

# Citizen Cuffed:

## An American Carceral Experience

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*Think about your reading life. What piece of writing has “taken the top of your head off,” to use Emily Dickinson’s phrase? Write a reading narrative in which you enter into dialogue with this writing—feel free to quote it. How has this reading experience changed you and helped you to redefine your life and your mission as a writer?*

Odd how a thing can exist long before there is language to name it. Though I had spent years subject to the whims of the Department of Corrections, the word “microaggression” had not entered my vocabulary. Each day I faced an existence wherein I was undoubtedly “other.” Each day I was reminded of my failings. These reminders were present in what I wore, in what I ate, in where I slept, in how and when I moved. These reminders were present in my body as much as my mind.

I am a white woman. As such, I have walked through the world paying little attention to the color of my skin. That is white privilege.

“White privilege” is another term that had little place in my vocabulary—at least until I collided with *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine. Suddenly, I knew from my experience within the criminal justice system what it felt like to be both hypervisible and invisible at the same time—an experience Rankine captured in the pages of this book that would change my perspective of the world and my place in it.

“Yes, and...” writes Rankine, again and again. I agreed with Rankine that “yes, and attested to a life with no turn-offs, no alternative routes.” I had driven myself crazy for years searching my memory for a turn-off that I might have missed. One night I had been driving in the rain, certain that I should take a left, but unable to stop myself from taking the right—into the arms of the lover who would give me scars that no amount of time would erase. Was the left turn an illusion? Did it ever exist at all?

I went to prison pregnant. I gave birth to a daughter in custody. I spent one night cradling her in my arms after I had unwillingly pushed her from my body. The next day I was unchained from the hospital bed. My child was placed in the clear plastic bassinet next to the bed I had vacated. Chains were wrapped first around my empty womb, then my wrists were secured to these same chains. I was led from the room, where my child remained. I looked over my shoulder as long as I could, unwilling to turn away from my daughter, trusting that the hands on each of my shoulders would not run me into a wall—not for my sake, but their own, you know. After turning the corner, I could no longer see her. Nor could I see anything else, not for the tears that were falling, but for the sheer weight of the pain and regret that pressed down upon me.

*Yes, and the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight.* I was obese the first five years of my incarceration. My body retained the shape of my pregnancy. I carried my grief in the shape of a phantom fetus. For years, new women at the prison would smile kindly at me and ask when I was due. Actual insult to actual injury.

The loss of this child compounded all the other losses—all of which were “locked in and coded on a cellular level.” I suffer from chronic back pain now. Surely the result of the weight of sorrow my body has been made to drag from there to here.

*You are not sick, you are injured—  
you ache for the rest of your life.  
How to care for the injured body,  
the kind of body that can't hold  
the content it is living.*

*Citizen* is not about me, and yet, I find myself within its pages. My injury and Rankine's are not the same. Though my position as an “American Citizen” and all that phrase implies, in terms of responsibilities and protections to and from the United States, are, indeed, threatened—those threats do not arise out from the pigment of my skin. Mine is a different injury than that of Rankine and other Black Americans. However, this injury is one which allows me to glimpse, however slightly, the injury that has been done to my countrymen.