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“By [some] other means”: Talking (about) Racism and Race through Visual Arts in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen. An American Lyric*

ABSTRACT

Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen. An American Lyric* is a perplexing work of literature both because of its original presentation of the issue of racism in the US today and the original formal ways through which its message is communicated. It is formally innovative and technically experimental in an unusual “average reader”-friendly manner, situating itself a world apart from postmodern “poetics of interruption and illegibility” (Davidson 602). Paradoxically, being almost a poem with a purpose, it expands existing categories. Its sociological orientation and emphasis on poetic language’s capacity to inform, instruct, emotionally move and morally engage the reader goes together with activating more experimental formal strategies, as it merges a variety of media: there are examples of spectacular instances of racism, represented by the photographs, and in a series of scripts for Situation videos made by the author in collaboration with her husband John Lucas. This article demonstrates how formal engagement with the visual arts may serve the purpose of stigmatizing racism and making poetry matter within the field of current public debate on important cultural, social and political problems discussed in historical contexts of racism-cum-race. The conceptualization of the issues discussed here is based on the notion of “seeing through race” (introduced into the field of study of the visual arts and literature by W. J. T. Mitchell in 2012), which has changed the perception of the relationship between race and racism.

Keywords: African American poetry, Claudia Rankine, racism, race, visual arts.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate how formal involvement and interplay of literature/poetry with visual arts helps serve the purpose of stigmatizing racism as a means for production of race, and makes poetry matter within the field of the ongoing public debate(s). For this purpose I will draw on W. J. T. Mitchell's concept of "seeing through race" in my discussion of Claudia Rankine's poetic volume entitled *Citizen. An American Lyric*. In my reading of Rankine's work I am going to implement the categories of race/racism as defined by Mitchell with an intention to discuss the poet's explorations of the insidiousness of American present-day racism. In particular I will focus on the function given to the photographs and Situation videos, which are analyzed in parts III and IV of this article.

I.

Rankine's volume expresses vital and unpleasant things about race relationships in the United States in the 21st century, when, to quote Hortense J. Spillers's ironic observation, "we are confronted, from time to time, with almost-evidence that the age of the postrace subject is upon us" (379). In this respect it evokes two milestone sociological studies of American racism published in the first decade of the new century (i.e. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism without Racists* and Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*), which painstakingly demonstrate how racism functions today in America, and reveal a stubbornness of racist attitudes held by people who would never call themselves racists. Rankine's volume provides ample evidence that despite the scholarly questioning of the very existence of race, initiated by Anthony Appiah in his groundbreaking argument that "the truth is that there are no races" (35), racism in America is as alive and kicking as ever; only its manifestations take less overt forms than in the past. *Citizen* describes with precision discreet cases of racist microaggressions, which take place regularly in public and semi-private situations, collected from the stories told by her friends and acquaintances. Rankine looks behind the facade of middle-class and academic standards and norms, and registers the moments when the individuals regularly transgress the new norm. As Rob Bryan puts it, "[h]er setting is not the blighted inner-city ghetto or the prison, but the manicured lawns of white suburbia and the genteel interactions of the academy." Racism as the race-producing act in its multifarious forms is the subject of Rankine's book.

Two vignettes in which the persona makes appointments through the phone (with a therapist and at the bank) provide proper exemplification on the subject:

The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients. You walk down a path bordered on both sides with deer grass and rosemary to the gate, which turns out to be locked.

At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house. What are you doing in my yard? It's as if a wounded Doberman pincher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry.

I am so sorry, so, so sorry. (Rankine 18)

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!

I didn't mean to say that, he then says.

Aloud, you say.

You didn't mean to say that aloud.

Your transaction goes swiftly after that. (44)

In both situations the *you* is accepted on the phone *as a client*, but at the same time treated not seriously enough—or even aggressively rejected—when met face to face *as a black person*. Those unacquainted with the insidiousness of racism in the US must be astonished at the peculiarity of such reactions as they are utterly irrational, especially from a strictly pragmatic point of view (the bank manager and the therapist may lose their clients). However, these must not be regarded as merely individual reactions, but as culturally-programmed responses to people of skin color other than white. In her essay entitled “The Whiteness Question,” Linda Alcoff argues that “whiteness” is inseparable from the denigration, reification, repudiation and subjection of those who are perceived as non-white, and makes a claim that “the very genealogy of whiteness was entwined from the beginning with a racial hierarchy, which can be found in every major cultural narrative” (217).

In order to make the sickening cases of racism work more powerfully on her readers, Rankine combines her poetic/verbal accounts with the works of the visual arts. The collection of vignettes documenting cases of racist microaggressions (in parts one and three of the volume) interacts with Adrian Piper's calling cards, a conceptual/visual art project from the mid-1980s. Piper, a very light-skinned black woman, would, whenever racially discriminatory comments were made in her presence, distribute

cards announcing “I am black” with a brief explanation of her reason for doing so. However, there are also two striking differences between Piper’s project and what Rankine does in *Citizen*: first, the racial identity of the addressed *you* in *Citizen* is assumed rather than stated (with a very few exceptions), whereas the purpose of Piper’s cards was to reveal it from the very start; and second, Piper’s work establishes an identification of the physical body of a person giving out the cards and the moral first-person subject who demonstrates their will through and in the discourse (“I am black”), whereas Rankine implements the pronoun *you* which does not refer to any concrete person in her text and demonstrates how that *you* is constructed in those situations against their will. This textual strategy is related to Judith Butler’s concept of “addressability” directly mentioned in *Citizen*:

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[S]omeone asks the philosopher . . . what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. 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. After considering Butler’s remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present. (Rankine 49)

“Addressability,” a quasi-Lévinasian philosophical notion which establishes a profoundly ethical relationship between the two people who participate in a situation that involves one who addresses and the other who is addressed, is fully explored by Butler in her *Precarious Life*, where the philosopher states:

The structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept that we address not only 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. More emphatically, however, what binds us morally has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid; this impingement by the other’s address constitutes us first and foremost against our will or, perhaps put more appropriately, prior to the formation of our will. So if we think that moral authority is about finding one’s will and standing by it, stamping one’s name upon one’s will, it may be that we miss the very mode by which moral demands are relayed. That is, we miss the situation

of being addressed, the demand that comes from elsewhere, sometimes a nameless elsewhere, by which our obligations are articulated and pressed upon us. (130)

Two levels of “addressability” can be identified in *Citizen:you* addressed as the target or, more often, as an untargeted recipient of racist comments and remarks which are not necessarily directed at them in the situations presented in the form of vignettes; and *you* as an “addressee within the text,” addressed by the persona/narrator (Rankine supposedly includes herself in this category). Simply put: *you* is everybody who recognizes her/his own experience in situations involving racism on the receiving end. Nonetheless, the category does not apply only to African Americans, at least theoretically. The strategy of using the “lyric-*You*” allows Rankine to achieve a “full-throated polyvocality . . . that thrusts every reader into the position of speaker and addressee simultaneously” (Shockley). Moreover, even though in most vignettes the racial identities of the participants remain unspoken, at the same time they are somehow absolutely clear. Obviously, a black reader will identify her/himself with the *You-as-the-addressee* of a racist remark or gesture, whereas the emotional situation of a white reader is more complex as they have to *choose* between two kinds of discomfort: EITHER they respond positively to the address and vicariously experience what it means to be a “black citizen in the US of the early 21st century” OR allow the address to fail and “reject the invitation of the lyric-*You* and remain white-identified” (Shockley) and, by extension, become accomplices in an act of racism. In this way Rankine achieves the same goal as Piper did with her calling cards—she confronts the white reader with present-day American racial positioning and demonstrates how racist microaggressions affect individuals on the level of personhood and citizenship, turning them into raced subjects.

II.

To disclose and understand the complex relationships between a poetic text and works of visual art and the overlapping categories of racism/race, in my further argument on Rankine’s *Citizen* I am going to draw on W. J. T. Mitchell’s theory of race, which explores the notion of race in terms of its visual quality, bio-discursive encoding, racist acts and resulting materiality. Mitchell’s theory of race represents a powerful argument which is polemical not only in relation to the claims of Appiah’s classic 1985 essay, but also challenges quite recent re-conceptualization of race by Joshua Glasgow, who has completely erased the biological discourse from

the race debate. In Mitchell's view, Glasgow's move "eliminates one of the key features of race-talk as a practice" (185).

The point of departure for Mitchell in his probing into the notion of race at the moment when "[t]he idea that racial identity corresponds to some real substance in the physical world" is thoroughly negated or questioned, is the realization of the fact that "racism persists" (xi), and this persistence takes place in the world in which an acute observer can spot the "dominance of visual images and metaphors in racial discourse" (xiii), the situation which favors seeing over other strategies of understanding. The critic's proposal is to perceive race as a medium, an "intervening substance" that both enables and obstructs social relationships" (4). Mitchell comes forward with an assertion that race "is *both* an illusion *and* a reality that resists critical demolition or replacement by other terms such as ethnicity" (14). Such a positioning of the category of race as simultaneously a myth (which "has a powerful afterlife that continues to structure perception, experience, and thought" and is a "subject to endless interpretation and reenactment for new historical situations" [22]) AND a "political and economic issue" (22), makes it necessary to be cautious not to dismiss it or pretend it is not there, but to analyze it on multiple levels and see it from different angles. Mitchell states that

race is not merely a content to be mediated, an object to be represented visually or verbally, or a thing to be depicted in a likeness or image, but race is itself a medium in its iconic form—not simply something to be seen, but itself a framework for seeing through. (13)

"The model of race as a symbolic-imaginary, verbal-visual complex is . . . not merely a psychological matter, but a public and palpable feature of the material world, of the epistemological and historical field in which knowledge is constructed" (20). Conceptualized in this manner, the "racial medium is . . . a prosthesis that produces invisibility and hypervisibility simultaneously" (13), a "vehicle for both fantasy and reality" (14). The ontological doubt that pertains to race makes it pointless to choose between the alternatives. Still, it remains a feature of but also a vehicle for reality, which suggests that race is only related to reality in a cause-and-effect fashion, and is not its essential, palpable component.

Mitchell supports his concept of race as medium by applying to it Lacan's "triad of psychological and semiotic 'registers,'" which he modifies by adding to them the fourth element to distinguish between race and racism. Thus, except for the Symbolic (the realm of language, law, negation and prohibition), the Imaginary (the location of fantasy, images, illusions and visual, non-verbal experiences) and the Real (the

wild zone of trauma), in order to place race as medium on the Lacanian map, the critic introduces a category that he labels “Reality.” Mitchell’s modification of Lacan’s categories has a mind-opening effect and testifies to the originality of the concept. Racism as the “brute fact, the bodily reality” (19), a phenomenon from the wild zone of Agambenian “bare life,” is situated in the Real. Race, on the other hand, as a construct made out of the elements of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, “the derivative term” (19), a “matter of constructed, mediated, represented ‘reality’—visible, audible, and legible” (17), and thus disembodied in a profound sense of the word, is relegated by Mitchell to the newly established Reality. Mitchell presents the relationship between race and racism in a non-standard way as interdependent and inseparable in a reversed cause-and-effect manner, as he states that “[r]ace is not the cause of racism but its excuse, alibi, explanation, or reaction formation” (19).

Thus, two inferences may be drawn from this: first, that race is definitely less tangible than it seemed before, and second, that both phenomena are not related in a conventional manner, where racism depends on the existence of race. On the contrary, Mitchell’s explication makes it possible for us to see that race is a product of acts of racism, and that only without those acts might it cease to exist and vanish from sight. Nevertheless, as long as racism is practiced in the real world, race has a subservient role to perform—to justify or rationalize the horrors of racism. To rephrase it through Lacanian categories once again, we may say after Mitchell that “[r]ace is the Symbolic-Imaginary construction of the fragile ‘reality’ to explain, contain, and manage the Real known as racism” (19). Mitchell maintains that if we think of race as a medium, as “something we see through, like a frame, a window, a screen or a lens, rather than something we look at” (xii), we begin to perceive the discreet-yet-stubborn presence of this interfering filter added to our perceptions of the components of the external world.

Marjorie Perloff’s statement in the back cover blurb of *Citizen* immediately identifies the interplay between race/racism in the sense that the latter pre-conditions the former:

What does it mean to be a black citizen in the US of the early twenty-first century? Claudia Rankine’s brilliant, terse, and parabolic prose poems have a shock value rarely found in poetry. These tales of everyday life . . . dwell on . . . the most ordinary of daily situations so as to expose what is really there: a racism so guarded and carefully masked as to make it all the more insidious.

The “shock value rarely found in poetry,” which determines the power of Rankine’s volume, arguably results from the intuitive realization

that race (and “black citizenship”) is generated by the horrors of racism represented by the “tales of everyday life,” which come out of “the most ordinary of daily situations.”

III.

How difficult it is for a black person in America to separate themselves from “bodily positivity” and gain personhood is illustrated by part II of *Citizen*, which contains an essay on Serena Williams, a tennis superstar who, throughout her career, has regularly experienced discrimination against her from the umpires on the court and from sport commentators on TV. Her story leads Rankine to asking a key question concerning the black body’s positivity: “What does a victorious or defeated black woman’s body in a historically white space look like?” (25). This question is intertwined in the volume with Zora Neale Hurston’s statement “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background,” a sentence stenciled on canvas and twinned with another canvas on its left which reads “I do not always feel colored” by Glenn Ligon (52–53).

The tennis court provides such a “sharp white background” for a black player. In December 2012, soon after Serena was named WTA Player of the Year, the Dane Caroline Wozniacki, a former number one player, parodied Serena at an exhibition match by stuffing padding down her top and up her skirt (to make her bosom and buttocks grotesquely big), “all in good fun” (36). Rankine ironizes about the mass-media reaction, asking a rhetorical question: “Racist? CNN wants to know if outrage is the proper response” (36). Not only CNN. For instance, Oliver Brown of *The Telegraph* gives Wozniacki his absolution and finds her impersonation justified “a bit silly and sophomoric,” adding that “on no sober analysis does it betray a more sinister motive.” So no, for sure it is by no means racist, although it may be a “crime against comedy.”¹ Undoubtedly, Brown maintains his “sobriety” throughout his article, rejecting most “radical” standpoints: “Racist! Or so the easily outraged cried. Hyper-sexualising! Or so those with a slightly larger feminist dictionary screamed.” The point is that Brown’s comments themselves are examples of covert racism and, as such, could be used in *Citizen*, a work which demonstrates that a racist act or comment does not necessarily have to result from intention. To think of Wozniacki’s performance as non-racist and non-sexist, one needs, for instance, to (intentionally) forget about Saartjie Baartman—the Hotentot

¹ See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/tennis/9741118/Its-not-racist-but-Caroline-Wozniackis-impersonation-of-Serena-Williams-is-a-crime-against-comedy.html>

Venus, and her story of being exposed on freak shows in London and Paris as an anatomical curiosity at the beginning of the 19th century. On the other hand, the parody can even have a positive aspect—doesn't Rankine herself point out, albeit ironically, that "Wozniacki . . . finally gives the people what they have wanted all along by embodying Serena's attributes while leaving Serena's 'angry nigger exterior' behind" (36)? Here is the "image of smiling blond goodness posing as the best female tennis player of all time" (36). When in 2015 Serena Williams became *Sports Illustrated's* athlete of the year, the *LA Times* put out a cover for its sports magazine asking the question if Serena Williams deserves sportsperson of the year more than a horse? (The horse in question was Kentucky Derby winner American Pharoah.) The *LA Times* is the same paper that made *Citizen* one of its books of the year in 2014.

Wozniacki posing as Williams is not the only photograph in Rankine's volume. The very first photographic image which appears in *Citizen* is a picture of a place called Jim Crow Road. Rankine uses the strategy of defamiliarization here. In the photograph, the archetypal suburban street strikes us with its disquieting emptiness and somehow sinister whiteness, as if its message was once again: "no blacks, whites only." The name of the deserted street, together with its larger than life appearance in terms of racial encoding: the spotless whiteness of a car parked in the driveway, snow white houses, the blue, cloudless sky, and the shadow of a Stop road sign, bring to mind a freeze frame from, say, *Blue Velvet* and simultaneously make you disbelieve what you see, and suspect that the picture has been photoshopped. But Jim Crow Road exists in the real world—the picture was made in Flowery Branch, Georgia, in 2007 by a photographer Michael David Murphy. Asked about it in an interview, Rankine says that "according to local lore" the road was named "after a James Crow" (qtd. in Berlant), which leaves the question, why "James Crow Road" was not good enough, without an answer. To make things even more suspicious and uncomfortable for the inhabitants, the surrounding Forsyth County was known for its infamous "sundown town" which, as Murphy claims "existed well until '80s." It is doubtful that the people who live in Flowery Branch are white supremacists who find perverted pleasure in the telling name of the road as a nostalgic commemoration of "them good ole days" in the gallant South when strange trees bore strange fruit, yet the sign may be treated as a visible proof that Jim Crow attitudes and practices die hard. That is the reason why the place is completely deserted in the picture. Symbolically the absence of white people—and, arguably, the reduction of the black presence to a shadow—communicates the point that nowadays racism exists in the US by itself, without declared believers and defenders, and without support of the ideology of race. Flowery Branch stands here for a place where the

“white good American lives”; “the white fantasy (which insists that black subjects have good manners and remain convenient)” (Rankine qtd. in Berlant), in practice meaning black invisibility is lived undisturbed.

Another photograph, this time conspicuously related to the subject of racism, is a picture taken at a lynching, which features in *Citizen* as “Public Lynching. Date: August 30. 1930,” although it is better known as “Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, 1930.” The difference between this photograph and the original is that the mutilated bodies of the two young blacks were removed from the picture by John Lucas: we can see a group of white people under a tree on whose bough the two black men were hanged. Since the picture was taken in the late evening or even at night, the crowd is lit by the flash whereas the background is pitch black. A middle-aged man is pointing with his tattooed left arm at the bodies which are not there. So his gesture seems surprising and absurd, as if he was asking: where have they gone? In this case Rankine uses the altered photograph to foreground her strategy of “redirecting the gaze on the spectator,” which is about “observing the people who would normally not claim racism as their thing” (Rankine qtd. in Asokan). The function of this method is to defamiliarize racist reality in America, to problematize, enhance and question the viewer’s or reader’s perception of something which is familiar (or even familial) to the white people who, assumingly, “are not supremacists and yet they will step into this moment, find it funny, and in doing so, they willingly disconnect themselves from the histories and realities of black people and the treatment of black . . . people in this country” (Rankine qtd. in Asokan). The altered photograph disturbs the viewer with the inexplicable strangeness of the behavior of the mob in the picture and amusement beaming from their faces, as the reason for their high excitement is unclear. And since most viewers know the original photograph, we suddenly realize how well-accustomed we have become to acts of racism in the form of objectification and victimization of the black body and, simultaneously, to the white privilege of spectatorship and entertainment. Here Rankine addresses the white crowd by turning the lens of the camera on them (rather than on the lynched black bodies which were removed from the original picture) and making them hyper-visible in their *whiteness thrown against a black background*.

IV.

As Catherine Wagner puts it, Rankine’s *Citizen* “insistently returns to scenes in which a distressing racial imaginary erupts into polite ordinary life” and consistently “theatricalize[s] interaction, drawing attention to

all participants' positions in the social field," hence intervening into the socio-political here and now. Arguably, the core of this racial imaginary in the volume is a permanent oscillation between black hypervisibility and invisibility, which remains one of the key tropes in critical reflection on African American literature from Dunbar to DuBois to Baraka, with Ralph Ellison giving it the most powerful expression in his *Invisible Man*. However, the instances of racism in the volume must not be regarded as caused by rational or even individual reactions, but as culturally-programmed responses to people of different skin color.

The insightful presentation of the problem of hypervisibility of black Americans, connected with invisibility and acts of racism, appears to be the key issue addressed in the Situation videos whose scripts are printed in *Citizen* (on the Internet we can find their complete text-cum-video versions in which the scripts are read out loud in a solemn tone by Rankine, while her reading is accompanied by visual materials shot by John Lucas). Four of them are of particular interest as they touch upon various aspects of racism in the world today: "Stop-and-Frisk," "Making Room," "In Memory of Trayvon Martin" and "In Memory of James Craig Anderson." All four focus on the experiences of young black men as targets of various forms of violence, brutality and discrimination.

In a conversation with the poet, Lauren Berlant talks on the subject of Rankine's interest in and reasons for implementation of visualities *in the text* and for situating video materials *outside the text*. She says:

I had wondered whether you thought something like that—that the images in *Citizen* could show what was exhausting/unbearable to witness once more in speech about the ordinary violence and world-shaping activity of American racism. A desperate desire is at work there for *something* to be self-evident, the force of which would change a situation. But *Citizen* lives meditatively enraged in a world where truth cannot be spoken to a structure. (Berlant)

John Lucas's Situation videos are the most daring attempts within/without the volume of demonstrating the exhausting/unbearable quality and collectively unconscious brutality of racist attitudes and practices in the US. Nevertheless, the striking self-evidence of racist practices, as well as the helplessness of changing the world in this respect, make the message communicated in *Citizen* profoundly pessimistic and spiritually paralyzing, especially since rational arguments do not work in confrontation with the concealed emotions within the social/political structure, which support white privilege and racism. In this respect Rankine's volume testifies to the fact that America represents a solipsistic society contrasted with a theoretical model of ideal pluralistic society, the model already challenged

by Craig Werner who has argued that present-day America is a society whose foundations are oppression and repression of its non-white citizens.

One of the aspects of the co-operation of oppression with repression in keeping blacks in their places is racial positioning and its sub-category: police racial profiling. Martha C. Nussbaum draws our attention to the fact that profiling is probably fair as long as it is done “by age and by type of vehicle . . . [b]ut when profiling tracks existing social stigma, a grave issue of fairness is raised . . . since it denies people an important sort of equality before the law on grounds of race” (289). Nussbaum distinguishes between profiling which is “unobjectionable, because it begins from a committed crime and works backward” and a “far more troubling . . . kind of profiling that *precedes crime* . . . using other traits as proxies for (alleged) criminal intent or activity” (288). It is the latter kind of profiling (i.e. profiling as an act of racism that produces race) which becomes a topic of “Stop-and-Frisk,” the only difference being that the (white) viewers themselves are doing their profiling alongside the traffic police.

That’s how it works in the video. In the footage we can see a few young black men in a shop trying on various items of clothes. There are flashing beacons reflected in the shop’s windows, and in voiceover we can hear a report of the arrest on the road. The direct effect of such a juxtaposition of parallel events is that when watching the film we experience some kind of tension, feeling some sort of dread, and expect that in a moment we are going to witness a crime committed by the youngsters in the shop or that some of them will be arrested for a crime committed earlier. But nothing of this sort happens; no drama takes place in front of us. Yet, we can hear a repeated phrase, over and over again, like a refrain: “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” (Rankine 105–09). The *you* is always a young black man, which provides a judgement on this sort of profiling.

The second Situation video I would like to comment on is entitled “Making Room.” It concentrates on a train episode in which a young black man is sitting at the window seat, gazing out into the darkness. The text of the script opens with a paragraph that sets up the scene and introduces the topic of racism without mentioning it openly. Moreover, further on there are also no references to the color of the passengers either, as for Rankine race is immaterial—as in Mitchell’s understanding, race is an idea about the body and not the body itself:

On the train the woman standing makes you understand there are no seats available. And, in fact, there is one. Is the woman getting off at the next stop? No, she would rather stand all the way to Union Station.

The space next to the man is the pause in a conversation you are suddenly rushing to fill. You step quickly over the woman's fear, the fear she shares. You let her have it.

The man doesn't acknowledge you as you sit down because the man knows more about the unoccupied seat than you do. For him, you imagine, it is more like breath than wonder; he has had to think about it so much you wouldn't call it thought. (131)

With no direct reference to the racial identity of the people involved in the situation on the train, Rankine manages to suggest who is who, as it would be thoroughly unbelievable if anyone questioned the color line divide: the man sitting at the window must be black, the woman standing her racism out is obviously white, whereas the narrator or her *alter ego*—the lyrical *You*, is also black. Here, like everywhere in Rankine's volume, race functions as "a snow-globe fantasy" (Berlant), a product of imagination that extrapolates white (self-)hatred and embodies it in blackness. However, it might be the young man's masculinity that causes the fear of the unoccupied seat, experienced by the white woman. As Nussbaum argues:

[t]he stigmatizing of African-American men as criminals is one of the ugliest and most invidious aspects of American racism, closely linked to the racially skewed disenfranchisement of convicted felons. . . . African-American intellectuals . . . have written eloquently about the pain and isolation inflicted by society's immediate perception of the black man as criminal. (289)

In the "Making Room" video the black man on the train experiences pain mixed with shame, which is a result of isolation he must have suffered when among white people. In the past, the law would have demanded that he stand up from his seat in order to vacate it for the white woman who feels disgust even at the thought (although it cannot be called a thought) of sitting next to a black man. The real problem of the young black man, which results from this very form of racism, is that situations like the one on the train are quite ordinary and common to American everyday social interactions rather than an exception to the rule:

Where he goes the space follows him. If the man left his seat before Union Station you would simply be a person in a seat on the train. You would cease to struggle against the unoccupied seat when where why the space won't lose its meaning. (Rankine 132)

"The space follows him" wherever he goes. Translated into the black histories and realities (both collective and individual), it means that there

is no escape from sheer racism, whose excuse and alibi is a person's skin color and (fictitious) race identity.

At the end of the script, after the narrator-persona has taken the empty seat when she sees that another white woman is looking for a seat because she wants to have a place next to her children and asks passengers to switch seats, the *You* experiences a sort of a panic and says: "You hear but you don't hear. You can't see" (133). The final segment of "Making Room" reads: "It's then the man next to you turns to you. And as if from inside your own head you agree that if anyone asks you to move, you'll tell them we are traveling as a family" (133). The family excuse is more than just an expression of solidarity with a young black man. It is a sign of bonding of a person of color with another person of color when confronting the oppressor.

"In Memory of Trayvon Martin" is another Situation video of interest for me. Its location is again a train, which suggests a necessity for blacks to move on, to never find stability or establish a home. The text read by the author (in voiceover) does not comment on the very situation we are watching, which may be contrasted with the next Situation video in the volume, entitled "In Memory of James Craig Anderson," where we have Rankine reconstructing the killing of the black man by "just a teen . . . with straggly blond hair" (94). In her reconstruction she mentions the killer's first name Dedmon, reveals the circumstances of his driving over Anderson on a "hot June day in the twenty-first century," and quotes the ultimately incriminating phrase since Dedmon says: "I ran that nigger over" (94), using the n-word just like that, as a precise phrase to identify his victim, which simultaneously places Anderson's body in the long history of American racism, violence and brutality. That is also the point made by Rankine in the Trayvon Martin video where the phrases she uses pinpoint the causes of—if not the reasons for—this racism-motivated crime by placing it in "the years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs," all of which "accumulate into the hours inside our lives where we are caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its root our limbs" (89–90).

In order to draw the reader's attention to a social context of racist practices, Rankine in *Citizen* employs photographs and Situation videos in two complementary ways: (1) by taking racism away from the textual reality into the material world, and (2) by creating a strict connection between, to use Mitchell's categories, the Real of racism and Reality of race. The visual arts demonstrate the mechanism of production of race out of elements taken from the sphere of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, making us see how it combines particles of the socio-historical and the fantastic. *Citizen* manages to provide a multilayered and in-depth poetic/visual analysis of the phenomenon of present-day racism in the US with

its “various realities” (Hilton Als in the blurb), as well as its covert or indirect manifestations which make for its insidiousness. The power of this volume resides in its “capacity to make so many different versions of American life proper to itself, to instruct [American readers] in the depth and variety of [their] participation in a narrative of race that [they] recount and reinstate, even when [they] speak as though it weren’t there” (Jonathan Farmer in the blurb). Nonetheless, as the visual components of the volume demonstrate by turning the reader into a modest eye witness, there is still a racism-generated narrative of race in America.

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