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# Claudia Rankine's Embodied Poetics of Witness

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## Abstract

In all of her creative work, Claudia Rankine has helped to revive the American tradition documentary poetics, whose most significant predecessors include Muriel Rukeyser, in a crossing of borders that is at once generic (in terms of literary forms) and socio-political (in her important role as a public intellectual and theorist of race, gender, and affect). Starting in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), moving into collaborative experiments with the video essay, and most recently in the acclaimed volume *Citizen* (2014), Rankine not only investigates models of documentary forms but also uses her formal border crossing as a means to forge a singular poetics of witness. This paper will explore Rankine's engagement with documentary modes over the past decade, tracing the ways in which her mixtures of lyric voice, essayistic prose, archival methodology, and visual imagery all recast the poetic approaches of Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* for the twenty-first century, creating a poetics that challenges us to become global citizens.

Exemplifying a diverse and growing body of new poetics, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* blends poetic voice with both essay and fictional narration to explore contemporary events, documented in numerous forms, both textual and graphic. Like Rukeyser, Rankine reflects on social justice, but in contrast to the approach taken in *The Book of the Dead*, Rankine's focus is broad: rather than zero in on one historical moment, Rankine's gaze ranges from the debacle of the 2000 presidential election to September 11, 2001 and its aftermath in the invasion of Afghanistan. Throughout, Rankine engages visual culture, employing images to disrupt narrative surfaces: black-and-white photographs, stills from TV news broadcasts, and medical diagrams are inter-woven with passages of text dispersed across the page-space, as the speaker recounts instances of personal and social trauma. Crossing the borders among narrative fiction, visual collage, and scholarly research (in extensive endnotes), Rankine blends a lyric impulse with cultural criticism to create a startlingly new poetic mode—one that complicates earlier notions of documentary (historical) truth.

Rankine went on to use new media to offer even more dramatic interventions into poetic and documentary discourses, challenging the distinction between lyric poem and documentary artifact. Among Rankine's many video essays called "Situations" (created in collaboration with John Lucas), "Zidane" employs footage of the infamous head-butt by the soccer (football) player Zinedine Zidane with a voice-over that collages texts by cultural critics from Frantz Fanon and James Baldwin to Cornel West; here, Rankine uses found material to theorize racism as inherited trauma. Rankine's experimentation employs documentary materials in radical ways, challenging both poetic idiom and the definition of documentary itself.

Taking these border-crossing works as preface, this paper will connect Rankine's earlier works to describe Rankine's singular achievement in *Citizen*, in which both the techniques of *Don't*

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Let Me Be Lonely and an adaptation to the page of several of the "Situation" videos reveal a complex dialogue among archival materials, essay, lyric, and visual art. Like Rukeyser, Rankine creates on the page an intersection between the knowledge of history and the embodied knowledge of lyric, suggesting the necessity of the poetic impulse to political understanding and, in particular, its importance to any comprehension of the effects of racism in the U.S. In this way, Rankine's formal border-crossing has contributed to (and even helped to shape) the current galvanizing awareness of racial injustice in the U.S.