

# Entangled Encounters: The Transcultural Counterwitness and Implication in Claudia Rankine and John Lucas's Situations

ASJ [asjournal.org/69-2020/entangled-encounters-the-transcultural-counterwitness-and-implication-in-claudia-rankine-and-john-lucas-situations/](https://asjournal.org/69-2020/entangled-encounters-the-transcultural-counterwitness-and-implication-in-claudia-rankine-and-john-lucas-situations/)

Matthew Moran

**Drawing on current definitions of public testimony, this study turns to the work of Claudia Rankine and John Lucas's *Situations* to explore how video poems challenge the pervasive stereotyping of black Americans in mainstream journalism and implicate viewers, particularly white ones, into the everyday and historical traumas of racial violence. Video poems, such as *Situations*, take advantage of multimodal channels to move viewers beyond spectator guilt to introduce a more nuanced understanding of American and global racism. Through an investigation of three of their video poems, "Stop and Frisk," "In Memory of Trayvon Martin," and "World Cup," this study explores how Rankine and Lucas's work opposes, and engages with, the pervasive stereotyping of black Americans presented in mainstream news media; how the multimodal nature of video poetry problematizes the viewers' relationship with American and global racism; and how acts of counterwitnessing implicate viewers into distant histories of racial trauma.**

## Introduction

- 1 In 2013, conservative talk host Rush Limbaugh triumphed at the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the Florida resident who gunned down the unarmed Trayvon Martin near his residence in Florida. In response to the growing national outrage and then president Barack Obama's comments on how "[Trayvon Martin] could've been me" (Obama), Limbaugh lambasted the "ginned up" liberals to his audience of over 15 million listeners, citing their desire to exploit historical inaccuracies to stoke an open war on white America:

[N]o other race has ever fought a war for the purpose of ending slavery, which we did. Nearly 600,000 people killed in the Civil War. It's preposterous that Caucasians are blamed for slavery when they've done more to end it than any other race, and within the bounds of the Constitution to boot. And yet white guilt is still one of the dominating factors in American politics. It's exploited, it's played upon, it is promoted, used, and it's unnecessary. (Limbaugh qtd. in Kim)

- 2 Other prominent conservative voices, such as Fox News Host Sean Hannity and Todd Starnes, scolded the former president for "race-baiting," calling his

comments an unnecessary and unproductive politicized conversation (Fung, “Sean Hannity”; Rayfield). Although extreme, the hosts’ comments provide a glimpse into the nation’s complex and difficult history with race. Over the next decade, Americans would return to these same discussions following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, the Jena Six case, the tragic massacre at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston and, most recently, the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd.

- 3 Amid the polarizing discourses in mainstream news coverage, poetry has occupied important spaces of counter-discourse. For example, in the weeks following the death of Michael Brown by the Ferguson Police, Langston Hughes’s 1938 poem “Let America Be America Again” received over ten thousand views on Poets.org (Schwartz). Outlets not known for showcasing poetry, such as the *Washington Post* and *BuzzFeed*, published poems in response to these killings (Petronzio). On social media, professional and amateur poets mourned black victims and called for justice and solidarity across the United States through movements such as “Black Poets Speak Out” (Petronzio).<sup>[1]</sup> But perhaps the most high-profiled response came from Jamaican-born, American poet Claudia Rankine and her husband, visual artist John Lucas.
- 4 In 2010, Claudia Rankine and John Lucas began their collaboration on a series of experimental video poems that “exist around the public experiences in individual lives” (Carter 2). These “situation” videos are a combination of still and moving images shot by Lucas and spoken-word poetry recorded by Rankine. In a 2014 interview with Lauren Berlant, Rankine comments that her video poems help her “to slow down and enter the event, in moments, as if I were there in real time rather than as a spectator considering it in retrospect.” She adds “[t]he indwelling of those Situation pieces becomes a performance of switching your body out with the body in the frame and moving methodically through pathways of thought and positionings.” *Situations* visualizes how narratives of race in the mainstream news media coexist with racial traumas. The multimodal nature of the video poem allows Rankine and Lucas to juxtapose image and non-image texts to reimagine the black experience for viewers and create spaces for legitimate investigation (Coleman). These video poems, which eventually became chapter six in her seminal work *Citizen, An American Lyric*, highlight the role of counter-discourses in America’s ongoing battle with racism; they also raise difficult questions about the role of historical guilt and responsibility for white viewers.
- 5 In a previous study, I put forth a definition for a figure of diverse social and cultural background who testifies from a marginal position, thereby challenging the dominant discourse in the public sphere. I call this figure the “transcultural counterwitness” (Moran). Drawing on current definitions of public testimony, this study turns to Claudia Rankine and John Lucas’s *Situations* to explore how their video poems challenge the racialization of black Americans in mainstream

journalism and implicate viewers, particularly white ones, into the everyday and historical traumas of racial violence. By examining three of their video poems, “Stop and Frisk,” “In Memory of Trayvon Martin,” and “World Cup,” this study argues that *Situations* moves its viewers beyond spectator guilt to introduce a more nuanced understanding of American and global racism through acts of counterwitnessing. This study addresses the following questions: How does *Situations* oppose, and engage with, the pervasive stereotypes of black Americans presented in mainstream journalism? How does the multimodal nature of video poetry problematize the viewers’ relationship with American and global racism? How do acts of counterwitnessing make viewers aware of distant histories of racial trauma?

## The Transcultural Counterwitness and Mainstream Discourses of Race

---

- 6 Born in Kingston, Jamaica, Claudia Rankine moved to the Bronx at the age of seven. Although Rankine is American, her migrant background taught her to be cognizant of the culture of racial discourse at an early age. In a 2016 interview with Aaron Coleman, Rankine reflects, “I’m now in my fifties, so it’s hard for me to think of myself as not the American citizen that I am. But I do know, growing up in my household with two Jamaican parents, that American blackness was referred to as American blackness and American whiteness was referred to as American whiteness. So even as a child I was thinking of the dynamics as a dynamic specific to this culture.” Rankine’s Jamaican background taught her to negotiate American culture at young age and observe it from “both inside and outside” (Coleman). Poetry became a means to create openness, ask questions, and seek out commonalities (Coleman; Sharma). Her position as an insider/outsider to the black American experience allows her movement through multiple worlds and points of view. Grounded in her transcultural perspective, her poetry seeks to connect these disparate human experiences through acts of counterwitnessing. (Rothberg, “A Dialog on Ethics and Politics” 31; Zamorano Llena, Hansen, and Gilsenan Nordin ix–xi).
- 7 Visual artist/filmmaker John Lucas was raised in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio. From an early age, Lucas was exposed to various acts of “ignorance and visceral hatred,” ranging from a “white only” clause on his parents’ lease to the harassment of a black classmate in high school (Fowler). Lucas is best known for his 2014 film *The Cooler Bandits*, a documentary about four black American teens who took part in a series of restaurant robberies in Ohio in 1991. Much of Lucas’s work has been in collaboration with poet and wife Claudia Rankine.
- 8 The term counterwitness draws on research from the fields of public testimony. In *The Moral Witness*, cultural critic Carolyn Dean provides a conceptual framework for thinking about the role of proxy witnesses, such as journalists, photographers, and otherwise concerned spectators who were not present during the violence. Dean defines the counterwitness as “a marginal cultural

figure [who] emerges as a symbol of frustration with uneven global justice and the strain injustice places on the governance systems it has created and sustained” (138). She argues that third-party witnesses can “fulfill the widespread political, social, and ethical commitment to victims’ care and empowerment” by drawing attention to acts of extreme violence (23). Another important contribution to this definition comes from Michael Rothberg, who bases his thinking on Jürgen Habermas’s and Michael Warner’s notions of the public and counterpublic spheres. The public sphere consists of communicative spaces of interaction and circulation distinct from the state, where self-governed and concerned citizens can engage in open and accessible discourse on issues of public concern (Brouwer and Paulesc 56; Eckert and Chadha 927; Fraser 57–58; Warner 58). Counterwitnessing depends on creating alternative spaces in the public sphere where mainstream discourses are contested (Pason, Foust, and Rogness 11; Warner 88).

- 9 Given its recurrence and reach, mainstream news has a significant impact on the ways Americans view and respond to issues of race; it is also an important avenue through which stereotypes are learned and supported (Fields 89). About half of all Americans rely on television as their primary source of news, with online news sites and social media acting as the next most common sources (Shearer). Since the Jim Crow era, mainstream news has produced and reproduced images of black Americans who are poor, uneducated, and ill-equipped to contribute to a functioning democracy (Hodges 408; Onwuachi-Willig 1151; Williams 74). Numerous studies confirm how mainstream news coverage creates a distorted view of black Americans, one that, for example, assumes black males to be “super predators” who are more likely than whites to commit violent crime and cause disruptions (Madison 280; Williams 73).
- 10 Many of these stereotypes are still present in contemporary news coverage, particularly amongst conservative pundits who reinforce “commonsense” ideas of race in American society through their coverage and talking points (Onwuachi-Willig 1127). For example, when discussing the Martin and Brown killings, Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly insisted both killings were the fault of widespread black-on-black violence (Engelhardt 8; Madison 278). A visibly angered O’Reilly concluded that violence in black communities was due to single parenting and a disintegration of family structures, not racial inequalities (Madison 278). In 2019, Fox’s Tucker Carlson echoed O’Reilly by calling racism “a conspiracy theory used to divide the country and keep hold on power” (Robinson). The real issue in the United States, according to Carlson, is not race but class (Robinson). Although these commentaries seem flippant, they reinforce theories of racial colorblindness and fail to acknowledge how the consequences of race play out in our daily lives.<sup>[2]</sup> Even more dangerously, such simplistic narratives assume that white culture inhabits the American “norm” and overlook the complexities of race in America by reinforcing a mythology that black American culture, not race, is the main barrier to social and cultural advancements (Engelhardt 10). Historically, media has had an important role

solidifying white interest in the United States (Gabriel 41). Whiteness, in the context of American media culture, “depends on defining others for its own self-definition” (48).

- 11 This is not to suggest that the mainstream left has not reproduced the same pervasive stereotypes of black Americans. The 2017 study *Color Of Change and Family Stories* reviewed relevant stories published or aired in the two-year period of January 1, 2015–December 31, 2016 from national broadcast and cable news outlets such as ABC, CBS, and MSNBC; and in national mainstream newspapers like the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *USA Today* (Dixon). The results of their study confirm that news media systemically misrepresent black families by promoting racially biased stereotypes which link blacks to crime and poverty (Rodgers and Robinson). Studies suggest, however, that left-leaning outlets have participated more in discussions over racism and inequality than their conservative counterparts (Anderson; Engelhardt 7–8; PEW). By reinforcing a black-as-other framework, mainstream news media, whether on the left or the right, continues to promote a culture where whites are seen as fostering social stability (Dixon 22; Doane 7).
- 12 Because of the all-encompassing nature of mainstream news, the internet has allowed poets, particularly marginal ones, an alternative discursive space to express their own identities, messages, and needs, and call for greater public change. With the rise of electronic media, poetry has achieved new popularity through new types of verse such as slam and video poetry (Gioia 25). Poets such as Claudia Rankine, Suheir Hammad, and Walidah Imarisha, have used electronic platforms for activism and civil discourse.
- 13 Video poetry, like traditional poetry, is comprised of image and music.<sup>[31]</sup> It relies on mnemonic devices and a catalogue of images to help deliver stories and share feelings and experiences with others (Wallace 558–59; 567). But video poems also require “other forms of representation, including linguistic, visual, aural, and spatial” to merge in meaning-making (Alghadeer 88). The interaction of text and visual image potentially generate new semantic dimensions in poetry, transforming allusions and figures of speech into an inter-media experience which allow viewers to adapt the experience of the poem to their own life-situations (92–93). Video poems differ from written ones, according to Maria Engberg, because they engage in senses other than sight. For Engberg, we experience, rather than read, video poems (6). In *Situations*, the interwoven images and voiceovers create a dialectical tension, encouraging the viewers to place themselves in the body of another person and negotiate “historical damage in localized moments” (Berlant) by reimagining racial encounters for its viewers. For Rankine and Lucas, *Situations* presents an opportunity to consider how the black body is a target of surveillance and restriction, and how such limitations impact communities of color in the United States and around the globe (Gallagher-Ross).

## Experiencing Blackness: Identification in “Stop and Frisk”

- 14 “Situation 6,” also known as “Stop and Frisk,” is a commentary on the controversial policing practice enforced in New York City during the mayoral tenure of Michael Bloomberg. The initiative allowed officers to search, question, and detain suspects who they believed to be engaged in crimes or endangering public safety, the majority of whom were black and Latino men (Cassady; Southall and Gold).



Figure 1: Image of black teen against police lights from Rankine, Claudia, and John Lucas. See “Situation 6 Stop and Frisk.” (03:22). Courtesy of the Artists.

- 15 The video poem opens to the sounds of organ music, reminiscent of a Baroque funeral dirge, followed by a group of black teens walking towards a clothing boutique. As the boys enter the boutique, the timbre of the organ is disrupted by high-pitched police sirens and voices of 9/11 dispatchers. For the remainder of the video poem, the moment-to-moment shot becomes obstructed, as police lights flash and flicker against the boutique windows and begin to superimpose on the faces of the black teens [see Fig. 1]. The camera positions itself outside the boutique window, observing the teens while they shop, which allows the viewer the privilege of watching the encounter at a “safe” distance. The camera also entangles the viewer into the larger “everyday” experiences of racial profiling. For example, while the teens shop, the narrative uses background noises such as the 9/11 dispatcher who asks one caller, “is [the suspect] a male or female?” (2:37) to reproduce the moments of a police pursuit. The voyeuristic nature of the cinematography and continuous transmissions of police audio reproduce the stereotypical images present in news media. Those images associate people of color, especially black males, with criminality and violence. Media critics Robert Entman and Kimberly Gross define this act as “symbolic racism” (102). Although we are not sure why we should be watching the black teens, we understand that the black teens could be watched. This conflict of “looking in” unjustly violates the

private space of the teens, and the viewer's participation in such predatory behavior produces an uneasy source of conflict between the subjects and reader.<sup>[4]</sup>

- 16 The *mise-en-scène* also shows how the black body becomes an obsession for the white imagination. The viewer is forced, willingly or unwillingly, to view the black teens as potential threats who must be observed, monitored, and controlled. Viewers are invited to track their movements, keep close vigilance, and participate in policing their behaviors. The moments recall Stuart Hall's research on mugging and moral panic. For Hall, the increased reporting of black muggings fueled the white imaginations' fear and fascination with the black body because it "tapped into ideas of black masculinity which had a much longer lineage" (Gabriel 102). As the black teens try on various hoodies, the moment echoes Fox's Geraldo Rivera's claim that Martin's hoodie was as much responsible for his death as was George Zimmerman (Fung, "Geraldo Rivera"). In her study "Policing Space, Policing Race," Sandra Bass explains how "gang profiles often focus on clothing, territory, identification by an informant, and affiliations. These are particularly poor measures given the widespread adoption of 'gang' clothing (e.g., baggy pants, scarves, shaved heads) in popular culture and the often fluid nature of social interactions among young people" (169). "Stop and Frisk" problematizes symbolism common in mainstream news, asking readers to consider their own presumptive biases in racial violence, thus making them participants in the same discriminatory practices that violate the rights of blacks daily.
- 17 The process of implication is furthered through the speaker's use of first- and second-person address. The lyrical address begins by reproducing a moment of police detention after the unnamed "I" leaves the house and is pulled over: "I felt whatever is happening is happening in front of me [...] Get on the ground. Get on the ground now. Then I just knew" (00:31–00:52). Here, the "I" is the recipient of the experience: its use potentially separates and deactivates the viewer from the encounter because the first-person address "either puts you in that voice or allows you to reject that voice immediately" (Schwartz). For Rankine, the danger of the first person is the viewer's ability to speculate that the moment has nothing to do with them and is not their problem (Schwartz). This either-or dynamic is renegotiated through the speaker's shift to second-person address: "And you're not the guy but still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description" (00:52–01:01). The poem's "you" forces the viewers, particularly white ones, into the racist encounter and into moments of negotiation which do not fit easily into mainstream discourses of race: one identifies with the stereotypical images, yet disidentifies with its real-world consequences. The repetition of the lines throughout the video poem mimics the powerful effects of racial discourse in the real world. For the viewers, the repetition of "guy" reinforces how stereotypes are reproduced in mainstream news and expresses the unconscious anxieties of the white imagination, since one black body is interchangeable with another. Studies confirm how exposure

to racial stereotypes of blacks “influence our subsequent impressions and behaviors” (Fields 85). The video poem articulates how the black body inherits, and potentially internalizes, such stereotypes.

- 18 Another powerful example is when the speaker says, “This is what it looks like. You know this is wrong. This is not what it looks like. You need to be quiet. This is wrong. You need to close your mouth now. This is what it looks like” (04:00–04:12). The contradictions within the poetry showcase the moments where implication emerges. Here, the viewer must confront their denial in similar moments of racial profiling, while also coming to a larger reckoning of their responsibility in everyday violence against people of color. While the camera reproduces the moments of the encounter, the poetic voice-over reinforces that viewers are bearing witness to “what it looks like” in their own skin.

### **Evoking Blackness: Layers of History in “Situation 5: Trayvon Martin”**

---

- 19 “Situation 5: Trayvon Martin” remaps the history of violence against the black body. The title takes inspiration from the infamous shooting of the unarmed, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin. The details of the Martin killing are well documented. On February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin was walking home from a convenience store near his Florida residence when he was confronted by community-watch volunteer, George Zimmerman. Zimmerman insisted that because his neighborhood had experienced a series of break-ins and burglaries, Martin’s appearance, wearing a hooded sweatshirt, was grounds for suspicion and intervention, although Zimmerman was told by the police dispatcher to refrain from confrontation. After a physical altercation, Zimmerman shot the unarmed Martin and claimed self-defense. Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges.
- 20 The video poem presents a divergence in white and black experiences of violence. It narrates its drama through the point-of-view of two black passengers who stare from the windows of moving trains into the distance (00:33). Throughout the video poem, the two passengers, who are oblivious to one another, are either isolated in full screen or placed in juxtaposition using split screen: one passenger is on the left and the other on the right. The use of close-up induces the reflective atmosphere of the video poem. The viewer is invited to study the protagonists’ expressions as they peer into the American landscape outside their windows, while the camera, sometimes moving in the rhythms of the train, holds steady on their faces. The use of black and white contrast within the background suggests that the two passengers may not be on the same train, although the split shot creates a shared understanding or silent dialogue between them. Here, the video poem introduces how the black experience embodies experiences unknown to whites.





Figure 2: Two silent passengers from Rankine, Claudia, and John Lucas. See “Situation 5 February 26, 2012. In Memory of Trayvon Martin.” (00:27). Courtesy of the Artist.

- 21 As the scenes progresses, the man on the left fades from the shot, leaving the passenger on the right alone, staring contemplatively into the sunset, in what feels like a moment of solitude. The use of sibilance and onomatopoeia in the lines “another dawn when the pink sky is the bloodshot of struck, of sleepless, of sorry, of senseless, shush” (01:28–01:36) augments the reflective atmosphere but also suggest that something more secretive, and perhaps sinister, remains at the heart of the passengers’ silent understanding [see Fig. 2]. The speaker recalls, “Someone wrote, ‘I said he’s my brother, I don’t know why I would have said that.’ Maybe she knows the violence done to the body of a brown child in the time before this one. Because I am a sister, because I have brothers, it’s as if I’ve always known” (01:37–01:56). Here, the speaker suggests, by extension, a shared understanding of the shame and violence done to the black body, an understanding not comprehended by whites, but evoked in this poem by a layering of experiences.
- 22 Rankine and Lucas layer historical events and archived photos to highlight the complex and multiple narratives residing in the black consciousness. The speaker recounts

Those years of and before me and my brothers, the years of passage, of plantation, of migration, Jim Crow segregation, poverty, of inner cities, profiling of one in three, of fast food, of two jobs, of boy hey boy, accumulate into the hours inside our childhood so we are all caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its roots our limbs. (01:57–02:26)

- 23 The repetition of the preposition “of” layers one traumatic memory over the next to single out, and draw parallels between, events. The “of” preposition also presents how historical memory locates itself in the black body. This effect is reinforced with visual superimposition of historical images which layer

themselves over the black passenger to bring forth various associations. Some of the images include a photo of Emmett Till, a planation, Rosa Parks, the Jim Crow caricature, Malcom X, and a NO COLOREDS restroom sign, and, lastly, an empty noose hanging from a tree [see Fig. 3]. The empty noose draws attention to the widespread history of lynching (Seguin and Rigby 3–6; McTaggart 794). As Ursula McTaggart notes, “racist symbolism more often appears as an empty noose carrying the memory of past violence and the threat of future aggression” (793). Such imagery is still commonplace. In 2019, after a black man pleaded guilty to rape in Indiana, Republican Jim Lucas posted an image of a gallows with two nooses in his Facebook feed (Associated Press). Even more frightening, the main campus of Oregon Health and Sciences University was closed in November 2019 when a noose was found at a construction site (Morrison).



Figure 3: Noose superimposed over passenger from Rankine, Claudia, and John Lucas. See “Situation 5 February 26, 2012. In Memory of Trayvon Martin.” (02:13). Courtesy of the Artists.

- 24 Rankine extends the noose metaphor when she puns on the word “hang.” In its most literal sense, “to hang” refers to death by suspension of the neck: “we are all caught hanging by the rope inside us, the tree inside us” (02:20). But “to hang” also refers to a state of connection through relation: “My brother hangs up though he is there on the phone” (02:58). Although Martin is never referenced in the video poem, beyond of course the title, the memory of his murder permeates the experience of the black passenger.
- 25 The video poem nears its closure with a series of rhetorical questions: “It is hot. Is it cold? Are you cold? It does get cool. Are you cool? Is it cool?” (03:05–03:12). The rhetorical questions place considerable pressure on the viewer: What exactly are we cool with? Here, the speaker asks viewers, particularly white ones, to negotiate their own color-blindness by considering the racist implication of viewing the black body as object of restriction and punishment. At its end,

viewers are forced, albeit momentarily, to question their roles in the direct or indirect reproductions of such violence. In “Trayvon Martin,” the past “hangs” in the present.

## **Entangling Blackness: Intertextual Exchanges in “Situation 1: October 10, 2006 / World Cup”**

---

- 26 “Situation 1: October 10, 2006 / World Cup” reimagines the final moments of France’s Zinedine Zidane’s career when he headbutted Italian midfielder Marco Materazzi in the chest during the 2006 World Cup final. In what became a turning point in the match, Zidane was issued a red card and ordered off the pitch. Zidane told reporters he retaliated after Marco Materazzi had repeatedly insulted his mother. Materazzi denied the allegations at the time (Press Association). Ten years later, in a 2016 interview with *Marca*, Materazzi admitted he insulted Zidane’s sister, not his mother, and contended Zidane’s reaction was undeserved, given “You would hear stronger words said on the streets of Naples, or Milan, or Paris” (“Materazzi”). The violent interaction remains one of the most iconic and controversial moments in the history of soccer.
- 27 “World Cup” is a remastering of Zinedine Zidane’s headbutt in slow motion, accompanied by a series of intertextual excerpts taken from literature, criticism, and television, written/spoken over the event. For Rankine, the Zidane/Materazzi exchange encapsulates a story of national versus ethnic identity (Flescher and Casper 27). Zidane was born in La Castellane, a large, impoverished, northern suburb of Marseille, known in French as a “quartier difficile” or sensitive zone with mostly first- and second-generation immigrants (Hussey). Zidane rarely addresses his Algerian heritage, perhaps because politicians such as Jean-Marie Le Pen have denied his Frenchness while Algerian nationalists have questioned his Algerianness. Tony Karon, a TIME journalist, best summarized: “Simply being Zinedine Zidane [...] requires navigating a political minefield.”



Figure 4: Zinedine Zidane headbutts Marco Materazzi from Rankine, Claudia, and John Lucas. See “Situation 1 October 10, 2006 World Cup.” (04:41). Courtesy of the Artists.

- 28 Rankine describes how she felt compelled by the mystery and familiarity of Zidane’s story, particularly as a black person in the United States, because it reminds her of other literary and historical moments, for example when Fredrick Douglass decides to fight his master (Flescher and Casper 27). “World Cup” attends to the close relationship between language, race, and oppression. In highlighting the intimate relationships between histories, local and global, past and present, “World Cup” encourages viewers to place American racism in an international context. The violence Zidane commits seems to be out of character in real time; but as the moment is slowed down and navigated through the use of video manipulation and intertextual exchanges, the video poem opens the “headbutt” to a personal moment of validation. In the most literal sense, “World Cup” counterwitnesses one of the most globally viewed televised events in history and moves the racialized American experience to a transcontinental one.
- 29 “World Cup” uses text-based palimpsest to bring to light how the past overlaps in the present and reiterates the historical significance of “blackness” for the white imagination. The personas in the poem include Ralph Ellison, William Shakespeare, James Baldwin, Fredrick Douglass, Frantz Fanon, Maurice Blanchot, Homi Bhabha, lip readers’ transcripts of the World Cup, and Zinedine Zidane. Although mosaic-like in composition, the video poem reads more like an organic whole than a series of intertextual exchanges, a strategy which seems not only to compliment the form but also its overarching themes.
- 30 For its American viewers, the video poem encourages us to identify with Zidane through the voices of important black, American writers and thinkers. These figures highlight how language has the power to segregate, subjugate, and shame, for there is always “meaning behind the words” [James Baldwin] (04:18–

04:21). Viewers, for example, are reminded of how racism is fossilized in the written and visual word. Viewers may recall “COLORED ONLY” signs from the Jim Crow era and connect them to more recent transgressions such as in 2016 when Rep. Dan Johnson edited a Facebook post of Barack and Michelle Obama with ape-like features (Bradner), or those in 2020 in New York’s Central Park when Amy Cooper, a white women, threatened to call the police on Christian Cooper, a black bird watcher, when asked to leash her dog in a leashed-only section of the park because he was “African American” (Maslin Nir).

- 31 The video poem also implicates viewers into larger networks of transcontinental and transgenerational violence. The poem’s use of important postcolonial personas, such as Frantz Fanon, introduces the complexities of a marginal identity: “No one is free. For all that he is, people will say he remains for us an Arab. You can’t get away from nature” [Frantz Fanon] (02:43–02:55). Rankine’s use of historical persona takes the form of palimpsest. For example, the video poem reenacts the first chapter “On Violence” from Fanon’s work *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon saw violence as a necessary step to be taken against colonial oppression. The poetry echoes Fanon’s words, “For they know they are not animals. And at the very moment when they discover their humanity, they begin to sharpen their weapons to secure its victory” (Fanon 8). It also includes borrows from James Baldwin’s “A Letter from a Region in My Mind” for the final lines. Here, the voiceover demonstrates how the written word can complicate an image just as much as an image can complicate the written word. As Rankine observes in a 2008 interview, “something else that happened in that moment was as violent to him as his head-butting, and it’s brought forward through language” (Flescher and Casper 27). By stressing the silence in the visual depiction of Zidane’s headbutt, “World Cup” draws attention to the importance of language in the contemporary media landscape.
- 32 The voice of Fanon entangles the black experience across spatial and temporal lines as well, placing the black American experience into a larger post-colonial context. For example, when considering the transnational importance of Fanon’s work, cultural critic Harvey Young insists that “the experiences of Fanon [...] are not particular to our respective bodies, but are shared among the majority of recognizably “black” bodies, both male and female, who live(d) an objectified existence within the Western world” (17). In this moment of transnational exchange, viewers may recall previous protests by black Americans in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, while simultaneously thinking about French-Algerians’ protests in Paris, France, in 1961. Both campaigns were responses to widespread racial violence and discriminatory practices targeting minorities and ended with extreme acts of violence committed against protestors at the hands of local authorities (“Birmingham Campaign”; Napoli). Viewers may also make more contemporary connections, such as the recent anti-racism protests in memory of George Floyd in both the United States and France. Floyd’s death has taken on universal importance and inspired new moments of reckoning on issues of social justices and the upholding of universal ideals of secularism and equality

(Onishi). “World Cup” enables a more nuanced understanding of the Zidane moment, one where the violence is given a transcontinental, transgenerational context using video manipulation and textual palimpsest. In doing so, viewers are encouraged to feel responsibility and empathy through a consciousness of past and present transgressions of global racism.

## Conclusion

---

- 33 *Situations* demonstrates how transcultural counterwitnessing activates alternative perspectives to challenge the racial stereotypes of mainstream journalism. Viewers of the video poems are invited to consider how pervasive stereotypes influence damaging images of blackness. By encouraging viewers, white ones in particular, to reimagine the invasive presence and resonance of racial stereotypes in media and our daily encounters, transcultural voices remind readers that race is “always active” (Flesher and Casper 18).
- 34 Secondly, the use of video poetry demonstrates the capabilities of technology when counterwitnessing traumatic events. The merger of linguistic, visual, and spatial representations in video poems help reimagine the impact of mainstream discourses on marginal groups and allow writers and artists to communicate the connections between the present and past in more dynamic and innovative ways.
- 35 Lastly, the poems demonstrate how the black American experience is entangled into a larger intercultural dynamic. Such recognitions invite viewers to consider how contemporary violence emerges from the past and ponders one’s ethical responsibilities in the reproduction of such violence. By addressing our contributions in the cultural, political, and social practices that produce racial injustice, implication provides a “larger reckoning with both the structures of power that undergird such cases and the histories that continue to resonate as afterlives” (Rothberg, *Implicated Subject* 10). Transcultural works, such as those in the study, illustrate how works of literature and art move beyond the spectacle of racial violence to reveal its impact on the lives of people of color in the United States and in other parts of the world. Perhaps, as recent protests against the death of George Floyd have shown, in a country where black and brown citizens live under the constant fear of violence, a moment of reckoning and accountability is not only much overdue, but necessary for our future.

## Notes

---

[1] #Blackpoetsspeakout is a poetic protest which started on Tumblr. The page hosted videos of black poets reading poetry and prayers in response to the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. See Browne.

[2] Regarding Tucker Carlson, the ideas presented might be best summarized when white supremacist David Duke tweeted “God Bless Tucker Carlson.” See “Vox: White Supremacists Love Tucker Carlson Because He Is Making A Case

For Western Civilization.”

[3] This refers to Northrop Frye’s concepts of “babble”, or music, and “doodle,” or image and metaphor.

[4] In her introduction to “On Photography,” Susan Sontag refers to the predatory nature of the camera and its ability to violate the subject (14).

## Works Cited

---

Alghadeer, Hessa A. “Digital Landscapes: Rethinking Poetry Interpretation in Multimodal Texts.” *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 3.2 (2014): 87–96. theartsjournal.org. Web. 20 June 2020.

Anderson, Monica. “As the Trayvon Martin Case Goes to Trial: Remembering a Major Media Event.” *PEW Research Center* 10 June 2013. Web. 10 October 2019.

Associated Press. “Indiana Lawmaker Under Fire For Posting Noose Picture.” *WFYI Indianapolis* 19 Aug 2019. Web. 22 May 2020.

Baldwin, James. “Letter from a Region in My Mind.” *New Yorker* 17 Nov. 1962. Web. 31 July 2020.

Bass, Sandra. “Policing Space, Policing Race: Social Control Imperatives and Police Discretionary Decisions.” *Social Justice* 28.1 (2001): 156–76. JSTOR. 21 Feb. 2020.

Berlant, Lauren. “Claudia Rankine.” *BOMB Magazine* 129 (Fall 2014). Web. 24 April 2020.

Bradner, Eric. “GOP Kentucky State Legislative Candidate Posts Racist Obama Images.” *CNN* 2 Oct. 2016. Web. 30 May 2020.

Brouwer, Daniel C., and Marie-Louise Paulesc. “Counterpublic Theory Goes Global A Chronicle of a Concept’s Emergences and Mobilities.” *What Democracy Looks Like: The Rhetoric of Social Movements and Counterpublics*. Ed. Christina R. Foust, Amy Pason, and Kate Zittlow Rogness. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2017. 55–71. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). 28 Feb. 2020.

Browne, Mahogany L. “Introduction to #Blackpoetsspeakout.” *Poetry Society of America* n.d. Web. 28 Feb. 2020.

Carter, Jacob. “Being Private in Public: Claudia Rankine and John Lucas’s “Situation” Videos.” *Miranda* 14 (2017). *Journals.openedition.org/miranda/10333*. PDF. 2 May 2019.

- Cassady, Anabel. "Re-introducing 'Stop and Frisk' or Revisiting It?" *Minnesota Law Review* 23 January 2017. Web. 27 April 2020.
- Coleman, Aaron. "The History Behind the Feeling: A Conversation with Claudia Rankine." *Spectacle* 23 Sept. 2015. Web. 8 July 2019.
- Dean, Carolyn J. *The Moral Witness: Trials and Testimony After Genocide*. New York: Cornell UP, 2019. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). 26 Aug. 2019.
- Dixon, Travis L. "A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families: Representation of Families, by Race, in News and Opinion Media." *Color of Change and Family Stories*, 2017. PDF. 20 July 2020.
- Doane, Woody. "Rethinking Whiteness Studies." *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*. Ed. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Ashley W. Doane. New York: Routledge, 2003: 3–18. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 4 April 2020.
- Eckert, Stine, and Kalyani Chadha. "Muslim Bloggers in Germany: An Emergent Counterpublic." *Media, Culture and Society* 35.8 (2018): 926–42. SAGEPub. Web. 2 Aug. 2020.
- Engberg, Maria. *Born Digital: Writing Poetry in the Age of New Media*. Diss. Uppsala University, 2007. PDF. 21 July 2020.
- Engelhardt, Andrew M. "The Content of Their Coverage: Contrasting Racially Conservative and Liberal Elite Rhetoric." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* (2019): 1–20. TandFonline, DOI 10.1080/21565503.2019.1674672. Web. 2 Aug. 2020.
- Entman, Robert M., and Kimberly A. Gross. "Race To Judgment: Stereotyping Media and Criminal Defendants." *Law and Contemporary Problems* 71.4 (2008): 93–133. DukeLaw. Web. 2 Aug. 2020.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove, 2004. Print.
- Fields, Claude. *Stereotypes and Stereotyping: Misperceptions, Perspectives and Role of Social Media*. New York: Nova Science, 2016. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 24 Feb. 2020.
- Flescher, Jennifer, and Robert N. Casper. "Interview with Claudia Rankine." *Jubilat* 12, March/July (2006): 14–28. Print.
- Fowler, Aaron. "Q&A with John Lucas, Director of 'The Cooler Bandits.'" *Akron Life* 24 March 2014. Web. 24 April 2020.



Fraser, Nancy. “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56–80. JSTOR. 1 Aug. 2019.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. New York: Atheneum, 1970. Print.

Fung, Katherine. “Geraldo Rivera: Trayvon Martin’s ‘Hoodie Is As Much Responsible For [His] Death As George Zimmerman’ (VIDEO).” *Huffington Post* 23 March 2012. Web. 9 May 2020.

—. “Sean Hannity Asks If Obama Is Like Trayvon Martin Because ‘He Smoked Pot’ And ‘Did A Little Blow’ (AUDIO).” *Huffington Post* 19 July 2013. Web. 4 Oct. 2019.

Gabriel, John. *Whitewash: Racialized Politics and the Media*. London: Routledge, 1998. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 4 June 2020.

Gallagher-Ross, Anna “In Progress: An Interview With John Lucas, Claudia Rankine, and Will Rawls of ‘What Remains.’” *We’re Watching* 23 Feb. 2017. Web. 24 April 2020.

Gioia, Dana. “Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture.” *Hudson Review* 56.1 (2003): 21–49. JSTOR. 1 June 2020.

Hodges, Adam. “Ideologies of Language and Race in US Media Discourse About the Trayvon Martin Shooting.” *Language in Society* 44.3 (2015): 401–23. *Cambridge Core*. 2 Aug. 2020.

Hussey, Andrew. “ZZ Top.” *Guardian* 4 April 2004. Web. 29 May 2020.

Karon, Tony. “The Head Butt Furor: A Window on Europe’s Identity Crisis.” *Time* 13 July 2006. Web. 29 May 2020.

Kim, Clare. “‘White guilt’? Forget it: Whites Have ‘Done More to End’ Slavery Than ‘Any Other Race,’ Says Rush Limbaugh.” *MSNBC* 22 July 2013. Web. 12 Feb. 2020.

Madison, Ed. “Media Portrayals of the Trayvon Martin Tragedy.” *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 15.4 (2015): 278–82. SAGEPub. 2 Aug. 2020.

Maslin Nir, Sarah. “White Woman Is Fired after Calling Police on Black Man in Central Park.” *New York Times* 26 May 2020. Web. 30 May 2020.

“Materazzi: I Spoke About Zidane’s Sister, Not His Mother.” *Marca* 8 July 2016. Web. 26 May 2020.

McTaggart, Ursula. "The Empty Noose: The Trouble With Removing Spectacle From Lynching Iconography." *Journal of Black Studies* 45.8 (2014): 792–811. SAGEPub. Web. 22 May 2020.

Moran, Matthew. "Rummaging Through the Ashes: 9/11 American Poetry and the Transcultural Counterwitness." *European Journal of American Studies* 15:2 (2020). DOI 10.4000/ejas.16018. Web. 22 July 2020.

Morrison, Erica. "OHSU Investigation Into Noose Found On Campus Is Inconclusive." *Oregon Public Broadcasting* 19 Dec. 2019. Web. 22 May 2020.

Napoli, James J. "The 1961 Massacre of Algerians in Paris: When the Media Failed the Test." *Global Research*, 1 Mar 1997. Web. 29 May 2020.

Obama, Barack. "Remarks by the President on Trayvon Martin." *White House Office of the Press Secretary*, 19 July 2013. Web. 4 Oct. 2019.

Onishi, Norimitsu. "George Floyd Protests Stir a Difficult Debate on Race in France." *New York Times* 16 June 2020. Web. 16 June 2020.

Onwuachi-Willig, Angela. "Policing the Boundaries of Whiteness: The Tragedy of Being 'Out of Place' From Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin." *Iowa Law Review* 102.3 (2017): 1113–85. Web. 2 August 2020.

Pason, Amy, Christina R. Foust, and Kate Zittlow Rogness. "Introduction: Rhetoric and the Study of Social Change." *What Democracy Looks Like: The Rhetoric of Social Movements and Counterpublics*. Ed. Foust, Pason, and Zittlow Rogness. Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 2017. 9–24. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 28 Feb. 2020.

Petronzio, Matt. "Refusing Silence: Black Poets Protest and Mourn in Verse." *Mashable* 7 Dec. 2014. Web. 11 October 2019.

PEW Research Center. "Wide Racial, Partisan Gaps in Reactions to Trayvon Martin Coverage." *PEW Research Center*. 2012. Pewresearch.org. PDF. 27 May 2020.

Press Association. "Zinedine Zidane 'Would Rather Die' Than Apologise To Marco Materazzi." *Guardian* 1 Mar. 2010. Web. 26 May 2020.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2014. Print.

Rankine, Claudia, and John Lucas. "Situation 1: October 10, 2006 / World Cup." *Situations*. Still Moving Films, 2015.

—. "Situation 5: February 26, 2012. / In Memory of Trayvon Martin." *Situations*. Still Moving Films, 2015.

- . “Situation 6: Stop and Frisk.” *Situations*. Still Moving Films, 2014.
- Rayfield, Jillian. “Fox News Host: Obama is ‘Race-Baiter in Chief.’” *Salon* 19 July 2013. Web. 4 Oct. 2019.
- Robinson, Nathan. “Guess Who Said It: Tucker Carlson or a Far-Right Shooter.” *Guardian* 10 Aug. 2019. Web. 8 Apr. 2020.
- Rodgers, Nicole and Rashad Robinson. “How the News Media Distorts Black Families: A New Study Shows Outlets from Fox to CNN to the New York Times are Guilty of Misrepresentation.” *Washington Post* 29 Dec. 2017. Web. 10 Apr. 2020.
- Rothberg, Michael. “A Dialogue on the Ethics and Politics of Transcultural Memory.” With A. Dirk Moses. *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders*. Ed. Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014: 29–38. Print.
- . *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2019. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 30 Aug. 2019.
- Schwartz, Alexandra. “On Being Seen: An Interview with Claudia Rankine from Ferguson.” *New Yorker* 22 Aug. 2014. Web. 8 Oct. 2019.
- Seguin, Charles and David Rigby. “National Crimes: A New National Data Set of Lynchings in the United States, 1883 to 1941.” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5 (2019): 1–9. SAGEPub. 2 Aug. 2020.
- Sharma, Meara. “Claudia Rankine on Blackness as the Second Person.” *Guernica* 17 Nov. 2017. Web. 4 Feb. 2020.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. London: Penguin Classics, 2010. Print.
- Southall, Ashley and Michael Gold. “Why ‘Stop-and-Frisk’ Inflamed Black and Hispanic Neighborhoods.” *New York Times* 17 Nov. 2019. Web. 27 Apr. 2020.
- “Vox: White Supremacists Love Tucker Carlson Because He is Making a Case for Western Civilization.” *Real Clear Politics* 21 July 2017. Web. 8 Apr. 2020.
- Wallace, Ronald. “Babble and Doodle: Introducing Students to Poetry.” *College English* 43.6 (1981): 556–68. JSTOR. 21 July 2020.
- Warner, Michael. “Publics and Counterpublics.” *Public Culture* 14.1 (Winter 2002): 49–90. MUSE. 2 Aug. 2020.
- Williams, Dianne. *Race, Ethnicity, and Crime: Alternate Perspectives*. New York: Algora, 2012. eBook collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 19 Feb. 2020.

Young, Harvey. *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2010. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 11 May 2020.

Zamorano Llena, Carmen, Julie Hansen, and Irene Gilsenan Nordin. "Introduction: Conceptualizing Transculturality in Literature." *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature*. Ed. Zamorano Llena, Julie Hansen, and Gilsenan Nordin. Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 2013. ix–xxvii. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 25 Nov. 2019.

## Author

---

**Matthew Moran** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Oulu (Finland). His doctoral thesis explores how transcultural American poetry addresses the relationships between memory, identity, and belonging. His research interests include media studies, memory studies, and transnational literature.

## Suggested Citation

---

Moran, Matthew. "Entangled Encounters: The Transcultural Counterwitness and Implication in Claudia Rankine and John Lucas's *Situations*." *American Studies Journal* 69 (2020). Web. 1 Dec. 2020. DOI 10.18422/69-03.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).