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"You are in the Dark": Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, Black Transnational Identities

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Black experimentalism probes different historical experiences and exclusive literary legacies that document a past marred by racism, injustice, humiliation, and exclusion. In the twenty-first century, black experimentalists face new challenges as they confront new means of racist aggression, unfair discrimination, and social rejection. This paper examines Jamaican American poet Claudia Rankine's cross-genre *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), which exposes micro- and macro-aggressions and reveals quotidian racism against blacks in America. The paper attempts to answer the questions: How does Rankine, through a transnational self-positioning, establish the ostentatiously lyrical 'I' of the narrative voice and address an ambiguous 'you'? And how are black identities forged amid those ever-racist micro- and macro-aggressions in the contemporary world? How does a transnation force its citizens to forge transnational identities therefore "marking a people in a state of perpetual not-at-homeness?" as Ashcroft puts it (2010, 74).

Keywords: Claudia Rankine; *Citizen*; experimentalism; apostrophe; racism; transnational

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"You are in the Dark": *Citizen* de Claudia Rankine, identidades transnacionales negras

El experimentalismo negro indaga en diferentes experiencias históricas y legados literarios exclusivos que documentan un pasado manchado por el racismo, la injusticia, la humillación y la exclusión. En el siglo XXI, los experimentalistas negros afrontan nuevos retos al enfrentarse a nuevas formas de agresión racista, discriminación injusta y rechazo social.

En este artículo se examina *Citizen*: *An American Lyric* (2014), un texto cruce de géneros de la poeta estadounidense de origen jamaicano Claudia Rankine, que expone micro y macroagresiones que revelan el racismo cotidiano contra los negros en Estados Unidos. El artículo intenta responder a las siguientes preguntas ¿Cómo establece Rankine, a través de un autoposicionamiento transnacional, el 'yo' ostentosamente lírico de la voz narrativa y se dirige a un 'tú' ambiguo, y cómo se forjan las identidades negras en el marco de esas microagresiones y macroagresiones siempre racistas en el mundo contemporáneo? ¿Cómo obliga una trans-nación a sus ciudadanos a forjar identidades transnacionales "que marcan a un pueblo en un estado de perpetua no pertenencia", en palabras de Ashcroft (2010, 74)?

Palabras clave: Claudia Rankine; *Citizen*; experimentalismo; apóstrofe; racismo; transnacional

The avant-garde in every field
consists of the lonely, the
friendless, the uninvited.

Chuck Palahniuk

1. Introduction

"The assumption remains, however unexamined, that 'avant-garde' poetry is not 'black,' and that 'black' poetry however singular its 'voice,' is not formally innovative" Harrytte Mullen states (2002, 30). Black experimentalism probes different historical experiences and exclusive literary legacies that document a past marred by racism, injustice, humiliation, and exclusion, and Anthony Reed describes it as "the art of saying the impossible" (2014, 3). It is a deviation from classical techniques; a re-telling of the same historical stories while pushing beyond limits. It establishes new constructs through disruptive language, content and style, and reconfigures literary expression and conventional aesthetic modes of representation in order to reflect the black experience in America. In the twenty-first century, black experimentalists face new challenges as they confront new means of racist aggression, unfair discrimination, and social rejection.

Through the works of Harryette Mullen, Ed Roberson, Nathaniel Mackey, and Erica Hunt, African American experimental poets attempt to fashion their *sui generis* poetics by advancing a transnational aesthetic for black racial identity. Transnationalism, put in the wider context of globalization, conventionally refers to migration and claiming citizenship to more than one state. It indicates how those citizens, as a diaspora, practice their political and legal rights in the new nation state. However, the article adopts a different premise in using the term, one which is built upon Bill Ashcroft's notion of transnation. According to Ashcroft, one does not have to be an immigrant and cross the national borders to live in a transnation because, "borders are drawn inside as well as around the state" (2019, 11). Ideological borders that set hierarchies and shape power

relations are no less influential than the geographical borders drawn around a state. Ashcroft argues that the transnation is "both internal and external" (2019, 11). It is a disruptive space that dissolves traditional binaries, questions national affiliation, and extends beyond the cultural boundaries of a state nation. Ashcroft defines it as "the fluid, migrating *outside* of the state that begins *within* the nation. The transnation is a way of talking about subjects in their ordinary lives, subjects who live in-between the categories by which subjectivity is normally constituted" (2019, 11). The transnation influences its citizens and plays a crucial role in establishing their identities in relation to the state and the concept of nationalism.

This paper examines Jamaican American poet Claudia Rankine's cross-genre *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), which exposes micro- and macro-aggressions and reveals quotidian racism against blacks in America. Rankine experiments with language, defies genre, uses graphic and pictorial elements, renegotiates canonical texts, unsettles epistemological assumptions, employs techniques from mass media, and blurs boundaries between prose and lyric. This paper attempts to answer the questions: How does Rankine, through a transnational self-positioning, establish the ostentatiously lyrical 'I' of the narrative voice and address an ambiguous 'you'? And how are black identities forged amid those ever-racist micro- and macro-aggressions in the contemporary world? How does a transnation force its citizens to forge transnational identities therefore "marking a people in a state of perpetual not-at-homeness?" as Ashcroft puts it (2010, 74). I start by historicizing experimentalism in African American literature from the 1920s until the twenty-first century to prove that it is well-established in black writings, having its own unique innovations and techniques. Then I move on to contextualizing Rankine in the black canon and showing how she experiments with the lyric by dethroning its subjective 'I' and shifting to an undefined, and sometimes undefinable, 'you'. The last section focuses on addressability and Rankine's experimental manipulation of the poetic apostrophe in *Citizen*.

2. "You think maybe this is an experiment"[1]

Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) subverted generic conventions and heralded an avant-gardist African American voice in the early twentieth century, when the Harlem Renaissance crossed paths with the modernist school. Through its stories and poems, *Cane* emerged as a psychological realist work grounded in folk culture, employing innovative techniques in its imagery, syntax, symbols, diction and modernist ambivalence. Black experimentalism also conspicuously flourished in the same decade in Langston Hughes' poetry as he took ultimate liberty with jazz rhythms, blues aesthetics, spiritual forms and black folk idiom in *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927).[2] Gwendolyn Brooks introduced a modernist paradigm to black poetry in her Pulitzer Prize winning *Annie Allen* (1949).

[1] Rankine 2014, 10.

[2] Hughes' experimental attempts did not end in the 1920s and he carried on with them throughout his long career of writing poetry, prose articles, short stories, and plays.

The same experimentalist approach appeared in Melvin Tolson's *Rendezvous with America* (1944) and his Afro-modernist epic *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953) with his use of modernist rhapsody, multiple voices, the breaking of linear chronology in narrating history, and avant-garde depiction of black genealogies. The late 1960s witnessed the emergence of the Black Arts Movement with its radically experimental Black Aesthetic, political inclination, African nationalism, and separatist stances, epitomized by the works of Larry Neal, Hoyt Fuller, Julian Mayfield, and Amiri Baraka.

With the exception of Baraka, most of the authors who had the prerogative to compile anthologies on American experimental poetics tended to exclude black voices from the canon.[3] According to Evie Shockley, experimental poetry has historically been constructed in America as inherently white (2011, 11). Despite their undeniable forays into experimental aesthetics, African American writers have been entirely dismissed, marginalized, misinterpreted, or imprisoned within critical contexts that corral them under the banner of race. Furthermore, Cary Nelson argues that for many years anthologies of American literature tended to include minority poems that were non-challenging, which would be accepted by a white readership (1993, 32). Black avant-gardists are therefore racially essentialized and only included provided that they do not disturb 'white' comfort zones. Their political, aesthetic, and formal innovations are read within repressive constructions of racial identity, yielding a unidimensional hermeneutics for their experimentalism that puts racial experience above formal innovation within a rigid binary where techniques are overshadowed by themes.

This exclusivist stance renders reading black experimentalism more challenging. Audre Lorde's "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" serves as a good vantage point from which to start.[4] David Marriott believes that "contemporary black experimental *writing* begins at the point where (white) notions of the avant-garde become impossible, or at least irrelevant" since race is part and parcel of the black equation (2017, 1). Despite the discourse on post-Blackness that emerged with globalization two decades ago, it is hard to argue that racism is a thing of the past. Houston A. Baker finds the term 'post-Blackness' quite problematic. In response to Michael Touré's *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now* (2011), Baker asserts that to be black in twenty-first-century America "is to live shorter lives, work disgusting menial jobs, suffer unemployment when such jobs fail, endure explicit and implicit insults for the audacity of 'appearing in public,' and move in city or country U.S.A. from 'can in

[3] Baraka is the only black poet included in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945–1960* (1960) and its follow-up *The Post-Moderns: The New American Poetry Revisited* (1982) owing to his association with Black Mountain Poets and the Beat Movement.

[4] In her famous article published in *Sister Outsider*, Lorde criticizes women feminists for not taking into consideration the difficulty black women face in terms of racial and class oppressions, as well as not including lesbians in their agendas. Her argument is built upon the notion that to change this, black women and lesbians have to understand that the master's house, a metaphor for the white model, should not be defined as the only source of support. Lorde's strong argument has been used in minority discourses to point to the same notion of going beyond the master's house and rules in order to achieve real changes.

the morning' to 'can't at night' with a noose [...] over your head" (2015, 253). This reality renders post-Blackness a utopian dream, if not a mere fantasy. Kwame Appiah equally believes that racism has not vanished in the twenty-first century, where "the color line and its cousins are still going strong [... and] we keep tracing the same contours with different pens" (2018, 133). Black experimentalists, fully aware of this black reality, seek to re-negotiate and re-conceptualize the politics and poetics of racial representation through utilizing non-conformist modes, mediums, genres, and forms of self-expression where form and content are complementary and theme is not given precedence over technique. Black innovators are thus concerned with re-setting the aesthetic relation between race and discursive techniques in order to establish their own subversive rhetoric of experimentalism. Their experimentalism remains significant since the conventional ideologies of race produce reductivist readings. Being open to myriad interpretations, aesthetic experimentalism creates more room to avoid falling into the pitfall of such readings and widens the perspective for understanding the text.

Racial experience and black history certainly remain indispensable for any black literary politics. Tyler Bradway avers that the black experimental must be located within black history and culture and seen within the context of white supremacy, racism, heteronormativity, and capitalism, and the various forms of violence that accompany them (2019, 22). However, this innovative body of writing incorporates more than these notions as it introduces specific artistry of new modalities of black reason and unity, this artistry being the outcome of the temporal and aesthetic breaches that the experimental creates (Bradway 2019, 22). Slavery, lynching, segregation, the failure and ensuing disillusionment of the Civil Rights Movement, the escalating violence against black bodies, and all other forms of racial injustices in African American history influence temporal and artistic perspectives that embrace and simultaneously go beyond this history. To understand black experimentalism; therefore, it has to be read on its own terms. Reed persuasively argues that the value of black experimentation lies in its ability to break down any consensus and thus allow new modes of thinking to come into being (2014, 22). The avant-gardist mandates of black writers resemble a progressive narrative, which builds upon, maintains, renews, and constructs its tools and techniques simultaneously. Meanwhile, they hold the scales balanced between form and content to make palpable the lived experiences of black people. Despite being dismissed, demoted, or excluded, black experimentalists' voices still echo resonantly in the African American canon of the twenty-first century, and those are the premises from which the poetic voice of Claudia Rankine emerges.

3. "Yes, and this is how you are a citizen"[5]

Jamaican immigrant Claudia Rankine (1963-) has written plays, poems and essays, produced documentaries, edited anthologies, and received myriad prizes for her

[5] Rankine 2014, 151.

work.[6] *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) heralded her experimentalist voice: it is a hybrid work that blends essays, poems and images to examine race riots, 9/11, and the role played by media in the new century. Katherine Leveling explains that the book was "hailed as experimental for its expansion of the scope of the lyric subject and its inclusion of both written text and images, as well as the melding of documentary fact with imaginative reflection" (2019, 33). *Citizen, An American Lyric* (2014), published a decade later, was seen as its follow-up and also as the culmination of this experimental voice in terms of both form and content in that Rankine uses a similar blending of genres and innovates further in her utilization of the lyric subject. Divided into seven chapters that tackle micro- and macro-aggressions while conjuring historical and current traumatic experiences, *Citizen* explores day-to-day verbal, physical, and emotional racism directed against black Americans through the use of video scripts, images, and artworks. Rankine describes this work as follows:

> One of the things I wanted the book to do was speak to intimate moments. I asked a lot of friends and people I'd meet, 'Can you tell me a story of a micro-aggression that happened to you in a place you didn't expect it to happen?' I wasn't interested in scandal, or outrageous moments. I was interested in the surprise of the intimate, or the surprise of the ordinary. So you're just moving along and suddenly you get this moment that breaks your ability to continue, and yet you continue. I wanted those kinds of moments. (2017a)[7]

Through depicting those intimate moments, Rankine ultimately proves that small issues can have equal implications to big ones, as African Americans are still racially profiled, stereotyped, and the victims of racial slurs. Incidents that appear innocuous, innocent, non-intentional, and unheeded can be terribly injurious to and even detrimental for black Americans.

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[6] Her poetry collections include: *Nothing in Nature is Private* (1994), *The End of the Alphabet* (1998), *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), *Plot* (2007), and her play *The Provenance of Beauty: A South Bronx Travelogue* was performed in 2009 and 2011 and *The White Card* was staged in 2018. *Just Us: An American Conversation* is a collection of essays and poems published in 2020. The prizes that she received include: Jackson Poetry Prize, Lannan Foundation Literary Award, Los Angeles Times Book Award and Morton Dauwen Zabel Award in 2014, Forward Prize, Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, PEN Open Book Award, NAACP Image Award, and National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry in 2015 for *Citizen*, MacArthur Fellowship, United States Artist Zell Fellowship, Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry in 2016, Colgate University, Honorary Doctor of Letters and John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship for poetry in 2017.

[7] Chester Pierce first coined the term micro-aggressions in 1970 in an article that he wrote to explain why he relinquished the chairmanship of a psychiatric group. In his article, he argued that it was the duty of black psychiatrists in America to ensure that "every black begins to have a proud ego image and learn to seize hope and pounce on opportunity. Every black must recognize the offensive mechanisms used by the collective white society, usually by means of cumulative proracist microaggressions, which keep him psychologically accepting of the disenfranchised state" (472). The irony is that Pierce speculated that if they had embarked on this mission immediately, its results would not be reaped until the twenty-first century. *Citizen*, published in 2014, proves that the task has unfortunately failed to achieve its goals.

Rankine disrupts many generic and writing techniques in her book, to the extent that some critics are not even certain what to call it. Kate Kellaway, for example, states that "Claudia Rankine's book may or may not be poetry – the question [however] becomes insignificant as one reads on." However, the subtitle states explicitly that the work is *An American Lyric*, and Rankine insists that the book endeavors to "pull the lyric back into its realities" (Chiasson 2014). The lyric defies easy categorization, generically and historically. However, it is conventionally seen as the rhetoric of the self. According to Hegel, for the poet to attain enlightenment and spiritualization, s/he has to use the lyric as their means of self-expression for all their feelings. Hegel's lyric ideal is where subjectivity encounters its self as the poet "must identify *himself* with this particularization of himself as with himself, so that in it he feels and envisages *himself*" (1975, 1133; italics in original). Nevertheless, the lyric must also have worldwide validity in order to dialectically achieve historical progress (Hegel 1975, 1111). Achieving this universality, the poet gives us something unanimously human, which induces sympathy in us (Hegel 1975, 1121). Hegel's nineteenth-century views and much of the Romantic poetry of the late eighteenth century became the legacy for the lyric that lived in the following century to serve different poetic agendas. In modern times, poets choose to position themselves in relation to the lyrical subject in myriad ways, taking into consideration various discourses on nationalism, politics, race, gender, sexuality, history, and social realities. The lyrical subject is seen in relation to identity since cultural constructions form this identity, influence its subjective historicity, and decide upon its location within specific hierarchies. But despite the new additions to the lyric, Mutlu Blasing believes that it is still seen as a means of self-expression that reflects the intimate and fundamental subject (2006, 4). Fictional or autobiographical, the modern lyric 'I' retains an element of subjectivity and acts as the mediator of poetic utterance that reflects the poet's personal emotions. However, modern avant-garde poetics may transcend this assumption.

Rankine believes that an American lyric is an internal song, composed collectively by the diverse voices of America.[8] It is not the traditional expression of one single consciousness, as she explains: "The lyric normally is thought of as a kind of internal song and I want to marry the position of blackness to the American song [...] it's not about American life then Black life. It's Black life as American life. And 'American Lyric' keeps the marriage singular" (2017b). Rankine's lyric converts the single subject into an emblem of multiple selves with blurred boundaries, the poetic personae not always having specific identity markers in terms of race and gender. Public and private

[8] Rankine's notion of an internal song is different from Walt Whitman's utopian poem "I hear America Singing" (1860) in which all voices come together in harmony to sing America, and also different from Langston Hughes' "I, too, Sing America" (1926) in which the dark brother proudly sings alone. Her vision is to see all voices coming together without assimilating into one melting pot where white norms are always put on top and given full power and authority, but rather in a way that grants equality among all its diverse voices without setting hierarchies in terms of race, class, gender, or sexuality. Her internal song of America grants each voice its own tunes and melodies.

spheres overlap in this marriage but the position of blackness is hardly granted power, sometimes it is not even seen. The question of invisibility creates self-doubt and insecurity, something Rankine herself ponders:

> Sometimes 'I' is supposed to hold what is not there until it is. Then *what is* comes apart the closer you are to it.
> This makes the first person a symbol for something.
> The pronoun barely holding the person together.
> Someone claimed we should use our skin as wallpaper knowing we couldn't win.
> You said 'I' has so much power; it's insane. (2014, 71)

The first-person pronoun 'I' is shrouded in uncertainty as it stands for 'something' unnamed and undefined. There is a haunting sense of absence that this 'I' is endeavoring to eliminate and bring into existence its own visibility. However, this pronoun possesses no power for blacks; it connotes nothing but vulnerability, volatility, and suspicion. The lyric subject perceives itself as an object, which demolishes the autonomous figure or authorial voice this pronoun usually represents, as Mary-Jean Chan argues: "Rankine's lyric 'I' is a speaker whose positionality is inherently unstable" (2018, 139). Being unseen erases one's sense of self, meaning stability becomes almost impossible to achieve and agency is missing. Rankine's speaker suffers from identity crisis as the center of their subjectivity fails to hold, and consequently, things fall apart. Hence, she shifts to the second-person 'you.' The rhetoric technique of apostrophe marks a discontinuation in speech to address a person, an idea or an object. It is a break off from reality in which the 'I' detaches itself to involve a 'you'. The shift could be seen as a self-defense mechanism since the 'I' wavers and fails to reach a safe haven. The 'you' emerges as the last resort that can save the 'I' from collapsing by asserting that this 'I' might still possess power. Although the 'I' insists that claiming any power is 'insane', it still reaches out to the 'you' for help. Having failed to enforce its visibility, the 'I' is bringing in the 'you' to prove through their communication that it still exists, and to combat its incumbent absence.

4. "Did you just hear? did you just say? did you just see? did you just do that?"[9]

How deep is the line that stands between 'I' and 'you' when one of them addresses the other? The process of addressability is far from simple. According to Judith Butler: "One speaks, and one speaks for another, to another, and yet there is no way to collapse the distinction between the Other and oneself. When we say 'we' we do nothing more than designate this very problematic" (2004, 25). Defining this distinctive line remains unfeasible and the bond implied in 'we' makes it more complex because it exposes the

[9] Rankine 2014, 55.

susceptibility of both personae by pointing to an oblique camaraderie between them. Addressability incorporates a hidden intimacy where the 'I' can hardly stand without the 'you', which shakes the ground beneath the question of autonomy. Butler believes that we must take into consideration the demands that result from living in a world in which human beings ineluctably depend on one another and are vulnerable to one another (2004, 27). The interdependence between 'I' and 'you' stems from their historical formation, however, it transcends this past to impact their social and political lives. Additionally, addressing the Other is a plea for recognition. Nonetheless, the process is not a static one, as Butler clarifies, because in it, we grow into new beings since we are created by virtue of address in which we display our need for the Other linguistically, which is indispensable to our existence (2004, 44). Addressability is a formative process where the 'I' gains not only recognition, but also acquires new perspectives of being that the 'you' introduces. Having situated the 'I' in what Butler describes as the "the mode of unknowingness" (2004, 30), Rankine turns to addressing the 'you'.

Rankine's use of 'you' summons the crucial question of addressability and opens new horizons of the avant-garde, as Livia Bellardini avers, in that this pronoun, being simultaneously challenging and intriguing, is in harmony with the poetic tendency towards experimenting (2022, 180). Address is not received correspondingly by the addressees. Rankine believes that "writers of color often begin from the place of being addressed. To be a person of color in a racist culture is to be always addressable […], and to be addressable means one is always within stigma's reach" (2015). Being addressable for African Americans is a union of incongruities as it equally invites and kills possibilities of communication, rendering blacks invisible and hypervisible at the same time, while leaving them labelled either way. Rankine builds on Butler's explanation of hate speech, stating that: "We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this. / For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person" (2014, 49).[10] Language seems to clash with race, establishing an intimate disquiet. Racist language enforces an absence upon blacks and compels them to question their very existence. In *Citizen*, Rankine introduces a vague 'you' that could be white or black, which overturns the question of addressability, since it remains vague who is addressing whom. The upended addressability forces the addressee to reconsider their positions and to acknowledge that some bond exists with the addresser.

Rankine's extensive use of apostrophic 'you' in *Citizen* marks her experimentalism and moves with her work into a new poetic realm that Reed calls the postlyric. The postlyric uses familiar techniques in ways that subvert the genre's hermeneutic enclosure, which features the enunciation and experience of a singular consciousness

[10] In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), Butler builds upon Althusser's notion of interpellation and examines linguistic injury stemming from hate speech by emphasizing how words can hurt. They argue that hate speech is a re-enactment of a formative address, in which the subject is constructed and that it has the propensity to either endorse or intimidate this subject.

with the propensity to stand for race (Reed 2014, 98). It disturbs conventions of identity as the lyrical moment of self-expression is converted into self-alienation and fragmentation, turning this self into the Other. The postlyric, therefore, disrupts the ontological assumptions that define the traditional underpinnings of the lyric. The apostrophic trope in Rankine's work falls into this genre. Having presented an 'I' that fears erasure, she grounds subjectivity in the second person pronoun 'you' instead: "You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being 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" (2014, 10). The addressed 'you' is not given any identity marker, however, the way the racist gesture is interpreted in the following lines suggests it is a black person: "You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having" (2014, 10). The 'you' occupies a subject/object position, and in both it is confused and does not know the right reaction against the launched micro-aggression and wonders: "Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me?" But since the question is not answered, the 'you' resorts to misidentification: "As usual you drive straight through the moment with the expected backing off of what was previously said" (2014, 10). The 'you' denies the implied racism in order to escape the awkwardness of the moment.

According to William Waters, "the lyric's removal from any set of interlocutor opens up new possibilities of self-invention and self-forgetfulness, which are in turn new forms of relation to the world, not given in quotidian language; these find their expression in the poem's conduct of its own specifically poetic ways of saying *you*" (2003, 5). The apostrophe creates a new space to re-conceptualize and re-negotiate the self; the detachment makes the process more objective and palpable since the lyric 'I' lacks this distance and is immersed in subjectivity. However, the situation can be quite confusing for this 'you' to reach out for those new possibilities: "You are rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood of Santa Monica. This friend says, as you walk toward her, You are late, you nappy-headed ho. What did you say? you ask, though you have heard every word" (Rankine 2014, 41). Rankine shifts the settings, but the 'you' seems to be oftentimes caught in the same context of being a black person talking with a white one. The apostrophe moves with the poem, taking it beyond temporality and locating it in the 'now' moment, creating a strong sense of continuity. Racism, and the subsequent uncertainty, seem to have no end since the 'you' encounters it in every setting: "At the end of a brief phone conversation, you tell the manager you are speaking with that you will come by his office to sign the form. When you arrive and announce yourself, he blurts out, I didn't know you were black!" (Rankine 2014, 44). Rankine's 'yous' reflect what Jonathan Culler describes as "the strangeness of apostrophe" (1981, 154); they weave a sad tale of black fragmented selves that are met with racism and suffer from the conflict of responding, or not responding, to it; they are thus left with a sense of emptiness and a strangeness that is not easy to cope with.

In an African American avant-gardist context, apostrophes do not invoke nightingales, sick roses or west winds. Rankine's apostrophes summon black selves to investigate their relation to others and to the world. Culler argues that an apostrophe crucially establishes the object as another subject that the subject can get intimate and achieve a harmonious reconciliation with (1981, 158). Nonetheless, this reconciliation is not always feasible when both the subject and the object are indeterminate about their positionality; they find themselves eventually either escaping or questioning the situation: "Hold up, did you just hear, did you just say, did you just see, did you just do that? (Rankine 2014, 55). The interrogative tone in Rankine's apostrophes poses challenges, as well as questions. Although, as Mark Smith states, the 'you' never answers and this nonresponse is a structural characteristic of the lyric (2007, 415), the profusion of these interrogations forces the reader to become involved in the apostrophe. The questions are haunting—"What is wrong with you? This question gets stuck in your dreams" (Rankine 2014, 54)—and they cannot be simply dismissed as rhetorical questions that are not waiting for an answer. When the past keeps repeating itself for blacks, bringing back all its unforgettable atrocities, the questions become too exigent to be discarded: "[W]ho did what to whom on which day? Who said that? She said what? What did he just do? Did she really just say that? He said what? What did she do? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? Do you remember when you sighed?" (Rankine 2014, 63). Rankine's recurrent questionings, in this sense, become a radical rupture of poetic norms, since most of the poems in *Citizen* display a clear resistance to closure by closing on those questions. Forging stable black identities rests largely on finding the answers that the 'I' and the 'you' are not able to deal with.

Rankine's apostrophes obscure the notion of selfhood and its ideological boundaries. Culler explains that never has there been a moment when the poetic apostrophe has been simple and direct (2017, 201). Rankine's address can be ambiguous, which further complicates its decorum. . The 'you' is mostly a singular black person, though the gender is not always marked: "[Y]ou have already settled into your window seat on United Airlines, when the girl and her mother arrive at your row. The girl, looking over at you, these are our seats, but this is not what I expected. The mother's response is barely audible – I see, she says. I'll sit in the middle" (Rankine 2014, 12). While here the gender of the poetic persona is unspecified, the reader does know it is a black person., However, 'you' can address both singular and plural nouns, and in its plural use sometimes Rankine's 'you' is not so racially explicit. In her "Script for Situation video" on Hurricane Katrina, two apostrophes are used, which are almost identical in structure: "Have you seen their faces?" used at the start and "Did you see their faces?" at the end (2014, 83, 85-86). Drawing upon the horrendous situation blacks faced during the hurricane and the fact that the American authorities were fully aware of it and did nothing, the apostrophic question is likely to address blacks, whites, and all readers. This collective 'you' turns the poem into a beckoning spectacle that asks the audience

to look at the faces of those affected, which will likely create an ambience of disruption and discomfort. Joel Schlosser notes that

> Rankine describes her use of the second pronoun as an attempt to disallow readers from knowing immediately how to position themselves. Whereas the first person would have deactivated the scene by allowing for immediate identification or disidentification, the second person, on the other hand, forces the reader to question how and why they might apply a racial identity. (2020, 446)

The positionality in this apostrophe is therefore quite intricate as it transcends any racial limitations; it is no longer a matter of being black or white, but rather of being human. At this moment, Rankine is not broaching a question that expects any answer; the apostrophe, resonantly rhyming with catastrophe, seeks to force its addressees to see the reality of the situation and not to turn a blind eye to it.

Thus, addressing a plural 'you' brings to light the ethical dimension of addressability. According to Butler:

> The structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails. (2004, 130)

They explain that this moral duty arises when the addresser calls upon the addressee to shoulder a responsibility or makes an accusation of failure. In these cases, addressability does both and hence it hazards a jeopardy as it forces the addressee to acknowledge their obligation and confront what they are trying to deny or, at best, ignore. Rankine's plural 'you' in the poem showcases how "the other's address constitutes us first and foremost against our will" as Butler puts it (2004, 130). Black or white, the addressees in the poem are cornered and pushed to take a stance towards an inhumane approach to Hurricane Katrina. For Rankine, the pressing ethical question, as also posed by Butler, is: "I may decide not to invoke my own desire to preserve my life as a justification for violence, but what if violence is done to someone I love? What if there is an Other who does violence to another Other? To which Other do I respond ethically? Which Other do I put before myself? Or do I then stand by?" (2004, 139-140). Rankine does not provide an answer for such compelling questions and leaves it to the 'you' to decide.

Butler argues that "[a]t the most intimate levels, we are social; we are comported toward a 'you'; we are outside ourselves, constituted in cultural norms that precede and exceed us, given over to a set of cultural norms and a field of power that condition us fundamentally" (2004, 44). The intersections of 'I' and 'you' are unavoidable and the bond is stronger than they both think, Butler explains: "[I]f I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the 'we'

except by finding the way in which I am tied to 'you' [...]. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being" (2004, 49). Rankine's 'you' incorporates this exigent intimacy. It fluctuates between the general and the specific, identification and rejection, invisibility and hypervisibility, inviting multiple interpretations for the pronoun, including seeing it as part of the 'I'. Having introduced an unstable 'I' that cannot handle the distress of aggressions,

> the use of 'you' distances the speaker from an experience. A person traumatized by an event, [...] could use 'you' to avoid feelings too awful to be re-lived. 'You' turns the person who had the experience into someone else, in a rhetorical technique that could be described positively (as a coping strategy), or negatively (as dissociation). (Borchard 2018, 182)

The 'you' in this case can be seen as a fragment of the self; a refuge or shelter that the self resorts to as an escape since it is introduced to scrutinize the same experience. The distance makes room for more objectivity in depicting the situation. In the "Stop-and-Frisk" script, Rankine delineates racial profiling through an interplay between the voices of 'you' and 'I':

> I knew whatever was in front of me was happening and then the police vehicle came to a screening halt in front of me like they were setting up a blockade. Everywhere were flashes, a siren sounding and a stretch-out roar. Get on the ground. Get on the ground now. Then I just knew.
>
> 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. (2014, 105).

The boundaries between 'I' and 'you' dissolve completely here; the subject and the object suffer the same situatedness of being racially stereotyped. The poetic persona is detained and beaten only because he is black, which is enough for him to fit the description of a criminal. An apostrophe is usually a diversion and re-direction of speech, however, the 'you' in this section is a segment of the 'I' that does not seek to disrupt the narrative, but, instead, to explain it and comment on it. It is not the conventional turning away, but a diving into to bolster the 'I' and support it in a moment of trauma. The 'I' and 'you' in this chapter bear the same stigma and lack agency. Unlike the previous chapters that focus on micro-aggressions, this one introduces the macro-aggressions of the police against African Americans. The black 'you' in the previous chapters escapes the racial slights by doubting, denying, or discarding them. However, facing police brutalities, the 'you', being part of 'I', sees the situation very clearly; the poetic persona is caught, humiliated, and beaten only because he fits the description. The 'you' fully identifies with the unstable 'I' and does not try to escape anymore.

Rankine's *Citizen* delves into the African American situation in the twenty-first century in a presumably post-racial America. Her poetic techniques are radical and

disruptive. She presents a perplexed lyrical speaker who resembles an unreliable narrator in fiction. The 'I' in her poems is emotionally involved and fails to achieve detachment or maintain a distance in order to attain a clear view of the situation. Kamran Javadizadeh emphasizes that the "book's first person does not create an illusion of wholeness but instead acts as a placeholder that lays bare the porousness of the subject it names" (2019, 481). Rankine's lyrical 'I' is deeply enmeshed in a tangled circle of racist oppressions that blur the vision and make the speaker too muddled to pass judgments, reach conclusions, or react in the right way. Having constructed this lyrical 'I', Rankine pushes the lyric to its epistemological limitation and shifts the subjectivity to an apostrophic 'you' which has the potential to stand for myriad interpretations. Rankine manipulates the poetic genre so that "*Citizen* makes of the lyric a most unsettling poetic encounter," as Grant Farred puts it (2017, 104). How to forge a black transnational identity amid behavioral and verbal racial slights becomes one of the many interrogative questions *Citizen* is always posing to this nebulous 'you'. African Americans did not cross the borders; their displacement takes place within the borders of America. Ashcroft explains that "[s]ubjects in the transnation are not necessarily transnational subjects. But they occupy what Fanon calls 'the zone of occult instability where the people dwell'" (2010, 78). America, through its practices of daily micro- and macro-aggressions, distills feelings of loss and alienation in its African American citizens, forcing them to forge unstable and fragmented identities in relation to their nation and to their sense of self-worth. Rankine's apostrophes show poetic personae who are uncertain about the right response and about their true positionality as citizens, the question of belonging emerges, but the answer is never provided. Despite their confusion, Rankine's 'Is' and 'yous' understand the ethical implications of the micro-aggressions they are exposed to and are always left suffering the consequences of them. Rankine invalidates stable positionalities by presenting those apostrophic 'yous' that eventually force the reader to become one of them. The personal and the public overlap, and sometimes even clash in harsh confrontations, as the black 'yous' attempt to enforce their presence, rectify their invisibility and make peace with their hypervisibility, whereas the white 'yous' stay silent and refrain from action, or worse, carry on with their racist aggressions. Inviting readers to identify with the apostrophic 'yous' moves Rankine's work into line with Reed's postlyric poetry and marks her verse as experimental *par excellence*.

5. Conclusion

Keegan Finberg argues that "race and racism are often elided by white lyric theorists" (2021, 329), which makes Rankine's contribution to the genre quite crucial. As Butler argues, addressing the Other is "to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other. It is also to stake one's own being, and one's own persistence in one's own being, in the struggle for recognition" (2004, 44). Involving the apostrophic 'you' in the poems is performing this task by inviting the addressee to see racism, acknowledge oppression, and act accordingly in

order to achieve a better future that embraces the 'I' and the 'you' equally. As readers try to decipher the race of the addressees, Rankine forces her "audience to become aware of their own 'substantial existence' as racialized subjects—including and beyond their semiotic function as addressees of a narrator speaking in the second person," as Kyle Frisina points out (2020, 148). Rankine's experimental work offers both a re-orientation and a disorientation for reading race in America. The poetic repertoire of *Citizen* introduces an American lyric of racial injustice that ends by addressing all pronouns to recognize the severity of the situation: "I can hear the even breathing that creates passages to dreams. And yes, I want to interrupt to tell him her us you me I don't know how to end what doesn't have an ending" (Rankine 2014, 159).

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