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“Let America Be America Again”:  
Echoes of Hughes in Claude Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*

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In her August 2014 interview with the *New Yorker*, Claudia Rankine states, “Langston Hughes, for me, was always the poet of the people. There actually were some interesting controversies between him and others around writing from the voice of the working-class people versus the ‘talented tenth,’ but he’s always expressed the feeling of the man on the street.” From his 1925 poetic portrait of the singing and playing Negro of “The Weary Blues” to his attempts to decry the violence against blacks, in memory of Emmett Till, with his poem “Mississippi—1955,” his works have conveyed the rising spirit of the black masses across time—a stirring discontentment with the African-American condition and the not so silent recognition that America was an unfulfilled dream. For Rankine, this notion is most evident in his 1938 “Let America Be America Again” in which he “addressed that aspirational moment in the hearts and feelings of African-Americans and minorities who walk around every day, thinking—knowing—that there are two Americas, and there have always been two Americas.” It is for that reason that Rankine channels Hughes and that “feeling of the man on the street” in her 2014 *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Here, Rankine offers a series of second person sketches representing the racialized body confronted with acts of racism and a historical silencing that she, like Hughes, attempts to combat. This paper will examine the traces of Hughes as a father or influence on Rankine’s work and the ways in which his poetry transcends the 1920s and 1950s to speak to longstanding issues prevalent in the United States today.