

BEYOND MIMESIS: CLAUDIA RANKINE AND TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA IN CONVERSATION

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Poet Claudia Rankine and visual artist Toyin Ojih Odutola place blackness at the center of their artistic practice. Having both relocated respectively from Jamaica and Nigeria to the US at a young age, they have matured a first-hand experience of how identity is constantly being shaped and re-shaped in one's interaction with a new environment. Through hybrid poetic forms and tonal fields, Rankine and Odutola resort to the artist's tools not only to subvert US cultural narratives that reduce blackness to a signifier of race, but more relevantly to enlist color as both the subject and the main question of their work. Juxtaposed to *Citizen's* central piece on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Odutola's drawings appear in the collection as a gateway for engaging and privileging a new language, structure, and semantics for blackness.

Rankine's multimodal collection works at the edge of a canon, with acts of racism crowding the book through poems, photographs, and portraits to expose and undermine the white gaze. On the other hand, Odutola works from photography only to move beyond it. While her human-size portraits are photograph-inspired in terms of subject matter, they are portrait-specific in terms of the materials she uses: black ballpoint, graphite, and acrylic fuel her drawings' brushstrokes, outlining "a new grammar for blackness" (2016). She moves beyond her photographic source to re-tell the story of blackness and suspend racial prejudice informing the interpretation of black narratives – first in the line's travels, then in the liminal space where the viewer meets the portrait. As Rankine states in an article dedicated to Odutola's work, «her artistic project demands the preeminence of the mark which [...] renders a peripatetic blackness» (2016), both materially and epistemologically. Borrowing from Édouard Glissant's theorization of a poetics of relation and from Barbie Zelizer's coinage of the «subjunctive voice» (2004) to describe how spectators engage with or complete the suspended narrative often captured in photographs, I will also engage with lyric and art theory to explore how the artists' formal choices allow readers/viewers to inhabit the work's subjunctive dimension, complicating the idea which, throughout US history, has viewed blackness as racial demarcation.

Keywords: Claudia Rankine, Toyin Ojih Odutola, lyric, poetics of relation, visual art, racial imaginary

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Background

«For the first time in NBCC history», we read in the 2015 Announcement Section of the National Book Critics Circle webpage, «a single book has been nominated in two categories»¹. Winner of the Poetry division, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) also features among the Award's same-year Criticism nominees on behalf of the book's «inventive composition» and «topical content» (NBCC: s. p.). Experimental, multimodal, and multigenre, Rankine's project seems to resist clear categorization despite the collection's subtitle clearly pointing to a literary, historical, and theoretical tradition which has kept poets and scholars engaged, for the last eighty years, in cutting or resewing ties between the text and the world². Can the lyric speak of the world we live in (and how) is probably the question that best summarizes years of critical exploration.

The Lyric Theory Reader (2014) by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, and *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) by Jonathan Culler, are two conspicuous examples of lyric investigations undertaken in academia today, the former an anthology of critical essays that examine the genre's history through the consolidation of various reading practices with which we have learned to approach the lyric over time, each serving specific historical, political, and institutional purposes; the latter a theoretical approach to lyric reading, grounded in the recognition of certain prosodic continuities across centuries of change. The timing of *Citizen's* publication, and its recognition from the NBCC as a relevant work of criticism, allows us to read Rankine's collection as a site for critical investigation aimed at reframing the lyric from within, stretching its formal boundaries to serve the present purpose of fully capturing the impact of racism on interpersonal experience. By showing us that it is important we think of the lyric in practical terms, the book seems to both shape and enact an epistemology aimed at expanding readers' understanding of themselves and/in the world. In this sense, Rankine

1 The NBCC grants awards for the categories of autobiography, biography, criticism, fiction, general nonfiction, and poetry. More information on the Circle's foundation, history, and mission can be retrieved at the National Book Critics Circle (NBCC) web site: <https://www.bookcritics.org/>. For more information on the 2015 finalist announcements, consult: <https://www.bookcritics.org/2015/01/19/national-book-critics-circle-announces-finalists-sandraf-award-to-toni-morrison/>.

2 Although in ancient Greece the term "lyric" was popular and designated «a song accompanied by the lyre» (Jackson and Prins 2014: 1), *reading* a poem as "lyric," namely as a literary production, became a mainstream activity in the mid-twentieth century, when literary criticism offered students a reading model to analyze poems from all periods. In this time frame, the New Critics passed on a general – yet not exclusive – understanding of the lyric as an autonomous artifact cut off from its maker. Skeptical towards impressionist interpretations grounded in "the emotional, imaginative, or psychological effects of a poem upon one or more readers" (Schryer 2012: 13), the New Critical mode of close reading privileged text over author, and analysis over interpretation.

employs formal hybridity to create an immersive reading experience that sheds light on the complexity of American identity: not only does she enlist the lyric to relay and record how a long history of racial discrimination keeps lingering in microaggressions African Americans experience on a daily basis; she also confides in the literary to reveal how unconscious bias shaping the white imaginary produces them in the first place. Reflecting the (hi)story of a society still deeply marked by racism, Rankine's recollections of microaggressions delivered in the second person serve as a starting point for thinking about the many ways in which literary works reflect, respond to, and societies that generate them. Rather than launching a new definition of the lyric, Rankine's approach to the genre is innovative – as much as it is cultural, metapoetic, and metaliterary – to the extent that it aligns with works of criticism that explore how texts “use” genres, versus validating why they “belong” to one or another generic category (Frow 2). On this note, Jonathan Culler's and John Frow's respective studies of genre as contingent literary practices help us contextualize Rankine's project within the broader debate on the current role of the lyric in today's United States. As Culler states in his book,

a claim about a generic model is not, then, an assertion about some property that all works that might be attached to this genre possess. It is a claim about fundamental structures that may be at work even when not manifest, a claim that directs attention to certain aspects of a work, which mark a tradition and an evolution, its dimensions of a transformation (49).

Signaling a threshold into new lyrical territory, *Citizen's* ambiguous identity dialogues with well-established lyric traditions³ to repurpose them for poetic, critical, and social ends.

3 The ambiguity of the second person, “you,” places Rankine's collection in conversation with an older Romantic tradition that views the lyric as mimetic, namely as a representation of intense private feelings expressed by a subjective “I” who is seeking meaning inwardly, regardless of the world's demands. Unlike the poetic “I” who in Emily Dickinson's emblematic “Letter to the world” is craving some sort of unfulfilled recognition from outside; and differently from the Romantic subject who seems to struggle in creating a strong bond with a world that doesn't seem to meet his needs, in the context of Rankine's contemporary American lyric, *Citizen's* “you” is a strategic and flexible form of address: it challenges what Culler identifies as that «mode of enunciation, where the poet speaks *in propria persona*» (1-2) by enlisting a dialogic and relational subject. Singular and plural at its core, “you” is capable of simultaneously conveying the colloquial tone of conversation, the intimacy of confession, and indeterminacy in terms of a clear referent. Whether it refers to the poet, the speaker who is sharing the stories, or pointing at the reader, the agility of the second person enables Rankine to turn the lyric mode outward, pulling the lyric subject outside of his/her refuge, while pulling readers into the text, making them accountable to an insidious racial dynamic these stories are exposing.

“The Route Is Often Associative”: Claudia Rankine’s Contemporary Lyric

Transgressing its own medial boundary – writing – *Citizen*’s hybrid structure has yielded many definitions. Some of these draw directly from the book’s title, positioning Rankine’s project in contrast with an older tradition that described the lyric as a closed, self-reflective form of expression. Others opt for placing the collection on a lyric timeline, reading Rankine’s enterprise not so much as an act of rebellion against the past, but rather as disobeying the rules of past lyric forms and uses that would be of little use for her today. Whether «anti» or «postlyric» (Reed 97), other definitions do without the lyric altogether, reading *Citizen* as an «experimental biopoetic» work (Hume 105), conjugating poetry with theoretical commitments capable of explaining the work’s extratextual relevance. Because the book depicts the «difficulty of relating and identifying» with an environment «one has been othered by», Hume resorts to critical race and environmental justice theory to attempt a definition of *Citizen* as a peculiar work of ecological poetry or environmental criticism (80). Keegan Cook Finberg also traces overlaps between lyric scholarship and the social sciences’ investigation in surveillance structures, arguing that Rankine’s re-shaping of the lyric reveals the racial and carceral apparatus of received lyric structures (2021). Others read Rankine’s volume as a reworked version of the modernist poem, highlighting its intertextual engagement with passages from US modernist poets Rankine quotes and resignifies (Robbins 125); as «investigative poetics» (Welch 126); or as a reinvention of the American lyric in the direction of the philosophical essay (Chan 141). The juxtaposition of private and public accounts reporting the African American’s loose, uncertain or breakable, approximates Rankine’s project to the lyrical essay as well as to the feminist critical tradition forwarded by woman poets who have employed the essay to inscribe the personal into the political, or, as Adrienne Rich states in *A Human Eye*, to write «subjective visions of objective conditions» (97). Perhaps, Grant Farrar’s “Citizen, a Lyric Event” is one of the few critical contributions to explicitly connect Rankine’s foregrounding of the present moment with Jonathan Culler’s preoccupation with temporality as one of lyric’s defining features⁴. Reviews of the work, on the other hand, define the book by what they see, relying on both suggestive and established terminology. From *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, *The Los Angeles*

4 According to Farred, *Citizen* engages with «the political demands of the now» (98), where the present features both as a window onto the past, and as a gateway into a future of ethical relationality the reader is asked to co-create in their present interaction with the text. For an exhaustive account of the different uses of the present tense, in poetry and elsewhere, read Culler’s “The Language of Lyric,” published by *Thinking Verse* in 2014.

Review of Books, Bomb Magazine, Literary Hub, L'Indice, just to mention a few, we read that *Citizen* is audacious, inventive, radical, ambiguous, dazzling, narrative, poetic, critical, political, ordinary. Regarding its structure, the book has been described as «not exactly poetry», «not (just) poetry» (Shockley 2016), or as a «concept book» (Iuli 2017) with strong pedagogical intentions pointing to alternative models of civil co-existence.

At the time of *Citizen*'s publications, eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed by the police in Ferguson, Mississippi, for supposedly stealing from a convenience store; George Zimmerman was found not guilty of second-degree murder of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin on the grounds that he shot the teenager in self-defense; and the Black Lives Matter movement was quickly gaining momentum with the proliferation of protests marches uniting in their fight against the perpetuation of racism happening within and beyond the interpersonal context. The subject of Rankine's book is thus suggesting we contextualize her artistic project within and without the literary field, because, as Antonella Francini reminds us in "Claudia Rankine: una lirica americana":

la modalità lirica [...] non basta più per raccontare un'esperienza personale che, improvvisamente, diventa anche specchio delle vicende di un intero popolo [...], un razzismo strisciante e quotidiano, quasi invisibile, a cui bianchi e neri sembrano essersi assuefatti, riemerso nell'era di Obama come una delle ferite più profonde nella cultura americana (s. p.).

While Rankine isn't the first American poet to resort to hybrid forms to link the artistic and the cultural to the political – merging art with politics, aesthetic experimentation with the building of new imaginaries – she was successfully innovative in using a combination of art forms to shape a real-time narration of the African Americans' daily experience of citizenry. Mixing poetry, prose-poetry, essay-writing, visual art, video documentaries, photography, and news reporting, her multimodal text asks readers to participate in connecting the book's multiple content-frames by activating their devices and engaging their senses in a visual and vivid poetic experience that exceeds the text more than once. Approximating what Francini calls «3D-poetry» (s. p.), *Citizen* is inter- and transmedial insofar as it is constantly crossing medial boundaries to give the reader the opportunity to look at its events from multiple points of view, each medium highlighting different facets of the same story. Showing her readers how meaning is created and re-created by context, Rankine's multifaceted lyric seems to offer us a concrete example of how distinct media heighten, oversimplify, or complicate meaning according to their inherent limits and possibilities, seconding Marie-Laure Ryan's definition of a medium as «the material supports of information whose materiality, precisely, 'matters' for the types of meanings that can be encoded» (Rippl 8). A medium, Ryan expounds, is «a category that

truly makes a difference about what stories can be evoked or told, how they are presented, why and how they are communicated and how they are experienced» (Rippl 8).

In *Citizen*, different media co-exist in their creation of a composite textual site where the everyday is constantly being connected to larger social tensions which have traversed the country since its foundation. As readers are engrossed in the text, walking across its seven chapters, linkages between past and present start revealing themselves through association: «The route is often associative», says the second-person speaker opening the collection, introducing us into *Citizen*'s constellation (Rankine 2014: 5).

Through a recreation of crossroads, Rankine's mixed poetics offers a multi-directional and multilayered reading path on which readers are constantly asked to mobilize their gaze; notice how their position in the world informs how they interpret and engage with it; trace a blurry line between fact and fiction; engage in artistic practices to re-frame scenarios and events told from mainstream media channels, as well as unsettle stereotypical representations of African Americans diffused by the media.

Reading Claudia Rankine and Toyin Ojih Odutola with Édouard Glissant

A cogent example of how *Citizen* resorts to the innovative force of the literary to articulate epistemic changes in our approach to collective living is presented half-way through the book, where a plethora of quotes collected from CNN are reporting the devastating impact of Hurricane on New Orleans' Ninth Ward. Scattered voices speaking with a tone of alarm mixed with confusion are rearranged on the page to offer readers a live commentary of the hardship that was suffered during the hurricane. Shifting perspectives keep bouncing off each other in a fragmented, messy, yet authentic recounting of «the difficulty of that» (Rankine 2014: 83), the hardship of being trapped inside the storm, in buildings, on roofs, in increasing water, while awaiting federal assistance which, we later learn by reading Rankine's piece, has reached that part of the city hours after damage. Rankine's repurposing of these declarations shifts our focus away from the material damage caused by the storm to the citizens that were most affected by it, revealing how the news' coverage of the hurricane obscured what, in the end, was confirmed as an act of federal neglect. «Who could see it coming», one says in the poem, speaking with a tinge of irony that Rankine is capable of reproducing in writing, hinting to the fact that both an estimation of the hurricane's magnitude and evacuation orders had been communicated to residents days prior to the storm's forceful arrival. «The fiction of the facts assumes randomness

and indeterminacy» (85), we read in the following pages, alongside an array of impersonal, first-, second-, third-person, then plural testimonies counter-sharing their own version of such «facts», as the poem's tempo ascends through repetition, consonance, and alliteration. Seemingly neutral questions and statements such as, «Where were the buses?», «FEMA said it wasn't safe to be there» (84), are reworded and reinterpreted in the first-person singular: «What I'm hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas» and «to be honest with you, I think they forgot about us» (84). Filtered through personal testimony, «the facts» are then laid bare and achieve momentum in an instance of collective awareness illuminating deeper structural divides which have been exacerbated by governmental failure to look out for its citizens: «We never reached out to anyone to tell our story, because there's no ending to our story [...]» (84), we hear another voice speaking in the collective mode, denouncing the lack of a prevention plan and the shortcomings of a rescue system for New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward. The extensive flooding that devastated the lower section of the city drew international attention not only to a vulnerable geographical site – located below sea level, the area is surrounded by water on all sides while also being in close proximity to the Industrial canal and Mississippi River. The hurricane also drew attention to the unequal recovery plan which left Lower-Ninth-Ward residents precarious for more than a decade, highlighting what *Citizen* re-quotes as the «classic binary between the rich and the poor, between the haves and the have-nots, between the whites and the blacks, in the difficulty of all that» (83) or what legal scholar Robert Verchick posits as fairness deficits fueling system failures (43). If in the 1800s wealthier residents built homes on former plantation land along the natural levee, from 1852, the flood-prone back swamps eventually become the home of working-class families, a shipping canal detaching the area from the main parts of the city. If the inhabitants of New Orleans' Ninth Ward received assistance after hours, the Lower section of the neighborhood after days, leaving «mumbling structures» unattended (Rankine 2014: 83) and peeling apart. The fact that the personal is also and inevitably political acquires even deeper meaning in light of the ontological dilemma experienced by the Lower Ninth Ward community, that of being both invisible and hypervisible when «thrown against a sharp white background» (Rankine 2014: 52-53). Accordingly, one speaker reports: «He gave me a flashlight, she said. I didn't want to turn it on. It was all black. I didn't want to shine a light on that» (84), prepare for the poem's closing, as the irony of the question «Did you see their faces?» (86) features in the poem as a refrain, a motif, of a never-ending story.

The attempt to reconstruct a coherent and multilayered narration that retells the story of Hurricane Katrina from a testimonial rather than medial perspective, is further carried out in the book through an artistic collaboration with

contemporary visual artist Toyin Ojih Odutola. One of Odutola's portraits, *Uncertain, Yet Reserved* (2012), is juxtaposed to *Citizen's* central piece to counter the literally fatal effects of stereotyping by portraying her subjects through radiating, multifaceted, and fluid black ball-point pen marks, deeply carved into the board. Highly textured and ink-stratified, Odutola's portrait creates a new grammar for blackness, as she privileges mark-making and fluidity within the line over verisimilitude. To quote from Rankine's essay discussing the artist's creative and critical intention: «Before a face becomes a face, for example, we take in its shapes, tonality, and lines. Whose particular face we are traveling toward rarely is the point [as] what matters is not the specific identity of the subject but the cumulative buildup of line that brings weight, complexity, and mobility to her images» (Rankine 2016: s. p.). Odutola's marks become a landscape our eyes are asked to traverse, a storied surface where layered narratives unravel in open fields of tonality that ultimately unhinge her black subject from any specific context.

Born in Ife, Nigeria, Odutola moved to California with her family when she was five. Her father's job as a chemistry researcher and lecturer brought them first to Berkeley, then to Huntsville, Alabama. Odutola started drawing when she relocated with her family to the South: engaging with the visual gradually became a means to claim a personal space outside of the color divide she and her family were living as African immigrants of Yoruba and Igbo descent in post-segregation Alabama. Ignited by the desire to understand how context informs selfhood, «how it defines and shifts one's sense of purpose and belonging» (Elephant s. p.), while in college, Odutola continued investigating in the power of art to convey her personal story to the viewer through color and marks, using the artist's tools to engage with open-ended image constructions, which, by and by, pull the viewer into a story that ripples beyond the specificity of the artist's biography. In 2008, she earned a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Alabama in Huntsville, and in 2012 a Master of Fine Arts from California College of the Arts, in San Francisco, where she became invested in merging storytelling with portraiture by pouring her immigrant experience into her methodology. Working with portraiture allows Odutola to problematize notions of authorship and representation while enlisting the line as an artistic and ethical tool to investigate and challenge essentialist definitions of culture and identity. Perceiving her own self as multilayered, undergoing continuous transformation, Odutola's portraits guide her viewers on a reading path which, overall, privileges process over resolution in terms of identity construction. Odutola has rapidly established her career as an artist: her work includes many solo and group exhibitions, two of which were exposed when she was still in university.

Uncertain, Yet Reserved opens a fruitful and meaningful conversation with

Rankine's text, bringing the idea of transculturality and the experience of migration into the critical arena of Rankine's American lyric. Odutola's contribution to Rankine's project allows me to enter the conversation revolving around *Citizen's* hybrid identity and suggest we read the collection as *rhizomatic* in both form and intention. Drawing from Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of the rhizome as a root-system in which all points are connected, I argue that reading *Citizen* as a «rhizomorphic» work (7) opens Rankine's text to a dialogue with Édouard Glissant's concept of the *Chaos-monde* (Glissant 1997: 94), an ideal and contemporary identity he ascribes to a world of unpredictable intersections, overlaps and exchanges. Through his coinage of the *Chaos-monde*, Glissant espouses the idea of a world marked by multiple cultural passages extending in all directions, symbolically recalling the image of the rhizome stretching outwards, «spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently» (Glissant 1997: 11). The relational framework Glissant is proposing as a possible new order for the contemporary world can assist us in understanding how Odutola's experience of migration – marked by a rupture from her mother tongue and by a double uprooting, first from Ife then from multicultural Berkeley – has transformed into a generative force informing her artistic practice, becoming the kernel for a creative process which, as she herself has shared in various interviews, begins with the mark: «I work very well when I don't know what I'm doing at first» Odutola shares with curator Erin Gilbert during their discussion on her 2021 *A Countervailing Theory* exhibition (Hirshhorn). The subjects of her portraits reveal themselves in the unfolding narrative of her marks, which, layer after layer, form a textured yet rhythmical language that gradually molds into a pattern, producing, in Zadie Smith's words, a kind of rhythm that «make[s] the eye dance aesthetically, politically, geographically, existentially» (The Drawing Center: s.p.). The creative process Odutola had already started experimenting with during her apprenticeship has now evolved into a signature style one can easily recognize in works of densely patterned surfaces that combine intentional mark-marking with non-linear, open-ended visual storytelling. Her subjects are as specific as they are difficult to pin down, swaying through sinewy lines of layered ballpoint pen and acrylic ink, which Odutola deliberately presses down into her boards so as to foreground and preserve the impermanent nature of her and our own identity in the line's dynamic circling. Mobility, which is one of the most compelling aspects of Odutola's work, stands out as a formally and politically charged field of inquiry, resonating with a condition of internal and geographical errantry vis-à-vis one of physical stability. Challenging hierarchical systems of thought grounded in rootedness and clear-cut boundaries, both identitarian and formal, Odutola permeates her drawing practice with ethical urgencies, investigating what Walead Beshty

describes as «the aesthetic manifestation of the ethical dimension of the work of art, i.e. its proposal of a modification in the social contract, with the artwork acting as a signification of this modification» (19).

Indeed, mobility, subject and method, is employed by both artists as a fruitful means for breaking free from the constraints of the binary or of bounded frameworks: while Rankine's *Citizen* transgresses formal boundaries, *Uncertain, Yet Reserved* creolizes stereotypical notions of identity and representation, as «the dark line and its repetition reimagines terrain – marking and making blackness unfamiliar» (Rankine 2016: s. p.). In Odutola's portrait, the multi-layering of lines and color is a means «to expand not only the definition of blackness, but to expand what blackness can contain, what blackness can reveal, and where it can go» (Rankine 2016: n. p.), mapping a different pathway to reconfiguring identity as unpinnable, transformative and imaginative entities to be understood in their ongoing relation with their world audiences. Glissant's emphasis on rhizomatic thought as the principle behind his poetics of relation offers one enlightening critical tool for understanding Rankine's and Odutola's work, in conversation. According to Glissant, a poetics of relation «presupposes no ideological stability», it is «latent, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible» (Glissant 1997: 32). *Citizen: An American Lyric* enters the public sphere as a counter-hegemonic artistic practice which seeks to decentralize a one-dimensional interpretation of the world, in favor of a polyvocal, collaborative, and multimodal speaker that is opening the text to manifold connections, linking the present to the past, as well as to a future. To quote directly from Glissant, «the word *creolisation* approximates the idea of Relation for us as nearly as possible» (Glissant 1997: 34), as it comes to designate both a real-life experience marking the Caribbean as a site of extraordinary cross-fertilization of cultures and languages, as well as a vision for future models of co-living – «one of our present-day goals» (Glissant 2008: 84). The Martinican philosopher is well aware of the utopian nature of this thought when pondering the possibility of «forg[ing] future Americas that are at last and for the first time both deeply unified and truly diversified in a world in which apartheid and racism still rule and dominate» (Glissant 2008: 84). He nonetheless believed in the force of the imagination to change mentalities, seeing relation as the process of this change, and poetics as the transformative mode of History (Glissant 1997: XII). Grounded in the basic reality of the archipelago, Glissant posits this diffracted space as an apt alternative to national world-ordering, for it allows us to visualize a world in which we are all connected while maintaining our distinctness, an ideal living condition he returns to us with another neologism, that of the «unity-diversity» (Glissant 1997: 1). In Glissant's own words, directly from Glissant, how, then, can our imagination take up the challenge of envisioning «a new dimension

of identity [...]? An identity that would not be the projection of a unique and sectarian root, but of what we call a rhizome, a root with a multiplicity of extensions, in all directions?» (Glissant 2008: 84). It seems to me that by combining different forms and viewpoints (Rankine), and by combining marks and color to divert mainstream narratives (Odutola), both artists resort to their own tools to highlight that identity takes shape in relation. I can thus posit that by creolizing their practices, Rankine and Odutola create sites of convergence in which multiple discourses – personal, political, poetic, theoretical – interweave.

What is particularly interesting about Odutola's practice is how she gives legitimacy to his new dimension of being by «injecting» her portraits with «the fictive» (Geha 312). *Uncertain, Yet Reserved* reconfigures blackness as a topography viewers can traverse and immerse themselves into: whether «race is there or it is not there, [...] its presence is never without our perceptions and projections. Blackness on the level of the line simply fills the terrain of the body with blackness», Rankine comments (Rankine 2016: s. p.). While the skin is specific, it is also carefully tended to in rich tones of black that «seemingly vibrate off the page» (Geha 311) so as to reduce the distance between portrait and viewer almost to zero, a strategy Odutola turns to challenge the externalizing gaze often implied in racialized readings of Black experience. A few questions emerge spontaneously at this point: Why may the visual, rather than the verbal, be chosen by Rankine as the medium that best captures the fragmented, difficult reality she unpacks in her lyric? What kind of relation does it establish with the viewer?

In “The Voice of the Visual in Memory” (2004), Barbie Zelizer claims that «an unusual relationship is created between spectator and image that positions spectators in the peculiar circumstance of knowing more than they see while positioning images between what the spectator knows and does not know» (159). Drawing from theories of visual representation, Zelizer explains that images captivate the viewer on the grounds of two emanating forces working in combination: a denotative force, which ties the image to its literal real-life referent (this force is particularly manifest in photographs), and a connotative force, according to which the image is assumed capable of evoking broader symbolic systems. Apart from their informational and symbolic dimensions, Zelizer believes that images withhold an additional force that resists explanation or narrative, resonating with what Roland Barthes calls «third meaning» (159). Photograph-inspired in terms of subject matter, Odutola's portrait addresses and challenges all three forces. The force of the denotative is diminished as the preeminence of the mark redirects the representational strength of the image away from the real and towards the imaginary, engaging Barthes' third meaning in the visual depiction of a shifting sense of self. Another signature feature in

Odutola's portrait, to consider alongside her use of the mark, is the lack of a specific context: floating in white non space, her subjects are suspended in uncertain yet defiant positions that redraw the terrain of both blackness and portraiture. Head tilted back, body in movement, Odutola's subject is carrying the iconic yet unfathomable gaze (Fracassa 174) which has been relentlessly puzzling the viewer since the *Mona Lisa*. On a par with *Citizen's* indeterminate second-person speaker, the portrait's subject is steeped in contingency and open to interpretation, allowing the viewer to engage with what Zelizer refers to as the image's «subjunctive voice» (162) to describe how spectators take part in the suspended narrative often captured in photographs by envisioning an ending on the brink of the familiar. In Zelizer's words, the subjunctive voice «is concerned with the capacity to couch what is represented in an interpretative scheme of what could be [...] adding supposal, hypothesis, and possibility to photographic verisimilitude. The condition under focus is transformed from a reality or future certainty into a probability made possible by someone's emotion, desire, or imagination» (163). Also referred to as the «what if dimension of the image» (161), the subjective voice is nothing less than the work's gesture towards possibility and change rather than resolution, as it works to activate «visual markers» that can modify or complicate what we see for subjunctive ends (164).

Placed after *Citizen's* question «Have you seen their faces?», which Rankine ultimately rephrases in the past tense as «Did you see their faces?», Odutola's *Uncertain, Yet Reserved* introduces an imaginative, contingent dimension to *Citizen's* relay that rewrites the story of black experience as one in flux, thus «complicat[ing] the historical pull, in a white supremacist frame, that views blackness as “simply” a racial demarcation» (Rankine 2016: s. p.). If by looking at the image we momentarily withhold the urge to give it meaning, to secure its subject, but rather immerse ourselves in its topography, I believe we can consider its function fulfilled. Odutola's task is investigative to the point that the “real subject” of her drawing is the exploration of the materials and of their capacity to craft a line that softens and sways the viewer's gaze (The Drawing Center). At the same time, Rankine's work is investigative as it explores the multiple meanings that different forms and media can engender, through a blending of lyric poetry, prose poetry, philosophy, and visual art. Opening a space for what might have been, could be, or remains unresolved, Rankine's and Odutola's artistic and ethical enterprises begin with blackness and circle outwards, reaching unexpected, unfamiliar spaces that ultimately push and redraw generic boundaries, while also opening new, hybrid spaces for experiencing art. This being said, *Citizen's* mixing of text and image compels an active and embodied form of reading, with readers stepping out of the traditional text-reader mold, becoming now viewers, now listeners, witnesses, or visitors walking through a museum-like space. It is

in this virtual space, where temporal and spatial coordinates often overlay, that artwork and text, verse and prose, collaborate to enhance the racist dynamics that have forged American citizenship and keep seeping in everyday encounters. However, what is most interesting about Rankine's and Odutola's collaboration, is how they both "creolize" their work by means of investigating art's capacity to trace new paths for perception and, ultimately, for meaning-making, leading readers towards unexpected places, both literary and non.

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