

ON RACISM AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF MOURNING: A CRITICAL READING OF CLAUDIA RANKINE'S *CITIZEN, AN AMERICAN LYRIC*

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ABSTRACT

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen, An American Lyric* (2015) problematizes the notion of citizenship through theory-laden poetical prose, images, and video scripts. This paper aims to critically read *Citizen*, the theoretical work *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (2016) written by Christina Sharpe, and Sara Ahmed's *Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007) and *Living a Feminist Life* (2017). The trace of canonical thinkers for Critical Race Theory (CRT) such as Frantz Fanon or Achille Mbembe will also be observed. I contend that *Citizen* can be read in the vein of a theoretical work close to CRT approaches, as it tackles similar topics such as death, structural racism, necropolitics, and raced intimacy. It provides multiple illustrative cases which are poetry-laden and politically-laden, as well as theoretical statements that give accounts of the phenomenology of racism in current US.

RESUMEN

El libro *Citizen, An American Lyric* (2015) de Claudia Rankine problematiza la noción de ciudadanía desde una prosa poética saturada de teoría, imágenes y guiones para videos. Este artículo tiene como objetivo leer de manera crítica *Citizen*, la obra teórica *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (2016) escrito por Christina Sharpe y las obras *Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007) y *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) de Sara Ahmed. También se mencionarán trabajos canónicos dentro de los estudios críticos de raza como los de Frantz Fanon o Achille Mbembe. Se argumentará que *Citizen* puede ser leído en la línea de estos trabajos

teóricos cercanos a posturas de estudios críticos de raza ya que se encuentran representados temas similares como la muerte, el racismo estructural, la necropolítica, las agresiones en la esfera más íntima en relación con la raza, etc. proporcionando múltiples casos ilustrativos. Dichos casos están cargados de lírica y de política, y son a su vez afirmaciones teóricas que dan cuenta de la fenomenología del racismo en la actualidad en los Estados Unidos.

INTRODUCTION

Media and self-recorded videos are becoming one of the most powerful tools via which to give account of everyday racism within allegedly post-racist US. On 10th May 2018, three African American people checking out of their Airbnb were met with seven police cars, after a neighbor had called the police because she had seen “suspicious” people “who did not wave”. There was a fourth (white) person checking out with the same group, but she had gone unnoticed (Criss & Vera). Two days later, a black student was woken up by the police whilst taking a nap in the common area of her dormitory at Yale University, because a white girl was suspicious of her (Caron). In a country where white stands for the unmarked norm, black stands for criminal.

Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen, An American Lyric* (2015) problematizes the very same notion of citizenship through theory-laden poetical prose, images, and video scripts. What are black citizens’ rights? What list of dos and don’ts should a black citizen bear in mind in the country of freedom? To be a citizen and to be a subject with political rights is a legal category that is constantly broken or violated for certain bodies. This foregrounds the fact that despite the alleged neutrality and color-blindness of the citizenship, being considered a full citizen, drawn from the notion of being a full subject, is not neutral (McKrittick 2015). The way the human is produced is highly informed by the white male subjectivity; unlike white people, who are granted rights from birth and who are entitled to an autonomous subjectivity, power apparatuses have prevented Black/Latinx bodies from existing to such an extent that survival is not expected (Lorde 112). This paper analyzes Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen, An American Lyric*, highlighting its close link to a history of slavery and unavenged deaths which do not comprise the past but the very present of contemporary United States. The theorist Judith

Butler argues that different bodies are entitled to different rights, that is, vulnerability and recognition is differently distributed. Therefore, some bodies are social subjects to be mourned if killed, whereas the death of other bodies (Black bodies in this case) goes unnoticed and is not grieved. The lack of recognition of some lives as “human” or “valuable”, that is, the lack of intelligibility of these lives as such (Butler 7) prevent society from taking seriously these deaths. The question raised by the necropolitical and racist system is the following: in a system where black bodies keep on being persecuted and killed, how can these bodies be mourned if there is no closure or no end for this slaughter?

AIM, STRUCTURE AND METHODS

This paper aims to read Rankine’s *Citizen*, the theoretical work *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (2016) written by Christina Sharpe and Sara Ahmed’s *Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007) and *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) through a diffractive lens. The trace of relevant scholars for Critical Race Theory (CRT), such as Frantz Fanon or Achille Mbembe, will also be observed. I contend that *Citizen* can be read in the vein of a theoretical work following approaches of CRT as it represents topics such as death, structural racism, necropolitics and raced intimacy and provides multiple illustrative cases. These cases are poetry-laden and politically-laden theoretical statements that give an account of the phenomenology of racism in the current US. As will be demonstrated, Rankine’s book challenges the boundaries of poetry and blurs the limits of lyrics: *Citizen* includes poems, photographs, reproductions of art pieces and transcriptions of video scripts. Furthermore, I contend that the use of the lyrical “you” instead of the “me” in the poems pushes the level of engagement needed from the reader. It is not a memoir of racism narrated in the first person but rather a public exposure: a call for the readership to get involved in race dynamics. The apostrophic use of the second person is a means of addressing the position of everyone - white, black, and brown bodies - in society. I contend that Rankine responds to Ferreira da Silva’s question of “how can a Black Feminist Poetics address the juridical, economic, symbolic dimensions of the political” (Ferreira da Silva 82). *Citizen* could provide a tentative answer: it responds by overlapping multiple cases

of lyrical encounters that cause interpellation, exhaustion and saturation in the readership.

In order to analyze how *Citizen* bridges theory and autobiography in order to give accounts of the aftermath of chattel slavery (Hartman 20; Sharpe 18) and its shaping of the world as white (Ferreira da Silva 84), this paper includes the following sections. After reflecting on the methodology and the theoretical approach, the paper will analyze *Citizen's* poetics in relation to (a) death and mourning of black lives; (b) the phenomenology of whiteness and antiblackness; and (c) the affective and bodily dimension of racism.

Regarding methodology, this paper proposes a diffractive take on comparative analysis, which means not reading *Citizen* through the theoretical body of work but rather reading with it, an approach by the New Materialism school of thought that takes matter into matter. Materialist diffractive readings propose a different take on unproductive debates like nature vs. nurture or biology vs. society within critical studies, not obliterating the discursive and constructivist approach but giving relevance simultaneously to textuality and the discursive, and corporeality and the material. For New Materialism, individual entities are phenomena which are always already both material and discursive. According to Iris Van der Tuin, "Diffractive readers do not care about canonical renderings of texts or of artefacts because they zoom in on how texts, artefacts and human subjects interpellate or affect each other" (van der Tuin 29). Thus, this reading of Rankine's text provides a diffractive approach to race dynamics.

THE BLACK CONDITION IS ONE OF MOURNING: RANKINE AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF CLOSURE

Throughout the entire text, *Citizen* covers violence in a vast array of modes and embodiments: from aggressions in unexpected and relatively intimate places, slanders in public, and violent silences to physical aggressions and murders. The hybrid lyric depicts situations where being black stands for being stopped, checked, arrested and eligible for gun violence. In several poems the poetical 'you' explains how, in the encounter with the other, violence happens because black bodies are read as dangerous and as violent perpetrators, and thus, policeable. In the following passage, the apostrophic narrator is going to the home of their new therapist:

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 pinscher 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. (Rankine[a] 18)

Due to the lack of explanation of who is yelling to whom, the poem demands that the readership give each person in the poem a "race" label. Although unsaid, it makes it clear that the therapist is assumed to be white, while the apostrophic narrator is black. In her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe states that the race dynamics, issued from the fact of "living in the aftermath of the slavery and the Middle Passage", which are condensed in the metaphor of the wake, have multiple meanings: keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship in the water, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening and consciousness (Sharpe 17-18). These polysemic meanings are all applicable to black lives in the current US: living in the current US means living under a regime of necropolitics, coined by the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe. Putting forward Foucault's notion of biopolitics, that is "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order, taking into consideration the administration of life and a locality's populations as its subject" (Foucault 34), Achille Mbembe argues:

Is the notion of biopower sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective? What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? (Mbembe 12)

Revisiting contemporary political philosophy, Mbembe argues that Nazi concentration camps were not the first places where the exploitation and disavowal of humanity took place. Sharpe's work explores these tropes as material and metaphoric places: the ship, the hold, the plantations. These lawless places, where the systematic negation of black lives occurred, have provided the ground for the modern political system. The disposability and the "killability" of certain bodies — (black bodies, bodies on the shores of the

Mediterranean sea, Palestinian bodies) — co-exist along with the production of normalcy, since “anti-blackness is the very foundational notion of the modernity” (Sharpe 7).

According to Sharpe and Rankine, racially-motivated killings are not the alleged exception but a constant and endless cause of death, due to the exceptionality of black bodies. The notion of justice produces and requires black exclusion and death. Rankine uses the powerful second person of the singular “you” to describe a situation where children are being babysat by a black person and the neighbor, feeling scared, calls the police:

Your partner calls your friend and asks him if there’s a guy walking back and forth in front of your home. Your friend says that if anyone were outside he would see him because he is standing outside. You hear the sirens through the speakerphone. Your friend is speaking to your neighbor when you arrive home. The four police cars are gone. Your neighbor has apologized to your friend and is now apologizing to you. Feeling somewhat responsible for the actions of your neighbor, you clumsily tell your friend that the next time he wants to talk on the phone he should just go in the backyard. He looks at you a long minute before saying he can speak on the phone wherever he wants. Yes, of course, you say. Yes, of course. (Rankine[a] 16)

Being outside talking on a phone, such a harmless and everyday act. Being outside a house, just standing there. Some bodies will be suspect, some bodies will not, in this very same situation; and this differentiated scrutiny constantly reminds some bodies that they are living “in the afterlives of slavery, in a lived and undeclared state of emergency” (Sharpe 100). How can black lives demand justice if the very notion of justice and its multiple apparatuses are embedded in racism? While writing this paper, I came across the news that on March 18 2018, Stephen Clark, an African American male aged 22, was fatally shot in his grandmother’s backyard by the Sacramento police. More than 20 shots were fired. Clark was found with a cell phone in his hand instead of the gun that the police suspected (Del Real). Rankine poetically enacts a political truth: to be in the wake, as Sharpe explains, means to be aware of being in the recoil of a gun. The wake of the aftermath of slavery means living in disaster for black bodies, writing with the disaster: “In the wake, we must connect the birth industry to the prison industry, the machine that degrades and denies and eviscerates reproductive justice to the machine that incarcerates” (Sharpe 87).

In a video script created in collaboration with John Lucas, Claudia Rankine describes how a black subject is stopped and arrested while driving. Again using the apostrophic device and a rhythm and repetition that recalls slam poetry, the apostrophic “you” describes racial profiling:

This is what it looks like. You know this is wrong. This is not what it looks like. You need to be quiet. This is wrong. You need to close your mouth now. This is what it looks like. Why are you talking if you haven't done anything wrong? 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[a] 105; 107)

The system of law does not equal the system of justice: although our so-called Western governments brag about their justice and democracy, arguing that our modern states follow the line of progressive improvement towards perfect justice and democratic systems, the exclusions that ground these regimes bring to light the fallacy of these narratives. This way of storytelling the past, present and future of democracy is delusive and is not accountable to those whose lives are still under siege.

Audre Lorde, when talking about motherhood, stated that raising black children in the US is like raising children “in the mouth of a racist, sexist suicidal dragon” (Lorde 30). The dragon is the US, a country where anti-blackness is the ground of justice itself, of the aftermath of the still present disaster of slavery, where some bodies are to be disposed, jailed or killed. What are the modes of mourning and grief for a disaster that does not come to an end? How can US society and black bodies heal from a trauma that does nothing but persist? Claudia Rankine wrote an article after the murders of nine black people in a church in Charleston in 2015 (Rankine[b]) entitled ‘The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning’. In the same vein as Audre Lorde’s statement, Rankine was told by a black friend with children that being black in this country was being ready for the ever-present possibility of your children being stopped by police or killed, and teaching children how to not act suspiciously in the streets, especially at night. One has to learn how to prove to be innocent and harmless.

Mourning and closure are impossible in a “post-racial” necropolitical US: the overflow of information, criminal cases and detention in the media challenges the notion of mourning as a

process that is elaborated and (if not totally) overcome, as it is a constant situation. Half-living, half-risking death in every corner: an endless grieving because of the system, or, as Sharpe proposes, an activity that is more similar to the wake or accompanying the dead bodies rather than to mourning. In *Citizen*, an homage to people killed for racial reasons is paid:

In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis
 In Memory of Eric Garner
 In Memory of John Crawford
 in Memory of Michael Brown
 In Memory of Akai Gurley
 In Memory of Tamir Rice
 In Memory of Walter Schott
 [...]
 In Memory
 In Memory

The black ink fades away by the end of the page, giving a notion of endlessness and depletion: the work of making memory of a not-yet ending disaster is impossible. The lack of possibility Being in the wake is, then, a more accurate term than grieving, as the racial event is not a matter of the past but the “presentification” of a still present slavery past.

THE WEATHER: “I DO NOT ALWAYS FEEL COLORED. I ALWAYS FEEL COLORED WHEN I AM THROWN AGAINST A SHARP WHITE BACKGROUND”

As the writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston stated, and a painting reproduced in *Citizen* shows (52-53), “I do not always feel colored. I always feel colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background”. That is to say, our race-based or gender-based differences are not always so conspicuous: they rely highly on the context where the difference is embodied and enacted. Frantz Fanon in his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1966), narrates how he becomes aware of his embodiment; how he phenomenologically understands the difference of race because of his exposure to the white gaze:

Look a Negro ... Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened ... I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories,

history, and above all historicity, which I had learned about from Jaspers. Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. (Fanon 31)

According to Frantz Fanon, black bodies confined to a zone of not being; that is, they are devoid of the right to exist. Black bodies are subject to the epistemic –and thus ontological and political– violence of existing as the infra-human, since the “hu-man” stands for the white male, and whiteness is lived as the background to the general experience, “only invisible for those who inhabit it” (Ahmed[a] 150) and is constructed as the weather (Sharpe 106). The weather represents the white norm: “In what I am calling the weather, antiblackness is pervasive as climate. The weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place” (Sharpe 100). Linked to the weather we find the ecology, that is, the “political movement that seeks to protect the environment, especially from pollution” (Sharpe 106). In the anti-blackness of the climate in which we are all enmeshed, black bodies are either too visible or invisible and interchangeable. As white stands for the norm, and it is the unmarked subject position, being black can stand for incarceration or “killability” as we have seen before, or for no visibility at all. Black lives are either invisible in everyday professional life or are hyper-visible at night as potential criminals. Again, without telling the subject position, Rankine uses the apostrophic “you” to depict black invisibility: “When he turns to you he is truly surprised. Oh my God, I didn’t see you. You must be in a hurry, you offer. No, no, no, I really didn’t see you” (Rankine[a] 77).

Every day, small racist interactions are considered misunderstandings, “until the same misunderstood person ends up on a jury or running national response teams after a hurricane” (Berlant). It is vital to foreground the symbolic violence that stems from conceiving of these aggressions as plain misunderstandings. A misunderstanding or a joke is disconnected from the structural, the symbolic and the political dimension. One does not hold responsibility for a misunderstanding, whereas one holds responsibility as an aggressor. In her book *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Sara Ahmed expresses the effort that one must put into

trying to make people acknowledge the violent structures that are the ground of democracy or freedom:

When you become a feminist, you find out very quickly: what you aim to bring to an end some do not recognize as existing. (...) So much feminist and antiracist work is the work of trying to convince others that sexism and racism have not ended; that sexism and racism are fundamental to the injustices of late capitalism; that they matter. Just to talk about sexism and racism here and now is to refuse displacement; it is to refuse to wrap your speech around postfeminism or postrace, which would require you to use the past tense (back then) or an elsewhere (over there). (Ahmed[b] 35)

Rankine, in her *Black Feminist Poetics* to address the world (Ferreira da Silva 84), inserts herself into the long filiation of women of color (such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Patricia High Collins) who report the strategy of the white-male oppressive system to hide the nature of the system and re-victimize their victims: first as black people, then as weak people who complain when they snap, speak out, and fight back against subtle oppression (Ahmed[a] 97).

In another work, Ahmed contends that some objects are more reachable for us because we are already oriented towards them; like race, constantly (re)produced and (re)producing when pointed at. It is not that similarity produces proximity but vice versa, proximity produces likeness (Ahmed[a] 155). It is the habit that conducts us towards certain objects (white or black bodies), attaching a specific affect to this inclination (such as normalcy, invisibility, fear or disgust). Therefore, the domesticity that white bodies share, which sets white bodies as the norm, the home, produces whiteness as a dwelling and blackness a suspicious or invisible category:

Because of your elite status from a year's worth of travel, you 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, tells her mother, 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[a] 12)

I wanted to emphasize the “this”, which marks the “you” in an object/not subject position: using “this”, the “you” is not contemplated as a person but as a thing; the “you” does not respond to the demand. Following Ahmed's notion of orientation, the girl

refuses to be next to a black body: the socially constructed white affect towards blackness is disgust or apathy. The arrival of certain (black or brown) bodies is noticeable and policeable, and it provokes a sense of disorientation and disruption in “how things are arranged” (Ahmed[a] 163). In another poem, Rankine’s apostrophic voice goes to the bank manager to sign a paper:

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.
What? he asks.
You didn’t mean to say that aloud. (Rankine[a] 44)

The bank manager was not expecting a black person. This interaction, the fact that the white mind’s expectation is not met – a black woman with a good financial situation? – stops the regular flow of interaction. These situations in which blackness is pointed out reveals that whiteness is the weather, the climate, and a reason why some bodies are stopped and some others are oriented towards similarity. Nowadays, there is a tendency for some people to criticize identity politics and the fact that we have to be politically correct, as in, for example, the fierce debate surrounding cultural appropriation. However, nobody wants to cancel humor or the celebration of cultures: what these critiques show is that mainstream humor exudes racism. Quoting Rankine’s work,

Someone in the audience asks the man promoting his new book on humor what makes something funny. His answer is what you expect—context. After a pause he adds that if someone said something, like about someone, and you were with your friends you would probably laugh, but if they said it out in public where black people could hear what was said, you might not, probably would not. Only then do you realize you are among “the others out in public” and not among “friends.” (Rankine[a] 48)

The status quo is white, as is the status quo’s humor. Whiteness is constructed as a dwelling, the proper orientation, and therefore being black is being always somehow out of place (Ahmed[a] 162). Whiteness, which in an interview Rankine states is not inevitable and is socially constructed (Trasher), is one of the main interests of the author; for example, Rankine wants to set up the Racial

Imaginary Institute to explore the specific sociocultural grounds of white supremacist discourses.

LIVING WITHIN THE WEATHER AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF MOURNING: VISIBILITY AND ANGER.

Related to whiteness, the fact that race is a social construct is at this point obvious. Activists and academics of color have had to walk a long path in order to deconstruct the idea of race as inherent and biologically-marked difference, and thus, inferior. According to Rosi Braidotti, the problem lies not so much on the differences among bodies but on the sociopolitical readings that stem from these produced and productive differences: “In so far as difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as others” (Braidotti 21). In this vein, New Materialism suggests the horizontalization of material-discursive dimensions: racialized (and gendered) bodies are not only linguistic constructions without any material consequences. In other words, matter does not precede discourse but rather both elements are co-created and co-creating in a constant entanglement (Barad 169). Scientific fields such as epigenetic (the study of the heritable phenotypic change due to environmental factors) argues for the permeability between biology and the environment. In *Citizen*, the poetical “you” states:

You are in the dark, 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.

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.

[...]

You fear the night is being locked in and coded on a cellular level and want time to function as power wash. Sitting there staring at the closed garage door you are reminded that a friend once told you there exists the medical term –John Henryism– for people exposed to stress stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure. Sherman James, the researcher who came up with the term, claimed the physiological costs were high. You hope by sitting in silence you are bucking the trend. (Rankine[a] 10-11)

Although race is not a deterministic fact biologically speaking, power relationships related to race are highly material and spatial: they play a major role in how space is shaped, who has the right to inhabit it and who is supported by a system that presents itself as color-blind. Multiple studies show that exclusion due to race and class results in a lower life quality and length of life, as well as medical conditions such as the aforementioned John Henryism.

The second part of *Citizen* begins by reflecting on Hennessy Youngman's, aka Jayson Musson's, YouTube videos on contemporary art issues. According to him, the "race card" can be played in contemporary art in order to get visibility and fame, "because if a nigger paints a flower it becomes a slavery flower, flower de *Amistad*" (Rankine[a] 34). Black people's art thus commodifies themselves and their rage: following Youngman's ideas, a black person has to do nothing beyond metabolizing their anger.

After compiling Youngman's declarations on how easy it is to play the "race card" in the contemporary art market, Rankine thoroughly analyses the case of Serena Williams. For the lyrical subject of *Citizen*, watching tennis has a conciliatory effect from the stressful and unavoidable everyday encounters. Serena Williams is also part of this long chain of "angry black women" who are aware of their color. She is highly policed for her reactions, whether the reactions entail anger or happiness. She and her sister have been strongly "booed" in several tournaments. Serena Williams' body, a black body within an overwhelmingly white ambiance, has been unfairly treated by the umpires and, after some unjust situations, in 2008, she produced an outburst. Her reaction was read as "insane":

Serena lost context by abandoning all rules of civility, it could be because her body, trapped in a racial imaginary, trapped in disbelief—code for being black in America—is being governed not by the tennis match she is participating in but by a collapsed relationship that had promised to play by the rules. Perhaps this is how racism feels no matter the context—randomly the rules everyone else gets to play by no longer apply to you, and to call this out by calling out "I swear to God!" is to be called insane, crass, crazy. Bad sportsmanship. (Rankine[a] 29)

Despite its proven resilience, the body has an unconscious memory. Every aggression, no matter how small or imperceptible, sticks to it: and after enduring years of racism within the field of tennis, Serena

Williams exploded in anger. Her body, clearly black in a sea of whiteness, is sharply questioned and policed. When some years after, in the 2012 Olympics, she won two gold medals and celebrated with a dance in the court, the media reported that “what Serena did was akin to cracking a tasteless, X-rated joke inside a church.... What she did was immature and classless” (Rankine[a] 32).

Thus, no matter which emotion Williams expresses, she will be labelled as out of place and her body will be singled out. Black bodies are under scrutiny and black people’s reactions to this policing are always considered as an overreaction. The same, however, is not said for white people; “the Dane Caroline Wozniacki, a former number one player, imitates Serena by stuffing towels in her top and shorts, all in good fun, at an exhibition match” (Rankine[a] 33). White people can be politically incorrect, deliver improper jokes, and act however they please, but black bodies –in this case black women’s bodies– are considered to be exaggerated: regardless of their reactions, they will be perceived as if they were yelling. That is a problem of a society that brags about its diversity but does not understand that diversity requires deep structural change. In popular culture, black women tend to be portrayed as “out of control, disagreeable, overly aggressive, physically threatening” (Jones and Norwood 2049). When women of color speak out about racism, they come across the white-male oppressive system that hides its biased nature and re-victimizes its victims. Therefore, firstly black women are despised for being black women, and afterwards they are despised because of being “angry” and “sensitive” towards so-called misunderstandings or harmless jokes. According to Lorde, “Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger at being silenced at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service” (Lorde 129). Tone policing is applied to black subjects who break the white norm and speak out, whereas there is no tone policing for white subjects’ statements.

The juxtaposition of aggressive racist encounters makes *Citizen* a hard and high-voltage work that pushes the readership to the limit, as readers are intimately engaged with the apostrophic “you” that shares the stories. According to the therapist Maria Root, long-term oppression have a high psychological impact, what she terms as insidious trauma, which “is usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic

intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power” (1992: 240). Therefore, the question raised here is how much racism can one take in a single life, in a single embodied and bodily experience of a constant oppression and misrecognition. As already quoted, people who suffer from John Henryism “achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the build-up of erasure” (Rankine[a] 11). Racism is a bodily experience, not only because bodies allocate difference, but because suffering from racism is a highly embodied experience that shapes bodily behavior and produces physical effects. The memory of the marked bodies is undeletable, and “the physical carriage hauls more than its weight. The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness” (Rankine[a] 23). The phenomenology of race is translated into an unstoppable flow of reactions to aggressions and uncomfortable situations, as the black body is always already out of place:

You take in things you don't want all the time. The second you hear or see some ordinary moment, all its intended targets, all the meanings behind the retreating seconds, as far as you are able to see, come into focus. Hold up, did you just hear, did you just say, did you just see, did you just do that? Then the voice in your head silently tells you to take your foot off your throat because just getting along shouldn't be an ambition. (Rankine[a] 55)

The fourth section of the book explores the breathing and sighing of a suffocated “you”, overworked and exhausted from the world where whiteness is the weather. The fact that Rankine chooses breathing is interesting, as it connects personal awareness, bodily experimentation and the social environment. Breathing, one of our basic needs, demands a specific ecosystem with specific air compounds in order to keep on living. Therefore, this basic activity reveals the entanglement of humans and their environment, and as long as whiteness is the climate and the ecology that preserves this norm, breathing and not suffocating might be a huge challenge for black bodies. According to Ahmed, “Having space to breathe, or being able to breathe freely is [. . .] an aspiration. With breath comes imagination. With breath comes possibility. If queer politics is about freedom, it might simply mean the freedom to breathe” (Ahmed[c] 20). Nevertheless, how to breathe freely if, with every break you take, aggression might come along? Rankine interrogates how to breathe

out exasperation if the world does not let you: “Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that” (Rankine[a] 59). Politics is everywhere, in the way we experience feelings, in the way we are affected by specific situations, and also in the way we can or cannot breathe. Sighing is a way of breathing that comes with a noise and a need to pause and stress the intensity. If the body is the threshold for unconscious memory, sighing might be a mechanism for coping with stressful and racist situations and a way to (un)fix memories:

The sigh is the pathway to breath, it allows breathing. That’s just self-preservation. No one fabricates that. You sit down, you sigh. You stand up, you sigh. The sighing is a worrying exhale of an ache. Forget all, the world says. The world had a lot of practices. No one should adhere to the facts that contribute to narrative, the facts that create lives. To your mind, feelings are what create a person, something unwilling, something wild vandalizing whatever the skull holds. Those sensations form a someone. (Rankine[a] 61)

Breathing is material and is political, it connects the inside with the environment. In the elegiac list with names of killed black people mentioned in the previous section, Eric Garner appears. On July 17, 2014, this 43-year-old African American man was choked to death by the New York City police whilst saying, “I can’t breathe”. The police officers who put him in the chokehold were not condemned for his death (Goldstein & Schweber). Afterwards, “I can’t breathe” became a viral statement that gave account of how embodiment is affected by the political external environment, and is closely related to the (un)livability within certain surroundings. This statement became viral as it illustrated the situation of black bodies which are constantly stopped and even deprived of the possibility to breathe. Sighing is a way of coping, but sighing, not breathing in a regular path, is pointing at something that is not going as it should. Therefore, the world feels irritated by this way of breathing that reports blackness as the weather:

Nevertheless, people that sigh are discouraged to do it as they are assumed to be overreacting and they are asked to move on: feel good. Feel better. Move forward. Let it go. Come on. Come on. Come on. (Rankine[a] 66)

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has contended that *Citizen* is closely linked to contemporary theoretical issues and can be read in light of them, and that theory can also be read and enriched with Rankine's work. Firstly, the black condition has been explored as an impossibility of mourning due to the necropolitical regimen that subjects racialized bodies in the aftermath of slavery. Secondly, the privilege of whiteness has been analyzed as a dwelling and as the norm, considering blackness as the strange and the dangerous. Lastly, the relationship between affect, namely anger, and the stereotypes of black women in relation to embodiment has been highlighted. *Citizen* has been awarded a large number of literary prizes, such as the 2014 National Book Critics Circle Award and the 2015 Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Poetry. The book is completely enmeshed in a current debate on race and racism in US politics and popular culture. Representing the vast array of topics such as death, violence, racist humor and everyday life microaggressions, Rankine's work gives a sense of what being black in the contemporary US means, and how it is linked to a past that is still present. The exhaustion that is placed on the reader when going through these hybrid lyrics, due to the overlapping of situations suffered and lived by a "you", interpellates, exhausts and saturates the readership. It thus provokes a parallel effect: as already noted, racism causes depletion and stress to the subjects that have to live within an anti-black climate due the constant aggressions and looks that they face. In the same vein, the reader of *Citizen*, regardless of their race, encounters a highly political poetics that discomforts them and leads them to fatigue and stress throughout the book.

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