

Just Us: An American Conversation by Claudia Rankine. Graywolf Press, 2020. 338 pages.

Review by Ed Meek

Just Us: An American Conversation is a hybrid work of nonfiction that is a patchwork quilt of thoughts, musings, conversations, charts, images, facts and quotes. Rankine, a poet and Yale professor, writes about her perspective and experience as a successful Black intellectual



and a citizen dealing with and thinking about racism and whiteness in the United States. Perhaps partly because Rankine is a successful Black intellectual, she is obsessed with racism and America's inability to come to terms with it. As she puts it, "Black personal achievement does not negate the continued assault of white terrorism." If you have read (or read about) *How to be an Anti-racist* and *White Fragility* and you want a more personal perspective on the subject of racism *Just Us* provides just that.

Rankine thinks associatively rather than sequentially so the book is episodic rather than arranged as an argument or a narrative with an arc like, say, Ibram Kendi's book. Kendi also has a charming persona. Rankine is more like a disgruntled but interesting guest at the dinner party who keeps turning the conversation back to subjects that make you uncomfortable but are well worth talking and thinking about.

She tells a number of stories about micro-aggressions by whites that happen to her and other Black women. She is waiting in line for a first-class seat at an airport when a white woman cuts in front of her. She asks the woman whether she noticed that she was standing in line. The woman claims she made a mistake, but did she really? Later, in another line at the airport, a group of white men form their own parallel line to get on a plane. They treat it as a joke. The point is, these things happen to Black Americans all the time. She tells us about a conversation with a white male sitting beside her on the plane who thinks of himself as colorblind. This is a common point of view in *White Fragility*. Whites seem to think we live in an egalitarian society where all lives matter and everyone has an equal chance to succeed. Rankine says to us: Does he not see me as black? When she tells him she teaches at Yale, her seatmate mentions that his son didn't get in to Yale but might have if he'd been a minority. Rankine reminds us of Brett Kavanaugh who whined about how he "worked his butt off" to get into Yale without anyone's help, although his grandfather went there.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/3

Rankine ties these experiences into white privilege, but she prefers the term “white living” since not all whites are economically privileged. Nonetheless, when it comes to wealth, whites are much better off than Blacks. Whites without high school degrees have more wealth than Blacks with college degrees. Blacks in the top ten percent of income earners have about 20% of the wealth of whites. What may be surprising is that the wealth gap between Blacks and whites has gotten worse in the last twenty years. This is partly due to the fact that Blacks were hurt more than whites by the Great Recession and many never recovered from it. On the whole, As Rankine reminds us, whites have ten times the wealth of Blacks in the United States!

Rankine also analyzes some of the unconscious ways we value whiteness from skin color to blond hair. She struggles with why this is true among people of color as well as whites. It is helpful to note that she titles her book, “a conversation” and you may find yourself arguing with her. Aren’t there many beautiful Black celebrities from Beyonce to Lupita Nyong’o? She talks about hair-straightening and black women who bleach their hair blond and what that might mean. She doesn’t always have answers to these questions. She talks about the Latin community and divisions between Latins who consider themselves white and who consider themselves persons of color or Black.

She points out that Americans took credit for electing Obama, a Black president, but exit polls from 2008, 2012 and 2016 show that a majority of whites consistently voted Republican. It was Blacks and other minorities voting en masse for Obama that enabled him to be elected.

Rankin wonders “What will it take for white Americans to change?” Following the death of George Floyd, Americans have been calling for justice, and a shift in our attitudes toward racism seems to be occurring. Near the end of the book, Rankine says, “reparations would mean a revolution of the American Consciousness...the great equalizer.” But, according to the latest polls at 538.com, only 26% of Americans support reparations. Yet most Americans do support changes to the system of (in)justice by ending mandatory minimum sentences, and allowing former felons to vote. Americans are for increasing racial diversity on college campuses, and bridging racial divides. Most Americans acknowledge that white people have advantages for getting ahead and the country has not done enough to give equal rights to Blacks.

At the end of *Just Us* Rankine tells the story of Ruby Sales, a black activist. In 1965, a white man, Jonathan Daniel, knocked Ruby Sales down and took a shotgun blast meant for her. As Rankine says, “Each of us ...capable of both the best and the worst our democracy has to offer.” Rankine begins the book with a poem in which she ends, “what I want / and what I want from you run parallel-- / justice and the openings for just us.” Once you’ve read *Just Us*, order a copy of her last book *Citizen: An American Lyric*.