How It Feels to Be Black in America

From everyday slights to Trayvon Martin, Claudia Rankine contemplates citizenship in a deeply divided society.

By HOLLY BASS

IN LIGHT OF the national demonstrations over the Michael Brown and Eric Garner cases, it’s tempting to describe “Citizen,” Claudia Rankine’s latest volume of poetry, as “timely.” Even the cover image of a floating hoodie, its sleeves and torso cut away, seems timely. Any American view-

ING IT WOULD IMMEDIATELY RECALL A CERTAIN BLACK TEENAGER WHO WAS SHOT AND KILLED BY A NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH VOLUNTEER IN FEBRUARY 2012. BUT THIS WORK, BY AN ARTIST DAVID HAMMONS, WAS CREATED IN 1993 — WELL BEFORE TRAYVON MARTIN WAS EVEN BORN.

AND THIS SEEMS TO BE PART OF RANKINE’S CONCEIT: WHAT PASSES AS NEWS FOR SOME (WHITE) READERS IS SIMPLY QUOTIDIAN LIVED EXPERIENCE FOR (BLACK) OTHERS.

THE CHALLENGE OF MAKING RACISM RELEVANT, OR EVEN EVIDENT, TO THOSE WHO DO NOT BEAR THE BRUNT OF ITS ILL EFFECTS IS TRICKY. RANKINE BRILLIANTLY PUSHES POETRY’S FORMS TO DISARM READERS AND CIRCUMVENT OUR CAREFULLY CONSTRUCTED DEFENSE MECHANISMS AGAINST THE HINT OF POSSIBLY BEING RACIST OURSELVES.

TO WI, IN MANY OF HER PIECES, IT’S EASY TO PRESUME THE “YOU” IS ALWAYS BLACK AND THE “SHE” OR “HE” IS ALWAYS WHITE, BUT WITHIN A FEW PAGES RANKINE BEGINS MADDYING THE PERSONAS AND PRONOUNS IN A WAY THAT FORCES US TO WORK A LITTLE HARDER. THIS TECHNIQUE REACHES ITS HIGH POINT IN A BREATHLESS, UNPUNCTUATED CONCLUSION TO HER LAMENT ON THE JENA SIX, THE GROUP OF BLACK TEENAGERS CHARGED IN LOUISIANA AFTER THE 2006 BEATING OF A WHITE STUDENT: “Boys will be boys being boys feeling their capacity heady butting bulging heads righting their wrongs in the violence of aggravated adolescence . . . for the other boy for the other boys the fists the feet criminalized already are weapons already exploding the landscape and then the litigious hitting back is life imprisoned.”

AS SHE DID IN HER 2004 COLLECTION “DON’T LET ME BE LONELY,” RANKINE AGAIN WORKS WITH A FORM SHE CALLS “AN AMERICAN LYRIC.” THE WRITING ZIGS AND ZAGS EFFORTLESSLY BETWEEN PROSE POEMS, IMAGES AND ESSAYS. THIS IS THE POET AS CONCEPTUAL ARTIST, IN FULL MASTERY OF HER CRAFT. AND WHILE THE THEMES OF THIS BOOK COULD HAVE BEEN MINED FROM ANY POINT IN AMERICA’S HISTORY, RANKINE SETS THE WHOLE COLLECTION RESOLUTELY IN THE PRESENT. CONTEMPORARY CONTENT AND CONTEMPORARY FORM MIRROR EACH OTHER.

RANKINE HAS PUBLISHED FOUR PREVIOUS VOLUMES OF POETRY IN ADDITION TO WRITING PLAYS, CREATING VIDEOS AND EDITING SEVERAL ANTHOLOGIES. HER MULTIDISCIPLINARY ETHOS COLORS EVERY PAGE OF “CITIZEN.”

THE BOOK IS DIVIDED INTO SEVEN SECTIONS WITH NO INDEX OR TABLE OF CONTENTS. WITHOUT TITLES TO SEPARATE AND GROUND THEM, HER POETIC TEXTS AND IMAGES FUNCTION AS FRAGMENTS OF MEMORY, COMING INTO SHARP FOCUS, THEN BLURRING. CUMULATIVELY, IT’S LIKE VIEWING AN EXPERIMENTAL FILM OR LIVE PERFORMANCE. ONE IS LEFT WITH A MIX OF EMOTIONS THAT LINGER AND WEND THEMSELVES INTO THE SUBCONSCIOUS.

THERE IS A LENGTHY ESSAY ON SHEREEN WILLIAMS THAT BEAUTIFULLY UNPACKS THE “ANGRY BLACK WOMAN” MOTIF IN A WAY THAT COULD ALSO BE SEEN AS TIMELY. AND THERE IS A SERIES OF “SCRIPTS,” SOME CREATED IN COLLABORATION WITH THE PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN LUCAS, THAT BLEND TEXT AND IMAGE TO CREATE A KIND OF REVISIONIST REMIX OF MAJOR MEDIA COVERAGE OF RACIALIZED INCIDENTS.


THERE ARE ALSO SEVERAL EVCOTIVE INTERNO MONOLOGUES THAT OFFER A KIND OF BREATHING SPACE BETWEEN THE TEXTS GROUNDED IN FACT. “YOU SIT DOWN, YOU SIGH. YOU STAND UP, YOU SIGH. THE SIGHING IS A WORRYING EXHALE OF AN ACHE. YOU WOULDN’T CALL IT AN ILLNESS; STILL IT IS NOT THE ITERATION OF A FREE BEING. WHAT ELSE TO LAYER YOURSELF TO BUT AN ANIMAL, THE RUMINANT KIND?” AT BEST THESE MONOLOGUES CAPTURE THE LIMINAL QUALITY OF BEING BLACK AND AMERICAN — WHAT DU BOIS CALLED DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS — THOUGH ON OCCASION THEY LAPSE INTO SLACK TAUTOLOGY: “DO FEELINGS LOSE THEIR FEELING IF THEY SPEAK TO A LACK OF FEELING?”

RANKINE HAS FOR THE MOST PART ABANDONED LINE BREAKS; SHE IS LIKE A PAINTER ABANDONING REPRESENTATION IN ORDER TO FOCUS ON CANVAS, COLOR AND LIGHT. IN HER WRITING THE CITY BECOMES THE BALLAD, THAT POETIC TECHNIQUE OF ALLOWING A SENTENCE TO RUN INTO THE NEXT LINE OF POETRY, OFTEN TO CREATE LAYERED MEANINGS, TAKES PLACE BETWEEN POEMS RATHER THAN BETWEEN LINES. AN INCIDENT IN A DRUGSTORE IN WHICH A MAN AN- INVOLUNTARILY CUTS THE LIST FOR THE CASHIER BECAUSE HE DID NOT SEE THE NARRATOR FLOW INTO A HAUNTING MEDITATION ON HURRICANE KATRINA THAT ENDS WITH THE FOLLOWING LINES OF DIALOGUE:

CALL OUT TO THEM.
DON’T SEE THEM.
CALL OUT ANYWAY.
DID YOU SEE THEIR FACES?

THE BULK OF THE BOOK CONSISTS OF LYRIC PROSE POEMS, IN PRESENT TENSE AND SECOND PERSON. A REASONED, MEASURED TONE MARKS THESE PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF EVERYDAY RACISM EXPERIENCED BY WHAT THE WRITER Ta-NEHISI COATES CALLS “GOOD PEOPLE.” RANKINE CREATES AN INTENTIONALLY DISORIENTING EXPERIENCE, ONE THAT MIRRORS THE EXPERIENCE OF RACIAL MICRO-AGGRESSIONS HER SUBJECTS ENCOUNTER. RACE IS BOTH REFERENCED AND PURPOSELY EFFACED WITHIN THE TEXT.

“The real estate woman, who didn’t even bother to say she was a real estate agent, just pointed to a house, and I bought it. I felt like I was being manipulated, but I didn’t know how to respond.”

A CHANELLER OF THE ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS AND A PROFESSOR AT POMONA COLLEGE, RANKINE SEEMS EAGER TO INDICATE THAT HER NARRATORS BELONG TO THE CULTURED, WELL-EDUCATED SET. THESE EPISODES TAKE PLACE AT A PRIVATE SCHOOL, ON THE WAY TO THERAPY, IN THE CABIN OF A PLANE. THESE ARE THE ACCOMPLISHED BLACK PROFESSIONALS AND ACADEMICS WHOSE LIVES ARE OFTEN SPENT IN WHITE CIRCLES, AND OFTEN PRESUMED TO BE FREE OF THE STRICTURES OF RACE. BUT RANKINE WANTS US TO KNOW THAT NO AMERICAN CITIZEN IS EVER TRULY FREE OF RACE AND RACISM. THE POTENTIAL TO SAY A RACIST THING OR THINK A RACIST THOUGHT RESIDES IN ALL OF US LIKE AN UNERASED MINE FROM A FORGOTTEN WAR.

“THE WORLD IS WRONG. YOU CAN’T PUT THE PAST BEHIND YOU. IT’S BURIED IN YOU; IT’S TURNED YOUR FLESH INTO ITS OWN CUPBOARD. NOT EVERYTHING REMEMBERED IS USEFUL BUT IT ALL COMES FROM THE WORLD TO BE STORED IN YOU. . . DID I HEAR WHAT I THINK I HEAR? DID THAT JUST COME OUT OF MY MOUTH, HIS MOUTH, YOUR MOUTH?”

AS RANKINE POINTEDLY WRITES, “JUST GETTING ALONG SHOULDN’T BE AN AMBITION.” “CITIZEN” THROWS A MOLOTOV COCKTAIL AT THE NOTION THAT A REDUCTION OF INJUSTICE IS THE SAME AS FREEDOM.