

Mr Chancellor,

Claudia Rankine is one of the foremost poets in the world today. Her life's work, the focus of her creativity and literary contribution, has been to highlight racial injustice. One of the unique distinctive contributions of her art has been to interrogate the acts of micro-aggression in everyday encounters between African-Americans and white Americans that scale up to murder and other atrocities. She exposes how fear, arising from the many historical legacies of slavery, permeates everyday encounters in a culture where bearing arms is a constitutional right. Hers is a powerful voice that calls time on the notion that racial equality has been accomplished since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, Claudia Rankine grew up in New York and went on to study for a BA at Williams College and a Master of Fine Art at Columbia University. Professor Rankine has taught at the University of Houston, Case Western Reserve University, Barnard College, and Pomona College. She is now the Aerol Arnold Chair in the University of Southern California English Department. Rankine has published five collections of poetry, including *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry, the PEN Center USA Poetry Award, and the Forward Poetry Prize. She was a finalist for the National Book Award for *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004); and *Nothing in Nature is Private* (1994), which won the Cleveland State Poetry Prize.

Professor Rankine has co-edited *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2002), *American Poets in the 21st Century:*

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*The New Poetics* (2007), and *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* (2014). 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 Theatre, and a second play *The Provenance of Beauty: A South Bronx Travelogue* was a 2011 Distinguished Development Project Selection in the American Voices New Play Institute at Arena Stage. Among her numerous awards and honours, Professor Rankine was the recipient of the Poets and Writers' Jackson Poetry Prize and holds fellowships from the Academy of American Poets, the Lannan Foundation and the National Endowment of the Arts. In 2013, she was elected as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. In 2014, she received a Lannan Literary Award, and was recently awarded a coveted MacArthur 'genius grant'. She divides her time between living in California and New York, and teaches at Yale University, where she is the Frederick Iseman Professor of Poetry.

Claudia Rankine's work often crosses genres as it tracks wild and precise movements of the mind. She explores the intersections between the personal, traditionally fertile ground for the lyric poet, and the wider 'historical self' of politics, collapsing the two spheres of activity and challenging our preconceptions about what it means to occupy a particular time, place and identity. What room is there for the African-American lyric poet, asks Rankine, 'who got into this business partly to talk about rain, trees, moons, skies, dejection, and joy' when interiority is crowded instead with instances of humiliation. A sense of the intolerable strain it imposes upon black people to become a store for the world's casual prejudice is articulated in *Citizen*: 'She said what? What did he just do? Did she really just say that? He said what? What did she do? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come

out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? Do you remember when you sighed?’

Rankine’s book-length, genre-defying work has been a literary intervention of global significance. It was a finalist for the National Book Award in the United States, and also holds the distinction of being the only poetry book to be a *New York Times* bestseller in the nonfiction category. *Citizen* explores the stories of black Americans encountering everyday racism, drawing upon a wide range of cultural reference points, from works of art and everyday street-level encounters, to Serena Williams, one of the greatest athletes of her generation, pushed to breaking point by systematic abuse in the wider culture and prejudicial treatment within her sport. Rankine shows how racism persists even, or perhaps more especially, when more overtly racist behaviour is outlawed. *Citizen* was published just as Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson Missouri and Eric Garner died of asphyxiation while under arrest by the New York Police Department. Civil unrest and protests followed the acquittal of police officers responsible, contributing to a groundswell of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. *Citizen* has been called ‘An especially vital book for this moment in time’ by Dan Chiasson in the *New Yorker*, and a ‘grimly compelling read’ by Newcastle University’s Professor Sean O’Brien writing in *The Independent*, who says ‘read it once and you will probably want to read it again. If anything, the situation looks grimmer and more shaming the second time’. O’Brien was writing before the outcome of the recent presidential elections in the United States. The rise of nationalist and populist movements here, in the rest of Europe and around the world, has given new urgency to promoting social justice and equality for all. We need Claudia Rankine now more than ever.

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Rankine's work provides a powerful challenge to the prevailing normativity of whiteness, captured in the quotation from Zora Neale Hurston in *Citizen*: 'I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.' Linda Anderson, Professor of Modern American and English Literature at Newcastle University, pays tribute to the importance of Claudia Rankine's work: it demands, she says, 'thinking critically about whiteness, and it's what we fail to do. Giving her this honorary degree recognises struggles around race and ethnicity are ongoing, especially now, especially when we don't recognise the significance of casual, everyday racism.'

Our Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Humanities and Social Sciences, Professor Julie Sanders, comments 'it is important to me that ongoing work at Newcastle University on the equality and diversity issue and on social justice issues in their broadest sense should be explored by staff and students through the creative arts, through practice and not least through drama, fiction, and poetry. For these reasons, it is an honour to have Claudia Rankine accept this honorary degree as part of our broader honouring of the legacy of Dr Martin Luther King.' Dr King stood in almost this exact same spot nearly half a century ago to receive his honorary doctorate from Newcastle University, an event which we will be marking next year with our Newcastle Freedom City celebrations. On that day in November 1967, just months before his assassination, he expressed hope for a better future: 'Through changes in habits, pretty soon attitudinal changes will take place, and even the heart may be changed in the process.' Surely the poetry of Professor Rankine has taken up this challenge, and shown the world that, although the laws that enshrined racial discrimination may have passed into history, the work of changing hearts and minds has only just begun.

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Mr Chancellor, for her outstanding international contribution to poetry and literary culture, and her unwavering dedication to promoting racial equality and social justice, I present to you Claudia Rankine for the award of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

*Citation by Professor Helen Berry, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2016*