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# The Racial Imaginary: Writers On Race In The Life Of The Mind



## Synopsis

"To think of creativity in terms of transcendence is itself specific and partial— a lovely dream perhaps, but an inhuman one." It is not only white writers who make a prize of transcendence, of course. Many writers of all backgrounds see the imagination as ahistorical, as a generative place where race doesn't and shouldn't enter, a place of bodies that transcend the legislative, the economic—in other words, transcend the stuff that doesn't lend itself much poetry. In this view the imagination is postracial, a posthistorical and postpolitical utopia. . . . To bring up race for these writers is to inch close to the anxious space of affirmative action, the scarring qualifications. "So everyone is here."— Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda, from the introduction

In 2011, a poem published in a national magazine by a popular white male poet made use of a black female body. A conversation ensued, and ended. Claudia Rankine subsequently created Open Letter, a web forum for writers to relate the effects and affects of racial difference and to explore art's failure, thus far, to adequately imagine. Born in Kingston, Jamaica, Claudia Rankine is author and editor of more than six collections of poetry and poetics. She is a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and a professor of English at Pomona College. Beth Loffreda is author of *Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-gay Murder*. She directs the MFA program in creative writing at the University of Wyoming.

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## Customer Reviews

Claudia Rankine: Born in Kingston, Jamaica, poet Claudia Rankine earned a BA at Williams College

and an MFA at Columbia University. Rankine has published several collections of poetry, including *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004) and *Nothing in Nature is Private* (1994), which won the Cleveland State Poetry Prize. Her work often crosses genres as it tracks wild and precise movements of mind. Noting that "hers is an art neither of epiphany nor story," critic Calvin Bedient observed that "Rankine's style is the sanity, but just barely, of the insanity, the grace, but just barely, of the grotesqueness." Discussing the borrowed and fragmentary sources for her work in an interview with Paul Legault for the Academy of American Poets, Rankine stated, "I don't feel any commitment to any external idea of the truth. I feel like the making of the thing is the truth, will make its own truth." With Juliana Spahr, Rankine co-edited *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2002) and, with Lisa Sewell, *American Poets in the 21st Century: The New Poetics* (2007). Her poems have been included in the anthologies *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present* (2003), *Best American Poetry* (2001), and *The Garden Thrives: Twentieth Century African-American Poetry* (1996). Her play *Detour/South Bronx* premiered in 2009 at New York's Foundry Theater. Rankine has been awarded fellowships from the Academy of American Poets, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Lannan Foundation. In 2013, she was elected as a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. She has taught at the University of Houston, Barnard College, and Pomona College.

**Beth Loffreda:** Beth Loffreda is a nonfiction writer and the author of *Losing Matt Shepard: life and politics in the aftermath of anti-gay murder*. She directs the MFA program in creative writing and teaches for American Studies at the University of Wyoming. She lives in Laramie, Wyoming.

Amazing book. Order was fast.

Who is permitted to write about Race and People of Color? Claudia Rankine is a renowned poet whose popularity seems to increase as her "prosecutorial" formulations multiply. Receiving several prestigious nominations and awards, Rankine is at her best when writing about the Universal or the Transcendent ("Some years there exists a wanting to escape"), literary configurations that Rankine dismisses in the volume under review. The Introduction to *The Racial Imaginary*, written with the writer, Beth Loffreda (hereafter, R&L), informs us that Rankine initiated the Racial Imaginary project online with "an open letter about race and the creative imagination" (p 13), soliciting readers' responses. The resulting book presents 28 selected posts, illustrated by strong and timely artwork chosen by the artist Max King Cap. R&L's Introduction is most emphatic when

rejecting *the imagination [as] a free space* (15) and when arguing that *To say, as a white writer, that I have a right to write about whoever I want, including writing from the point of view of characters of color* that I have a right of access and that my artistry is harmed if I am told I cannot do so *is to make a mistake*. (15-16). These themes continually resonate with the reader. The volume is divided into five Sections: Institutions, Lives, Readings, Critiques, and Poetics. Institutions highlights R&L's distinction between Race and Racism, and a wide range of intensely personal, even, confessional, voices describe their experiences, mostly in the form of seemingly cathartic expressions of white guilt, realizing the Editors' prediction that, *[The 'internal tumult' will] be made up of some admixture of shame, guilt, loathing, opportunism, anxiety, irritation, dismissal, self-hatred, pain, hope, affection, and other even less nameable energies*. (21). The entries in the book's first two Sections, and their sometimes discomfiting revelations, left me wondering about the power differentials and dynamics between Rankine and most of the other writers. The potential for Rankine's voice to influence, if not intimidate, her subordinates should be considered; although, Rankine might counter that attempts to construct a hierarchy based upon rank, prominence, or authority inherently reflects structural racism, classism, and sexism. Clearly, Rankine intended her Racial Imaginary project to be an egalitarian and communal effort. The Section, Readings, begins with a well-researched and instructive essay by Joshua Weiner. He has a fundamentally progressive goal, *to disrupt the structure, so that we can see it* (124). Weiner's tools for dismantling power structures are ideas and words, and his cogent analysis of representations of identity in several texts privileges the universality of the theme, *the individual and society*. Critique is a brief Section addressing the challenging topic, *writing race*. As a self-described *black woman*, Diane Exavier states, *I feel like race isn't something I always want (or need) to talk about, but it is something that other people won't let me forget*. (205). Importantly, this author proposes a solution: *I truly believe that it is the recognition of the Other that ultimately leads to unification*. (206). However, Exavier does not tell us how to do this. In the same Section, Soraya Membreno's perspectives on race and ethnicity are refreshing and unique in this volume. *I am Hispanic, yes, but that's not your business*. (212). And, later in her essay, *Race does not define me, it is my culture, but it is not me*. (213). Membreno asserts her right to define her own identity, a timely topic given recent debates about

Rachel Dolezal's "passing" (also see Lacy M. Johnson's piece in this section and Tamiko Beyer's essay on page 245). The Poetics Section includes 15 brief entries on how individual poets engage the topic, "Race", in their practices. I wish this Section had been expanded to include more personal reflections on the process of writing poetry. The book would have benefited from a discerning summary chapter written by R&L with the purpose of placing in perspective similar and different themes and trends across essays, including, a (revised) conceptual framework, particularly, since many of the contributors' views seem incompatible with those of the Editors as proffered in their Introduction. A particularly evident, though, possibly, useful, consequence of reading each essay is thinking about the inherent inconsistencies of assumptions and intellectual constructs employed by the authors, and it might be worthwhile for scholars to "unpack" the subtexts and deep structures within and between Sections. Indeed, Rankine, herself, may have some ambivalence about her rejection of the Universal and the Transcendent, since the "voice" of her 2014 book, *Citizen (Graywolf)*, employs many generic references and sentences relevant to all humans, especially, marginalized groups other than blacks ("You are you even before you"; "Why do you feel okay saying this to me?"; As usual, you drive straight through the moment with the expected backing off of what was previously said). Furthermore, Rankine is aware that, in a Postmodern world, identity is fractured, though she advances a collective identity and meta-narrative based on Race. Hopefully, Rankine and Loffreda will expand this program and other writers will initiate their own. The project under review makes clear that poets need to talk among themselves about definitions, motivations, craft, and priorities and that poets of color should dialogue about the potential to ignore facts that do not fit particular narratives or metanarratives. Though I was annoyed, throughout this volume, by numerous editorial oversights, and I had the impression that the book was hastily assembled, *The Racial Imaginary* is recommended as a genuine attempt to initiate a conversation about Race and Racism, presented via a variety of viewpoints from a diverse group of contributors.

This is a very entertaining and engaging book that kept me engaged throughout-wonderful book!!!! Anthony D. Woods/o *Velvet Tears: Breaking the Silence*

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