next to the man on the train, bus, in the plane, waiting room, anywhere he could be forsaken. You put your body there in proximity to, adjacent to, along-side, within.

You don't speak unless you are spoken to and your body speaks to the space you fill and you keep trying to fill it except the space belongs to the body of the man next to you, not to you.

Where he goes the space follows him. If the man left his seat before Union Station you would simply be a person in a seat on the train. You would cease to struggle against the unoccupied seat when where why the space won't lose its meaning.

You imagine if the man spoke to you he would say, it's okay, I'm okay, you don't need to sit here. You don't need to sit and you sit and look past him into the darkness the train is moving through. A tunnel.

All the while the darkness allows you to look at him. Does he feel you looking at him? You suspect so. What does suspicion mean? What does suspicion do?

CR

In a way, the train piece was meant to critique the position of wanting to repair historical damage in localized moments. The question for me was: What do I gain by dwelling in the struggling public spaces that wish to obliterate the black male body? The train piece attempts to stage the impossibility of actually putting your body in the place of devastation if it doesn't belong to you. Or it asks: If its intent is to destroy someone else, but comes out of the same history that made/makes you, does it also belong to you? In a sense, the scandal of Walker's *A Subtlety*, to return to that, is its refusal to contextualize or educate beyond what can be seen. If you can't or won't do the math, then the space must hold your reactions too. I struggle with wanting to reroute the content I am living, and often its supremacist frame is pushing back, pushing back hard.



Michael David Murphy, *Jim Crow Rd.*, *Flowery Branch*, 2007, C-print, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

This funnels directly into my next question, about the visuals in the work, especially now in relation to your statement about your depleted "curating abilities" in the wake of a self-ironic but not self-reflective whiteplay. Throughout the book there is the image archive you collect without direct captioning: from Glenn Ligon, Carrie Mae Weems, Mel Chin, and so on. As curator, and what you want the images to do?

CR

One of the ways your book *Cruel Optimism* works for me is that it talks back to the unreadable or unbearable encounter. Like Baldwin, you offer pathways to consider, sidestep, and groove into disruption. The images in *Citizen* were intended to work in a similar way. I was attracted to images engaged in conversation with an incoherence, to use your word, in the world. They were placed in the text where I thought silence was needed, but I wasn't interested in making the silence feel empty or effortless the way a blank page would. In your *Sex, or the Unbearable*, you say the experience of "any non-knowledge is not usually a blockage or limit but is actually the experience of the multiplication of knowledges that have an awkward relation to each other, crowd each other out, and create intensities that require management."

The first image in *Citizen* is a 2007 photograph taken in a suburban subdivision in Flowery Branch, Georgia, of Jim Crow Road. When I first saw the image I wondered if it was photoshopped, but it's an actual road curiously named after a James Crow (why not stick with James?), according to local lore. The photographer, Michael David Murphy, has a series entitled *Unphotographable*, in which he writes about photos that, unlike *Jim Crow Rd.*, he couldn't take for one reason or another—text stands in for the place of the image. In this case, his image stands in place of my text. The tangential relation of the images with the text, in a sense, mimics a form of “the public.” They are related and can be taken in, but, at times, are hardly touching, or they come up in a different context elsewhere in the text, before or after they appear. *Jim Crow Rd.* comes after a piece about being in middle school. Presumably the school is on a road; here is another road. All these roads make up the country.

LB

I had wondered whether you thought something like that—that the images in *Citizen* could show what was exhausting/unbearable to witness once more in speech about the ordinary violence and world-shaping activity of American racism. A desperate desire is at work there for *something* to be self-evident, the force of which would change a situation. But *Citizen* lives meditatively enraged in a world where truth cannot be *spoken* to a structure. It emerges only in the spaces in which structure reveals itself in form—in each other, in other people's storytelling, in aesthetic mediation, in indirection. One *wishes* that talking back (in an internal monologue or into the air, for example) at the television, grabbing its lapels with the screen grab, as you do, will do something, will shake up something structural and change it beyond the solidity of the snow-globe fantasy of the white good life (which insists that black subjects have good manners and remain convenient).

But in *Citizen*, “speaking truth to power” always amounts to a local encounter; therefore it always carries with it the pathos of the incremental, however powerful the representational act is. So it's notable that in *Citizen* the linguistic event of *conversation* is always excoriating, even among friends, and not just white friends like me; whereas the *image* archive demands shortcuts to the real. There's something consoling in the interruption by the image in your text, even when the image itself is a sudden punch. The image forces things to stop for a moment. It forces the reader to reinvent breathing so that the eyes can again focus.

We haven't said yet how expressive the shocking whiteness of the paper you've printed the book on is—as if citing the Zora Neale Hurston sentence you reprint in the image of Glenn Ligon's *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*. The image resonance of the text, and the images themselves, create the ocular stress of an unfinished contextual shift.

Yet the image you describe, of the quiet sign at Jim Crow Rd., is also muted, like the landscape on a humid day—still, airless. The camera is dead-pan. It just shows a thing. There is no soundtrack melodramatizing our affect for us, it does not allow us to be passively taken up by the flow of an orchestration. We are left there with our nervous system, if we take the time to look (there's a lot of skimming in books and galleries and the everyday of information). We are left there with the atmosphere of encounter pressuring a disturbance in us.

There are no bodies in the image. The purpose of *Jim Crow Rd.* is to make certain that no bodies are on the lawn, the lawn is a defense weapon. (*Citizen* contains quite a few lawn stories, of black bodies out of place in the privileged suburbs *where you live* inducing a trigger-finger white fear and loathing that thinks it can erase itself with a “sorry” explanation.) But there are no white bodies on the lawn, either; and the photographer decided not to represent landscape workers (no doubt workers of color) fouling the zoning fantasy of the street name.

I love what you say about street signs, that they always represent the lines that interconnect us in the space of the citizen (even when we are not citizens, presumably); also, they mark a fork in the road, a decision about the world. In relation to them, we are always in movement, even when we are also stuck. If only the impacts of each other and what we see took us singularly down straight lines. But no. The book is an archive of simultaneously organized and disorganized observational and affective activity; of reactive moments and simultaneous counter-movements.

And so it goes until the vista includes only displacement of feeling back into the body, which gave birth to feelings that don't sit comfortably inside the communal.

You smile dumbly at the world because you are still feeling *if only the feeling could be known* and this brings on the moment you recognize as desire. Those moments of desire are the miracles of *Citizen*—however mixed, they are also always in proximity to happiness. The epigraph, from Chris Marker, predicts as much: “If they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black.” It was a test, I felt, Pay attention to my desire for things to work, for that's where intimacy works. The image archive resists that: its images—for example, of a lynching, of Carrie Mae Weems's *Blue Black Boy*—tend to register the violent effects of the structural pleasures that white people enjoy. But there is also here the pleasure of beautifully executed art, of being stopped in one's tracks. There is the pleasure of composition, the forcing of a different attention. There is controlling the referent and the desire for relief from the immediate pain of the encounter that your sensorium wakes up to every day.

Every day your mouth opens and receives the kiss the world offers, which seals you shut though you are feeling sick to your stomach about the beginning of the feeling that was born from understanding and now stumbles around in you—the go-along-to-get-along tongue pushing your tongue aside. Yes, and your mouth is fullup and the feeling is still tottering—

CR

I was drawn to the one screen grab, which was taken from Jayson Musson's *ART THOUGHTZ: How to Be A Successful Black Artist* on YouTube, and documentary photos in the book because they seem to go beyond illustration of the moment that spawned them. In addition to depicting a controversial "news" moment, they performed affect or underlined historical excess. The conversations they invoke spill over, staining the moment being photographed. For example, the position of tennis player Caroline Wozniacki's hands emphasizes her enhanced Hottentot Venus figure, as if her audience might miss an intention that outruns the mimicking of Serena Williams's body. The women on the Rutgers basketball team who were insulted by Don Imus exude a disgust (am I reading into this?), though their mouths are all closed. *Please*, they all seem to be saying, without saying anything. Their feelings, as I am reading them, flood their decorum of silence, which is, in part, the subject of *Citizen*. Rashaad Newsome's *Shade Compositions* are notable for their successes in depicting the recognizable outrage and disbelief performed routinely and silently by black women's bodies given their historical relationship to power, the moments when they "throw shade."

His mock symphonies presuppose the moments that make necessary these compositions. I always intended to include Newsome in *Citizen*, but the Rutgers women's performance of shade trumped the reenactment of it. I don't know if you know his work; I'm a great fan because he enacts Ralph Ellison's definition of freedom as "knowing how to say what I got up in my head." Ellison was referring to the act of writing, but Newsome suggests that our body's stance is all the articulation we need.

Roland Barthes in *Theory of the Text* makes the claim that, "The classical sign is a sealed unit, whose closure arrests meaning, prevents it from trembling or becoming double, or wandering. The same goes for the classical text: it closes the work, chains it to its letter, rivets it to its signified." The use of images in *Citizen* is meant in part to destabilize the text so both image and text would always have possibilities, both realized and unimagined by me, beyond my curating powers. Consequently, 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. Another way to think about this would be to invoke the theorist Barbara Johnson's discussion, in *A World of Difference*, of how the dynamic of intertextuality differently energizes a text. It, she writes, "designates the multitude of ways a text has of not being self-contained, of being traversed by otherness." She describes the text as "traversed by forces and desires that are invisible or unreadable to those who see it as an independent, homogeneous message unit, a totalizable collection of signifieds." This resonates partly because I feel that the entrance of the black body works like that in the American landscape. You can have a seemingly predictable conversation on the phone, and then you enter the room and your image derails expectations for public decorum and decency: *I didn't realize you were black*.

In *The Female Complaint*, you write, "sometimes a person doesn't want to seek the dignity of an always already violated body and wants to cast hers off, either for nothingness, or in trade for some other, better model." I was thinking about this when I saw the work of the artist Nick Cave. His *Soundsuits* initially struck me as wishful thinking, they were fanciful garbs, but reading Robin D.G. Kelley, specifically *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, which makes the argument that change comes out of the surreal, and that we have to find pathways there, helped me to value the stealth of Cave's suits. Later I read that he started making them in response to the beating of Rodney King.

The opposite of the surreal dream is the lying down in the stereotypes in an attempt to throw them in relief. Pope.L, Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, and Jayson Musson, aka Hennessy Youngman, all do this for me. All their layering and super-imposition and running alongside and multiple utterances render the idea of realism mute when it comes to self-consciousness around race. It's impossible to just see what's there as a single thing or to speak all that you see. All the double destinations allow consciousness to be "charismatic and mobile," as my friend Juliana Spahr would say.

Another friend, the poet Cole Swensen, kindly wrote about my previous poetry book, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, in her collection of essays *Noise That Stays Noise*, and she suggested that the language was simple and direct in order to perform truth-telling. This reading of the style of the book surprised me because 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." I even added notes to say that the truth, as in the facts, are in the back of the book. I am not interested in narrative, or truth, or truth to power, on a certain level; I am fascinated by affect, by positioning, and by intimacy, as I know you are. What happens when I stand close to you? What's your body going to do? What's my body going to do? On myriad levels, we are both going to fail, fail, fail each other and ourselves. The simplicity of the language is never to suggest truth, but to make transparent the failure. The linguistic failures are disappointing and excoriating, as you say, and the images don't exactly recoup or repair—they are a form of recess, which is its own kind of movement, including both the break from and passage back to the unbearable.

Kate Clark's *Little Girl* and Wangechi Mutu's *Sleeping Heads* were both important for me to get the rights to use in *Citizen* because they performed, enacted, and depicted something ancient that I couldn't or didn't want to do in language. In African-American literature it's the moment the ancestor shows up in a corner somewhere, a direct descendant of slavery. They are both, in a sense, collaged pieces insisting the viewer bring together that which does not live together. They are disturbing because they are "wrong" and yet familiar on a certain level. Perhaps your word, *extimate*, could live and function here. The incongruity, the dissonance, revolts and

attracts. *Unheimlich* comes to mind—you want to look away and can't look away because it's your doppelganger that's been shadowing you.

Clark uses taxidermy to create her sculptures. In the particular piece I used in *Citizen*, she attached the black girl's face on this deer-like body—it says it's an infant caribou in the caption—and I was transfixed by the memory that my historical body on this continent began as property no different from an animal. It was a thing hunted and the hunting continues on a certain level. So when someone says, "I didn't know black women could get cancer," as was said of me, I see that I am not being seen as human, and that is fascinating to me, even as it is hurtful in a more superficial way, since my stomach hurts more from the chemo—or is it the diagnosis?

Mutu's works confuse that which is desired with that which is imposed upon a body. They feel violent and intimate instantaneously. They are ancient and contemporary. They acquiesce and rebel all at once in their willingness to expose the collaged moment. Her work refuses the simplicity of the final read; relationality is complicated shit, I am reminded again, as her work floods my body.

I made a conscious decision to inhabit my own subjectivity in this book in the sense that the middle-class life I live, with my highly educated, professional, and privileged friends, remains as the backdrop for whatever is being foregrounded. Everyone is having a good time together—doing what they do, buying what they can afford, going where they go—until they are not. The break in the encounter wouldn't wound without the presumed intimacy and the good times. While the images themselves are disturbing, they belong to an elite world of museums, galleries, and private collections. They are exquisitely made and pleasurable even in their disturbances. The book ends with Turner's *Slave Ship*, because it seemed funny that those trips across the Atlantic would have us disgorging still.

Maybe the disgorge is a form of storytelling. The entire book is a collection of stories gathered from a community of friends and then retold or folded into my own stories. And though it's not strictly nonfiction, *Citizen* is not fiction either. The experience of writing it, which might or might not be the experience of reading it, was to see my community a little better, to see it, to understand my place in it, to know how it sounds, what it looks like, and yet, to stay on my street anyway. Good times.

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