Claudia Rankine, The Art of Poetry No. 102

Interviewed by David L. Ulin

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Claudia Rankine was born in 1963, in Jamaica, and immigrated to the United States as a child. She attended Williams College and received an M.F.A. in poetry from Columbia University. Since early in her career, she has crossed the lines of genre, creating books as unified projects rather than loose collections, peeling back the surface of the moment to get at the complexities underneath. She is the author of five books—*Nothing in Nature Is Private* (1995), *The End of the Alphabet* (1998), *Plot* (2001), *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), and *Citizen* (2014)—and has collaborated on a series of videos with her

husband, the filmmaker John Lucas, some of which infiltrate her writing in the form of transcriptions and images.

I met Rankine over three Fridays in July at her home in Claremont, California. It was a tumultuous period: our first conversation took place the week of the police shootings in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and in the suburbs of Saint Paul, Minnesota, and the ambush killing of five police officers during a rally in Dallas, Texas; the third, the afternoon after Donald Trump's speech accepting the Republican nomination for president. These public topics wove through our discussions, explicitly and implicitly, as they often do in Rankine's work. Long a professor at Pomona College, Rankine was preparing to move across the country for a new job, at Yale University; in her dining room, the sideboard was covered with piles of books on race and whiteness, for a course she was developing.

Rankine has won numerous prizes, including a National Book Critics Circle Award and a Los Angeles Times Book Prize for *Citizen*, which was also a finalist for the National Book Award. Just a few months after we spoke, she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, which she plans to use to found the Racial Imaginary Institute. (The name comes from a book of essays she coedited last year.) In conversation, she is thoughtful and focused, speaking softly, with an edge of urgency. "How do you get the work to hold the resonance of its history?" she wonders. It's a question that occupies the heart of all her books. That the history to which she refers is both personal and collective is, of course, the point.

INTERVIEWER

You've spent the past two years on an extended speaking tour for *Citizen*. The book came out in 2014, during the protests in Ferguson. Recently, we've seen police shootings of African American men in Baton Rouge and suburban Saint Paul and five police officers killed during a rally in Dallas. What's your sense of where we are?

RANKINE

If we go back to the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, there was a feeling, at least for white people, that suddenly they were seeing into black lives and how these lives played out in encounters with the police and the justice system. People were shocked. Then we saw the lack of indictment. In a number of other deaths, we saw that videotaping doesn't affect the course of justice, which we knew from the beating of Rodney King. Then we saw what happened in Baton Rouge, we saw what happened in Minnesota. Now you get to Dallas, and we have created somebody like a Timothy McVeigh, a veteran who is clearly triggered by what he's been seeing in the news. In McVeigh's case, it was Waco, Texas, and with Micah Johnson, it was the killings of African Americans, the videos of these deaths. He's not interested in Black Lives Matter protests. He's interested in retaliation.

INTERVIEWER

Citizen addresses these issues directly. It is literature as an act of public engagement. And yet, poetry—all writing—begins as a private act between the writer and her material. What is the relationship, for you, between these two modes?

RANKINE

The relationship between public engagement and private thought are inseparable for me. I worked on *Citizen* on and off for almost ten years. I wrote the first piece in response to Hurricane Katrina. I was profoundly moved by the events in New Orleans as they unfolded. John and I taped the CNN coverage of the storm without any real sense of what we intended to do with the material. I didn't think, obviously, that I was working on *Citizen*.

But for me, there is no push and pull. There's no private world that doesn't include the dynamics of my political and social world. When I am working privately, my process includes a sense of what is happening in the world. Today, for example, I feel incredibly drained. And probably you do, too.

INTERVIEWER

You make work in private, but once it goes public, readers make it their own. They define the work—and, by extension, you—in terms of who they are, what they want or believe.

RANKINE

In the case of *Citizen*, I willingly moved toward that engagement. It felt like the first time I could actively be involved in a public discussion about race, in a discussion that, to me, is essential to our well-being as a country. It wasn't simply about publicizing the book, it was about having a conversation. It was also an opportunity for me to learn what others really thought and felt. The responses were various. One man said he was moved by a reading I gave and wanted to do something to help me. I said I personally had a privileged life, which I do, and that I didn't need his help. What I needed was for him—this was a white gentleman—to understand the urgency of the situation for *him* and to help himself in an America that was so racially divided. It wasn't about him coming from his own position of privilege—of white privilege—to take black people on as a burden, but rather to understand that we are all part of the same broken structures. He said, I can take what you're saying, but you're going to shut down everybody else in this audience. And all of a sudden I was like, What? I thought you wanted to help me! To remove him from the role of "white savior" was to attack him in his own imagination. A white woman, a professor, told me that what I was calling racism was really bias against overweight black women. You might think they were just a defensive man and a crazy professor, but again and again I was coming up against what was being framed as understanding and realizing that it was not that.

INTERVIEWER

And yet, both of those people would likely describe themselves as well-intentioned, even allies of yours.

RANKINE

They came and they engaged. I have a lot more patience and curiosity than I used to for following those arguments, for seeing where they will go. Often somebody will be interrupted by another member of the audience, who will jump in to shut that person down. This either comes out of an intent to protect me or else they're just impatient with

a line of thinking they don't agree with. I don't know. But one of the things I do know is that you're not going to change anybody's mind by shutting them down.

INTERVIEWER

You talked about some of this in your keynote speech at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, especially the expectation that poetry should be relatable to a white audience. That's a fallacy, and it starts with the audience, not with the poets or the poetry. It renders our relationship with language defensive—"I'm putting up a shield of language as a way of protecting *you* from all the things *I* don't want to engage with."

RANKINE

That's what makes writing challenging and interesting. How do you get the work to arrive at readers in a way that allows them to stay with it and not immediately dismiss it? It's something I think about, because I know I'm also writing for people who don't always hold my positions. It's not that I think white people are my only audience. It's that I think of America as my audience, and inside that space are white people as well as people of color. Some white people still believe that white privilege and white mobility are the universal position. If a writer has a different experience of the world, the work is no longer seen as transcendent or universal. So as I'm moving around in a piece, I am hearing all those voices in opposition.

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INTERVIEWER

The voices of the audience?

RANKINE

Voices I have encountered, yes. For me, working on a piece is like playing chess. You're moving the language around to say to somebody, Yes, I know you're possibly thinking this, I know this is a possible move for you. I'm going to include it here so you don't think that I haven't been listening. An example would be the Serena Williams essay in *Citizen*. That essay was dependent on the fact that a reader could go to YouTube and look up the moments I referred to in her life. I didn't want anyone who disagreed with my take on events or remembered them differently not to have a chance to access the moments for themselves. It happened, in an interview in Boston, that a gentleman said to me, I am a real tennis fan and I don't remember any of these things happening. The actual footage was easily obtainable by searching YouTube. I could have talked about the stress of racism on a body differently, but I needed examples that were available to the reader as raw data. I didn't want anyone to take my word for anything.

INTERVIEWER

"If you don't believe me, look it up."

RANKINE

That's not a bad way to work, or to be in the work. I spend a lot of time looking things up, doing research. I am always curious what I missed because I was looking right when I should have been looking left. I think it's important for *Citizen* that many of the moments in it are researchable. Without that, its credibility as a mirroring text would be lost. It took longer to collect incidents of microaggressions from friends and colleagues than it would have to simply use my own experiences, but it was essential to me that it be a collective and researchable document.

INTERVIEWER

You call the Williams piece an essay. How did it develop?

RANKINE

In *Citizen*, there are episodic pieces structured around microaggressions, which are set in conversation with more scandalous and murderous accounts, such as the pieces addressing Hurricane Katrina, Trayvon Martin, or stop-and-frisk in New York. But my challenge as a writer in the Williams essay was, How do you show the effect of all this injustice on a human body? On an actual somebody? And how is that somebody read by the public? I didn't want it to be a traditional lyric because I wasn't trying to create an internalized consciousness for Serena Williams. I was talking about an invisible - accumulation of stress in the body, so I had to show how it worked over time. I needed a form that would allow me to do that, and so I ended up with the essay.

That said, it's a lyric essay, not an essay essay, because it was written to fit into *Citizen*.

INTERVIEWER

A lyric essay in the sense that it can abandon the strict logic of argument for something more intuitive or emotional?

RANKINE

Yes, and it utilizes many of the techniques of poetry—repetition, metaphor, elision, for example. I love finding the lyric in nontraditional spaces. Often when I teach my poetry workshop, I will take essays or passages from fiction or a scene from a film and list them among the poems to study. The "Time Passes" section in the middle of *To the Lighthouse* is an example of a lyric impulse. Others might be a passage from James Baldwin or Homi Bhabha or an image by Glenn Ligon or a song by Coltrane.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about how this works in *Citizen*. On the one hand, we've got Serena in a lyric essay. Then there are the passages at the beginning, those short pieces written in the second person—the girl who doesn't want to sit next to the woman on the plane because she's African American, the coworker who mistakes her for someone else and then refers to it as "*our* mistake." Those, too, are lyric moments. Traditionally, we associate the lyric with autobiography, but here the second person opens up the writing so that it becomes a collective experience.

RANKINE

When I first sit down to write, these movements are all intuitive. Just this morning, for example, I was listening to the recording of the shooting of Philando Castile in Minnesota, and the little girl, the four-year-old in the backseat of the car, says, "It's okay, Mommy, I'm right here with you." I wrote it down. That will be the beginning of something. Every time I watch that video, my eyes tear up, my throat closes. I hear that little girl, and I am transported to a place beyond my intellect. I'm no longer thinking about the policemen—I'm experiencing that child and her utterance. When a moment enters me that profoundly, I know I can wait to write because I'll forever be in dialogue with the moment. That part of the process I don't interfere with. I will be surprised and ready to begin when her voice makes its way into a piece.

INTERVIEWER

And you might sit on that line for . . .

RANKINE

Months. Or a week. Or a day more. Or years. Once it's on the page, I feel like *that's* when the writer shows up. Right now her voice just accompanies me. In terms of *Citizen*, the initial drafts were in the first person. But I didn't think it was effective, nor did I think it was structurally honest, because many of the accounts were not actually my experiences. Even though I employed the first person in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* to weave together disparate situations, in this book I wanted the opposite. I wanted the disparate moments in *Citizen* to open out to everyone rather than narrowing inside a single point of view. Only when I employed the second person did the text become a field activated by the reader, whoever that reader is. That's what you want—for the text to be as alive and mutable as possible.

INTERVIEWER

Much of *Citizen* is about the black body. This is part of what Serena represents, and something similar plays out across the other narratives. There's the man, for instance, who knows he is going to be pulled over, so he opens his briefcase on the passenger seat. That anxiety builds up in the body.

RANKINE

The key is that the anxiety, the stress, isn't a narrative. It's what interrupts the narrative, what stalls mobility. It's an invisible sensation that requires adjustment by the body, beyond the space of words. As a poet, I want to use language to enter that space of feeling. I'm less interested in stories. That's one reason I write poetry. Often when people are speaking with me, I feel what they are saying is the journey to how they are feeling. I mean, it's not that I'm *not* interested in what they're saying, but I feel like what they're saying is a performance. In many conversations I realize that the thing that's being said is really not the point at all, there's this subterranean exchange of contexts, emotions, and unspoken signals. I think a lot about how white dominance is part of this invisible and unmarked dynamic.

INTERVIEWER

Sometimes, what is being said is at a perpendicular angle to what is really going on.

RANKINE

Exactly. The question is, How do you get to an authentic emotional place? I'm often listening not for what is being told to me but for what resides behind the narrative. What is the feeling for the thing that's being told to me? One of the reasons I work in book-length projects, instead of individual poems, is because I don't trust the authenticity of any given moment by itself.

INTERVIEWER

The individual poem falls prey to the same narrative contrivance—

RANKINE

Of the novel, yes. Its trajectory is on an arc of time. Instead, I feel that what happens formally in *Citizen*, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, and *Plot* is an obsessive circling of the subject. Many positions are inhabited relative to a line of inquiry. It's like one of those mirrored rooms where the spectator sees the same thing repeated in different variations and from different angles.

INTERVIEWER

So in *Citizen*, those second-person vignettes form a series of slightly different but similar interactions. And part of the effect is that we feel it in the body.

RANKINE

Didn't feel it the first time? Here it is again. We don't get there by saying it once. It's not about telling the story, it's about creating the feeling of *knowing* the story through the accumulation of the recurring moment.

INTERVIEWER

Immersion as opposed to narrative.

RANKINE

That's why, in this case, narrative is irrelevant in a certain sense. It could be these ten stories or it could be ten other stories. I tried to pick situations and moments that many people share, as opposed to some idiosyncratic occurrence that might have happened only to me. For example, many black people have been in a situation where they've been called by the name of the other black person—at the office, at the party, in the room. The stories are many and the emotion is one.

INTERVIEWER

The one that sticks with me is when the second-person narrator is jokingly called a "nappy-headed ho" by a friend, because it's a failed attempt at intimacy. The speaker is

reaching for connection in some way.

RANKINE

When I heard that story, I found it fascinating. It's a matter of perception, of course, but as my friend was speaking, I thought that person wished to belittle her because they felt ignored. It could be because she was late, simply that. Some people go ballistic about being kept waiting. I also thought the "nappy-headed" utterance could be an attempt to say, I was anxious to see you. Why were you not anxious to see me? But because whiteness sees itself in a place of dominance, suddenly the racial dynamic comes into play. One benefit of white privilege is that whiteness has an arsenal of racialized insults at the ready. Like, *I* was anxious to see you and I'm *white* so I will put you in your *black* place. I didn't say any of this when my friend was telling me the story, but it struck me that maybe this woman liked her. You know, *liked* her. When I listen to people, I'm constantly thinking, Why do you remember this moment over everything else? And what exactly was the moment trying to say to you? As people of color, we can hear, we can feel, when the language is weaponized against us.

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INTERVIEWER

These small moments, they stick with you.

RANKINE

They're what stabilize and destabilize us. As a writer, I'm trying to draw those small moments *into* the larger moments. For the Hurricane Katrina piece, I was interested in *what got said around* the abandonment of all those people. We know the storms came, that people were abandoned, some of them drowned, they were left in the stadium without food or water. But when you have somebody like Barbara Bush touring a Houston relocation site for Katrina victims and saying, "And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them," those are the moments I find gut-wrenching. You have a woman saying, "You know, I didn't want to turn on the lights, everything was so black, I didn't want to shine a light on that." I mean, somebody *actually* said that. Or Wolf Blitzer said, "These people . . . are so poor and they are so black." He *actually* said that. I can't forget this. I made a structure to hold the utterance because I *couldn't* forget. In these moments, black people are not seen as people. The same way you do not shoot somebody with a four-year-old child in the backseat unless you don't see people.

Darren Wilson—the officer who shot Michael Brown—volunteered that when he saw Brown what he saw was a "demon." He also said, "When I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan." I don't think he could have been any plainer in expressing what was in his imagination. Projections of his imagination were being laid upon the body of this eighteen-year-old. But nobody investigates that. Nobody says, Hey, let's take Michael Brown out of this situation.

Nobody asks, Why are you a policeman, if stereotypes, bias, and projections are informing you when you go into situations with people of color? Not long ago I was at the Ohio Reformatory for Women. Eighty percent of the inmates were white. Where and when do we see that reality represented? These women do not exist. Whiteness cannot support evidence against its own privilege, so these women are invisible.

INTERVIEWER

How much of your thinking about these questions goes back to the theorist Judith Butler? You've long been interested in her work.

RANKINE

Years ago, I went to hear Butler give a lecture. I'd always read her work, and I was very excited to see her speak in person. Her talk reiterated much of what I had read in her books, but then someone in the audience asked, Why are words so hurtful? The entire audience was ripped into attention. Everybody wanted to hear that answer. The response was something like, Because we are addressable. And the way we demonstrate our addressability is by being open to the person in front of us. So we arrive, we are available to them, we expose ourselves, and we give them the space to address us. And in that moment of vulnerability and exposure, we are not defended against whatever comes.

This has informed so much of my thinking, in life and in writing. I'm working on a theatrical staging of *Citizen* right now and I've been exploring that vulnerability of address whenever the characters interact.

INTERVIEWER

So although I've never met Serena Williams, I have an opinion about her, she is addressable to me.

RANKINE

There's an illusion—and I think it *is* an illusion—that we have access to her body, that we are free to say what we want about her, as if it will never reach her, or other black women. All the racism around black women's bodies has landed in the person of Serena Williams, even though, on a certain level, it has nothing to do with her.

INTERVIEWER

Does that ever give you pause? You had not met her when you wrote *Citizen.*

RANKINE

I had not met her when I wrote *Citizen.* But in a certain way, I could say I didn't write about Serena Williams. What I wrote about was the public's response to Serena Williams, the things that have been said about Serena Williams, and the way she has been treated unfairly inside the sport of tennis. In that sense, I don't think I've ever actually written about her.

INTERVIEWER

How addressable are you?

RANKINE

I was in London doing a taped program for the BBC. During the Q and A, there was a white gentleman, apparently quite well-known across the water, who raised his hand and said to me, I really liked your book, but I liked you better in your book than I like you here. It wasn't a question. I said to him, Well, I think the real question is, What did you want me to perform for you? What performance were you expecting that you're not receiving right now? He didn't answer. I would have liked for him to answer. You can never quite access the image in people's minds that you are being compared with. People often say to me, I expected you to be angry. Why aren't you angry? Or they've read the book and feel the book isn't angry, but it says what they feel, so they're curious how one can say exactly what they feel without saying it in a way that's angry. This is coming from African Americans as well as white readers. I think people forget that white people are just people, and that we're all together inside a system that scripts and constructs not just behavior but the imagination.

INTERVIEWER

The imagination first, don't you think? The imagination dictates the behavior.

RANKINE

Right. Ours is a structural and institutional problem. It's complicated because of the vast amount of privilege white people are allotted inside the system, but nonetheless we are a society, and if people are walking around feeling fearful based on the imagination, an imagination put in place by a white-supremacist understanding of the world, that's a problem for everyone.

INTERVIEWER

The End of the Alphabet deals with many of these issues. This is a book about someone going through or having gone through trauma, deep pain, or dislocation. We never know exactly what the dislocation is, but the source isn't important, what's important is the experience. It highlights the tension between narrative and moment as overtly as any of your books.

RANKINE

When I set out to write that book, I specifically wanted to address the question, How do you write about the feeling of devastation that we all share? You meet people and you know they've had some kind of traumatic loss, something destructive in their lives. You intuit that without knowing their story. You don't have to know anything about them, you just know. I thought, Why can't I write a book that is less concerned with narrative but centralizes this feeling beyond it? The narrative could have been twenty years ago, it could have been the Holocaust, it could have been anything, but the feeling of past trauma is communicated by whoever is standing in front of you—that's what stays real.

INTERVIEWER

It's like muscle memory.

RANKINE

It's like a muscle memory that is not private. That's the other thing that's interesting to me—it's not private, it's shared.

INTERVIEWER

How do you mean?

RANKINE

In the sense that I can feel it. I know that sounds kind of out-there, but I feel, when I meet somebody and they have had a kind of trauma—I don't have words for it, but I feel like I know that person in the room. When you arrive at the moment where they tell you what they've experienced, it's just the words being put to the feeling. But you already knew—you knew it by their eyes, you knew it by something. I wanted to write a book that was beyond what usually gets communicated in language.

INTERVIEWER

So the title refers to these limitations of language?

RANKINE

Yes. Beyond the narrative, beyond the storytelling, beyond the anecdotes is another world of feeling so buried and dark and crippling that it needs its own genre. Poetry! We have Robert Lowell's attempt to do that in "For the Union Dead," but that is what you might call a psychoanalytic reading. Then you have somebody like César Vallejo, who will write a poem that says, I feel miserable today as César Vallejo, and nothing can account for the misery of César Vallejo. I am paraphrasing. It's that unmarked and unnameable place I was interested in entering in *The End of the Alphabet.* The book doesn't have an arc, it just is. How many ways can you articulate the sense of nothing?

INTERVIEWER

As we were saying earlier, your work often moves between voices and tenses—first person, third person, present, past—as if to blur the specifics of the self.

RANKINE

I think this is because from the beginning, even in *Nothing in Nature Is Private*, as a black person in the United States, I was always myself and a black person in the United States, you know? I was simultaneously myself personally and also myself historically—

INTERVIEWER

Your interior self.

RANKINE

My interior self, but also myself as Claudia, who moved from Jamaica, grew up with my parents, the little dramas in my life. And then, I was also the Claudia who understood that part of the way in which she lives in this country is determined by the color of her skin. What is possible for me, what is open to me, what gets said to me, what doors close when I'm approaching—all of that.

INTERVIEWER

Does the fact that you were born in Jamaica, that you came to the United States as an immigrant, complicate those things?

RANKINE

It brings in other layers to consider. When you come to this country as an immigrant with your parents—you know, that's also crucial, because you're seeing the world through their lens initially—it affects everything. I remember my mother telling me, You can't trust these white people, I don't care if so-and-so invited you over to their house, you're not going. She had spent her entire life in Jamaica. This was her first time out of the country, and she was very suspicious of the motives of white people. We lived on Harper Avenue in the Bronx. I went to Cardinal Spellman High School, which at the time required uniforms. When I started, they had scoop-neck frocks, but there were these older, cooler uniforms that had bands that connected to the skirt. There was a family at the end of the block whose daughter had gone there, so her mother said to my mother, Your daughter is going to Spellman, my daughter graduated and I have some uniforms. Would you like them? I did want them, because they were the old ones, but my mother said, No, thanks. Later, I asked, Why didn't you take them? And she said, Why didn't she come to my house and knock on the door and give them to me? Why is she taking them out of the back of her car and acting like we don't live two doors down? For her, that was a form of insult—polite people would have said hello and had a conversation before handing over the uniforms. I always regretted not getting those uniforms. They seemed so much chicer.

INTERVIEWER

Your parents came to New York for economic opportunity?

RANKINE

Yes. They worked in hospitals. He was an orderly and she was a nurse's aide initially. It's a cliché, but he worked two jobs, so he was doing nine a.m. to five p.m. and then, I think, ten p.m. to six a.m. or some such. I don't know how, but he ended up buying buildings in the Bronx and becoming a landlord. By the time I started high school, we owned our own home at the very northern end of the Bronx. When he bought the house, it was like *A Raisin in the Sun.* Within two years, it went from a completely white neighborhood to a completely black neighborhood. You could see it happen—every day I came home from school, there would be another white family moving out. I don't think that, as a child, I knew the language around white flight, but certainly I knew the transition was happening. I could see it.

INTERVIEWER

How much do you think this contributed to your sensibility, your way of thinking about the world?

RANKINE

I've always been interested in justice, but this might have had something to do with the dynamic inside our household, because my father—he was a piece of work. I think my sense of injustice started then.

INTERVIEWER

He's no longer living?

RANKINE

No, he passed away. But he was frustrated. Who wouldn't be if you were working two jobs, if you were a black man in the United States? It was the 1970s, and, as I think is often the case, a lot of his stress got taken out once he got home.

INTERVIEWER

Is this when you began to think as a writer?

RANKINE

In the sense of being interested in the dynamics of charged situations, of trying to figure out how language—because in his case it really was language, if you stayed silent you were usually okay—became a trigger. I think I never lost that. But it is also tied to having come here as an immigrant and a young child and being put in a situation where you have to pay attention—vigilance, that's how I would describe it. You have to have a sense of vigilance even in your private spaces. I didn't start writing until I got to college, but from the beginning I was trying to see how I could write in ways that were . . . not greater than me, but that were not autobiographical, let's put it that way. You have to remember that I was in graduate school during the Language poetry movement, but that I also came out of an orientation that was based on autobiography, so these two modes started to come into conversation during that period.

INTERVIEWER

You were at Williams as an undergraduate and Columbia as a graduate student.

RANKINE

Yes. I studied as an undergraduate with the phenomenal Louise Glück. Louise could probably trace her roots as a poet back to Lowell and Berryman. Much of what I was reading in college was part of that tradition, but Louise was also trying to push the mythological up against the autobiographical. She complicated the confessional impulse. She was not interested in excess. That was useful for me. In graduate school, I read Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and Gertrude Stein. I thought about the limits of

autobiography. As a black person, it's difficult *not* to understand that you are part of a larger political and social dynamic, but those writers made me pay closer attention to the materiality of the language itself. For white people, part of their privilege is that their positionality is never under threat, so the language appears to have more mobility, if you don't care about its investments.

My question was, How do you keep the intimacy of the language that is afforded the first person in the meditative, introspective lyric, and yet make it democratic and aware of its political investments? That's why, in *The End of the Alphabet*, I put aside narrative, and it's one of the reasons I wrote the book as a book rather than as individual poems. I was no longer interested in writing poems that built toward a story or that accounted for time in any linear way. I was seeing how far I could get simply with the ordering of words.

INTERVIEWER

What about the expectation of confession? You write, in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, "Because Oprah has trained Americans to say anything anywhere . . . no longer does my editor see confession as intimate and full of silences."

RANKINE

The autobiographical impulse grew out of a push against the modernist universalizing of the "I"—no one wanted to be Auden or Eliot anymore. Lowell, James Wright, Amiri Baraka, and Adrienne Rich—they all rejected their early work for a more authentic and accountable use of the first person. For Lowell, just saying "I" was enough. For Baraka, saying "I" as a black man meant even more. These poets were saying, I don't want to be the universal "I." I want to stand in the truth of my particular positioning. The same is true of Adrienne Rich. One of the things for me about reading Rich as a college student was that she was overtly and clearly addressing the female body, female identity, and female possibility, and I remember thinking, This is very close to what I would say about these things—but not exactly. And that was it. The next semester I signed up for writing classes.

INTERVIEWER

So your decision to write began with a connection to Rich, but also a disconnection, or distinction?

RANKINE

Right. In order to have it say what I needed, I was going to have to do it myself. Now it seems full of hubris, but it wasn't like that at all. It was pragmatic. You know, black women are nothing if not pragmatic, because their whole existence in this country has been about negotiating a life without the fantasy of external support. It was Malcolm X who said, "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most - unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman." If anyone had taught Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, or Nikki Giovanni in my college literature classes, I might have begun in a different place.

In any case, it felt as if Rich had opened up a line of inquiry I needed for my own development as a person, beginning with feminism. She and James Baldwin together—

because I was reading Baldwin at the time—began to give me language to speak.

INTERVIEWER

So Baldwin had a similar impact, as an essayist?

RANKINE

I think so, because inside the African American writing community, the same kind of drama was going on. You had Du Bois's notion of what should be presented to the white world and how you should do that, and on the other hand, you had people like Langston Hughes who were not writing for any one gaze, who could write across class lines.

INTERVIEWER

And could appropriate so-called low forms, such as the blues.

RANKINE

Exactly. Baldwin comes out of that tradition as well. We see the same thing with Jean Toomer. He's somebody who refused to perform blackness and because of that couldn't write after *Cane*, which is a masterpiece. The implications of who was going to read his work, and who he'd have to be for that audience, crippled his production. I think it's something all those writers had to think about.

INTERVIEWER

This brings to mind Rich's notion that silence is poison.

RANKINE

That is probably the most important aspect of Rich's work for me, the idea of silence as a poison. I think that's where I started with *Citizen*, with the sense that you should speak out because if you don't, it's going to harm you.

INTERVIEWER

And yet, we now live in a culture that has embraced confession uncritically, for its own sake—as a first-person gloss on *everything*.

RANKINE

A first-person accounting. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat—all of it is about, I am here, I'm eating this, I'm standing in front of this, I'm seeing this, I'm with this person. It's all right if that's how someone finds their way to a public voice and a sense of community. The question for me is how to retain the intimacy of autobiography and still speak to the generalities of existence. In my books, there isn't one answer. For *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, the use of the first person was very necessary.

INTERVIEWER

Although it's a mistake to assume that this first-person narrator is you.

RANKINE

Some people had trouble with that idea, that the first person could be a structural position unconnected to any particular self.

INTERVIEWER

And then they felt it as a kind of—

RANKINE

Betrayal.

INTERVIEWER

Because you had deceived them?

RANKINE

In their opinion. The text does say that the "I" is a construct. At no point does it say, This is nonfiction. In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, because it contains so many disparate narratives and travels across such a range, I needed an engine that pulled everything together while still allowing things to shift like a gear shift, and that was how the first person was intended to function.

INTERVIEWER

Like *Citizen*, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* takes on a wide array of narratives. There's the political narrative, there are several overlapping personal narratives, there's the question of loneliness, there's an extended meditation on death.

RANKINE

There were stories told to me by friends that I wanted to include. I had a friend whose sister had lost her children. There were stories of people dying that I heard twice removed. I was in their company but as the partner or friend of somebody else who was visiting. The first person let me maneuver seamlessly through these different lives.

INTERVIEWER

Throughout the book, you appropriate images or bits of information, such as a list of pharmaceutical companies or the Google search bar. That device seems to have its roots in *Plot*, where you use language to describe what might otherwise be images—the paintings the protagonist makes, for one.

RANKINE

I've always been very interested in the visual. The visual is capable of doing things text can't do. It never occurred to me in *Plot* to use actual images, although as I was working,

I wondered, What does she do, this character I've created? And I thought, She's a painter! So I decided I could put the space for her work in the book. I'm not sure if that idea made it to the final version of the text. Looking back, it does feel like with each book I wrote, I was taking baby steps toward an inevitable relationship on the page with the visual, but each time it felt risky. By that, I mean unconventional.

INTERVIEWER

What caused the shift, the decision to integrate actual images—and not only images but also screen grabs, bits of data—into the body of the text?

RANKINE

You begin to see things as possible by reading other people's work. A big influence on me was Charles Bernstein. I remember reading works of his that were just lists, and I had this fantasy that if I had a house with a foyer, where you walked in and had to move through it to get to the main rooms, I would have a recording of Bernstein reading his poem "In Particular" playing on a loop. I carried that desire, that image, around in my head for a long time, and I'm sure it allowed for the use of images, because as Bernstein was listing these people—"An Indian fellow gliding on three-wheeled bike / An Armenian rowing to Amenia / An Irish lad with scythe" and so on—I was seeing them.

INTERVIEWER

Your books, taken together, trace their own sort of movement. In *Nothing in Nature Is Private*, you're feeling out the territory, with a variety of poetic forms and subjects. Despair or dislocation becomes a theme in *The End of the Alphabet*, although we don't know exactly what the crisis point is. In *Plot*, the crisis sharpens, revolving around life and birth—the narrative center is a woman reluctant to give birth to a child who is already growing inside her. Then, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* pushes that internal despair to some kind of political engagement, and *Citizen* traces the desolation of public life.

RANKINE

That's accurate, I think, although this shouldn't suggest I knew what I was doing. I think that *Plot* is the most autobiographical because it's a book I wrote before I was pregnant, almost as a way to think about what it means to be an artist and to be a mother. We see that in *To the Lighthouse*, and I was also interested in Bergman's films, which sometimes show a reluctance toward parenting on the part of the male characters, based on a reluctance to replicate their own childhoods. So all those things were floating around.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps the most surprising turn in *Plot* comes at the end, which is written from the point of view of the child. It becomes a reconciliation, or conciliation in any case. "One has to be born," the child says. You shift persons here, not just grammatically—the actual protagonist becomes someone else.

RANKINE

My favorite part of *Plot* is all the definitions of *plot*, the idea that the thing that buries you is also the narrative of your life. It is important that the story include the product of the story. So let's say I was talking about my mother and myself, which I wasn't or maybe I was, who knows, but let's say I was, then the child's voice functions as a recuperative gesture to the struggle that preceded it, which is not to say the child won't have the same struggle—

INTERVIEWER

Or that the mother will be redeemed.

RANKINE

Right, just that the life is not the thing to be refused.

INTERVIEWER

All of that is only seen in retrospect, anyway, at which point the details appear inevitable. We read it in terms of cause and effect, whereas we all know this is not the condition of being alive.

RANKINE

Yes. There have been devastating moments, and there will be more devastating moments, but there will also be a life. I gave a reading in New York not long ago and somebody, a young black man, said, I read *Citizen* and I want to know why there aren't any hopeful moments in the book. And I said, The book is full of people living their lives, and even if it focuses on the interruptions to those lives, around the interruptions there are still lives. That, I think, is important to remember. So that's why bringing in the voice of the child represents a restorative moment. That was the intent of the afterword.

There have been devastating moments, and there will be more devastating moments, but there will also be a life.

INTERVIEWER

The End of the Alphabet is your densest book. Then there's a real shift toward transparency between *Plot* and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. How conscious were you of that?

RANKINE

One of the things I wanted in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* was for the language to be transparent. I didn't want people to have to stop to think, I don't know what she means by that. I wanted it to feel simple, accessible, even conversational. As a writer, this was the challenge—How do you get the ideas of, say, Butler or Lauren Berlant or Derrida or all the reading you've done, all the thinking you've done, inside seven sentences that say, I saw this thing and it made me sad? And how do you do it in a way that the research

material is not effaced, that trace elements are still present? That seems always to be the challenge—to create transparency and access without losing complexity.

INTERVIEWER

What about the shift, or expansion, of poetic form to include, or even become, prose?

RANKINE

When I was working on *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, I started working in paragraphs. I was still utilizing repetition, metaphor, all of the poetic techniques and devices available to me. They were just applied to the sentence, not the line, the paragraph, not the stanza. But when I handed the book in, my then publisher said, This is not a poetry book. And it wasn't just them. I remember a male poet who came to my house—I was living at that time on 116th Street—we went for a walk in Riverside Park and he said to me, As your friend, I want you to know that *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is garbage. It's not good. I'm telling you this as your friend.

INTERVIEWER

This was based purely on the form?

RANKINE

The form. It's not poetry, I don't know what this is, but it's not very good. I had to get a new publisher. This turned out to be a good thing because it forced me to say, You know, you could be right, but if it's going down, I'm going with it because it's what I mean. In those moments you just say, Whatever. Thank you very much for reading. That is what I've got. And not only is it what I've got, it's what I mean.

I also got a letter from an editor who had been a fan of *Plot* and asked to see new work. I sent the new work and he replied, I don't know what you think you're doing, but I can't publish this. Again, I thought, Okay then—I didn't send it to you, you asked for it. So that's how *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* began its public life. After Graywolf took it, many of those people who criticized it came around. The editor who had rejected the pieces for his journal sent me a nice letter saying something to the effect of, I was cleaning out my office before classes started, and I came across your poems. I read them again, and boy was I wrong. Which was very kind of him to have done.

INTERVIEWER

The moment of thinking, This is what I've got, and not only that, but this is what I want, this is what I mean—it seems essential, transformative.

RANKINE

People often ask the question, When do you know that you're finished? And I think that's when I know, when I've said what I mean. It might have taken me ten years or five years or two weeks, but that's what I mean. For now.