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A Critical Reading of the Concept of Essentialism in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved parents who have given everything they could to create the man I am today. To our dear supervisor, Aicha HOCINE, for her time and effort that she spent with us to finish this dissertation; there are no words to thank her enough we will always be at her debt. Moreover, to my life-long companion and my best friend Mr. Mohammed El Amine BENACEUR for being the great person he is. Also, to all our friends who have encouraged and supported us, thank you.

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This work is dedicated to my parents for their endless support and for believing in me. I would like to express my appreciation to my siblings and my friends for all the encouragement and prayers. Furthermore, I would like to give my deepest gratitude to our teacher, Aicha HOCINE for helping us and for being a great leader in this journey. Finally, I would like to thank my best friend, my brother, and my soulmate Mr. Zine Labidine YOUCEFI for being always there for me, and for being the candle lighting in the darkest nights.

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Abstract

This dissertation undertook the explanatory approach to make a relation between the idea of Essentialism and the act of Racism, investigating the American lyric titled *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) by Claudia Rankine to find this interrelation between the two terms in contemporary American society and African American community in particular. Since most previous researchers have mainly focused on reading the book from a stylistic- based approach to illustrate the striking styles used by the author and to highlight what they symbolize or refer to, this dissertation tends to answer a broader question about the reasons that stimulate the racist acts. This dissertation employs Gayatri Spivak's ideas about race and essentialists' beliefs to shed more light on Essentialism as a concept as well as a belief and investigate why it is a major reason for Racism. Consequently, this dissertation concluded that the racist acts were stimulated by the essential beliefs that human beings were raised on and it was not possible at the moment to end Racism because human psyche needed time to change completely especially in the case of the essential beliefs. Moreover, there was a proportional correlation between Essentialism and Racism; in other words, based on the human attachment to their essential beliefs, the acts of Racism would be more violent and out of control. On the grounds of this conclusion, a number of recommendations were put forward to shed more light on the link between Essentialism and Racism and their impact on human civilization.

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General Introduction

General Introduction

Humans have tenaciously searched for the meaning of their nature and their place among other species raising so many questions about identity and looking for the answers about what makes humans the same as well as what differentiates them. In spite of the observable similarities and differences between human beings, the psychological and behavioral aspect of humans cannot be entirely defined and classified because of the brain's unlimited capabilities; hence, the research of human identity was not complete. However, the concept of essence has emerged to give every individual the ability to define them based on the importance of things to every person.

Therefore, other concepts like races, cultures, religion and ideologies are to be found essential and people are raised to believe that these concepts are what make them who they are. In this context, Racism is seen to be fueled by these essential ideas, arguing that humans are naturally defensive when it comes to what they believe in and sometimes this defense mechanism may take an aggressive and violent course. If this prediction was true, it would make sense to the brutal and unjustified actions that are happening every day in the world which can be understood as natural defensive actions. Therefore, these actions cannot be acceptable in our societies because they may lead to unpleasant consequences.

Throughout the course of history, thinkers and philosophers have tried to find a meaning for the human essence and what is important for them to live for. Much of their research was focusing on finding the observable characteristics and behaviors of the subject of the study then they were identifying each subject with the related findings; they called these findings essences. For example, humans walk on two legs, communicate by words, cry, laugh or think; they have a specific physique that differentiates them from other species. Most of the earlier studies were focusing just on overall idea of essence and they needed to focus more on the psychological area of human beings to understand what is actually essential.

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Accordingly, the main aim of this dissertation was to put more lenses on the psychological part of human beings through investigating some behaviors that were believed to be generated by essential ideas. Eventually, Essence as a fundamental notion highlights the identification of the unique characteristics of each and everything. Researchers and thinkers believe that Essentialism can be an efficient tool to identify things from each other. Essentialism can be taken as a belief or it can turn into actions. Most humans' shared essences are sex, race, religion, nationality and culture which have caused the division of human beings from the beginning of time into smaller groups, and ultimately caused the partition of countries and nations. Moreover, racism is one of the most controversial phenomena of all times originated from the distinctiveness of racial features that caused discrimination and created an endless debate about labeling fellow human beings.

Similarly, Claudia Rankine (1963), in her *Citizen: an American Lyric* (2014), tends to narrate stories of racist actions which were told to her via Black American friends who were victims of these acts and also other stories about racism not just in America but also in other countries indicating that racism is not just against Blacks but also other races performed by the White race. The book has an aesthetic style added to it in which it is a combination of prose and poetry, which is new, creative, and powerful style of writing and a prevailing way to convey the message of the author. Those stories raise many questions about the motives of these racist acts and to which extent it may develop to, hoping for finding a solution and making a definitive closure to it.

Essentialism was and is still a subject of interest to many thinkers and researchers; it was a philosophy at first which was not meant to be studied by whomever because of its many interpretations that may be taken erroneously. Philosophically speaking, Essentialism was a way

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to understand the human combination. Human mind was always a complex enigma because of the brain's abilities and unpredictability, for that reason the study of the essence of the mind and the soul was not trouble-free considering the complexities of the mind. Accordingly, Essentialism has remained a philosophy for centuries.

John Locke (1632,1704), the well known British philosopher who studied political philosophy, also dealt with concepts like state of nature, political obligation and others, dug deeper into the human brain to define its perception to the idea of essence, how things are perceived and defined by the brain. However, lately the post colonial thinker and writer Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942), the Indian scholar and writer specialized in the post colonial studies and a feminist critic, conceptualized Essentialism and wanted to create out of it a tool for resistance. Yet, Greg McKeown (1977), a British writer and public speaker, viewed Essentialism from another lens, taking it from a psychological side to develop oneself and to make people focus on what is actually essential.

In this vein, *Citizen: An American Lyric* seems to be an adequate material to investigate the relation between Essentialism and Racism. However, most of the conducted studies were about the style used in the book. Moreover, an acceptable number of journals and articles were about the kinds of Racism in the book and how it can take other shapes and forms.

A thesis entitled *The Aesthetics of Racism in Claudia Rankine's Citizen: An American Lyric* focused the lenses on the different shapes and forms that Racism could take and how Rankine showed them in the book. Another paper entitled "A Poetics of American Citizenship: Blackness, Injury, and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*" highlighted the lack of rights for Blacks in America and how they were not considered as citizens which the author referred to it as an "injury" from which blacks could not "stand" because of it. A paper which is titled "On Racism

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and the Impossibility of Mourning: A Critical Reading Of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*" was a critical reading of the book with the implication of the Critical Race Theory or (CRT), which tried to take the topics presented in the book and link it to (CRT) approaches.

Yet, there is still considerable ambiguity and uncertainty with regard to the act of reading Rankine's book from psychoanalytical perspective to apply the focus on the reasons of Racism and what the stimulating factors that perceive the racist act are. Henceforth, the significance of this research is to spot light on the concept of Essentialism as one of the factors that play an impactful role in the existence of Racism in the first place.

Moreover, analyzing Claudia Rankine's book gives insightful notions about the possibilities of the influence of Essentialism on people who practice the acts of Racism which can develop into violence in worst cases scenarios. In addition, having knowledge about the grounds of Racism and why there is a human need to express the superiority of their own race will clear the ambiguity around the subject and satisfy the curiosity. Moreover, Racism has been known for more than five centuries and it passed through many changes. However, Racism has taken other shapes and forms and it is necessary to know how to make an end to it and this will be possible by having the knowledge about the motives of this act and put more effort on eliminating the bad habits that individuals are raised on.

Hence, this dissertation seeks to investigate the intervention of essentialist beliefs in the racist acts through the reading of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*. In order to achieve this aim, this research is formulated by a substantial question: to what extent do writers of lyrics aspire to preserve or reform individuals' attitudes towards social as well as psychological

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issues regarding Essentialism and Racism? In order to deal with this research question, the study has thrown up three-sub questions in need of further investigation:

- Due to the limited theoretical background about the subject of Essentialism, why do philosophers and thinkers avoid conducting research concerning Essentialism?
- Throughout the History of Black people in America, How were Black people viewed in the White society? How are Black people viewed today?
- In Claudia Rankine's *Citizen an American lyric*, why did the author use a mixed style of poetry and prose in her book? How are the themes of the book related to Essentialism? And To what extent can Essentialism impact Racism?

In addition, this dissertation sets up a number of hypotheses in order to answer the main question as well as the sub-questions:

- Rankine's significant style seems to challenge readers to investigate new subjects, give different interpretations and stimulate criticism.
- Collecting as much as possible background information about Essentialism from the works of philosophers like Plato, John Locke, and thinkers such as Gayatri Spivak may explain why the community of intellectuals avoids investigating Essentialism.
- Having enough knowledge about the history of Black people in America will provide insightful information about Blacks in the White society.
- With the support of some stories from Rankine's book also having an idea about the concept of Essentialism it may be possible to find a link between the acts of Racism and the essentialist beliefs.

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Therefore, this dissertation will undertake an explanatory approach in investigating Claudia Rankine's book; this approach allows the researchers to explain the relation between Essentialism and Racism and how they affect each other. Moreover, this dissertation will be divided into three main chapters in which each chapter will be specifically devoted to answer one research question. The first chapter will be theoretical in which it will be dedicated to the previous studies and critics about Essentialism as a philosophy and a concept. The second chapter will be dedicated to the history of Black people in America until the present day. The final chapter will be an analysis of Rankine's book investigating her themes and styles and its relation to the topic and include the findings of this research using examples from Rankine's work to support the problem statement.

**Chapter One:
Theoretical view of
Essentialism**

Chapter One: Theoretical View of Essentialism

Introduction:

Cultural studies have played a fundamental role in the lives of people; everything humans ever known is the extract of diligent and time consuming research taken by professional researchers and thinkers like John Locke (1632,1704), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942), Homi K. Bhabha (1949), Paul Gilroy (1956), and many others. They have introduced a collection of theories covered many debatable controversies, starting from individuals to politics to culture to society, spotting the lights on many topics for instance: culture, identity, social problems.

I-1. Toward a Definition of Essentialism:

Essentialism is the idea that everything has a set of characteristics that defines its identity and controls its function; the Greek philosopher Plato (428,348 BC) called it "the whatness" of something which means how a thing or a person should be. "Essentialism is the assumption that groups, categories or classes of objects have one or several defining features exclusive to all members of that category" (Ashcroft et al. 96). This indicates that everything known on earth or in space has a collection of characteristics that makes it special in a way that enable the human brain to recognize things from each other.

In a postcolonial context it is what the colonizer used in order to discriminate it "self" from the colonized "other", Bill Ashcroft (1946) an Australian author and a co-author of *Post-Colonial Studies_ The Key Concepts (Routledge Key Guides)* explained this colonizer/ colonized relation by "to expose the falsity of this mode of representing the colonial subject as an "other" to

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the Self of the dominant colonial culture” (Ashcroft et al. 97)¹. There is no accurate definition of the term as a matter of fact thinkers and philosophers avoided giving different discourses of the term regarding the sensitivity of the subject

the early National Liberation theorists such as Fanon , Cabral and James were always fully aware of the dangers of essentialism, and were always critical of the application of such essentialist discourses as nationalism and race in the construction of the modern postcolonial state (Ashcroft et al. 97).

The term was referred to as dangerous to apply because of the unbalanced state of the postcolonial world and it may cause profound consequences.

I-1.2.The Origins of Essentialism:

The roots of concept of essence before it was coined as the term “Essentialism” originally started from the Greek philosopher Aristotle (358 BC,323 BC), He studied the philosophy of Parmenides, which is a study about the conception of Permanentism, the collection of things that are unchangeable and preserved substances, for example the truth and the fate .This idea was shaped in another form by another Greek philosopher Plato who argued that everything has an essence, a collection of attributes that differentiate things from each other, in which everything is self explanatory with the help of the discrimination between the essence and the existence

¹ The concept of self and other simply means humans’ ability to identify oneself from another using comparison; In other words, how an individual comprehends who s/he is, by recognizing what s/he is not (See Britannica).

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(Mehmet ŞAHİN.194). The essence is "the whatness" of something which means how a thing or a person should be however, existence is the presence, the visibility or the observed aspects of something or someone. The Christian Protestants are the ones who first used the term Essentialism in as known in the present day. Unlike the Catholics who are more conservatives and attached to traditions and past experiences, Protestants give a big deal to the everyday experiences and presented Essentialism in education by changing the curriculums to focus more on the essential points that students need in their daily lives, In relation to that the term "the philosophy of Essentialism in education" came to existence in the united states. William Bagley (1874,1946), James D. Koerner (1959) and many others criticized the educational system in the United States and they argued that curriculums should be dynamic and practical since students are a part of society it is an obligation to make them more effective, beneficial and productive in the society, that will be achieved by teaching them the hard work, discipline and respecting authorities, alongside the essential things that are viewed as important to build their personalities (Mehmet ŞAHİN.195-196).

I-2. Conceptualizing Essentialism through Different Points of View:

The term Essentialism can be viewed from many different points of view and perspectives. It is a broad term; it may be regarded from a metaphysical view, an educational view and a psychological view. Thinkers and philosophers like Aristotle, John Locke (1632, 1704), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942) and Greg McKeown (1977), provided different interpretations and definitions for Essentialism, though there is no precise and final definition of the term because it can be used in different fields.

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I-2.1. John Locke's Real and Nominal Essentialism:

The idea of English philosopher and thinker, John Locke, about Essentialism is more like an analysis of human thinking. John Locke in his "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (1689) introduces two ideas. The first idea he called real essence which makes something what it is (human/animal). For example, the cat eats meat it is also furry, walks on four, tiny, and domestic...etc. However, in the case of concrete object, it is the underlying physical cause of the object's observable qualities; for example, a diamond is an expensive material, glassy and hard (Jan-Erik Jones). Nominal essence however, is the abstract idea that humans create in order to define a species or genus; it is more analytical than observable; yet, real Essentialism remains ambiguous and not clear to the common people, human brains naturally connects object, species or genus with words that refer to, though we define things by their nominal essences not by their real essence. John Locke in his essay claims:

Real essences First, Essence may be taken for the very being of anything, whereby it is what it is. And thus the real internal, but generally (in substances) unknown constitution of things, whereon their discoverable qualities depend, may be called their essence... Nominal essences. Secondly, The learning and disputes of the schools having been much busied about genus and species, the word essence has almost lost its primary signification... Between the nominal essence and the name there is so near a connexion, that the name of any sort of things cannot be attributed to any particular being but what has this essence, whereby it answers that abstract idea whereof that name is the sign. (402-403)

Locke clearly explained that it is impossible to identify anything based on the nominal or "real" essence; It is more complicated than that, people ought to make connections between things to

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simplify these complexes for our brains. Our understanding is limited; it is impossible to know everything about something therefore, our brains break things down to avoid confusion.

I-2.2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Strategic Essentialism:

Eventually, the Indian theorist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, was one of the first thinkers who elucidated the meaning of Essentialism as a concept in a postcolonial perspective, and in the 1980s she introduced the Strategic Essentialism. The term simply means when different ethnic groups or minorities agree on one specific ideology, identity, culture and political vision in order to make their voices loud enough to reach the elite or the controlling class. It is a temporary essentialization² that creates a sense of solidarity and co-operation in people. The term was also mentioned in the feminist movements and the theme of the subalterns (Eide). However, Spivak in her book *Other Asias* showed her disappointment in the misuse of the term by groups of nationalists who distorted the true intentions and goals of the Strategic Essentialism and diverted it into vested interests. In an interview by Sara Danius, Stefan Jonsson with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Miss Danius asked G.C. Spivak about her idea of Strategic Essentialism and Spivak replied:

The strategic use of essentialism. You know, I gave a long inter-view in the opening issue of *Differences* where I said that I no longer want to use it... When, in the United States, the statement "the personal is political" came into being, given the socio-intellectual formation, it really became quite quickly "only the personal is political." In the same way, my notion just simply became the union

² Essentialization, according to Merriem Webster, is to express or formulate in essential form, reduce to essentials, furthermore, it is when people share a common essential substances such as culture, belief, idealization, etc.

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ticket for essentialism. As to what is meant by strategy, no one wondered about that (Darius, Jonsson35).

Taking into consideration that the term is controversial and sensitive, Spivak was careful in the way that she used the term and highlighted that Strategic Essentialism is used for beneficial purposes for people. She was frustrated with people who took advantage of others for their personal interests and decided to not use it again.

I-2.3. Greg McKeown's Essentialism:

Greg McKeown, a British writer and public speaker, defined Essentialism from a psychoanalytical perspective. Greg McKeown in his book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* claimed that the term Essentialism or how we should perceive it is in this sentence "*less but better*" which means doing less things that contributes better results, in other words doing what is most important to you knowing that these things may benefit you the most. Essentialism for him is a way of living and thinking; it is focusing on the things that mean the most, the things that will contribute more for the self than the other. He argued that some people should be selfish in a positive way, they should work on themselves and stop pleasing other people. In *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, McKeown said:

The way of the Essentialist is the relentless pursuit of less but better. It doesn't mean occasionally giving a nod to the principle. It means pursuing it in a disciplined way... Essentialism is not about how to get more things done; it's about how to get the right things done. It doesn't mean just doing less for the sake of less either. It is about making the wisest possible investment of your time and energy in order to operate at our highest point of contribution by doing only what is essential. (4)

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McKeown emphasizes on the importance of focusing on the less and the self interest, he also highlighted discipline and having a plan because a good planner will succeed. He believes that doing everything will more likely result nothing, however with a good plan an focusing on what is essential a man would have everything.

I-3.A Critical View of Essentialism:

It is known that the subject of Essentialism was considered as a sensitive topic that should be handled very carefully by thinkers and philosophers to avoid the creation of any kind of confusion or misunderstanding by the common people. The ancient Greek philosophers investigated Essentialism in a way to define things around us that makes us question the reasons of its existence, so the idea of Essentialism was new and people did not aggressively interpreted it, at least at that time. However, one of the most famous modern thinkers, the Indian writer and scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, introduced a new conception for Essentialism that she called Strategic Essentialism; though this latter had so many positive aspects, it had its negative and even dangerous outcomes.

I-3.1.Spivak's Strategic Essentialism:

The term Strategic Essentialism was coined for the first time by Spivak in an interview with the Australian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz in 1984, where she was driven by the conversation that was about Feminism in post colonial countries to mention the term eventually.

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Spivak considered a strategic use of Essentialism to support the Feminist movement³ because of the difficulties that faced these women to make their voices heard. Later in 1988 in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, Spivak explained her suggestion of Strategic Essentialism:

I was saying that since it is not possible not to be an essentialist, one can self-consciously use this irreducible moment of essentialism as part of one's strategy. This can be used as part of a "good" strategy as well as a "bad" strategy and this can be used self-consciously as well as unself- consciously, and neither self-consciousness nor unself-consciousness can be valorized in my book. (Spivak 109)

Spivak was clearly aware of the consequences of her words; she knew that her words may be taken out of context so she had to explain herself more. After taking her Strategic Essentialism out of context by many people, Spivak stated that her mentioning of the term Essentialism was unintentional during her interview with Elizabeth Grosz in 1984. She was not really aware of how people may perceive and use the term, in interview which is entitled of "Outside in the Teaching Machine": "Indeed I was not aware of my strategic use of Essentialism. I knew it in response to Elizabeth Grosz, a woman who cared enough to interview me." (Chakraborty 628)

Spivak always believed that humans were essentialists; she was an essentialist herself so it is quite impossible to consider that the term Strategic Essentialism was a creation of odds. She had her thoughts about it and she considered it as a solution to some problems of the post colonial world. In an interview with Ellen Rooney in 1993, Spivak talked about her dream of building a

³ Feminism according to Merriam Webster is a belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. The feminist movement however, is a political, ideological, economical and social movement to equalize rights between sexes. Read more about feminism in Britannica website.

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world with one common language, one political system that every country should adopt; a world where there is no differences, a rather utopian world that Spivak had dreamed of; yet, she has seen that Essentialism is a double edged sword which can be used as a beneficial perspective like her Strategic Essentialism or her vision of the perfect world. On the other hand, it is a destructive concept and causes distortion in societies and governments. Spivak had good intentions in creating Strategic Essentialism; however, it was taken out of context and used against its purpose which was the benefit of the group not individuals.

I-3.2. Essentialism in Relation to Racism:

Essentialism and Racism were always related in a way or another. On the one hand, it is known that Racism is the beliefs that some races are superior form others; on the other hand, Essentialism is the collection of characteristics and attributes that makes something what it is. For humans, race and origins are considered an essential thing; therefore, people may develop racist ideas against others as a defensive reaction to protect their own. This interrelation between Essentialism and Racism is understandable if one just thinks about it from a neutral point of view because people tend to not consider themselves as racists; however, no one can deny that race is an essential thing for a human being. Racism has always been a phenomenal issue, starting from slavery until the present day and there have been so many attempts to make it justifiable and normal. Starting from the failed scientific efforts to study the origins of human races or what is called 'polygenism', to genetic essentialism which allows us to make a relation between racism and Essentialism.

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I-3.2.1. Genetic Essentialism:

The term Genetic Essentialism was introduced in the late years of the last century (Dar-Nimrod, Heine 800); a term that has justified racism indirectly. Genetic Essentialism is a study of human behavior, ideas, beliefs, ideologies, sexual orientation, criminality, mental illness, and many other things according to their genetics (Dar-Nimrod, Heine 801). Moreover, humans are created in a certain way which makes them what they are; for example, a Black person is a creation of a genetic heritage that gave him his skin color, his sexual orientation, his morals, and beliefs. Which makes it a doubtful subject and hard to understand yet, these are scientific facts and some of them cannot be deniable. It is agreed that if a person was brown that would be because his parents were brown or at least one of them, or if they had blue eyes that would indicate that one of their ancestors had blue eyes: it is simple genetics; but, it is hard to believe that if they were Black then they would most likely be addicted to drugs or have natural criminal skills, and that is what Genetic Essentialism is introducing. Lian Dar-Nimrod and Steven J. Heine (1950) professors of psychology in the University of “British Columbia” in their essay about “Genetic Essentialism: On the Deceptive Determinism of DNA” defined the study of genetics as following:

Genes can explain almost everything about us, or so it seems. People inherit genes associated with their physical characteristics and also their political attitudes, religiosity, personality traits, vocational interests, and specific phobias. (Dar-Nimrod, Heine 800)

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They strongly believe that people are a combination of physical and mental characteristics that they have inherited from their ancestors and they are most likely going to be a part of this cycle and give it to their children. They do consider that the claims of Genetic Essentialism cannot be one hundred percent true and reliable but it does exist in our societies.

Genetic Essentialism points out how the idea of Essentialism as a whole plays a major role in the existence of Racism that one still sees today everywhere in the world. During the 1820s, James Cowles Prichard (1786- 1848) introduced 'polygenism' a study of human origins that claims that human races have different origins; White people in particular believed in this theory and claimed their position on the top of the hierarchy of species as the most superior among all. The theory of James Prichard is to a certain extent similar to the Genetic Essentialism or even the same, although Lian Dar-Nimrod and Steven J. Heine did signalize that Genetic Essentialism can lead to Racism when they highlighted the consequences of Genetic Essentialism

A third consequence of genetic essentialism is that it may lead people to view groups that share a genetic foundation as being homogeneous and discrete. The relevant condition may be perceived as coterminous with the boundaries of its associated group—all members of a group that share the genetic essence have the potential to possess the associated condition, and that condition should not be observed in those who do not share the underlying genetic foundation. (Dar-Nimrod, Heine 802)

This belief of being one of a kind may create the feeling of uniqueness and exclusiveness which more likely will develop to racism.

Chapter One: Theoretical View of Essentialism

Conclusion

The concept of essentialism is a broad topic and it can be studied from many facets. Psychologically, essentialism is to know the self and what is better for it, focusing on the important things and ignoring all the distractions, it is also the ability to recognize and make connections. Essentialism also can be seen as the idea which could bring people together as a group and make them stronger unit with effective actions. Thinkers and writers avoided talking about the subject because of its sensitivity; hence, the subject of essentialism remains unfinished especially on the effect of essentialism on the daily interaction on human beings. In other words, the unclear definitions of the subject of essentialism raised more questions on the relation of essentialism with race and identity which caused major problems nowadays such as racism, identity crisis, psychological troubles, and many other issues in the modern world.

Chapter Two:
The History of Black People
in The Democratic Land of
America

Chapter Two: The History of Black People in The Democratic Land of America

Introduction:

Black history in the United States of America roots back to more than five centuries of challenges that created the Black society and identity today. Blacks' freedom was taken by force from them; they were exported in the worst and inhuman conditions a one can imagine to a New World as slaves to work for their White masters. Men and Women both experienced all sorts of cruelty, injustice, abuse, and prejudice.

II-1.Blacks in the New World:

Most historians agree that the majority of Blacks in America are originated from the Africa's Atlantic coast , starting from the Sahara Desert (now Mali, Niger, Chad) in the north to the Kalahari Desert (south Africa, Namibia, Botswana) in the south (Scott and Shade). Blacks lived in highly localized agriculture communities; affected by their environment, they were raised to be farmer and professional hunters and fishermen. The Portuguese and the Spanish after the discovery of the New World adapted a new economical system in order to plunder the goods of the New Lands.

The slave trade started in the Americas when Spanish merchants receive licenses from the Crown to import African slaves to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola (Scott and Shade).Moreover, because of the growing demand of sugar cane in the European market, The Portuguese developed an economic interest with the central African kingdom Known as Kongo. The Kingdom of Kongo provided slaves for the Portuguese with cheap prices to work in the sugar cane fields in the New World. The demand of the enslaved Africans was much more than the kingdom of Kongo could provide. Slave traders developed more techniques to transport slaves across the Atlantic, which allowed them to transport larger numbers of people along with cargo

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and supplies. during the 1570s, The Portuguese slave trade across the Atlantic to Brazil grew to reach more than 10,000 exported slave per year.

The first record of slaves in an English colony was in 1619, in the words of John Rolfe one of the earliest English settlers “twenty and odd Negroes” were brought by a Dutch ship to the shore of Virginia (Wayne) (History.com). Abraham Piersey, a representative of the Virginia Company and the wealthiest man in the colony held the Blacks as servants because slavery was not legalized in the British colonies until 1641. The numbers of Blacks in Virginia remained low until 1660. After this date there was a growing need for labor because of the accessible lands and opportunities in the middle colonies like Carolina. The numbers of white immigrant workers declined which called for an alternative solution (Scott and Shade). Therefore, the slave trade started to grow rapidly in the America to reach 6 to 7 million slave in the 18th century alone (History.com).

II-1.1."Black," "Negro," or "Afro-American:

The human mind tends to label things in order to classify and register them. Naming is the human way to differentiate things from each other; it is a distinctive designation of a thing or a person (Merriam Webster). Moreover, Race names have long been associated with the development and maintenance of racial attitude (Fairchild 47). In fact, when Europeans led feet on Africa and observed African people and culture they labeled Africans as “Blacks”, the term holds up both physical and mental differences between Africans and Europeans (Jordan, 1968). Accordingly, Jordan (1968) and others (e.g., Longshore, 1979) have noticed based on the English lexicon that many negative words are associated with the word “Black”; on the other hand, most terms associated to “White” are positive (Fairchild 47). Based on this observation many studies were conducted in order to see if Europeans intended to use the name “Black” in order to

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discriminate and degrade the African Race. Halford H. Fairchild conducted a study to examine the attitudinal responses of white subjects to the terms "Black," "Negro," and "Afro-American". Fairchild concluded that Whites often associate negative adjectives like laud, lazy, and Rude with Blacks. Hence, Whites used the name "Black" to demean, subjugate, and degrade Africans

A negro is "member of a black-skinned race of Africa," 1550s, from Spanish or Portuguese "negro" or "Black," from Latin *nigrum* (nominative *niger*) "black, dark, sable, dusky" (applied to the night sky, a storm, the complexion), figuratively "gloomy, unlucky, bad, wicked," according to de Vaan a word of unknown etymology; according to Watkins, perhaps from PIE *nekw-t- "night." The Latin word was also applied to Africa's black peoples, but the usual terms were *Aethiops* and *Afer* (Etymology Dictionary). The noun- Adjective "Negro" with capital "N" in English was used to abuse, to humiliate, and to put racial judgments on Black people in the same sense that the Spanish and Portuguese used it.

Afro- Americans are considered as the biggest ethnic minority in the United States today. They are originally Africans; though, many other have non-Black ancestors known also by Mixed Blacks. They are rightful citizens of the United States after centuries of oppression and enslavement and force labor they gained their freedom in 1865 with the ending of the Civil War (Britannica). The African-American had hard times attempting to fit in with the society that once treated them as animals and even after taking their freedom they were not considered as equal as Whites for almost a century until the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. Afro-Americans struggle to fit in created an identity crisis; they could not bring back their African ideologies and beliefs in the modern world of America and forget about their slave history. W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness explained the situation of Black folks in America after granting their freedom, he emphasized a distortion in the black soul and how they wanted to have a place in this

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society so they adopted White culture without forgetting about their slave history and African roots (Du Bois). Paul C. Mocombe (1971) in his book *The Soul-less Souls of Black Folk* explained Du Bois's double consciousness psychologically:

...the Americanness of black American life was a result of their sociocultural contact with whites, the cultural ideas and practices associated with their "Negro-ness" was grounded in their biological determining racial type. Du Bois utilized the idea of race as a substance both biological and spiritual [...] (1)

II-2.The Importance of Slavery in the American Economy:

Slavery was the engine of economy in the New World. The European colonies in the New World used slaves to cultivate the vast new and rich lands. At first Black people were not the only slaves, there were slaves from other races even Whites. Most of the white workers were criminals and outlaws (Wayne 10). The slave trade itself was a bountiful industry. After the legalization of slavery in 1641, slave auctions were all over the country. Slaves were sold and bought to be someone's property. By the end of the 18th century the total estimated worth of slaves in the United States reaches 210 million in today's dollars (History.com).

The British colonies were specialized primarily in planting tobacco; it was their main cash source. In 1622 the total of the tobacco exported from the colonies was 60.000 pounds; by 1639 it reached 1.5 million pounds. By the end of the century British imported 20 million pounds per year from the American colonies (History.com). The British trade strategy is known by the "triangular trade". The British ships would take a cycle journey starting from England imported with textile, guns, and other manufactures to the western African coast to sell its products and import slaves to the colonies in North America to work in the fields of tobacco, cotton, and sugar cane, then back to the home land imported with raw materials from the colonies. Ronald Findlay

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(1935) professor of Economics in his essay "*The -Triangular Trade- And The Atlantic Economy Of The Eighteenth Century*" quoted Malachy Postlethwayte (1707-67) a British commercial expert about the importance of slavery in the economics of the Kingdom as follows:

Are we not indebted to those valuable People, the Africans for our Sugars, Tobaccos, Rice, Rum, and all other Plantation Produce? And the greater the Number of Negroes imported into our colonies, from Africa, will not the Exportation of British Manufactures among the Africans be in Proportion, they being paid for in such Commodities only? The more likewise our Plantations abound in Negroes, will not more Land become cultivated, and both better and greater Variety of Plantation Commodities be produced? As those Trades are subservient to the Well Being and Prosperity of each other; so the more either flourishes or declines, the other must be necessarily affected; and the general Trade and Navigation of their Mother Country, will be proportionably benefited or injured. (2)

After the American Revolution, Americans' main planted product was cotton. Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793 to facilitate the process of removing seeds from the cotton fibers. Ironically, the machine doubled the production and there was a need for more slaves to plant and cultivate the land and collect the cotton by hand (O' Callaghan). Between 1803 and 1835, the cotton trade flourished from 100,000 bales to more than a million which drove impressive profits to the American Government.

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II-3. Towards the Freedom of Slaves:

Slavery in the United States of America lasted for more than two centuries and a half. Blacks suffered a lot because of the limited rights and the oppression that they experienced; they have had enough of prejudice and they needed to find a glimmer of hope for freedom. Due to the miserable condition that slaves went through while being transported from Africa to the New World, they needed a kind of spiritual awakening to enlighten their souls to have faith in humanity again. Religion played a major role in shaping Black people's identity and pushed them to fight for their freedom. Blacks were interested in Christianity especially after the religious movement known by "The Second Great Awakening" between 1790s and 1820s. The Great Awakening was a religious movement that came as a reaction to the Enlightenment movement that deviated people from religion. The movement tried to reemphasize the teaching of Calvinism⁴ (History.com). Protestantism in its core encourages individuals to take responsibility for one's salvation which stimulated surges of religious enthusiasm into Blacks to outline their plant towards freedom (Drescher 303) (Boyer 10-11).

II-3.1. Before the Civil War:

Blacks' journey to gain freedom started by individual attempts and small riots against their own masters which were insignificant and usually ended with being punished by their masters or even killed. Eventually, Black slaves started to organize rebellions as a way to gain their freedom by force as it was taken from them by force. In 1800 Gabriel Prosser (1775-1800) a literate enslaved blacksmith organized the first major slave rebellion. Gabriel was a religious and a

⁴ Calvinism is The Protestant theological system of John Calvin and his successors, which develops Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone into an emphasis on the grace of God and centres on the doctrine of predestination (Oxford Dictionary)

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literate man who wanted to destroy the economic hegemony of the merchants, which were the only Whites that he considered as enemies. Gabriel was a son of an African-born mother and a slave of Thomas H. Prosser. Gabriel's plan was to steal guns and gunpowder from Richmond's military warehouse and kill all Whites in sight. The attack was interrupted by a heavy rain storm and it was postponed. Then, the governor James Monroe was informed by a Black man called Billy about the plans of Gabriel and his companions; for that reason, James Monroe prepared the state militia to encounter the attackers. On September, 1800 the 25 years old Gabriel Prosser and 34 others were hanged in public (Egerton) (Britannica.com) (History.com).

The Underground Railway was also an option for slaves to gain their freedom. Between 1810 and 1865 an organization called the Underground Railway escorted slaves from the southern states to the borders of Canada in the north by providing safe houses and protected roads. Canada abolished slavery in 1819, as well as giving many rights to blacks which encouraged Blacks to look for better life (Britannica.com) (History.com). The exact number of American blacks who settled in Canada prior to the Civil War is unknown. Until recently the estimate accepted by most scholars was thirty to forty thousand (Hepburn 93). However, the overall number of escaped slaves was around one hundred thousand (pbs.org). The organization was founded by the abolitionist Elias Hicks (1748-1830) a minister from Long island who believed in the freedom of Blacks (Sinha 171), other well-known members included Harriet Tubman (1822-1913) and Fredrick Douglas (1818-1895).

One of the most bloods spelled Black rebellions in the history of the United States was Nat Turner's rebellion. Turner (1800-1831) was a slave in the plantation of Benjamin Turner; his parents were free born in Africa, his father escaped from slavery and emigrated to Liberia where he spent his remaining days as a free man (Cromwell 208). Turner was interested by Gabriel

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Prosser's plot of 1800, so he learned to write. He was strongly religious and he declared that he was a prophet from god and convinced so many Blacks to follow him (Cromwell 209) (Encyclopediavirginia.org). In the august 21, 1831 Turner and six other Black men started the massacre that ended up with the death of sixty-one White people. Turner and his companions started by killing Joseph Travis and his family (Turner's master at the time); then, they marched from a plantation to another collecting guns and other soldiers. Turner's forces were separated and not organized and turner was overpowered by the White forces which forced him to flee. Turner remained lost for nearly ten weeks after the incident, which created a state of fear and disturbance among the Whites. Many Blacks were killed for no reason because of the actions of Turner. Nat Turner was captured and hanged in November 11, 1831(Cromwell 209-216) (Encyclopediavirginia.org).

II-3.2.The American Anti-Slavery Society:

The American Anti-Slavery Society was political, literal, and religious abolitionist organization. They are a collection of religious and literate White and Black men and women such as Fredrick Douglas, William Lloyd Garrison (1805-79), Theodore Dwight Weld (1803-95), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), and others. They saw slavery as a violation to the human rights and to the United States' believes and foundations. It started in Philadelphia in 1833. Particularly, after the Nat Turner revolt of 1831, American abolitionists realized the failure of gradualism and persuasion, and they subsequently turned to a more militant policy, demanding immediate abolition by law. The organization helped in passing many acts in favor of the blacks

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as such the compromise of 1850⁵ and the 13th amendment⁶ in the American constitution. The Anti-Slavery Society shaped the public opinion to shed more light on the Black case and give more rights to the Black population. It ended after issuing the Fifteenth Amendments in the American institution which give the right to vote to Blacks in 1870 (History.com) (Britannica.com).

II-3.3.The Civil War:

The Civil War was the bloodiest conflict ever happened on the American soil with more than six hundred and twenty thousand dead and more than million injured (History.com) (O'Callaghan 51). The southern states wanted to keep slavery because they needed slaves in order to farm the vast lands in the south. The southern economy was based entirely on agriculture and trade and slavery was an important part in this cycle. Moreover, the southern wanted independence from the North for many reasons like westward expansion, states' rights, and taxation (O'Callaghan 51) (History.com). However, the northern states witnessed a big abolitionist movement shaped the public opinion to shed more light on the Black case and give more rights to the Black population; in addition, the majority of the states were Free states. This conflict created a division between the north and the south, between pro- and anti-slavery states.

In 1860, Abraham Lincoln (1809-65) was elected president of the United States after less than a month from the creation of the confederacy. He wanted to keep the Union and warned the

⁵ In 1850 Congress voted in favor of another compromise. California was admitted to the United States as a free state, while people who lived in Utah and New Mexico were given the right to decide for themselves whether or not to allow slavery (O'Callaghan 45).

⁶ The 13th amendment abolished slavery in the United states (see archives.gov).

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Confederacy from doing so, he said in his presidential oath “You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I have a most solemn one to preserve, protect, and defend it.” (O’Callaghan 50). The Confederacy neglected Lincoln’s notion and elected Jefferson Davis (1808-89) as a president, which was the start of the Civil War. The Union was much stronger than the Confederacy by number of soldiers and the quality of materials. The advantage of the south was that they had the possibility of not fighting at all and gain independence. Lincoln’s main objective was to preserve the nation from braking apart but he had no choice other than war. In the summer of 1862, Lincoln issued the Emancipation proclamation in which he declared the 1st of January 1863 as a final date to end slavery in the Confederacy states (O’Callaghan 51). As a consequence, added More than 186.000 Blacks joined Union army latter (History.com). The Civil War ended by the victory of the Union after the surrender of General Robert E. Lee (1807-70) to the forces of General Ulysses S. Grant (1822-85) in a small village in Virginia called Appomattox o n April 9, 1865 (O’Callaghan 52). The 13th amendment in the American institution abolished slavery in the United States later on December 6, 1865.

II-4.Civil Rights Movement:

After the Civil-War, Blacks gained their freedom and officially became rightful citizens of the United States. However, they had fewer rights and they suffered prejudice and discrimination especially in southern states. Jim Crow Laws (1877) were issued in southern states which allowed racial discrimination. Black were not allowed to be in the same public places as Whites by law, there were schools for Whites and other for Blacks, Interracial marriage was illegal, and the right to vote was limited to literate Blacks only. Moreover, Black were also abused physically and even murdered especially after the creation of the secret organization known as the KKK or Ku Kl ux

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Klan⁷ in 1865 (O'Callaghan 56). During the Second World War, Most Blacks worked in low waged jobs at a time where war- related jobs were flourishing, which forced Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945) the American president at that time to pass Executive Order 8802 on June, 1941 that gave all Americans the right to work in all government jobs regardless of race, creed, and color (Britannica.com). Rosa Parks (1913-2005) was considered the mother of the civil rights movement after she was arrested by White police men because she refused to give up her seat on the bus for a white man. Her incident was the reason for the creation of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) led by Martin Luther King. Jr(1929-68). In 1957 president Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969) issued the Civil Rights act that was the first major civil rights legislation since the Civil War which gave Black citizens in southern states the right to vote without limitations, which was a big step towards racial equality in America. In 1963, Civil Rights movement's leaders organized a march in Washington D.C for calling for equal rights in jobs and freedom of speech. The march is famous by Martin Luther King's memorable speech "I have a dream". Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-73) issued the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that granted Black equal jobs with Whites as well as payment. Discrimination and violence against Black Americans lasted for few years after the success of the Civil Rights movement, leaders of the movement were assassinated like Malcolm X (1925-1965) and Martin Luther King. However, Civil Rights movement succeeded to gain the right of equal jobs and payment, voting, housing, and many other rights that Black people have only dreamed of in the past (History.com) (Britannica.com).

⁷ Ku Klux Klan a secret US organization of white Protestant Americans, especially in the south of the country, who oppose people of other races or religions (Cambridge Dictionary)

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II-4.1.Black Americans in the 21th Century:

After the Civil Right Movement in the 1950s until today, African Americans have equal rights as everybody else in America but it is still surrounded by stereotypes and indirect or unintentional racism or as Rankine referred to by Microaggressions. The Blacks now are known as African Americans, they have their own culture and community which identifies and differentiates them from others. The only problem is that they are not feeling that there is an equal treatment between them and White Americans. Rankine illustrated stories of Black Americans daily interaction with these unfair practices for example “stop and frisk”⁸ stories or the unreasonable adjudication against Blacks in particular.

The 21th century is witnessing the rise of many social movements that seeks to make an end to racial discrimination and physical and verbal abuse. Black Lives Matter is an international movement that demands justice against the excessive use of the power of law by the police against Black folks (Blacklivesmatter.com). Recently, in May 2020 there were massive riots and protests all over the United stated under the name of Black Lives Matter after the killing of George Floyd an unarmed Black man by a White police officer. The movement succeeded to drew the public attention to Black peoples’ problems with Racism in the American society today (Britannica.com). This highlights its significance in American history and historic values.

⁸ stop and frisk according to Merriam Webster is a state law that allows a police officer to stop any person without making an arrest based on a reasonable suspicion that the person has committed or is about to commit a crime.

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Conclusion:

The Black history was a journey of an African man in the New World from a “Black” undefined and strange humanlike creature, to a “Negro” who was supposed to work tirelessly for his master to finally a free American citizen an “Afro-American” in the present day. A rich history shows how much the human mentality changed because of time. In the past, there were fewer human principles, and many brutal behaviors were seen as usual, which are not acceptable and less visible in today’s world. Moreover, knowing the past will make the research for the solutions of today’s problems easier.

Chapter Three:
An Analytical Reading of
Essentialism Claudia
Rankine's *Citizen: An*
American Lyric

Chapter three: An Analytical reading of Essentialism in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Introduction:

Claudia Rankine's in her Lyric entitled *Citizen: an American Lyric* (2014) spots the light on Racism in the American society today. With the use of an interesting yet confusing writing style, she manages to cover so many controversial topics such as Racism, Macroaggressions, invisibility, identity, and many other topics that exist in many societies and influence the future of human beings.

III-1.Claudia Rankine's Style in *Citizen* and Its Significance:

Citizen by Claudia Rankine was a material of criticism from the moment it was published in 2014, because of her choice of genre that was confusing and unusual. Rankine mixed her book with a collection of biographical and autobiographical stories in a form of poetry and prose; she also added some art work and image in different parts of the book as a kind of connecting the text to these photos and pieces of art. The major question was whether or not *Citizen* is full book-length poetry; the answer is that it is complicated. It is crucial then, to define poetry. It is defined as a literary work that uses an aesthetic language in a rhythmic way to express feeling or to convey an idea (Merriam Webster). Rankine's book is subtitled "an American lyric" which indicates that it contains lyrical poetry⁹; in fact narrative poetry overwhelms it as well. It is a collection of the experiences that Rankine herself, her friends and other colored people in the world overcame and challenged, in which Rankine centered those stories on the subject of racism. Calvin Bedient observed that "Rankine's style is the sanity, but just barely, of the insanity, the grace, but just barely, of the grotesqueness" (poetry foundation).

⁹ A lyric poem is short, highly musical verse that conveys powerful feelings. The poet may use rhyme, meter, or other literary devices to create a song-like quality. (see Thoughtco.com for more insightful information).

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A question on why she picked poetry as a style to write this book can be raised. First, she is a poet and a playwright; thus, she knows that poetry is a strong way to convey a message, a powerful message like racism and violence is better to be presented to the public in a form of a poem to attract attention and to open the door for critics. Poetry has been always a material for discussion more than prose, because of the high use of emotion and carefulness in using and picking words that hold strong and more complicated meanings in its depths. She wanted to use poetry to put more spotlight on the subject and bringing it to as much people as possible. In an interview in the University Of Baltimore School Of Law, Rankine explained why she used poetry not prose and argued:

I started to interview black people about micro-aggression. I didn't want to pretend to be in their position; I just wanted to say what they told me. They told me what happened but not how they felt. These sentences and their prose made lyric seemed like the right genre. (The Johns Hopkins News-Letter)

Also, her use of the poetry was odd and strange, she narrated some stories in a rhythmic way and then she switched the style to write an essay about Serena Williams in the middle, the book carries on this way between prose and poetry until the end, which makes it difficult to classify and was heavily criticized. Rankine was asked about her motivation in writing such a book in the 26th annual Chicago Humanities Festival and she claimed, "I think I was just interested in what it meant to bring the stories to page and how language could hold history and enact the simplicity of the moment that is never simple" (Youtube.com).

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It is worth mentioning that the book could be oriented to Black people in a first sight; however, it was a message or a calling to the White people to open their eyes, to figure out and to reconsider their relationship with the people of different color and race in general. White people often do not pay attention to the idea of race, because they have never experienced the position of being alienated by the majority; hence, Rankine wanted to address them in an indirect way. An article about Rankine's book *Citizen* which can be found in Harvard University Press's website highlighted this point:

If you are used to the idea that you can present yourself however you like, walk wherever you choose, apparently unaffected by race, then you might be white. ... All of us have been shaped by what we call "race," but white people—white writers—often don't know it. "Yes, of course" could be the sound of a white person knowing it. (Harvard University Press)

Rankine used the second personal pronoun "you" and she talked to her fellow Black people about what they were experiencing on the daily basis. The use of "you" gets the reader to be engaged in the experience that is told and to wonder what the feeling to be in that position is. Her genius use of language makes us as readers feel the pain of every man/woman of color and live their lives or at least conceptualize their struggles. Everybody can be addressed at one point as they may have a racist part they are not fully aware of, even people of color can show a sense of racism in some situations so when Rankine used the pronoun "you" to address the reader she was aware that what she was saying can be reflected in anybody's live and experiences.

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Moreover, poetry for Black people is a part of their culture; they lived with it and it is living inside of them¹⁰. Historically, when Black people were kept slaves they used poetry as a motivational tool to pour inside their hearts hope and strength and to keep them going no matter what the circumstances are. Rankine's use of poetry and the pronoun "you" can be interpreted as a call for revolution and revival of the black soul and ambitions. She called out her people to look at their situation in America in an attempt to remind them of their essential beliefs and to practice their blackness more proudly and transparently, without fear or hesitation.

III-2. Themes of Identity in *Citizen: An American Lyric*:

The 2014 prose/poetry book by Claudia Rankine the Jamaican/ American poet and playwright which was a collection of the stories of Rankine's friends and people of color and what they experienced with Racism and discrimination, was like a scope for human beings to discover people of color more deeply especially on the identity level. Rankine's brilliant writing allows the reader to dig deeply into meaning and try to analyze people's experiences and motives.

III-2.1. Racism and Microaggression:

Claudia Rankine's main focus in this book was about addressing the different kinds of Racism that she and her race experienced on a daily basis in America. Racism is defined by Merriam Webster as the belief of a certain racial group that their traits and capacities are better or purer than other races and eventually they develop a feeling of superiority over the others. Hence,

¹⁰ See Annie Nelson's article about "*A Reflection on Early Expentions of Black Poetry*" on denverlibrary.org. And the book entitled "*Modern Black Poet*" by Donald B. Gibson for additional information about the history Blacks and poetry.

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this feeling of superiority and difference will be transformed into actions, such as looks or word or more dangerous actions that lead to violence.

However, Microaggression according to Merriam Webster is the unconscious or unintentional actions against marginalized members that express a prejudice attitude. The term was coined by Chester M. Pierce (1925-2016) a professor of psychology in the University of Harvard in the 1970s then he observed the insults and the slights performed by White people against Black people. He concluded that these insults were unintentional yet still racist. However, other psychologists like Kenneth R. Thomas, a PhD, in the University of Wisconsin-Madison criticized this concept arguing that it made people of color vulnerable and weak to these little details that often were not being paid attention to, he said to the American Psychological Association Monitor "the microaggression theory, in general, characterizes people of color as weak and vulnerable, and reinforces a culture of victimization instead of a culture of opportunity,"(Desmond-Harris).

Rankine dedicated some chapters in the book to spot the light on the actions by non-Blacks against Blacks that they alleged to be unintentional or unknowledgeable, and that she called Microaggressions. Racism will be always a part of people's lives; in a kind of Microaggressions Rankine showed readers that racism can be acted in different shapes. It can be performed in a form of jokes (racial jokes), remarks, comments on the Internet, and even in silence.¹¹ It can sometimes be unintentional because individuals create stereotypes for each other so our brains link the behaviors according to appearances. For example, Asians of different regions, Chinese or Japanese or Koreans, are all considered geniuses and martial arts

¹¹ When two people of different racial groups encounter each other and cannot be able to normally communicate because they do not feel uncomfortable with each other.

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professionals¹², as it is the case for Arabs who are seen as primitive, terrorists and very wealthy¹³, or black who are irresponsible and criminals¹⁴.

The psychologist Derald W. Sue said that microaggressions were not to be taken as racism; they were just unconscious actions by ordinary people who did not mean to be hurtful to other people. He states:

People who engage in microaggressions are ordinary folks who experience themselves as good, moral, decent individuals. Microaggressions occur because they are outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator. (Desmond-Harris)

Rankine, in her book, focused on showing these Microaggressions that she and her friends has experienced and will experience every day, starting from hearing the N-Word¹⁵ in Starbucks to seeing what media and people say about Black people like calling Serena Williams a “black angry woman” (bbc.com). Rankine brought for the readers stories of young and old Black people who came across such situations; she wrote in *Citizen*:

¹² Isabel Paner conducted a research entitled “*The Marginalization and Stereotyping of Asians in American Film*” and famous Hollywood movies like *Year of the Dragon* (1985), *Rush Hour* (2001) and others.

¹³ See “*Reel Bad Arabs*” by Jack Shaheen, also movies such as *Cannonball Run II* (1984) *Back to the future* (1985), and Disney *Aladdin* (1992).

¹⁴ See Narissra M. Punyanunt-Carter’s journal about “*The Perceived Realism of African American Portrayals on Television*”

¹⁵ N-word is used euphemistically to refer to the word *nigger* (*Merriam Webster*)

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You are twelve attending Sts. Philip and James School on White Plains Road and the girl sitting in the seat behind you asks you to lean to the right during exams so she can copy what you have written. ... she tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person. (Rankine 5)

She described a young boy/girl who encountered Microaggressions, being judged and compared to someone they were different from which may break their self-confidence and make them question their existence in a selective environment. People of color in all ages faced or will face Microaggressions, Rankine displayed another story about adult colored man/woman who stumbled upon similar conditions:

You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street swallowed by speed; he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there. You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted. (Rankine10)

This situation can be viewed in two perspectives. The first view is that they think that there is no colored person who is great at writing; the second view is that they prefer a White person to get the job rather than an unusual, alien "colored person". Educated people can also perform Microaggressions; in *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine wrote "when the woman with multiple degrees says, I didn't know black women could get cancer, instinctively you take two steps back" (45).

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III-2.2. Invisibility and Hybervisibility:

Invisibility is defined in a broad way by Merriam-Webster as someone or something that cannot be seen or perceived. It also indicates a situation in which someone is neglected and not recognized or when his/her existence does not make a difference. Hypervisibility, however, is defined as something or someone extremely visible, known and recognizable. These two contradicted concepts took place in the stories that Rankine told the readers in her book especially in chapter VI, when she recalled some violent events that happened in the past to Black people in America and out of America. She wrote about James Craig Anderson who was killed in 2011 by an 18 years old White guy who ran over him by his car shouting "I ran that nagger over" after beating him with the help of other White boys, Rankine described the incident with:

Then the pickup is beating the black object to the ground and the tire marks the crushed organs. Then the audio, I ran that nigger over, is itself a record-breaking hot June day in the twenty-first century. (94)

The murderer, Deryl Dedmon, and his crime partners were sentenced from 7 to 50 years of jail the incident was not that well known and did not have the deserved attention by the media. Rankine presented another incident to make readers compare justice for Black people with justice for Whites and the story she picked was one of the famous stories that were hugely covered by the media. It was the 2008 incident known as "the Jena six incident" in Jena high school, Louisiana where six Black teenagers were sentenced 100 years in jail for the attempt of murder after the beating of the White teenager Justin Barker. Apparently those Black teenagers were abused by a group of White teenagers before they beat up Justin Barker where they found robe nooses hanged from a tree in the school courtyard which was meant for them. Rankine was not

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consented with the injustice put upon those kids; however, she did not agree or support those kids because they had been drifted by their emotions, she stated in *Citizen*:

Boys will be boys being boys feeling their capacity heaving butting heads righting their wrongs in the violence of aggravated adolescence charging forward in their way experiencing the position of positioning which is a position for only one kind of boy face it know it for the other boy for the other boys the fists the feet criminalized already are weapons already exploding the landscape and then the litigious hitting back is life imprisoned. (101)

Rankine also wrote about her friend who was in a drug store; she was next in line and a White man entered the store and went directly to the seller who told him that the woman was next he acted-as he was surprised and said "Oh my God, I didn't see you" (77). He added after the woman offered him to go next if he were in a hurry and he replied "No, no, no, I really didn't see you."(77) Such a situation creates a feeling of resentment, doubt and anxiety which can negatively impact her self-esteem as well as identity and make her question her existence and essentials.

Based on these events, it is possible to claim that White people are hypervisible, which means that they can make their world just around them; their bad actions are kept invisible and they make sure to make the good actions visible, on the one hand. On the other hand, Black people are recognized as invisible and not considered humans as Whites; however their actions are hypervisible especially if those actions were bad.

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III-2.3.Citizenship and the Struggle of Black Americans in America:

Eventually, the 14th amendment in the American constitution guaranteed citizenship for Blacks who were born in the American soil. It granted freedom to all Blacks in America. However, for almost one century after the issuing of the 14th amendment, Blacks were treated unequally to whites in every level in the society which required change that was brought by the Civil Rights Movement. Even though today a majority of Black Americans feel the inequality; thus, their citizenship is just a theoretical amendment in the Constitution and cannot really be applied. Rankine showed this dissatisfaction in the stories she wrote; those stories were collected from her Black friends and other people of color but in general most of these stories were from the American society. This inequality as Rankine showed her readers was imbedded and covered that it looked normal that White people think that it is not hurtful or typical. However, a close look can manifest this inequality; for example, the unjust and excessive judicial system in America that imposes unjust provisions against Blacks in America like the incident of Jena Six. Rankine demonstrated so many examples of this unjust treatment of Black citizens. She exhibited the killings of Black Americans like James Craig Anderson by White extremists or the stop and frisk tactics which every Black man and even woman had once experienced.

Rankine wrote in *Citizen* about a friend who experienced the stop- frisk by the following:

...the police vehicle came to a screeching halt in front of me like they were setting up a blockade...And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description. I left my client's house knowing I would be pulled over. (105)

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Black Americans are used to be harassed by the police for things that they did not do. Both Blacks and Whites are human beings; Yet, they are treated differently. That is what makes it visual that there is something happening in this society what makes it hard for the majority of Blacks to fit in. Considering that Rankine herself is not originally American, she was born in Jamaica and experienced the struggle of fitting in. Rankine in an interview at a hotel in SoHo introduced her thoughts about citizenship for Black Americans:

As African-Americans, that's what's being played fast and loose with, our citizenship. When you have the Trayvon Martins and the Michael Browns being shot and killed, it's because, on certain level, there is a kind of mutability in the understanding of citizenship around the black body. (Rankine)

The issue of citizenship of Black Americans is in the black body and defiantly the history from both sides the Whites and the Blacks. Whites, in this sense, think that they offer Blacks freedom and there is no need for more because they believe that they have issued justice and equality; however, the Blacks believe that they are still a minority with less rights and discriminated because of their skin color which makes them grasp more on their history and essential beliefs like the origin land "Africa" and their blackness.

III-3.Racism in Sports:

African-Americans in the White American society are living an unsettled and even dangerous life, Blacks face every single day a great chance of being killed, a greater chance of being imprisoned, and they even may end up unemployed which makes them develop a feeling of displacement and alienation, in a life with no opportunities and a future with no promises.

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Being a Black athlete in a society that discriminates Whites from Blacks consciously and unconsciously has been an out of reach dream for many Blacks. Starting from college, African-Americans had fewer opportunities than Whites in most college activities and privileges. Though Black students had the physical requirements and abilities, they rarely succeed in gaining a college scholarship. According to a study in 2007 done by Mark Kantrowitz, an expert in student financial aid showed that Whites managed to gain a college scholarship by a total of 65.2%, however a 11.9% of Blacks were lucky to gain it (Kantrowitz).

It was Jackie Robinson the first Black man who broke the color barrier in sports, in baseball specifically; he is the first African-American who played in Major League Baseball on April 15, 1947 and he gave a good example for both Blacks and Whites of what Blacks are capable of doing even under the pressure and the struggle. Moreover, he faced many acts of abuse, both verbal and physical abuse; he even received death threats (Biography website). After that, African-Americans have started participating in sport generally trying so hard to make their voice heard and to fight racism by practicing Whites' sports.

Claudia Rankine, in her book *Citizen*, mentioned some examples about those who fought Racism in the field of sports like Serena Williams, the American tennis player and the Algerian/French former football player Zinedine Zidane. She wrote about their experiences with Racism and how they reacted against and defended their origins and essentials.

III-3.1.Serena Williams:

Serena Williams was born on September 26, 1981. She is an American professional tennis player. Her career was full of victories and, at the same time, full of struggle because of Racism; however, she managed to be successful in the game. Serena has won 23 Grand Slam single titles;

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on July 08, 2002 she reached the first ranking in women's single tennis for the first time and she hold the title for 319 weeks. (National Museum of African American history & culture)

In *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Rankine narrated a story about Serena's quarterfinal match of the 2004 United States open, Serena was facing her fellow American Jennifer Capriati. The distinguished tennis chair umpire Mariana Alves made five bad calls against Serena which made Serena lose the game. Rankine comments:

The serves and returns Alves called out were landing, stunningly unreturned by Capriati, inside the lines, no discerning eye sight needed. Commentators, spectators, television viewers, line judges, everyone could see the balls were good, everyone, apparently, except Alves. ... Tennis superstar John McEnroe, given his own keen eye for injustice during his professional career, was shocked that Serena was able to hold it together after losing the match. (Rankine 26-27)

Even after being oppressed by Alves, Serena did not show any sadness or regressions, she managed to control her anger for the sake of her race because any "inappropriate" action would be a bad reflection on the whole Black race especially from a famous Black figure like Serena. However after the match she stated "I'm very angry and bitter right now. I felt cheated. Shall I go on? I just feel robbed." (Rankine 27) showing her disappointment in the unprofessional actions of the chair umpire in particular and of the White race in general.

After five years of Alves' incident, exactly in the semifinal match of the US Open, Serena was not doing so well in the game; she was stressed, and after losing the first set, she smashed her racket on the court, and by doing that, the umpire gave her a warning. After that in the second set

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she was serving to stay in the match at the match point. The line judge who was responsible for watching Serena's body and Serena's moves said that Serena stepped on the line when she was serving, no one could see what happened. As a consequence to these circumstances, Serena got angry and reacted aggressively against the judges. Serena was fined 82.000\$ and suspended from playing in the US Open for two years without a regard to her past experiences with Racism in the fields of tennis and the pressure that she encountered (Rankine 28).

III-3.2.Zinedine Zidane:

Zinedine Yazid Zidane was born on June 23, 1972, in Marseille from Algerian parents, he is one of the greatest football players of all time, he won 1998 Ballon d'Or and he was named FIFA World Player of the year in 1998, 2000, and 2003.(Biography website)

In 2006 World Cup Final between France and Italy, Zinedine Zidane was making the history by playing a great game; suddenly he ended up shown a red card after smashing his head against the Italian professional football Marco Materazzi's chest, what cost France the World Cup after winning Italy in penalty kicks. Rankine quoted Zidane in *Citizen* "Do you think two minutes from the end of a World Cup final, two minutes from the end of my career, I wanted to do that" (Rankine 124); that's what he said in an interview declaring that what Materazzi said to him was much more important than that.

For years, people believed that Materazzi had insulted Zidane's mother which led him to violently hit Materazzi ; Materazzi never confirmed or clarified what he did; however, after 10 years from the incident Materazzi claimed that it was Zidane's sister he spoke about not his mother (Marca website). Every day I think about where I came from and I am still proud to be who I am ... (Rankine 122). Zinedine Zidane had heard a lot of insults in his career, he kept

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everything inside, he could have handled everything peacefully but he could not contain his anger when it came to his family or his origins.

III-4. Essentialism and Violence:

The term violence according to Merriam Webster Dictionary is defined as the a physical act that causes a physical or psychological harm or damage, this physical act can be in many forms but the intension behinds it is to cause harm. Based on this definition it is fairly obvious that Racism has the same outcome which can be physical and psychological as well, and Rankine in her book *Citizen* could shed light on these outcomes in multiple stories. Moreover, in view of the fact that Essentialism is a major motive of Racism, it is worth mentioning that Essentialism has a great impact on the existence of violence in the first place, which explains why thinkers and authors avoid discussing this topic in particular.

In other words, in the context of Racism in relation to violence it is possible to say that what makes a person violent is the same thing that makes him or her racist; and it falls down to Essentialism because it plays a major part in developing racist beliefs which will eventually build up into violent acts. For example, White people, in America in their first days on the new land, believed that they are a perfect race and that they were chosen by god to live and expand in those lands adopting the doctrine of "Manifest Destiny"¹⁶; these beliefs gave them a green light to enslave Blacks and violate their rights, even today Blacks are physically and verbally assaulted every day by Whites.

¹ Manifest Destiny is a belief that Americans were destined to expand and explore across North America, but it was just a feigned reason for them to take control over other territories. See Britannica for more information.

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Rankine dedicated her book *Citizen* to narrate those stories of violence from people whom she knew or heard of. One of the iconic stories that show how Essentialism may lead to violence is the story of the famous former French footballer Zinedine Zidane, the story is better known as the “Zinedine Zidane headbutt” in 2006 football World Cup final when Zidane attacked the Italian national player Marco Materazzi because he was offended on a personal level by something Materazzi said to him. In *Citizen*, Rankine mentioned a quotation by Zidane commenting on the incident in an interview when he said “What he said “touched the deepest part of me.” (128), it means that Materazzi disrespected something very important and essential for Zidane, and consequently, the reaction was violent.

However, there are others who disagree with the relation of violence with Essentialism, arguing that Essentialism has nothing to do with the acts of violence. Lode Lauwaert (1981) a Belgian PhD in philosophy and one of the supporters of this idea, wrote an article about “Essentialism and violence” in 2019. Lode denies the relation between Essentialism and violence saying that it is impossible to define violence because it has no essence, because as humans we tend to define things by how we perceive them based on what makes a thing what it is. Lode rejects that violence is defined by the damage caused in which he gives an example of someone pulling someone else’s hair, if he pulls two or three head-hairs that cannot be considered as violence even though it looks and sounds violent, however obviously pulling a handful of hairs is without no doubt an act of violence; also if someone scratches the paint of someone else’s car, it will not damage the functioning of the car which means that Lode believes that not every action that causes damage can be seen as violent, violence is relative and damage cannot be considered as an essence to violence(Lauwaert 27-36). Yet, he is wrong if it is compared to Racism

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considering that Racism is a violent act, if a Black person was physically abused by a White person, s/he would be hurt more than hearing the an offensive word yet those two different acts are similarly abusive.

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Conclusion:

Citizen is an interesting book starting from style to themes of genres used in it, which makes it open for interpretations and criticism. The theme of essentialism is not addressed directly in the book regarding that the central idea or the focus of the author was to shed light on those racist practices that she later addressed as Microaggressions; yet, Essentialism is imbedded in the acts of people of color and their reaction to racism, how they live with this racism and how they are still attached to their blackness. Moreover, the use of Essentialism can create social classes, racism, and violence which may lead to the destruction of societies. In addition, it is obvious that the idea of essence cannot be removed it is a part of the human psyche and formation; hence, problems such as Racism and violence will always exist in our societies. However, Racism and violence can be eradicated without requiring the removal of human's essences. This can be achieved by giving people a proper education and turning them to intellectuals who differentiate themselves from others by culture not skin color.

General Conclusion

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Human nature tends to be curious about everything, eager for answers, and constantly, raising questions that usually have answers and in many cases some questions remain unsolved. Time feeds up this curiosity because of the changes that come along with the ages. Accordingly, every new era of time comes with many other problems that need to be solved and many other questions that need to be answered which make the human curiosity endless as time passes.

In fact, the question that is asked about the most important things that a human being cannot live without has always remained unsolved and it may never be answered. Humans' needs can change from a generation to another and what was extremely important in the nineties is not needed at all today. This elucidates that the concrete things that can be changed or replaced are not important to humans. This does not mean that humans have nothing important; the answer has been fulfilled by the concept of essence which indicates that everything has a collection of characteristics that defines it. For humans' race, religion, culture, nationality, sexuality, and many other features are considered essences which point out a collection of the most important things that humans believe in. Race, however, has been affected negatively by the concept of essence. Throughout the history of human existence, humans have had a tendency to identify themselves from other creatures by using the observable characteristics of the human physical appearances and blood lines which are conceptualized and known as "Race". This concept has created many distortions in human connections and relationships, causing an unstoppable diversion between the different races which have eventually led to the creation of different countries and nations. Additionally, racism has become visual and it has been justified for centuries. Although time has changed, the old brutal and inhuman practices of racism undoubtedly still exist today.

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* has provided great examples about Racism's new forms and kinds, with a beautiful and appealing language and style. The mixture of

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prose and poetry celebrates criticism which contributes in advocating Rankine's cause. As well as, the debatable themes like Macroaggression and Hypervisibility which shows other dimensions for Racism. Rankine wants to show readers that Racism has not yet ended, but it is not as noticeable as it was before. She gives some examples of past racist incidents and present Racism, or better called "aggressions," arguing that Racism has taken other forms and it is still as terrible and horrific as it was in the past. Some of the people that Rankine mentions in her book show that there is a relation between Racism and Essentialism; for example, Zineddine Zidane was heavily criticized after the incident in the World Cup finals by the same people whom he lived with and played for. This shows that the French people who criticized Zidane had the need to clean up the image of their race; also, Zidane sacrificed his career for his race and beliefs. Similarly, Selena Williams felt the need to represent her Black people in Whites' sport. Her aggressive behaviors and her anger were human natural reactions and a defense mechanism that was alerted by the violation of her race and origins.

Moreover, it seems that the need to defend the essentials led to more complicated outcomes which designates that Essentialism leads to violence as it is the case for Selena and Zidane. There was a need for violence because of the pressure of feeling outnumbered and affected by a history of aggression and having a feeling of duty to defend what it means to be the most important aspect to the people whom they belong to. Furthermore, White people practise Racism to widen the gap between them and other races because they believe in the superiority of races with the use of power and violence. This sense of superiority has been always a part of the characterization of White people. This behavior can be clearly seen through a close look at the history of Blacks in America. Recently, George Floyd, the young Black man was shocked to death by the police of Minneapolis; he was arrested for passing a counterfeit of twenty Dollars

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bill in a grocery store. The policeman declared that George was a threat and he had to pin him on the ground to calm him down. There was no threat because George was cuffed, the policeman wanted to show his superiority over Floyd which highlights the need to protect the essence.

Essentialism is a dangerous concept and a lot of thinkers and philosophers have, intentionally or unintentionally, ignored and avoided studying it. However, to fulfill the human need for knowledge, philosophers like Plato, John Locke, and thinkers like Gayatri Spivak attempted to study and interpret Essentialism. Hence, it has been taken out of context as it is the case with Spivak's Strategic Essentialism and it has been practised for selfish reasons which indicate that initiating a study about the subject of Essentialism would create more problems. However, humans need essences in order to be able to define their existence and objectives in life because without an essence the human soul would be shallow and void. Therefore, this distortion in the world was a creation of concepts like Essentialism which encourage division and violence, Racism and hatred. The concept of race should not be an essential thing as well as other negative essentials that people are raised with. In other words, humans should be selective when it comes to essentials. The eradication of Racism will be a long process that needs to have a lot of changes starting from education to social connection and relationships. However, this change needs tolerant mindsets that believe in equality and justice as well as humanity not skin colors.

Glossary

Glossary

Glossary term	Glossary definition
Empiricism	The belief in observation and experience as the basis of knowledge, rather than logical deduction. As used in modern literary theory, the term usually has an unfavorable sense, referring to those critical approaches that dismiss theoretical abstraction in the belief that *TEXTS (or facts of history or biography) can 'speak for themselves' without the intervention of analysis and interpretation. The more neutral adjective empirical refers to research based upon observation. One who pursues any inquiry within the limits of empiricism, or who regards theory as a distraction, is an empiricist. (Baldick 78)
Existentialism	A current in European philosophy distinguished by its emphasis on lived human existence. Although it had an important precursor in the Danish theologian S0ren Kierkegaard in the 1840s, its impact was fully felt only in the mid-20th century in France and Germany [...]Its fundamental premise, that 'existence precedes essence', implies that we as human beings have no given essence or nature but must forge our own values and meanings in an inherently meaningless or *ABSURD world of existence. Obligated to make our

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	<p>own choices, we can either confront the anguish (or * ANGST) of this responsibility, or evade it by claiming obedience to some determining convention or duty, thus acting in 'bad faith'. Paradoxically, we are 'condemned to be free'. (Baldick 89)</p>
Nominalism	<p>a theory that there are no universal essences in reality and that the mind can frame no single concept or image corresponding to any universal or general term. the theory that only individuals and no abstract entities (such as essences, classes, or propositions) exist. (Merriam-Webster)</p>
Rationalism	<p>the belief or principle that actions and opinions should be based on reason rather than on emotion or religion. (Cambridge dictionary)</p>

Appendices

Appendices

Appendix one: Claudia Rankine's Biography

Claudia Rankine was born in the 1st of January 1963 in Kingston, Jamaica. She is a play writer, an educator, and an American poet. Rankine immigrated to New York City with her parents when she was seven years old, she was educated in Roman Catholic elementary and secondary schools in Bronx. She earned her BA (Bachelor of Arts) at Williams College then her MFA (Master of Fine Arts) at Columbia University. She is known for her social activities in preventing justice between races. Her interesting writing styles and use of language was her explicit signature in all her works. Her best-known works are: *Nothing in nature is private*(1994), *The End of the Alphabet* (1998), *Plot*(2001), *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2002), *Don't Let Me Lonely : AN American Lyric*(2004), and *Citizen : An American Lyric*(2014). Rankine has won the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) image award and the Pen Open Book Award in 2015, also her book *Citizen* was finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for poetry.



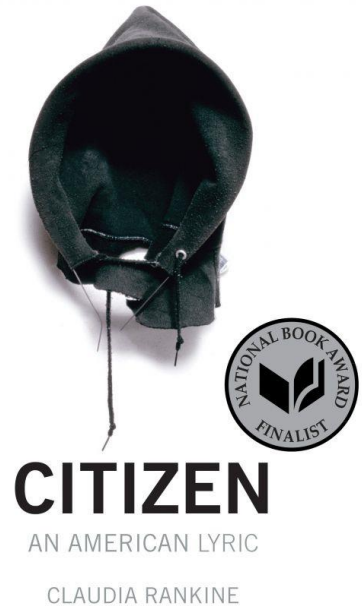
(see <https://www.britannica.com>

And <https://www.poetryfoundation.org>)

Appendices

Appendix 2: Synopsis of *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Citizen: An American Lyric is a book written by Claudia Rankine and published by Graywolf Press in 2014. The book is a combination of lyric prose and photographs, visual art, quotes, and slogans. Rankine gathered stories of her friends and combined those stories to her own experiences to shed the light on the phenomenal of racism that black people face every single day. *Citizen* was a finalist for the National Book Award in poetry and winner of the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) Image Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, the PEN Open Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award in poetry. Claudia said to *The New Yorker* “I started working on *Citizen* as a way of talking about invisible racism—moments that you experience and that happen so fast”, *Citizen* took the microaggressions as serious as the macroaggressions. It talks about incidents that could happen to any Black man any day which people may turn a blind eye on, but in fact it’s another face of racism. Claudia talked in her book about stories of famous celebrities like Selena Williams and Zinedine Zidane, as well as other Black people and the racism they have experienced. The book’s form that includes imagery and paintings makes it appealing and interesting to the reader. As well as, the beautiful rather confusing writing style that makes it engaging and enjoyable. Rankine’s use of the third person also makes the reader sympathize and fill the shoes of the people that Rankine narrated their stories in her Lyric.



(For more information see: <https://www.arts.gov>)

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