



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

States of emergency/states of emergence

Notes on Claudia Rankine

Citation for published version:

Spinks, L 2023, 'States of emergency/states of emergence: Notes on Claudia Rankine', *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.20004>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.4000/ejas.20004](https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.20004)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

European Journal of American Studies

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



States of Emergency/States of Emergence: Notes on Claudia Rankine

Lee Spinks



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/20004>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.20004

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Lee Spinks, "States of Emergency/States of Emergence: Notes on Claudia Rankine", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 18-2 | 2023, Online since 03 July 2023, connection on 10 July 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/20004> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.20004>

This text was automatically generated on 10 July 2023.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - CC BY-NC 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

States of Emergency/States of Emergence: Notes on Claudia Rankine

Lee Spinks

- 1 Considering Frantz's Fanon's account of colonial psychology and the law of white supremacy Homi Bhabha remarks:

What is the distinctive *force* of Fanon's vision? It comes, I believe, from the tradition of the oppressed, the language of a revolutionary awareness that, as Walter Benjamin suggests, 'the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight.' And the state of emergency is also always a state of *emergence*. (59)

- 2 Bhabha's concluding sentence caught the eye of Claudia Rankine who reproduced it in her celebrated 2014 volume *Citizen: An American Lyric*. This essay revisits the connection between emergency and emergence in order to reconsider the relationship between subjectivity, sovereignty and race as it appears in both *Citizen* and Rankine's earlier, and in many ways companion volume, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004). Its reading of Rankine is impelled by the following claims: the state of emergency from which she writes is the ongoing crisis of black suffering; this state begins in an original law-founding act of violence which establishes white supremacy by inscribing the social death of slavery at the core of black being; that in tracing the relationship between black abjection and the law of white supremacy Rankine simultaneously explores the estranging effects of living a black social life in the shadow of social death and how far the repetitive and ritualistic character of supremacist violence can be explained by the presence of an indelible black phantasm at the foundation of white sovereignty; and that only with the rejection of fantasies of absolute sovereignty can we imagine a future redeemed from the ceaseless social staging of scenes of racial domination. In pursuing these claims it emphasizes Rankine's development of a style of writing as much as a concept of history responsive to this continuing state of emergency, a style rooted in the artful reworking of lyric—both volumes profess the

declarative, although still enigmatic, suffix “An American Lyric”—that distinguishes all of her major work.

1. Standing in Death’s Position

- 3 In *Lonely* the state of emergency which comes into force, Benjamin reminds us, whenever state power is simultaneously the law and beyond the law is most explicitly figured in governmental responses to the 9/11 terrorist attacks which included the curtailment of political rights to free assembly, the suspension of key civil liberties in the name of homeland securitization, widespread domestic surveillance of dubious constitutional propriety, the extraordinary rendition of terrorist suspects to black sites beyond the range of legal scrutiny, the prosecution of a “War on Terror” fomenting large-scale military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the further synchronization of the interests of civil society with the systemic imperatives of the permanent war economy. Such responses are hauntingly evoked by the spectral image of President George W. Bush that punctuates every section of the text, suturing scenes of private turmoil or public questioning to the institutional and ideological mechanisms underpinning the national emergency state. Against this background Rankine foregrounds the ideological effects of a culture of fear—fear of external terrorism, fear of domestic subversion, fear of the stranger in our midst—in dampening political optimism, diminishing oppositional energies and canalizing social feeling towards exclusionary and reactionary ends.¹ Across the media images circulate of lost or traumatized bodies, news bulletins warn of anthrax in the mail, the “language of description competes with the dead in the air” (82). But alongside this contemporary emergency, *Lonely* also explores *another* kind of emergency, an emergency, as it were, *within* the emergency, located in the continuing enclosure of black life within the afterlife of slavery. A decade later *Citizen* develops *Lonely*’s unsparing vision of the social fate of blackness by exploring the reciprocal connection between the social (re)production of black deathliness, white fantasies of absolute sovereignty and the white supremacist ordinary of everyday American life.
- 4 These points may be developed by briefly considering a curiously neglected scene which constitutes the aesthetico-political matrix of all of Rankine’s major writing. Near the beginning of *Lonely* a speaker recalls her childish fascination with the oddly spectral existence of movie actors seemingly destined always to be survived by their own cinematic representation (“Every movie I saw in the third grade compelled me always to ask, ‘Is he dead?, ‘Is she dead?’”). This youthful memory immediately prompts another, much more anguished, form of reflection:

Or one begins asking oneself that same question differently. Am *I* dead? Though this question at no time explicitly translates into Should I be dead, eventually the suicide hotline is called. You are, as usual, watching television, the eight-o’clock movie, when a number flashes on the screen: 1-800-SUICIDE. You dial the number. Do you feel like killing yourself? the man on the other end of the receiver asks. You tell him, I feel like I am already dead. When he makes no response you add, I am in death’s position. He finally says, Don’t believe what you are thinking and feeling. Then he asks, Where do you live?

Fifteen minutes later the doorbell rings. You explain to the ambulance attendant that you have had a momentary loss of happily. The noun, happiness, is a static state of some Platonic ideal you know better than to pursue. Your modifying process has happily or unhappily experienced a momentary pause. This kind of

thing happens, perhaps is still happening. He shrugs and in turn explains that you need to come quietly or he will have to restrain you. If he is forced to restrain you, he will have to report that he is forced to restrain you. It is this simple: Resistance will only make matters more difficult. Any resistance will only make matters worse. By law, I will have to restrain you. His tone suggests that you should try to understand the difficulty in which he finds himself. This is further disorienting. I am fine! Can't you see that? You climb into the ambulance unassisted. (7)

- 5 Perhaps the first thing to note about this passage is its enigmatic reimagining of the earlier childish query about the movie actor (“Is he dead”) as “Am I dead”? Who could be in a position to pose such a question? Not a dead person, clearly, bereft as they would be of any remaining power of speech, but rather someone who feels as if they *might* be dead insofar as they no longer seem to be inhabiting a kind of recognizably living life. This perception of possibly posthumous or no longer living life may, of course, have its roots in psychological depression, and the scene allows us to approach it in precisely this way, proceeding as it does down a pathological-therapeutic pathway from feelings of anxiety and disorientation to the calling of an emergency mental health helpline and the subsequent transit of the speaker to some kind of clinical facility. Yet at the same time this rote classification of a still obscure condition neglects an unexamined social residue concealed in the speaker’s elliptical encapsulation of her own disabling condition—not “I am feeling suicidal” but rather “I am in death’s position”—a statement far stranger and broader in its range of implication than any merely psychological confession.
- 6 The strange or uncanny aspect of the locution “I am in death’s position” lies in its radically depersonalizing quality, the way it transforms a condition of mind (“I feel deathly”) into a positional or systematic relationship between the speaker and her world. To find yourself “in death’s position” in these terms is not necessarily a sign of emotional or psychological disturbance but rather the historical effect of being remanded to the place of social death by the absence of social recognition and your exclusion from the full privileges and immunities of citizenship. Read in this way, Rankine’s phrasing echoes Orlando Patterson’s influential reinterpretation of the slave as an internalized outsider in a state of “social death.” Slavery is defined for Patterson in the first instance, we recall, not merely by the remaking of the slave as a form of property (although she is that too), but also that, stripped of any recognizable social existence outside her master, she “becomes a social nonperson.” Denied all rights and claims of birth and unable to anchor her living present in any community of memory, the slave is forcibly integrated into her new world as “an internalized outsider in a state of social death,” a desocialized and depersonalized nonbeing whose relation to slaveholder society is maintained in the form of an inclusive exclusion which positions her as both intrinsic to structures of social authority and economic production and extrinsic to civic notions of rights and recognition, thereby condemned to the place of the living dead (41).
- 7 This impression of a profound social burden concealed within the speaker’s halting self-representation is reinforced by the second paragraph which also turns upon a linguistic opacity containing a similarly vital historico-political legacy and charge: her strange remark that she is experiencing a “momentary loss of happily.” What initially appears to be nonsense, however, makes its own particular sense if we read it as a kind of time-lapse sentence: a sentence, that is, which compounds two different time-signatures or modes of historical perception into a single compacted flash of political

recognition. As Rankine's subsequent sentence shows, "happily" stands here in eccentric or ungrammatical relation to "happiness," a term which, the adverbial phrase "know better than to pursue" reminds us, echoes the raced republican promise of the Declaration of Independence ("life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"). Returned to this context, Rankine's solecistic use of the adverbial rather than noun form in the phrase "momentary loss of happily" is felicitous rather than unhappy in linking the speaker's affective incapacity to the historical exclusion of black life from whatever is considered to count as civic value and virtue. Understood in strictly republican terms, the meaning of happiness lies also in the *pursuit* of it, a pursuit which projects a vision of existence as a ceaseless experiment in creative self-fashioning; this happy republican potentiality is, of course, precisely what was refused black being which found itself fixed and determined in advance in the image of social death. Relocating the torsions of Rankine's phrasing within the rhetorical forms of republican self-constitution thereby underscores the connection between the private emergency signalled by the weirdly affectless remark "Your modifying process has happily or unhappily experienced a momentary pause" and the ongoing crisis of black civic exclusion and dispossession stretching from the inception of chattel slavery, the 3/5th compromise, and the bitter legacy of Jim Crow and racial segregation right up to contemporary political struggles over affirmative action, mass incarceration and voting rights.

- 8 This passage brings several significant features of Rankine's writing sharply into focus. The first is its emphasis upon the ongoing enclosure of black life in the "wake" of slavery or what Christina Sharpe calls the "the continuing and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (14). To speak of the persisting afterlife of slavery is not to suggest, Sadiya Hartman cautions, that there are negligible differences between bondage and liberty; rather it is to recall us to the highly provisional character of black incorporation into the civic realm of rights and recognition in a racial order where black freedom is never guaranteed, always under threat of erasure, and secured only at the expense of a heavily burdened and encumbered existence (116). By using the metaphor of social death to frame contemporary questions of subjectivity, race and power Rankine simultaneously underscores the complex legacies of slavery in conditioning the nature and limits of black freedom and the discrepant bestowal of emancipation in a putatively "post-racial" society where blacks are habitually exposed to the threat of gratuitous violence, continually policed by the regulatory force of the state and still denied the benefits and protections of full and equal citizenship.
- 9 Complementing Rankine's coupling of black freedom and social subjection is her stress upon the foundational link between black abjection and the culture of white supremacy. Crucial to this connection is the fabrication of blackness in the image of impoverishment or lack against which whiteness defines itself in its sovereign mastery and absolute self-possession. Typically this fabrication variously configures blackness in stereotypical terms as dangerous, erratic, irrational and constitutionally unequipped to regulate its own internal impulses and libidinal promptings, thereby requiring the application of external forms of control to render it minimally conformable to norms of social responsibility and respectability. Precisely this connection between black abjection, disciplinary power and white sovereign mastery is revealed here in the deeply ambiguous statement "By law, I will have to restrain you" where the law of white supremacy is simultaneously performed and constituted by the production and management of racialized bodies.

10 Another abiding consequence of what Hartman calls the “antagonistic production of abstract equality and black subjugation” is the emergence of a new model of black personhood: the encumbered individualism of the freedperson accorded few of the benefits and all of the burdens of citizenship. Constantly coerced, surveilled and morally policed by invasive instruments of state power seeking to re-enslave the emancipated in a culture propped up by legally enforced racial servitude, the burdened black individual is simultaneously “emancipated and subordinated, self-possessed and indebted, equal and inferior, liberated and encumbered, sovereign and dominated, citizen and subject” (117). Constantly compelled to meditate upon “problems” of blackness and justify their own fitness for citizenship, blacks increasingly internalized white views of themselves, producing that double view of themselves as both citizen and slave from which must arise, Du Bois famously cautioned, “a most painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality, and a moral hesitation which is fatal to self-confidence” (96). The legacy of this injurious constitution of black personhood is clearly visible in Rankine’s protagonist’s repetitive self-scrutiny, relentless feelings of worthlessness and abandonment, and overpowering sense of her own social nonexistence. Rankine’s parsing of her titular term loneliness as, among other things, “not not feeling” but rather an intolerable excess of emotion which remains trapped within the black body identifies one cause of this nonexistence as a blockage in the economy of social sentiment which means black feeling can pass neither as “American” nor pass its way into the wider community (58). The same predicament returns in *Citizen* as a state of “visceral disappointment,” a phrase which ties the social derogation of black feeling to its disappointment or historical lack of civic standing in the constitution (viscera) of the American body politic (24).

2. An American Lyric?

11 In examining Rankine’s recent work it is also worth considering her recurrent emphasis on the “lyric” quality of her writing. Lyric is, of course, famously elusive of definition, but critics have traditionally identified lyric writing from the eighteenth century onward with a combination of the following qualities: brevity, sensuality and passion; private rather than public address; the creation of memorable speech; with poems employing a first-person speaker to express individual feeling or heightened emotion; and with poems that deal in the present tense with the immediacy of personal experience.² Against this background talk of the lyric character of Rankine’s writing is apt to appear perplexing to readers encountering extended textual paragraphs which, with their intricate exchange of subject positions and dextrous interplay of private and public forms like journal entries, conversational anecdotes, archival photography, cultural criticism, fine art, film scripts and medical reports, seem much more closely attuned to the discursive modalities of prose narrative than generic expectations of lyric poetry.³ Yet while acknowledging Rankine’s apparent divergence from traditional generic practice, the distinctive lyric quality of her work comes much more clearly into focus when seen as an exemplary instance of what Juliana Spahr calls the “revisioning of the lyric impulse” characteristic of an innovative strand of contemporary poetics—a revision by which Rankine reconfigures lyric resources in the act of invoking them as a means of exploring the social interpellation of both black and white identities and the centrality of race to the American national imaginary (1).⁴

- 12 Rankine's strategic revision of lyric takes several related forms. Nikki Skillman has persuasively shown how Rankine reworks the Romantic opposition between an ideal of pure lyric expressiveness and an accompanying awareness of lyric subjectivity as the effect of language and social scripting to expose the entrenched racialized distinction between the rational self-possession of white civic personhood and the historical construction of blackness as the embodiment of primitivism, irrationality, incoherence, defect and lack (424). The malign history of racist signification which relentlessly reproduces black life in the image of "subhumanity," the idea of metaphysical "nothing," or as a chattel, commodity or merely fungible object makes the apostrophic quality of lyric expressiveness a particularly fraught medium within which to accommodate the diremptive realities of black experience; in response Rankine racially reconfigures lyric address as the dispossessive testimony of a (black) subject whose profound self-alienation and accumulated burden of traumatic memory sometimes leaves them stupefied, socially marginalised, adrift in time, and able only to communicate their distress in expressive fragments which repeatedly dissolve into verbal dissociation, neologism and bursts of fractured speech (436).⁵ Similarly, her recurrent reorganisation of lyric address into a series of disconcerting and demoralising exchanges between a black speaker and her white confidant exposes the mechanisms of exclusion that hold racial hierarchies in place by opening a coincidence between black social death and the play and performance of white priority and prestige (Marriott 3).
- 13 Rankine further radicalizes lyric form by cultivating what Jonathan Culler calls the "special 'now' of lyric articulation" to recalibrate our sense of narrative time. The bold wager of poetic apostrophe, Culler maintains, "is that the lyric can displace a time of narrative, of past events reported, and place us in the continuing present of apostrophic address, the 'now' in which, for readers, a poetic event can repeatedly occur" (Culler, "Lyric" 226). This continuing present or special lyric now distinguishes itself in Rankine's writing in small acts of alterity or moments of fractured speech ("I had a momentary loss of happily") which, by abjuring narrative continuity for the singular temporality of the poetic event, briefly lift us out of linear time to expose the ideological and discursive mechanisms that organize American racial reality. In consequence, sometimes Rankine's lyric impulse most powerfully appears not, as might be expected, in the delineation of affect, worldview or subject position, but rather as what Skillman marvelously calls "a spirit of subversiveness at the vanishing point of prose" which momentarily ironizes, suspends or undoes the racist narrative of the human in the image of white supremacy to give glimpses of expressive life to whatever is repressed within it (423).
- 14 Rankine's resistance to exclusionary thinking is also evident in her signature recasting of lyric voice as a second-person mode of address.⁶ Much of Rankine's resistance to conventional lyric practice is directed against the presumed universality of the lyric subject which, as Mary Chapman reminds us, has historically been understood as a form that "implicitly addresses universal concerns through the perspective of an authoritative, autonomous, representative lyric 'I'" (102). The presumptive universality of this lyric claim to autonomous and authentic personhood—a universality which is unmarked and unremarked because the racial condition of its emergence always remains unexamined—is, of course, precisely what has been denied the black subject in its figuring as less than human and the creature of social death. Conversely, Rankine's

exchange of “you” for the lyric “I,” her use of “you” as in Anthony Reed’s words a kind of I-less “I,” dramatizes the loss of the “ontologically self-securing ground” of black existence in the guise of a poetic subject that cannot simply come clean or stand its own ground since it is always marked, obscured, covered over and put into play by powers not its own (98). In this way her deployment of the second-person as a racially complicated form of first person address helps her “drag the first person out of the social death of history” by “exposing the implications of what it means to speak from the seeming coherency of that position” (Rankine, *Citizen* 72).⁷

3. Wanted Dead and Alive

- 15 Throughout *Lonely* Rankine’s protagonist is haunted by the spectre of loss and diminishment: the poem begins with the story of her mother’s miscarriage before successively recounting the death of her grandmother, the death of a close friend from breast cancer, the death of her sister’s children in an automobile accident, and finally the death of her father. Part of the unremarked brilliance of Rankine’s technique is how she fuses these personal tragedies with the situational paradox of black life as a form of social death. Consider, for instance, the speaker’s sorrowful recollection of her friend’s final days before her death from cancer when she eventually refuses any attempts at resuscitation and relinquishes her will to live: “No. She has decided. She’s grown tired. She is finished. No matter whose will to live remains at her bedside, her death is safe” (9). How should we understand the counterintuitive notion of a “safe death”? It might mean that the business of dying will safely be concluded without undue interference and thereby brought peaceably to a dignified conclusion. But by thus imbricating the notion of a “safe death” with ideas of autonomy and dignity, Rankine’s phrase cannot help recalling to mind precisely what it would guard against, the corollary and contrary association of the “unsafe death,” an adjectival prefix which, like its cognates, “unsafe killing” and “unsafe conviction,” routinely punctuates accounts of the relationship between state power and the black community. Rankine’s intermittent short-circuiting of our conventional habits of sense to expose the everyday social reality of black life also inflects another similarly arresting work of phrasing which describes her protagonist’s fascination with the outlaw protagonists of 1960s Spaghetti Westerns. Is not intrinsic to the pathos of the outlaw (the figure who gasps “I’m not going to make it” at the fatal climax of his own story), Rankine’s speaker muses, the fact that ‘he is not going to make it to his own death?’ Rankine’s startling combination here of the blandly workaday (“not going to make it” has the routine air of a cancelled social appointment) with the absolutely exceptional event (my own death) powerfully redirects our gaze from the senseless sense of her sentence’s ostensible meaning (senseless because none of us can fail to make it to our own death, whenever it may come) to the notion of civic propriety cancelled within it: the acknowledgement, that is, that she cannot make it to her own proper death because she has never been fully included within the realm of social life. The compelling spectacle of the Western outlaw therefore offers her an uncanny reminder of her own precarious identity as a liminal social body constantly vulnerable to institutional violence because it has no rights the state is bound to respect: “For them, life and death are simultaneously equal and present” (25).

4. The White Man Creates the Black Man

- 16 At one point in *Citizen* Rankine quotes Fanon's dictum that in phantasmic terms "the white man creates the black man" (128). If, as Fanon insists, to exist is to exist in relation to an otherness, Rankine extends this insight by showing how the social fate of the black subject is to exist in the paradoxical relation of white racial recoil *from* and fetishistic fascination *with* the black body. Her writing traces the effects of this paradoxical positioning in the way the white gaze simultaneously establishes a cautionary distance from the black body while constantly invigilating its actions, regulating its movements, moralizing its behavior, and securing its position in the place of social death. Such white disavowal of blackness nevertheless maintains a continuing libidinal connection to its repudiated object—the desire to disavow, is, after all, still a *desire*—which potentially jeopardizes its own subjective security. Here, as Homi Bhabha observes, a certain irony appears: while complaining constantly of the supposed errancy of the black subject, its racially fantasized tendency to always be found in the wrong place (the gang, the street-corner, the jailhouse) rather than the right one (the school, the regular workplace, the stable nuclear family), the identificatory locus of white desire is always also divided from itself and in two places at once since it can only preserve the inviolability of its own racial self-image by means of its phantasmic investment in the idea and image of blackness (63).
- 17 The psychosocial mechanisms by which the white gaze produces the idea and image of blackness becomes the explicit focus of *Citizen*. Here Rankine exposes the illusory universality of civic rights and recognition by exploring the role played by the white "racial imaginary" in remanding the black subject to the social margin (30). To be "black in America," she writes, is to find yourself "trapped in disbelief," unable to recognize your own image in a culture which continually renders you invisible in the act of addressing you. Throughout *Citizen* Rankine anecdotally reflects this crisis in the registration of black subjectivity in a series of everyday exchanges which show how "blackness" is collectively produced by a kind of inclusive exclusion that erases the particularity of black personhood in the same movement as it asserts general and stereotypical claims about the realities of black experience. Sometimes these acts of erasure woundingly appear in the "confusion" of a close friend (a "confusion" *between* bodies which is also a fusion of black bodies) who unaccountably mistakes you for another—what she calls the "all black people look the same" moment (9); at others they present themselves in casual insinuations concerning the alleged inequity of affirmative action procedures in college selection and general hiring practices or the occasion your child is pushed to the subway floor by a white man "that did not see him, has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself" (17). The disavowal of black entitlement to respect and recognition in order to preserve the narcissistic satisfactions of whiteness is perfected in those moments when you are asked to assume responsibility for your colleague's failure to acknowledge you: "Yes, and in your mail the apology note appears referring to "our mistake." Apparently your own invisibility is the real problem causing her confusion. This is how the apparatus she propels you into begins to multiply its meaning" (43).
- 18 Yet while the "apparatus" of white prestige presupposes the social marginalization of the black subject, it also and always requires the production of prejudicial images of blackness in the service of its own repression. Repeatedly in *Citizen* Rankine suggests

that the integrity and inner coherence of white identity depends upon the phantasmic appearance of a formless black threat against which it must defend its interests and secure its borders. This appearance is central to the scene where her protagonist attends her appointment at the home of her trauma therapist:

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 pinscher or a German shepherd had 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. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry.

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

- 19 Crucial to this scene is Rankine's virtuosic refashioning of lyric temporality to conflate two different orders of time. While lyric temporality typically achieves some of its most powerful intensifying effects by replacing narrative or historical time with the continuing present of poetic address, Rankine here dissolves the special "now" of lyrical enunciation into an injurious stream of historical echoes and associations. This reversal powerfully appears in the tension between two different senses of the term "appointment." Considered within the situational limits of Rankine's lyric present tense the passage's emotional power lies in how the speaker's appointment almost fails to take place as she is unexpectedly subjected to her therapist's farrago of racial fear and hostility; but seen differently the terrible revelation concealed in her hostile reception is that her appointment has somehow *already* happened since her body is always already appointed to the stereotypical role of the unaccountable and uncontrollable social phantasm whose existence reciprocally guarantees the whiteness and rightness of her therapist's subjective sovereignty. To be "appointed" in this sense is precisely not to be recognized on your own terms—we must never forget, Du Bois reminds us, that most Americans answer all queries regarding blackness "a priori" and in advance (48)—but to appear instead with what Rankine calls "the full force of your American positioning" as the embodiment of white racial fantasies and anxieties (14). Similarly, Rankine's desolating observation about the Rodney King beating ("Before it happened it had happened and happened") offers both a melancholy judgment upon the ghastly repetitiveness of racialized police brutality and a broader onto-political insight into the strange double time of black existence in the wake of slavery (where contemporary black experience seems bleakly continuous with aspects of eighteenth century racial culture) and the continuing social death of black social life (116).
- 20 The strange double time of the (black) life of social death suffuses *Citizen's* opening pages where a disquieting rehearsal of a child's racially discriminatory schooling is abruptly interrupted by the disconcerting photographic image of the street-sign "Jim Crow Road" which still adorns an otherwise unremarkable cul-de-sac in Flowery Branch, Georgia. Irrupting into the text without preface or explanatory context, the image seizes hold of us like a "punctum," Barthes's term for that element of an artwork which pricks a hole in our accustomed ways of seeing to expose the affective and ideological histories concealed within them (26-27).⁸ Slicing through the ideological circuits which maintain and disseminate the illusion of "post-racial America," Rankine's photographic punctum symbolically sutures the Jim Crow history of black social marginalization and economic exclusion to the segregated affluence of modern exurban white communities. Like her subsequent seemingly placeless quotation of a 1930 lynching image, Rankine's invocation of "Jim Crow Road" suddenly stretches our

sense of historical time by inscribing the unfinished legacy of white supremacy at the core of American social modernity. Through the uncanny doubling of temporality engendered by these kinds of punctum effects what “gets reconstructed as metaphor” in *Citizen* is the failed project of Reconstruction in a society where liberty, property, bodily integrity, civil rights and whiteness still remain inextricably entwined (5).

- 21 Throughout *Citizen* Rankine re-examines the repertoire of social and psychic injuries which produced the burdened individuality of black freedom. Prominent among these are experiences of social invisibility (“she never actually saw you sitting there”) and voicelessness (repetitively caused by injurious racial encounters that “strike you across the larynx”) and those feelings of disequilibrium, resentment and incomprehension inculcated by the white supremacist ordinary of everyday life (6-7). She explores this supremacist ordinary in a sequence of “microaggressions” wherein a commonplace encounter between her speaker and a white friend abruptly collapses into exasperated antagonism when her confidant’s momentary racial coding of their situation confronts her with the phantasmic role played by her irreducible racial otherness in the (re)production of the white social imaginary. Recurrently the wounding appearance of racial asymmetry at the heart of social recognition reveals itself in a breakdown or failure of tone—a breakdown repeatedly signaled by the speaker’s outraged challenge “What do you mean?”—because “tone” for Rankine is never merely personal but always also involves a kind of social pre-positioning or “everyday kind of maneuver” which helps us both to “read the spaces between things” and determine who and what is to be accorded value in those “everyday” public spaces (the café, the street, the restaurant, the mall) where “equality and sharing are legislated to happen, where one has expectations for justice, for evenhandedness, and for ‘we are all just people here’ indifference” (Berlant and Rankine, *Bomb*).
- 22 Rankine identifies an equally pernicious kind of social pre-positioning in the ruinous consequences for black sovereignty of its internalization of the white racial imaginary which leaves black life, David Marriott ruefully observes, originally violated by a whiteness that comes from the inside out and trapped within the white projection of blackness as social death (15). Throughout *Citizen* the thanatological horizon of black life continually appears in the sounding of Trayvon Martin’s name by the car radio: “Yes, and this is how you are a citizen” (51). Periodically the need for psychological relief from such relentless exposure to racial injury produces a psychic split between the subject who suffers and its self-alienated articulation of a “go-along-to-get-along tongue” which “pushes your own tongue aside” to perform black deference for the emotional reassurance of a white audience (154). Eventually the internalised burden of such self-alienated existence (“Yes officer rolled around on my tongue, which grew out of a bell that could never ring because its emergency was a tolling I was meant to swallow”) threatens the complete dissolution of the personality:

Don’t say I if it means so little,
holds the little forming no one.
You are not sick, you are injured—
You ache for the rest of your life.
How to care for the injured body,
the kind of body that can’t hold
the content it is living? (105).

- 23 Preeminent in Rankine's artistic response to this predicament is the lyrical undoing or volatilization of narrative structures which sustain the phantasmic scenario of white supremacy:

You like to think memory goes far back though remembering was never recommended. Forget all that, the world says. The world's had a lot of practice. No one should adhere to the facts of narrative, the facts that create lives. To your mind feelings are what create a person, something wild vandalizing whatever the skull holds. (61)

- 24 Rankine's reservation about the narrative facts "that create lives" within the workings of the white racial imaginary is that they too easily elide black life with the originary white fantasy of blackness as social death. Instead she inscribes this black lack back into these narrative facts ("the problem is simply a lack, a lack before, during, and after") by cultivating a style of double lyric which considers black life simultaneously from two perspectives as both what is crucial to, and presumptively discounted within, the realm of shared social experience (64). Rankine's elaboration of this style of double writing recalls to mind Adorno's remark that lyric is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism which can only protect the authenticity of the experience it is seeking to preserve by refusing the detour into sovereign or unencumbered individuality and keeping in view the relation between the subject and the objective generality of worldly things as they press themselves upon us (219). Like *Lonely*, this sense of lyric as the subjective expression of a general antagonism emerges in *Citizen* in small instances of alterity or moments of potent negation which disturb the ontological presumptions of white sovereignty and the ideological representations of the white racial imaginary by exposing their hidden foundation in the dereliction of black being.
- 25 Rankine presents a compelling instance of such potent negation in her rendition of Serena Williams's suddenly explosive behavior after a series of outrageously unjust line-calls during the 2004 Women's US Open. "No one could understand what was happening," she writes, "Serena in her denim skirt, black sneaker boots, and dark mascara, began wagging her finger and saying 'no, no, no,' as if by negating the moment she could propel us back into a legible world" (27). Crucial to recognize in this description is how the antagonistic terms of American racial reality become implicated in the style of Rankine's poetic saying. To grasp the full significance of this scene we need to realize the full force of Rankine's conditional ("as if") by, as it were, negating the negation in order to give voice to what ideology conceals; what "propels us back into a legible world," that is, is not Williams's momentary negation but rather her anguished performance of her racial prepositioning as a black body in historically white space, a performance which "illuminate(s) the erasure the attempted erasure triggers" (24). The continuing enclosure of black life in the afterlife of slavery means that Williams's "moment of manumission," in Rankine's arresting phrase, can never simply arrive in a gesture of pure transcendence or singular recalcitrance; instead the enduring work of freedom requires the revelation or making "legible" of the basis of white authority in the production and performance of black subjection (30).
- 26 Rankine's meditation upon the vexed genealogy of racial prepositioning also comprises the affective and political core of the various "Situation Scripts" she created in collaboration with the photographer and filmmaker John Lucas which employ a kind of temporal and scenic double exposure to inscribe the wake of slavery at the heart of black civic identity. Here is the opening of the "Script for Situation in Memory of

Trayvon Martin”: “My brothers are notorious. They have not been to prison. They have been imprisoned. The place is not a place you enter. It is a no place. My brothers are notorious. They do regular things, like wait. On my birthday they say my name. They will never forget that we are named. What is that memory?” (89).

- 27 How are we to understand this paradoxical place which is “no place,” this “prison” that is “not a prison you enter” but where you still find yourself “imprisoned”? In two ways at once: first by extending the idea of the prison beyond its immediate institutional environs to encompass the wider contemporary American social field where black “brothers” hardly need to go to prison to discover that they are already *in* prison given the mutual entanglement of black citizenship and black dispossession; and by relatedly acknowledging that this place which is “no place” symbolizes the unrealized destination of equal citizenship for a people who have never been accorded full social rights and recognition and who can “never forget” that their four-hundred year old exile from sovereignty and self-possession began when they was first “named” and known by someone else’s title. Rankine’s mournful presentation of this black civic “no place” accrues additional affective weight from the artful spatial syntax which simultaneously expands and contracts the historical scene of her writing. A remarkable, and remarkably appalling, instance of this spatial syntax appears in her interposition of a souvenir snapshot of a white crowd casually disporting itself at a 1930 lynching between two situation scripts memorializing recent black victims of racial homicide. Rankine’s rendition of racial violence here is both terrifyingly immediate and radically historicizing insofar as her imagistic reconfiguring of *Public Lynching* throughout the two sections that enclose it resituates these contemporary killings in the continuing legacy of slavery’s long and unbroken unfolding. The recursive echo of *Public Lynching* in “Trayvon”—a section which never names its child victim—therefore lends a terrible historical dimension to his public slaughter:

Those years of and before me and my brothers, the years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs, boy, hey boy, each a felony, accumulate into the hours inside our lives where we are all caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its root our limbs, a throat sliced through and when we open our mouths to speak, blossoms, o blossoms, no place coming out, brother, dear brother, that kind of blue. (89-90)

- 28 In moments like these Rankine presents lynching as both a symbol of the black body’s continuing vulnerability to gratuitous violence and as a metaphor for the still suspended promise of black citizenship “caught hanging” in the abyssal space between social death and civil rights. The same metaphor recurs in the lavish poetic sentence that opens her situation script on the Jena Six where a black pupil, upon encountering the noose his white classmates have suspended over a schoolyard tree to assert their racial dominion over public space, is suddenly apprised of both his deeply provisional right to incorporation in civil society (symbolized here by the counter-seat protests and hardened seats at the back of buses during Jim Crow) and the affective power of this restaging of black servitude in diminishing black hopes of equality and autonomy (“this is how they learn the ropes”):

As he walked across grass still green from summer walking out of the rain a step beyond into a piece of sky dry all day for him in this moment a shelter as he sat beneath the overhanging branches of the ‘white tree’ surprising himself at the center of the school yard thinking of the slight give in the cushions of the counter seats he had read about in the textbooks did the hardness of the ground cross the

hardness of the seats in buses as he waited to be noticed listening to the lift and fall of the leaves above him. (99)

5. What Ails You, Dedmon?

- 29 But while Rankine's situation scripts repeatedly return to the coincidence between black life and black social death they also locate the origins of antiblack violence in a fundamental contradiction at the core of white sovereignty which leaves it trapped within the historical circumference of its own phobias and fears. This contradiction can be briefly outlined: the historical production of blackness as social death is the ideological mechanism that enables whiteness to affirm itself in its sovereignty and supremacy; but simultaneously this prior dependence of white upon black being inscribes a lack or insufficiency at the heart of white identity that threatens its ontological security. The ontological foundation of white sovereignty in black excorporation therefore appears to place whiteness in an impossible dilemma in which blackness must be both avowed and disavowed, relentlessly manifested and remorselessly obliterated from view. One solution, of course, is to ontologize black extinction by constantly reproducing black life as social death, and Rankine remains minutely attentive, as we have seen, to the ways modern state power and the contemporary public sphere conserve white hegemony by continually reconfiguring the radical contingency of black civic existence. Equally revealing in her writing, though, are those moments when the compulsion to disavow the intrusive black phantasm intrinsic to white self-possession precipitates explosions of supremacist violence which also conceal currents of unappeasable mourning for the impossible fantasy of an absolutely inviolable and self-founding white sovereignty.
- 30 A striking instance of the process described here is the script for situation video "In Memory of James Craig Anderson" which recalls Anderson's 2011 lynching in Jackson, Mississippi, by a gang of white racists who robbed and beat him before running him over in a pickup truck. Crucial to Rankine's script is her uncanny doubling of the scene of killing in which Denyl Dedman's pickup is simultaneously figured as the murder weapon and a metonym for the law of white supremacy which regards black bodies as so much disposable flesh for the execution of white fantasies of absolute sovereignty and racial mastery: "James Anderson is dead. The pickup truck is a figure of speech. It is as the crown standing in for the kingdom." Conscripted into helpless passivity by the cool technological gaze of the CCTV camera we can only watch as Dedmon's truck "activates its darkness" (the ceaseless reproduction of an antiblack world) in a violent affirmation of supremacist feeling which remakes Anderson's body in the act of destroying it as a mere thing, an "object" not a subject, the inhuman life of social death: "The pickup truck is a condition of darkness in motion. It makes a dark subject. You mean a black subject. No, a black object." What is also remarkable about this scene, however, is the abrupt conversion of Dedmon's "explosive anger" into the "imploding anger" of a whiteness which finds itself robbed of racial prestige in the act of affirming it by the desolating intuition that its sovereignty is never simply self-possessing but contingent upon its inscription of deathliness at the heart of black experience: "James Craig Anderson is dead. What ails you Dedmon? What's up? What's up is James Craig Anderson is dead. So sorry. So angry, an imploding anger. It must let you go. It let you go" (95).

31 It must let you go—but how? Is there an ending to the ongoing emergency of antiblack violence and the perpetuation of a racial order based on black subjugation? In her more pessimistic moments Rankine seems to struggle to believe so as she laments “I don’t know how to end what doesn’t have an ending” (159). Certainly any ending we can envisage, *Citizen* suggests, requires whiteness to first renounce the cruel optimism of its attachment to an idea of inviolable sovereignty founded upon the phantasmic production of black social death. Such attachments, as the plight of the aptly-named Dedmon reminds us, inevitably culminate not just in the repetitive rehearsal of antiblack violence but also the destruction or deadening (dedmoning?) of a capacity in whiteness to transform itself by becoming other than it is. Yet as Slavoj Žižek points out—and as Dedmon is ultimately compelled to confront—subjective sovereignty is always already marked by the presence of some negative or nonsovereign element which underwrites its phantasmic coherence; real freedom and genuine self-possession therefore demand we acknowledge the nonsovereign element in ourselves and embrace our subjective founding in fantasy and lack in order to conceive identity and intersubjectivity in new and less violent terms (15). Understood in this way Rankine’s pedagogical framing of the American racial scene (“It wasn’t a match, I say. It was a lesson”) has little in common with simplistic notions of art as “educational” or “consciousness-raising”; instead it presents a series of “limit situations” in which the subject is brought up against the self-limitation imposed by its foundational dependence upon some nonsovereign outside in order that it might transcend its fantasies of absolute sovereignty and achieve another life beyond their grasp (159).⁹ In its exposure to the limit situation Rankine’s (white) subject is temporarily compelled to inhabit life “in the break” in Fred Moten’s words, sundered from sovereignty and momentarily wrested from its defensive investment in a world grounded in supremacist thinking. The daunting but inescapable necessity of such exposure is implacably apparent in Rankine’s coercively confiding use of the generalized second-person (with its insinuating corollary “So where do you stand in relation to all this?”) which reminds us both that there is no exception from the state of exception that defines the American racial emergency and that any passage beyond it towards another way of living requires the emergence of a white subject no longer wholly constrained by the prior ontology of whiteness. Or as Rankine writes to this subject at the end of *Citizen*: “To be left, not alone, the only wish – / to call you out, to call out you” (145).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adorno, Theodor. “Lyric Poetry and Society.” *The Adorno Reader*, edited by Brian O’Connor, Blackwell, 2000, pp. 211-229.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge, 2015.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1981.

- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.
- . "Claudia Rankine by Lauren Berlant," *Bomb* 129, 2014, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/claudia-rankine/>. Accessed April 2, 2022.
- Chapman, Mary. *Making Noise, Making News: Suffrage, Print Culture and U.S. Modernism*. Oxford UP, 2014.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and The Postcolonial Imperative." *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994, pp. 57-93.
- Chan, Mary Jean. "Towards a Poetics of Racial Trauma: Lyric Hybridity in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2018, pp. 137-163.
- Culler, Jonathan. "Lyric History and Genre." *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, Johns Hopkins UP, 2014, pp. 63-76
- . *Theory of the Lyric*. Harvard UP, 2015.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Edited by Henry Gates Jr. Oxford UP, 2007.
- Dubrow, Heather. Lyric Forms." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature 1500-1600*, edited by Arthur F. Kinney, Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 178-199.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann, Grove Press, 1968.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford UP, 1997.
- Hume, Angela. "Towards an Antiracist Eco-poetics: Waste and Wasting in the Poetry of Claudia Rankine." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2016, pp. 79-110.
- Jackson, Virginia. *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*. Princeton UP, 2005.
- Jenkins, Eric S. "Another Punctum: Animation, Affect and Ideology." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2013, pp. 575-591.
- Kimberley, Emma. "Politics and Poetics of Fear after 9/11 in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2011, pp. 777-791.
- MacMillan, Rebecca. "The Archival Poetics of Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2017, pp. 173-202.
- Marriott, David. *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being*. Stanford UP, 2018.
- Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. U of Minnesota P, 2003.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death*. Harvard UP, 1982.
- Rankine, Claudia. "The First Person in the Twenty-First Century." *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*, edited by Kate Sontag and David Graham, Graywolf Press, 2001, pp. 132-36.
- . *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*. Penguin, 2017.
- . *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Penguin, 2014.
- Rankine, Claudia, and Juliana Spahr, editors. *American Women Poets in the 21st Century*. Wesleyan Press, 2002.
- Reed, Anthony. *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2014.

Meara, Sharma. "Blackness as the Second-Person." *Guernica: A Magazine of Arts and Politics*.
<https://www.guernicamag.com/blackness-as-the-second-person/>. Accessed April 6, 2022.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke UP, 2016.

Skillman, Nikki. "Lyric Reading Revisited: Passion, Address and Form in *Citizen*." *American Literary History*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2019, pp 419-452.

Warren, Calvin L. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism and Emancipation*. Duke UP, 2018.

Zizek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. Verso, 1997.

NOTES

1. As Emma Kimberley observes, in *Lonely* "fear is depicted as an instrument of confusion and control, with the Hegelian idea that images of death are used by the government to keep the citizens in a permanent state of fear for their own lives, thus seeing emergency powers as a legitimate and necessary intrusion" (787).
2. In preparing these remarks I have primarily drawn upon Jonathan Culler's "Lyric History and Genre" and his *Theory of the Lyric*, Heather Dubrow's "Lyric Forms," and Virginia Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*.
3. Several critics have written illuminatingly upon Rankine's singular relationship to lyric tradition. Three responses that have informed my thinking here are Angela Hume's reading of Rankine's "vexed lyric mode" as an attempt to "register the structural forces and forms of power that both racialize and subject raced bodies and environments to degradation and violence"; Mary-Jean Chang's critique of Rankine's "critical awareness of the need to refashion the lyric in response to the tribulations of being a black citizen in contemporary America"; and Rebecca MacMillan's account of *Lonely* as a kind of "archival poetics" structured by "visual and textual documents that engage the questions of what it means to live through and chronicle" moments of historical crisis. See Hume 80; Mary-Jean Chan 139; and Rebecca MacMillan 173.
4. Revealingly, Spahr's speculative reimagining of contemporary lyric poetics appears in a volume co-edited with Rankine herself.
5. Calvin L Warren interrogates the historical incarnation of blackness as the idea of metaphysical "nothing" in *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism and Emancipation* 6.
6. On Rankine's strategic usage of second-person address see Sharma Meara "Blackness as the Second Person."
7. Rankine, Claudia, "The First Person" 134.
8. On the role of the punctum in the work of ideological defamiliarization, see Eric S. Jenkins, 576.
9. Marriott, David 86.

ABSTRACTS

This article considers Claudia Rankine's representation of racial violence and the culture of white supremacy in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* and *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Beginning from her conviction of the fundamental connection between white supremacist thinking and the enclosure of black life within the social death of slavery, it explores the consequences for both

black and white identity of white fantasies of absolute sovereignty. Central to Rankine's elaboration of these questions, the article maintains, is her virtuosic reconfiguring of lyric form to expose the ideological and discursive mechanisms that organise American racial reality.

INDEX

Keywords: Claudia Rankine, Don't Let Me Be Lonely, Citizen, social emergency, white supremacy, social death, anti-blackness, sovereignty, lyric

AUTHOR

LEE SPINKS

Lee Spinks is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. He has published books on Friedrich Nietzsche, Michael Ondaatje and James Joyce and numerous articles on modern and contemporary American literature, Postcolonial writing, and critical theory.