“Claudia Rankine’s Don’t Let Me Be Lonely is an utterly riveting, extraordinary, original and unforgettable book. It defines its own genre. It resurrects, in one’s admiration for the poet as well as the narrator, the notion of autobiography, while defining wholly new terms for the real. In a world obsessed with, and overrun by, fraudulence, and thus with narcissizing ‘reality’ versions of the most intimate aspects of human life, Rankine breaks out of virtual emotion, reawakens honesty, and exhibits such raw political courage and aesthetic bravery it sends tremors through the entire field of American poetry as she finds it. And all this aside, it is a mesmerizing meditation, a brilliant rant, a terrifying account of our lives. Sad, funny, smart, tart, nuanced, blunt: one can only say thank you to such a poet.” – Jorie Graham

“It is a time of confounding darkness and metastasizing media imagery in our society, a time when even death and the self have been reconfigured as commodities. Yet it is precisely ‘in the dark’ and alone, where the poet paradoxically invokes and affirms the necessary presence of the other. Claudia Rankine here mobilizes the narrative power of prose and the transnational logic of poetry to create a work of singular courage, lucidity and imaginative force.” – Michael Palmer

“Claudia Rankine here manages an extraordinary melding of means to effect the most articulate and moving testament to the bleak times we live in I’ve yet seen. It’s master work in every sense, and altogether her own.” – Robert Creeley

Claudia Rankine

AN AMERICAN LYRIC
Also by Claudia Rankine

Plot
The End of the Alphabet
Nothing in Nature Is Private

Coeditor with Juliana Spahr:
American Women Poets in the 21st Century:
Where Lyric Meets Language

DON'T LET ME BE LONELY

An American Lyric

Claudia Rankine

Graywolf Press
SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA
Copyright © 2004 by Claudia Rankine

Publication of this volume is made possible in part by a grant provided by the Minnesota State Arts Board, through an appropriation by the Minnesota State Legislature; a grant from the Wells Fargo Foundation Minnesota; and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great nation deserves great art. Significant support has also been provided by the Bush Foundation; Target, Marshall Field's and Mervyn's with support from the Target Foundation; the McKnight Foundation; and other generous contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals. To these organizations and individuals we offer our heartfelt thanks.

Special funding for this title has been provided by the Jerome Foundation.


Published by Graywolf Press
2402 University Avenue, Suite 203
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55114
All rights reserved.

www.graywolfpress.org

Published in the United States of America


4 6 8 9 7 5 3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2004104187

Cover design and photograph: John Lucas

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the editors of the publications in which poems from this book first appeared: Boston Review, EPR, Fence, Pierogi, and TriQuarterly.

Grateful acknowledgment is also made to Catherine Barnett, John Lucas, and John Woods who collaborated with me on this manuscript.

I would also like to thank Calvin Bedient, Mei Mei Berssenbrugge, Sarah Blake, Allison Coudert, Ulla Dydo, Louise Glück, Polly Gottesman, Saskia Hamilton, Bob Hass, Lyn Hejinian, Christine Hume, Ann Scott Knight, Sabrina Mark, Sarah Schulman, and Mike Goodman for turning this work into a conversation. Thanks also to the MacDowell Colony.
And most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the
sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle,
a sea of grief is not a proscenium, a man who walls is not
a dancing bear...
There was a time I could say no one I knew well had died. This is not to suggest no one died. When I was eight my mother became pregnant. She went to the hospital to give birth and returned without the baby. Where's the baby? we asked. Did she shrug? She was the kind of woman who liked to shrug; deep within her was an everlasting shrug. That didn't seem like a death. The years went by and people only died on television—if they weren't Black, they were wearing black or were terminally ill. Then I returned home from school one day and saw my father sitting on the steps of our home. He had a look that was unfamiliar; it was flooded, so leaking. I climbed the steps as far away from him as I could get. He was breaking or broken. Or, to be more precise, he looked to me like someone understanding his aloneness. Loneliness. His mother was dead. I'd never met her. It meant a trip back home for him. When he returned he spoke neither about the airplane nor the funeral.
And I am not exactly a crying person, though my eyes tear up frequently because of my allergies. In any case, the other tears, the ones that express emotions, the ones that recognize and take responsibility for the soul don't come. Instead I get a sharp pain in my gut. And though heart disease is the leading killer of American women, the pain has nothing to do with that. I have had it all my life. Not quite a caving in, just a feeling of bits of my inside twisting away from flesh in the form of a blow to the body.

Sometimes I look into someone's face and I must brace myself—the blow on its way. For instance, I go into my bedroom to put on socks because my toes could be cold and on the TV is Abner Louima: I hope what comes out of my case is change. What happened to me should not happen to any human being, to my children or anybody else's children... .

Sometimes I think it is sentimental, or excessive, certainly not intellectual, or perhaps too naïve, too self-wounded to value each life like that, to feel loss to the point of being bent over each time. There is no innovating loss. It was never invented, it happened as something physical, something physically experienced. It is not something an "I" discusses socially. Though Myung Mi Kim did say that the poem is really a responsibility to everyone in a social space. She did say it was okay to cramp, to clog, to fold over at the gut, to have to put hand to flesh, to have to hold the pain, and then to translate it here. She did say, in so many words, that what alerts, alters.
I felt it too.  
The loneliness?  
I let it happen.  
By feeling?  
By not not feeling.  
That's too much . . .  
Like dying?  
Maybe, or death is second.  
Second to what?  
To loneliness.  
Define loneliness.
Why are we alive? My sister had a daughter and a son. Is she dead? Is he dead? Yes, they’re dead. My sister’s children and her husband died in a car crash. She is a psychiatrist, but she cannot help herself. She does not, probably cannot, legally, prescribe herself any drugs. Her world—she is letting it—is crumbling. “Why…” “What…”

I listen, but do not speak. I look into her eyes. We sit on the floor of public places, our faces wet. Then, like that, I am in my car, turning the key in the ignition, my own quotidian affairs breaking in. Who will she be when she is too tired to cry? Where does her kind of grief go? Paul Celan whispers in my ear,

All those sleep shapes, crystalline
that you assumed
in the language shadow,

to those
I lead my blood,

those image lines, them
I’m to harbour
in the slit-arteries
of my cognition—,

my grief, I can see,
is deserting you.
Define loneliness?

Yes.

It's what we can't do for each other.

What do we mean to each other?

What does a life mean?

Why are we here if not for each other?

Or a friend's mother dies when she is on her way home from her father's funeral in Switzerland. While her plane crosses the Atlantic, her mother dies of a heart attack in New Hampshire. I run into this friend in SoHo at the Cupping Room. She is wearing a long fur coat.

It was my mother's. She died . . .

This woman, a college friend, seems fine. Perhaps we are not responsible for the lives of our parents—not in our pores or our very breath. We can expect. We can resolve. We can come to terms with. Afterwards we wear their clothing, sit in their chairs, and remember them. Profoundly remember them. But we are not responsible. The construct of my sister, this character, feels erased. Anything, I tell her. I write in my notes, I will do anything. In truth I can do nothing but see in the activity of her grief three people's death. The end of each day is followed by morning.

A husband wakes up beside me, stretching, asking,

Sweetheart, honey, dearest,
how did you sleep?
Mahalia Jackson is a genius. Or Mahalia Jackson has genius. The man I am with is trying to make a distinction. I am uncomfortable with his need to make this distinction because his inquiry begins to approach subtle shades of racism, classism, or sexism. It is hard to know which. Mahalia Jackson never finished the eighth grade, or Mahalia's genius is based on the collision of her voice with her spirituality. True spirituality is its own force. I am not sure how to respond to all this. I change the subject instead.

We have just seen George Wein's documentary, *Louis Armstrong at Newport, 1971*. In the auditorium a room full of strangers listened to Mahalia Jackson sing “Let There Be Peace on Earth” and stood up and gave a standing ovation to a movie screen. Her clarity of vision crosses thirty years to address intimately each of us. It is as if her voice has always been dormant within us, waiting to be awakened, even though “it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, (and) through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech.”

Perhaps Mahalia, like Paul Celan, has already lived all our lives for us. Perhaps that is the definition of genius. Hegel says, “Each man hopes and believes he is better than the world which is his, but the man who is better merely expresses this same world better than the others.” Mahalia Jackson sings as if it is the last thing she intends to do. And even though the lyrics of the song are, “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me,” I am hearing, *Let it begin in me.*
Or Paul Celan said that the poem was no different from a handshake. *I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem*—is how Rosemary Waldrop translated his German. The handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that—Here. I am here. This conflation of the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive.

Or one meaning of here is “In this world, in this life, on earth. In this place or position, indicating the presence of,” or in other words, I am here. It also means to hand something to somebody—Here you are. Here, he said to her. Here both recognizes and demands recognition. I see you, or here, he said to her. In order for something to be handed over a hand must extend and a hand must receive. We must both be here in this world in this life in this place indicating the presence of.
Notes

Page 5
Researchers at Arizona State University conducted a study of violence in the top-5-grossing movies from 1964, 1974, 1984, and 1994 to determine trends in onscreen violence over time. The number of deaths had, in fact, increased from an average of 8 to 15 deaths per film. Notably, the 41 deaths found in the films from 1964 were non-graphic in nature, while 82% of deaths in the movies from 1994 were depicted graphically.


Page 7
1-800-SUICIDE is the phone number for the National Hopeline Network. It is an organization that links together crisis-prevention hotlines located locally throughout the United States. The network's purpose is to provide an easy-to-remember, toll-free phone number for people contemplating suicide. All member groups are certified by the American Association of Suicidology.


happily (not to be confused with haply—adv. [Archaic] by chance or accident; perhaps)—adv. form of HAPPY

happiness—n. form of HAPPY

happy—adj. 1 favored by circumstances; lucky; fortunate 2 having, showing, or causing a feeling of great pleasure, contentment, joy, etc.; joyous; glad; pleased 3 exactly appropriate to the occasion; suitable and clever; apt; felicitous [a happy suggestion] 4 intoxicated, or irresponsibly quick to act, as if intoxicated: sometimes used in hyphenated compounds: see SLAP-HAPPY, TRIGGER-HAPPY.


Page 8
If breast cancer is missed on one year’s mammogram, a woman’s life expectancy is not usually altered, offering her little recourse under the law. However, the
The Peruvian poet César Vallejo was descended from two Chimú Indian grandmothers and two Catholic priest grandfathers. He was a lifelong political activist. He was particularly moved as a young man, observing the backbreaking labor of underpaid workers on the sugar plantation where he worked in the accounts department. He went on to become a staunch anti-Fascist when he lived in Madrid in his later life.

**Page 56**

Allergies are the human body's overreaction to substances that it thinks will cause it harm. These include harmless substances such as dust and pollen. Tears are the eyes' attempt to purge themselves of these irritants. This excess activity can often lead to conjunctivitis (pink eye). According to the American Academy of Ophthalmology, 22 million Americans have allergies, and a majority of them have allergic conjunctivitis.

Haitian immigrant Abner Louima was arrested in front of Club Rendezvous in Brooklyn on Saturday, August 9, 1997. New York City police officers arrested him after dispersing a disorderly crowd outside the nightclub, reporting that Louima had struck Officer Justin Volpe with his fist. The police officers reportedly beat Louima inside their patrol car. Then later, in the precinct bathroom, witnesses say Officer Charles Schwarz held down Louima while Volpe sodomized him with a broken broomstick. Volpe pleaded guilty and is now serving 30 years in prison.

**Page 57**

Ahmed Amadou Diallo, a West African immigrant and street vendor, was shot dead in the early morning hours of February 4, 1999, in the vestibule of his Bronx apartment building. Despite being unarmored, four police officers expended 41 rounds shooting at Diallo. He was declared dead at the scene.

The most publicized reaction to the killing of Amadou Diallo was the performance by Bruce Springsteen of his song “American Skin (41 Shots).” He premiered the song at a June 4, 2000 concert in Atlanta. Before the tour reached New York, eight days later, the head of the New York City Police Benevolent Association had already called for all 27,000 New York City police officers to boycott the show and refuse to moonlight as security guards. The Police Commissioner Howard Safir supported him, and Bob Lucente, the president of the state chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police, lost his job over the issue, after saying, “[Springsteen's] turned into some type of fucking dirtbag. He goes on the boycott list. He has all these good songs and everything, American-flag songs and all that stuff, and now he's a floating bag, and you can quote me on that.” Springsteen's song describes a mother warning her son to always admit inferiority to police officers, noting that “The secret my friend / You can get killed just for living in your American skin.” This song was released only as a single, and was not included, to the chagrin of many critics, on his next full album The Rising, which was released after the events of September 11, 2001, in which many New York City police officers lost their lives.

In Myung Mi Kim's fourth book of poetry Commons (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), her final words are the suggestion to "mobilize our notion of the responsibility to one another in social space."

**Page 61**

Translator and poet Paul Celan committed suicide in 1970.


**Page 63**

According to a 2001 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (using 1998 mortality data), the leading cause of death for adults, aged 25 or older, in the state of New Hampshire was cardiovascular disease (39%).

The name of this café is a reference to a room used for measured coffee tasting. "Cupping" coffee means to sample different coffees to determine their flavor profiles. Cupping is also used to determine if a coffee has defects or in the process of creating new blends. A cupping room, somewhat like a clean room, is a space built with precisely controlled conditions that establish the ideal environment for cupping. The Cupping Room Café's L-shaped design—with windows only at either end—and its open doors does not, in fact, create the requisite conditions for an actual cupping room.

**Page 67**

In 1996, 12-year-old Lionel Tate beat his 6-year-old neighbor, Tiffany Eunick, to death, pretending to be a professional wrestler. Prosecutors offered his mother a deal that he spend 3 years in a juvenile facility, which she turned down believing her son would be acquitted. Instead, he was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison without parole, the youngest person ever given such a sentence in the United States. He has received support from the NAACP, the Vatican, and the Human Rights Commission in Geneva, but his request for clemency is left solely in the hands of Florida Governor Jeb Bush, who turned down Tate's first request due to his poor conduct in prison. A second request for clemency has been entered by Tate's prosecutor, Kenneth Padovitz, who feels his sentence is too harsh, and should have been no more than 6 to 9 months.

Lionel Tate was one of nearly 3,000 juveniles tried as an adult in the state of Florida in 2001.

Lionel's mother, Kathleen Grosssett-Tate, is a Florida State Trooper.

In December of 2003, Lionel Tate's first-degree murder conviction and life prison sentence were overturned by the Florida appellate court who determined that
The full name of the Islamic fundamentalist group commonly referred to as al Qaeda is “al-Qaeda al-Sulbah,” which means “The Solid Base.” In the organization’s founding charter, it is described as the “spearhead of Islam” and the “pioneering vanguard of the Islamic movements.”

"I am Tiger Woods" was the slogan associated with Nike’s 1997 print- and broadcast-advertising campaign featuring the wunderkind professional golf champion.

In the September 11, 2001 attack, not only were the Twin Towers destroyed, but the whole system of buildings that surrounded and connected them, known as the “World Trade Center Complex.”

Condoleezza Rice on President George W. Bush—“He least likes me to say, ‘This is complex.’” See Nicholas Lemann’s “Without a Doubt” in The New Yorker, (October 14, 2002).

The USA Patriot Act was passed by the United States House of Representatives on October 24, 2001. The full title of the legislation is the “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001.” Two days later, President Bush signed it into law. This 342-page document was drafted and passed in a hurry following the terrorist activities of September 11. It gives substantial new power to both domestic law-enforcement groups and international intelligence agencies in pursuing terrorists, allowing them to bypass the usual checks and balances provided by the judicial branch of the government. While several provisions are set to expire, others are not, including giving the government the right to subpoena electronic communications, an override of the privacy provisions of the Cable Act for communication services offered by cable providers, and “Sneak and Peek” allowances, which lets law enforcement delay notification of the execution of a warrant. In November of 2003, the FBI invoked the Patriot Act to subpoena financial documents to aid them in uncovering a political corruption scandal involving a Las Vegas strip club. This was the first obvious use of the Patriot Act in a non-terrorism-related matter. In early 2003, a draft of the Justice Department’s follow-up bill, “The Domestic Security Enhancement Act of 2003,” was leaked to the press by the non-partisan Center for Public Integrity, a civil rights group. This act was dubbed “Patriot II.” Though it received criticism and was shelved, some points have been advanced through other legislation.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the first case of inhalation anthrax attack in the United States was reported in Palm Beach County, Florida on October 4, 2001. The 63-year-old Robert Stevens was probably exposed to the anthrax on September 19, opening mail in his of-

lice at America Media in Boca Raton. He began showing signs of illness on September 30 and died on October 5.

* Palm Beach County was the focus of national attention the previous year as the site of a vote recount in the 2000 presidential election.

Mahalia Jackson was Gospel music’s first superstar and is still generally considered the greatest Gospel singer ever. She is noted for her crossover success, creating music that appealed to an ever-expanding audience over the course of her career, solidified by her appearance at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1958.

George Wein is a Boston-born jazz pianist who launched his own career at the Newport Jazz Festival, in 1954. He also opened the notable jazz club, Storyville.

Mahalia Jackson performed her farewell concert in Germany in 1971, just months before she died.

Paul Colan made this statement during his speech on the occasion of being awarded the Bremen Prize for German Literature (the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen) in 1958. He said that language must be freed from history.

Mahalia Jackson faced particular adversity in the later years of her life. Her friends and fellow civil rights activists Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Robert F. Kennedy were all assassinated, causing her to retire from political life in 1968. She then went through a notably messy and well-publicized divorce that led to her physical deterioration; she had several heart attacks and lost a hundred pounds quite quickly. Still, she was able to regain her form and perform several concerts before dying on January 27, 1972.

Andre Breton also cites this passage from Hegel in his Surrealist novel Nadja.

The fact that Frieda Berger had such a tattoo at all was enough to signify that she had been imprisoned at Auschwitz. Auschwitz Concentration Camp complex was the only site where prisoners were systemically tattooed during the Holocaust. A more common practice was having serial numbers sewn into the clothing of inmates. The tattooing at Auschwitz began in 1941 when about 12,000 Soviet prisoners of war were brought there. In May of 1944, the “A” series was introduced (the previous system used no letter prefixes except for the Soviets [AJ], Gypsies [Z], and those slated for "reeducation" [EH]), and that actually signified nothing more than the beginning of the alphabet. The “A” series was to be given to the first 20,000 new Jewish male prisoners and the first 20,000 new Jewish female prisoners. Subsequent series were to follow the alphabet, but the camps were closed before the “B” series was completed. Due to a logistical
the following night. American and Canadian authorities both attributed the outbreak to causes originating on the other side of their shared border.

Elizabeth Costello is the title character of J. M. Coetzee's 2003 novel (his first published subsequent to winning the Booker Prize in 1999 and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003). She is an aging novelist who is struggling with a writer's greatest fear, a loss for words.


Page 130
Paul Celan wrote this in a 1961 letter to Hans Bender, a noted parapsychology researcher.


Page 131
According to the Oxford English Dictionary:

Our contemporary understanding of the word "here," as in "this place" or "the place," finds its origins in the Gothic prefix "hi," meaning this (it is placed before a noun). The pronouns "he," "him," "his," and "her" also come from this source, as well as the pronouns "hither" and "hence." From this source the feminine "she," plural "they," and neuter "it" all eventually evolved.