

American Lyric, American Surveillance, and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*

KEEGAN COOK FINBERG

Abstract

This essay contends that Claudia Rankine's Citizen: An American Lyric (2014) invites an overdue conversation between recent scholarship in lyric theory and writing on racial surveillance, including material on bias in artificial intelligence and disciplinary policing strategies. I argue that Citizen manipulates received structures of the lyric as both a racial and a carceral apparatus and compares those structures to contemporary forms of racial surveillance. Through the revelation of similarity in lyric and surveillance structures, Citizen illustrates a method of reading that exploits lyric history and form to suggest a reorientation of surveillance and a way of coping with its effects. I argue that this new American lyric is invested in participating in public life.

Perhaps you remember the image of Johari Osayi Idusuyi holding open Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) at the Donald Trump campaign rally in Springfield, Illinois, in the fall of 2015. In the image I remember, Idusuyi is circled in red; she is seated just over Trump's left shoulder.¹ You cannot see her face because the book completely conceals it, but her dark fingers are spread out over the glaring white of Rankine's cover image. She is sitting in a sea of white people, except for a few other faces dotting her section behind the podium. The cover of *Citizen* was at that point iconic—the reading public knew that the book was about antiblack racism and police violence—and so the image went viral; a planned protest, many assumed.² In the next few days, video footage and several interviews revealed the whole story. Idusuyi was an undecided voter when she went to hear Trump speak, but the rally irked her. As she explains it, the campaign asked her to sit in VIP seats for public optics because she was one of the few black people in attendance. Furthermore, she found the Trump supporters—egged on by Trump

¹ For this image, see *Bookforum's* "Paper Trail."
² By November 2015, *Citizen* had already been on the *New York Times* Bestseller list, was a finalist for the National Book Award, had been nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award in two categories (it won for poetry), and had won prizes from the PEN Center USA, the NAACP, and other organizations. Articles and profiles of Rankine had appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and numerous other publications. See "Worlds Collide," Brown, and Idusuyi, for discussions of the image of Idusuyi reading going viral and potential reasons that Idusuyi was reading this book.

himself—to be bullying and offensive, and so she decided to tune them out and to focus on her book instead of the rally. She was reading two books at the time, but she happened to have forgotten *The Alchemist* and to have brought *Citizen* with her. When asked by neighboring supporters to pay attention to the rally, she ignored them. When they accused her of not wanting to be there, and they asked her to leave, she responded, “I do want to be here, that’s why I’m here. You don’t know who I am. I’m reading my book because I’m uninterested. Did you not just see what happened? This person disrespects women, minorities, everybody and you’re still supporting him” (Idusuyi).

Some people on the left were disappointed by the parts of this story that constituted coincidence, deciding at best it was a marvelous fluke (“Worlds Collide”; Brown). But as Jonathan Elmer argues, this was a moment of public address—Idusuyi knew that she was on TV—and it mirrors the way that *Citizen* recreates what lyric means in our contemporary society, “a litany of encounters – painful, awkward, enraging encounters – with a pervading racism that is hard to bring to visibility” (115). For Elmer, this public address is a moment of “public humanities.” I wish to argue something more humble: when faced with an unpleasant and potentially violent scene, Idusuyi did what she could to sustain herself. She was “uninterested,” and yet she wanted to be there, to participate by coping. Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* demonstrates how to cope. *Citizen* provides a method of reading that constitutes survival when the “public” consists of witnessing or enduring potential or actively unfolding antiblack, state-sanctioned violence. Theories about the centrality of witnessing have a long history tied not only to citizenship and the humanities but also to lyric, the subtitle of Rankine’s book.

How might an “American lyric” constitute citizenship, as the title implies? What does that mean for an American public? I suggest that Rankine’s book answers these questions. The answer is partially about lyric and partially about knowing that you are on TV. That is, this essay considers two recent conversations: one that is broadly taking place in poetry and poetics and is often called “lyric theory,” and another, which is not usually thought about in terms of literature at all, the conversation about racial surveillance, bias in artificial intelligence, and disciplinary policing strategies. I contend that these conversations can productively be put together through a close look at Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*. First, this essay will explore theories of lyric and of surveillance, illustrating their relation to theories of the public. I will argue that *Citizen* manipulates received structures of the lyric as both a racializing and a carceral apparatus and compares those structures to contemporary forms of racial surveillance. The essay’s next section maps out how *Citizen* uses received structures of the lyric and its literary devices like countersurveillance technology to suggest a way of coping with these racializing forms. I conclude that *Citizen* illustrates a method of reading that exploits lyric history and form to suggest a reorientation of surveillance in service of black survival.

The Lyric and the Prison Cell

The question of what constitutes a contemporary American lyric is complicated. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics* ends by telling us that “the story of the lyric charts the history of poetics” (Jackson, “Lyric” 833). Indeed, lyric is often used to stand in for all poetry and sometimes all literature. Yet, it is usually agreed that what marks it as distinct from other literary forms has to do with the linked issues of expressivity and temporality. A lyric subject is a speaker who can exist out of time: as Virginia Jackson puts it, a lyric speaker “is thought to require as its context only the occasion of its reading” (*Dickinson’s Misery* 7); or as Jonathan Culler explains, it exists within a perpetual “now” or a “nontemporal lyric present” (“Francesco Giusti”). Jackson and Culler stand on opposite sides of a debate; but whether, like Culler, you believe that modern lyric is part of a long tradition of ritual event, or, like Jackson, you maintain it is characterized by expressive subjectivity that was created by more recent critical practices, you mostly agree that modern lyric is removed from the “public.” Helpfully, Michael Warner provides a definition of lyric poetry to contrast it to public address, claiming it is simply “in a way the opposite” (79). Warner explains that instead of addressing real persons and living in real time, lyric poetry creates an atemporal private scene that we are invited to overhear. We do not read the “I” or the “you” in lyric poetry to be us or anyone we know, but rather, in his example, lover and beloved. These pronouns do not have to be lover or beloved, but even when a lyric seemingly addresses the audience, theorists of the lyric maintain it is not a direct public address because of issues of iterability and textuality.³ Where public discourse puts us into participatory interaction with others, models of modern lyric make us into lurkers and snoops with our hands tied.

However, there are increasingly more forms of civic engagement that take us for merely spectators. With the rise of both sanctioned and clandestine surveillance, a large part of public discourse is now defined by bearing witness to “private” acts. To take one example that Rankine’s *Citizen* is also interested in, dispatch records and cell phone videos have recorded scenes of previously hidden violence perpetrated by police. In addition to interrogating the moments when these shielded acts are made public, Rankine’s book disrupts, appropriates, and reproduces these forms of surveillance as lyric discourse.⁴ Parts of the book include “situation videos” created in collaboration with filmmaker John Lucas, or scripts for videos that readers can watch online. When an interviewer brought up the use of videos in the book, Rankine answered: “have you seen the recent video in Clinton correctional facility where guards refer to a black prisoner’s ‘non-compliant’ body? He is non-compliant because he is dead” (“Claudia Rankine: ‘Blackness’”). This is not an episode Rankine writes about in *Citizen*. Rather, it is a moment of racial violence that she saw recently on the news. I read her answer as an indication that the public has come to be constituted by the act of witnessing, making everyday life more like definitions of lyric. *Citizen* inverts lyric’s tendency to make the intimate scene public by showing how these scenes have already become widely circulated. By intimate here, I do

³ See Culler’s “Address to Listeners or Readers” (*Theory of the Lyric*, 191-201).

⁴ By “surveillance” here I refer to both sanctioned and unsanctioned modes of watching and recording.

not mean that there is something intimate about the video; I mean that Rankine is exploring how this surveillance footage—public in the sense that it is mass consumed but also because it is an institutional scene—is experienced in a private moment and that the video affects those who watch it in an intimate sense. For Rankine, lyric form is everywhere, and it is in a state of extreme crisis. Mirroring surveillance, lyric is immobilizing and individuating, but it requires people to participate in (or at least be privy to) civic events, often scenes of violence toward African Americans.

The lyric scene is inherently an odd one—when do we speak to ourselves outside of time without any acknowledgment of someone else listening or without considering another subjectivity? And if lyric is the mind speaking to itself, how exactly would someone else overhear? Nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics have created numerous metaphors that might enable the mind to speak to itself and for the reader to hear the mind's inner workings. John Stuart Mill originated the saying that lyric is not heard but overhead, and his carceral metaphor for the lyric speaker is very influential. In 1833, he wrote that the lyric is “the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen, in the next” (Mill 350). As Rankine's description of the prison video shows, the lament of the prisoner is now seen by all, heard by all. Yet, it is heard by all individually, as if readers really are positioned in one of Mill's solitary cells. For example, as the interview structure indicates, Rankine could have watched the abuse of the Clinton prisoner on her phone the night before her interview. The visible, audible lament of the prisoner is the American lyric, and it is public discourse. The structure of private overhearing—which I am inviting us to think about in terms of the lyric in *An American Lyric*—has come to constitute the public.

Citizen is not the only place to look for an argument about a crisis in the definition of lyric. The troublesome history of the lyric as a solitary fictive voice has been well told, especially in recent years. The same year *Citizen* was published, several important books on lyric theory also entered the stage: Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins's *The Lyric Theory Reader*, Gillian White's *Lyric Shame*, and Anthony Reed's *Freedom Time* were published in 2014; Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* came out in 2015; and Dorothy Wang's *Thinking Its Presence* in 2013.

The broadest in scope, Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* delineates norms and standards for what makes Western lyric poetry, which, he argues, is a transhistorical genre that began in Ancient Greece. In contrast, Jackson and Prins compiled an anthology to illustrate that the lyric as we know it today is made through historical practices that both idealize and, therefore, narrow the larger category of poetry. Elaborating on Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery*, they explain that reading poetry as lyric “emerged by fits and starts in the nineteenth century” but “became mainstream practice in the development of modern literary criticism in the twentieth century” (General Introduction 2). According to Jackson and Prins, Mill suggests that we read with the prison metaphor in mind—he does not say that this is the definition of lyric, and he definitely does not indicate that it is normal for everyone to be in prison cells.

However, a codification—or normalizing of the overhearing metaphor—happens through professional criticism, which increasingly defines the lyric, and indeed all poetry, according to these criteria. They write that after the mid-twentieth century “turning away from listeners” became standard for the lyric genre, which then became the norm for poetry. While Jackson and Prins argue that the “lyricization of poetry” contains the overheard solitary speaker at its core, in contending that we maintain the lyric as a robust, transhistorical genre, Culler suggests that a focus on the speaker, either talking to an imagined audience or being overheard, is a limiting contemporary pedagogical misstep (*Theory of the Lyric* 2, 115).

White’s *Lyric Shame* takes up Jackson and Prins’s historicization of lyric, and she argues that the contemporary lyric product is so overblown that it is a shaming caricature, whereby lyric is defined as “about” a confessional self and the avant-garde exists to eschew such a self. In other words, for White, the avant-garde depends on this constructed model as much as lyric does. Dorothy Wang and Anthony Reed’s books, which are discussed later in my essay, separately illustrate how the category of experimental or avant-garde poetry and the category of the lyric are shaped by race, even if race and racism are often elided by white lyric theorists. Neither *Thinking Its Presence* nor *Freedom Time* discusses the prison cell as a central category for the poetry they examine, though they both point out in different ways that notions of an unfragmented, unquestioned lyric subject rely on structures of whiteness.

It is important to note that poetry itself has been critiquing notions of the coherent lyric subject—and the odd temporality induced by how she might turn her back to her audience or perhaps be locked in a cell—for a long time. As Wang, Reed, and White show, this model is deconstructed in many types of contemporary poems, and their method of deconstruction is often what puts them into categories like “avant-garde and experimental” or “minority poetry.” In addition to questioning unmarked whiteness, Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* contains all the hallmarks of experimental writing: borrowed text, multiple or fractured voices, constraint-based systems of creation, ekphrastic cataloging, and acute engagement with visual art. The fact that it was the first book to be nominated by the National Book Critic’s Circle for both the categories of poetry and of criticism proves that it is engaged in a form of cultural critique, an avant-garde standard. The fact that it won for poetry and lost for criticism proves its position within known strategies of reading (i.e. it seems like a poem), and it also proves the power of the subtitle that Rankine has now used for two of her books, *An American Lyric*. Yet, as the book is self-consciously and recognizably “lyric,” it also questions notions that the lyric tradition is separate from the public or ideas about literature as set apart from public life. *Citizen* enters into this conversation to say that this troublesome metaphor of the lyric poet talking to herself is not “poetry’s utopian horizon,” as Jackson’s reading of nineteenth-century print cultural influences on lyric theory situated it. It is also not just a readerly projection, as Culler suggests (*Theory of the Lyric* 109-25). In fact, this prison metaphor is the everyday. Surveillance has made the experience of private emotions part of a shared public and has, in a sense, created subjects publicly.

The contemporary surveilled prison cell comes with a very particular temporality, which Rankine exposes, and I will explore below. Relatedly, *Citizen* explores the formulation of a subject performing for one audience though ostensibly speaking to another. The prison guards in the example above are not performing for the camera or a prisoner. However, as in many cases of exposed state-sponsored or sanctioned violence, the guards implement what society will allow, and their violence is historically and structurally prefigured. Rankine points out that the indirection of the formulation of lyric address is a historical artifact that, when we see it in the everyday, makes violence allowable, as it also arrests readers into inaction through their mediated positioning.

Although it has not directly been tied to the lyric prison cell, much scholarship has been devoted to the disciplinary force, predictive power, and brutality of surveillance in *Citizen* and other recent poetry.⁵ Meanwhile, outside of literary studies, the large category of “surveillance” had become the central currency of experienced mediation by 2014. Beginning with issues like Wikileaks and the National Security Agency, gliding into debates about ubiquitous facial recognition technologies, it has now become clear that even moments of state crisis about surveillance lead to further surveillance. The sphere of virtual overhearing—and of watching—often makes up the news, and it is on our minds so much that perhaps it changes our behaviors. New surveillance technologies have the effect of moving Foucault’s metaphorical architecture of Jeremy Bentham’s eighteenth-century panopticon to every area of virtual and real existence. But they also distinguish, sort, and stratify in newly “scientific” ways. The technology of not just collecting but also parsing has changed, shaping many aspects of neoliberal regimes. Drone technology, policing algorithms, biometrics, and data analysis sort and create bodies and spaces as much as they describe them.

In *Carceral Capitalism*, Jackie Wang uses the metaphor of “invisible cells” to explain how algorithmic forms of power work by targeting and categorizing certain populations and how “in marking subjects as potential risks, they are actually produced as such” (43). Examples that Jackie Wang considers include the COMPAS algorithm, which is used by courts and parole boards to calculate the risk of recidivism, a technology about which it is proven that black people are twice as likely to be incorrectly labeled “high risk” (49). Wang also carefully considers PredPol, software for law enforcement agencies that uses data mining and predictive analysis to foresee where crimes will occur (PredPol is short for “predictive policing”). As Wang puts it, “using crime data gathered by the police to determine where officers should go simply sends police to patrol the poor neighborhoods they have historically patrolled when they were guided by their intuitions and biases” (236). Wang shows that following the growing crisis of the police’s legitimacy after demonstrations, riots, protests, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, predictive analysis like PredPol is an attempt to revise the police’s public image by relying on so-called objective technologies. It is not just police that use these technologies—facial recognition and biometrics used by corporations, government institutions, and

⁵ See Bennett, Johnston, and Brady.

⁶ The ACLU forum “Will Artificial Intelligence Make Us Less Free?” examines the use of surveillance systems across public and private sectors, each essay showing that “disfavored communities and populations already subjected to disproportionate government scrutiny will bear the brunt of these new technologies.” For an article about the inaccuracy of these systems when it comes to people of color, see Lohr.

organizations also exert prejudice.⁶ Much of American public life is shaped by the cell: from mass incarceration, which depends on physical cells to systems that hold subjects in invisible cells, to witnessing the brutality that goes on inside of cells, real but far away.

One way to think of the role of modern lyric is as a method to understand the cell and the person in it. As David Rosen and Aaron Santesso argue, surveillance and literature are not too different because, in their words, surveillance shares “some of literature’s interests – most notably discovering the truth about other people” (10). As lyric in particular is occupied with discovering and making private subjects, new surveillance technology and its tactics are important to consider. As I will show in the following section, *Citizen* uses specific tactics of figurative and visual exploitation as lyric method to expose the racializing power of its historical structures.

Rankine’s Devices: Lyric as a Way to See You

From the beginning, *Citizen* foregrounds its literariness, which is linked to devices of hypermediation and surveillance. The book opens with a page simultaneously rich with literary devices and denying this fact:

When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows. Usually you are nestled under blankets and the house is empty. Sometimes the moon is missing and beyond the windows the low, gray ceiling seems approachable. Its dark light dims in degrees depending on the density of clouds and you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor. (5)

“Devices” here means our iPhones, tablets, and laptops. “You” are too tired to be distracted, too tired to look anything up. This foreshadows reading fatigue at the outrageous number of names of black people subjected to state-sanctioned murders that we will be challenged to look up (or that we will be too tired to look up) in the next hundred pages of *Citizen*. But the devices that we are too tired to turn on are also our inner resources, coping mechanisms, our *modus operandi*. What will we do, left to our own devices, but too fatigued to turn them on? This book disorients; it strips away our previous coping mechanisms, warning us now that it will make us vulnerable, tired, and without resources.

Yet, it is the third meaning of “devices” here that is the most challenging: literary devices. In a passage saturated by figurative language (alliteration, oxymoron, metaphor, reoccurring tropes), we are told that “you” are not in the realm of literary devices, but simply in the world of your memories, which passively “gets reconstructed as metaphor.” How is a metaphor constructed or reconstructed? What sort of reader does not root out devices or study how they are constructed but simply lets them “reconstruct?” What sort of experience of temporality demands this? Before I can begin to answer these questions, I need to further

⁷ The term “pun” itself is not clearly definable or classifiable, and I use it here to mean word play (Culler, “The Call of the Phoneme” 4).

attend to the pun on “devices.” Puns or wordplay of many kinds—paronomasia, antanaclosis, zeugma—proliferate in *Citizen*.⁷ The first prose poem incorporates a highly allegorical memory triggered by smell. It is a story about quotidian antiblack racism that involves unmemorable white people and happens to take place on the punning “White Plains Road.” Part of this story is your memory that “Sister Evelyn is in the habit of taping the 100s and the failing grades to the coat closet doors” (Rankine, *Citizen* 5). A nun “in the *habit*” sounds more like the punch line to a joke than the painful memory of a young girl that is recounted in this section. Is this the reconstruction that you are falling back into? This pun—and the others that run through the prose sections of *Citizen*—points out that we are cloaked in habits that create contexts, that the spaces that we live in affect the ways we think. Each pun reveals something crucial about these spaces. Unlike a metaphor or a rhyme, puns do not simply yoke, juxtapose, or travel between two concepts. Rather, they muddle them, or, as Debra Fried puts it, they “transform and unshape (staining a newspaper red all over, turning a door into a jar)”; in other words, puns “jumble” (Fried 83). In Derek Attridge’s words, puns are a “scandal” because they confuse the usual rules and purpose of language, not just by inserting ambiguity but also by enforcing it: “In place of a context designed to suppress latent ambiguity, the pun is the product of a context deliberately constructed to enforce an ambiguity, to render impossible the choice between meanings, to leave the reader or hearer endlessly oscillating in semantic space” (141).

The “devices” in the example above oscillate between: (1) the source of the documentation of state-sanctioned violence (i.e. the iPhones themselves or the video devices of surveillance), which is also the means for knowing, learning, or being kept up to date (participating in a public through social media, news, etc.); (2) the gumption to endure; and (3) the means of making speech literary or rhetorical, even the possibility of polysemy itself. Our iPhone is tainted by lyricism; our inner resources are transformed into poetry and a tablet. This is the world of *Citizen*, where designing, coping, and framing are staged as attention to multimedia through lyric literacy. This principle guides the short narratives about microaggressions, the “situation videos,” the meaningful movement between image and text, and the strategies of the text that orients itself outward. This is the “scandal” that Rankine enforces: that hypermediation, lyric poetry, and our ability to cope are muddled, superimposed onto each other.

The reader’s work here is to see that the lyric logic of the book itself is punning. Preoccupations of the book include “blues” (police uniforms, ocean colors recalling the middle passage, and blue as a state of being connected to the history of African American blues forms); the difficulty of breathing (allergens, pollens—both political and environmental) and other bodily effects of racism; and the contrast between black and white shadows or the paradox of hypervisibility and invisibility both as effects of racism. Puns force us to consider multiple contexts in order to be in on the “joke.” Readership gains a jumble of contextualizing information that allows us to participate in the text.

What happens to this jumble—how it is interpreted or how it interprets—is important. As Foucault has charted, as early as the seventeenth century, the telescope, lens, and light-beam shifted institutional power toward observation. The dispersal of a previously sovereign, unified power to the mere feeling of being watched produced profound changes. This turn to visibility—“humble modalities” and “minor procedures”—transformed institutions to *make* individuals by training them with “eyes that must see without being seen” (Foucault 171). By the early eighteenth century, as Foucault puts it, “using technologies of subjection and methods of exploitation, an obscure art of light and the visible was secretly preparing a new knowledge of man” (171). Since the connections to antiblack racism are readily made, it should not come as a surprise that American race struggles and the politics of the Black Panther Party’s resistance were what motivated Foucault to do this genealogy of prisons and power (Heiner 337). Further developing the theory of Foucauldian “knowledge,” and indeed linking it to the literary realm, much of *Citizen* meditates on new forms of watching or looking that carry the logic of surveillance. Indeed, the text is fixated on visibility, for example through its careful consideration of the pastime of watching and playing sports, a public and a surveilled experience.⁸ In the realm of sports, racism is experienced with anger, but specifically as seeing others’ anger: tennis player Serena Williams is angry about racist calls “in HD before your eyes”; soccer player Zinedine Zidane is described as “something is there before us” (Rankine, *Citizen* 122). Using the temporality of surveillance, the watching of Serena Williams’s anger is descriptive and in a sense predestined—it is paired with performance artist Jayson Musson’s (a.k.a. Hennessy Youngman) video to show us that something will happen, or it will get reconstructed (23). Under the disciplining gaze of white line judges and a white audience, Williams will be made to feel “most colored”; she will show the angry exterior that Hennessy Youngman explains. After Williams’s experience with bad calls, *Citizen* explains, “a year later that match would be credited for demonstrating the need for speedy installation of Hawk-Eye, the line-calling technology that took the seeing away from the beholder” (27). Yet the book questions whether the seeing can ever be taken away from the beholder: just a couple of pages later, Williams is accused of stepping on the line while serving, and wry parentheticals explain that “(the Hawk-Eye cameras don’t cover the feet, only the ball, apparently),” and although the foot-fault cannot be found on footage, it is somehow “seen” by the line judge (29). There will always be a form of racializing visibility—the humble modality of scrutiny that not only watches but also makes things happen—at play or, as Rankine puts it, “no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived” (24).

Later, in the situation script entitled “World Cup,” French soccer player Zinedine Zidane head-butts Italian Marco Materazzi, an action that ended his playing career. The poem here is a collage—a repurposing of language from Baldwin, Shakespeare, Fanon. The historical weight of race discrimination is laid atop the footage of Zidane’s small retaliation. The footage is slowed down on the video and printed screen by screen in the book to anticipate the head-butt, designed to allow viewers

⁸ Auto-style *Citizen* includes images that are not illustrative but form an invaluable part of the text. This interest in visibility is not a divergence from Rankine’s earlier books, most especially *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* which has the same subtitle. See Nealon and Macmillan.

and readers to pinpoint the second when Zidane's tenses his muscles to perform the act. Even if this moment was not originally seen, it can be reconstructed. This interrogation of visual perception seems to encapsulate the themes of hypervisibility and invisibility—both effects and sources of racism—that run through the book. These forms of technology—both literary and “scientific”—see the world but also create scandal; they are layered with blur and anticipation.

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Citizen famously uses “you” as the central referent for the lyric subject, rather than the traditional expressive “I” of lyric poetry. This “you” is multiple, which creates genuine discomfort as it makes the reader aware of her own positionality. As the book continues, pronouns—their power and their difficulty—are revealed to be a central theme.⁹ “He,” “she,” and “I” are introduced as the impetus behind the lyric use of “you.” Part V is a meditation on the book's strategy: “Sometimes ‘I’ is supposed to hold what is not there until it is.... This makes the first person a symbol for something. The pronoun barely holding the person together” (71). This desire to eschew symbols mirrors the state of being without devices. A fragmented subjectivity yearns toward completion. A few moments later, an interlocutor tells this speaker, “... the first person can't pull you together” (71). The “you” here is of course the informal, internal subject, but also it is all of you. The poem is describing the difficulty of pulling everyone (all these yous) regardless of gender, race, or class—or because of these aspects of our positioning—into a single pronoun.

In structuralist thought, pronouns and deictics are interesting because one needs context in order to understand them. If we do not have the context to understand them, we invent one. As Culler explains, deictics or shifters create a fictional situation of utterance. In the case of lyric poetry, they force readers to “construct a poetic narrator who can fulfill the thematic demands of the rest of the poem” (*Structuralist Poetics* 166-67). The shifters “I” and “you” have enormous power in that they could be anyone, and as Rankine points out above, they must refer to someone. And if they cannot, they must be a symbol for something. Reed argues that, for Rankine and other African American poets, speaking between pronouns has an extra layer of mystification from the position of the racialized subject (97). In African American writing specifically, the subject and the subject's unified voice have been decentered by a history of appropriation and revision (102). In other words, many types of experimental writing push back against the notion of a unified lyric subject, but in black writing these changing pronouns reflect “procedures through which some human lives can be made structurally insignificant and disposable, visible only in narrative as a reminder of some people's proximity to disappearance” (121). The “you” in *Citizen* does not bring everyone into a universal framework, but rather it clearly points out who is usually unmarked and who is not.

⁹ The philosophical importance of pronouns has long interested Rankine. In *The End of the Alphabet*, a relationship is puzzled through with pronouns (74-75). In *Plot*, a character quotes—or perhaps paraphrases—Virginia Woolf by asking, “What would the world be without an ‘I’ in it?” (62). In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, the speaker changes between I, You, and We. In that text, Rankine meditates on fear of death as relationship to society through a discussion of pronouns: “the relationships embedded between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ unhinge and lose all sense of responsibility. That ‘you’ functioning as other, now exists beyond our notions of civil and social space” (84).

A closer look at one of the short prose “microaggressions” in *Citizen* is necessary to understand the complexity of identification and context.

You and your partner go to see the film *The House We Live In*. You ask your friend to pick up your child from school. On your way home your phone rings. Your neighbor tells you he is standing at his window watching a menacing black guy casing both your homes. The guy is walking back and forth talking to himself and seems disturbed.

You tell your neighbor that your friend, whom he has met, is babysitting. He says, no, it’s not him. He’s met your friend and this isn’t that nice young man. Anyway, he wants you to know, he’s called 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. (15)

For the neighbor, the difference between the “nice young man” and the “menacing black guy” is simply context. When he met this friend through the speaker, he was harmless (“nice”), even infantile (“young”), but later the friend becomes criminal (“menacing”). Where in the home he is postracial, outside on the street he is racialized. The speaker’s request that her friend goes to the back not only resonates with the theme of invisibility in the text but also with the history of Jim Crow segregation as layers of racist historical memory unfold through this reference. This is a technique we see throughout the book, for example with David Hammons’s artwork on the cover that predicts and recalls Trayvon Martin’s murder after Rodney King’s beating through the history of lynching.

Subtle narrative details, like the response of “four police cars” and sirens for a call about an unidentified man on the street, show the larger context of the scene: likely a mostly white middle-class or upper-middle-class neighborhood; certainly a world where being black on the street can be criminal and at any moment prove fatal. As I was revising this essay, Ahmaud Arbery was killed while going for a run.¹⁰ Backyards or homes may or may not be safer: when I was working on an earlier version of this essay, Stephon Clark was murdered by police in his grandfather’s backyard; before the essay was published, Breonna Taylor was killed in her own apartment.¹¹ The repetition of the last line is crucial. “Yes, of course” may be an admission of white guilt, simultaneously a recognition, affirmation, and a surrender in the process of

¹⁰ See Fausset.

¹¹ See Robles and Del Real and Opper et al.

¹² See Rankine's interview with Lauren Berlant. At several readings, Rankine has mentioned that the microaggressions in the book are made up from stories from her friends.

negotiating white supremacist structures. The first time the phrase is uttered clearly by the speaker; the second utterance could be the friend or even the reader.

Rankine's method for creating the book was to collect the stories and experiences of her friends and colleagues.¹² In this way, it is a rereading or recasting of familiar lyric grammars. As she interrogates the possibility of the second-person "you," she considers several sentence structures for their implicit linguistic politics. When an interviewer asked Rankine if it felt like a burden to write about race, she responded, "for me, this will sound odd. I find it interesting to look at language itself and think about what language can do" ("Claudia Rankine: 'Blackness'"). This look at language itself—both what it can do and the ways in which it restricts or prohibits—is a central part of *Citizen's* focus. In one passage Rankine's speaker ("you") explains that she and a friend were "... comparing the merits of sentences constructed implicitly with 'yes, and' rather than 'yes, but.' You and your friend decided that 'yes, and' attested to a life with no turn off, no alternative routes" (Rankine, *Citizen* 8). By "a life with no turn off, no alternative routes," you and your friend refer to the state of being a racialized subject and the object of antiblack racism. The book catalogs the ways in which microaggressions, everyday hate speech, and then severe acts of violence sanctioned by the government dictate all modes of experience from breathing to inhabiting space. The book shows that there is often no room for protest or resistance in this environment, and language proves it. The grammar comes full circle toward the end of the text: "Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on" (151). For certain subjects, to be a citizen is to experience a life with "no turn off[s]" consistently having to "move on" the same path. The American lyric means experiencing this situation publicly, it means participating in shared grammars and surveillance.

In the long passage above, the doubled "Yes, of course" is not quite the "yes, and" of no alternative routes, of letting it go. "Yes, of course" is a related but slightly varied grammar. This grammar is the function of the reader—you—to say "yes, of course." As Culler argues, a rule of all shifters, and one might argue especially the second-person shifter "you," we misidentify as we read them, and then recreate context as we understand more. Thus, as we say "yes, of course," we are reconstructing metaphors. We are acknowledging that we cannot know and cannot create the situation exactly but rather can only reconstruct and affirm. This grammar of affirmation is in dialogue with theories and experience of surveillance. The temporality of surveillance is anticipation and affirmation. If nothing happens, surveillance is not necessary—the footage will not be viewed (Rosen and Santesso 11-12). Of course, the cameras may still be on, the ethos of danger enforced. Thus, the entire surveillance apparatus is about reconstructing the event that is to come. Surveillance enforces forms of control created around foreclosed notions of these events, and Rankine's poetry actively shows the ways in which surveillance shapes the lives of black people. As Simone Browne succinctly puts it in *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, racializing surveillance is a technology of social control wherein "moments and enactments of surveillance reify boundaries, borders, and bodies along racial lines, and where the outcome is often discriminatory treatment of those who are negatively racialized by such surveillance"

(16). Further illustrating this discriminatory treatment, Rankine has explained, “that’s one thing about being black in America. You have to curtail your movements, to live in such a way that what the white gaze projects upon blackness will not end your life. So you’re always thinking, can I walk at night? Can I hold Skittles in my hand? Can I have my cellphone out? If it glitters, will somebody think it’s a gun? At what point can I just be?” (Burke). Regardless of how readers interpret the subject position of the speaker of this “yes, of course,” the line is an acknowledgment of what Rankine refers to as the “white gaze” of surveillance that, by anticipating, creates a restricted present moment.

Browne’s work on race and biometric technology is particularly helpful for illuminating Rankine’s interest in literariness and devices, both in their capacity to do harm or exhaust and in their potential to soothe or provide coping mechanisms. In particular, pronoun misrecognition is helpfully put into conversation with racialized surveillance. As Reed claims that African American lyric or postlyric poetry draws attention to the way that black subjects can at any moment be disappeared, so too surveillance mechanisms go through a cycle of misrecognizing and disappearing black and brown faces. Most surveillance techniques use biometrics built on a white prototype and thus misidentify those outside it, and in some cases, specific groups of people are rendered “unmeasurable” (Browne 113). In other words, because they are built on prototypical whiteness, these technologies are remarkably less successful at recognizing and identifying people of color, causing grave consequences. Similarly, as scholars have pointed out, *Citizen’s* pronouns play with the assumption of an unmarked white default, but ultimately disallow it.¹³ The very “devices”—puns, shifters—that Rankine is interested in, like surveillance technologies, do not just curtail movements, but have the power to disappear or morph people. In pointing out a problem with our devices as similar to a problem with our grammar, Rankine is suggesting both a crisis and a potential of the lyric form. The answer may be a redirected lyric attention not too different from surveillance, or “sousveillance,” a term meaning unsanctioned countersurveillance.¹⁴ Browne coins the phrase *dark sousveillance* to refer to “the tactics employed to render one’s self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of undersight.” She explains, dark sousveillance is “an imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance, a critique that takes form in antisurveillance, countersurveillance, and other freedom practices” (21). *Citizen’s* lyric devices critique the white gaze by looking back, obfuscating, and reorienting through blurring and skewing techniques. Even Rankine’s answer to why she included situation videos is a form of dark sousveillance: why did she include situation videos in her *American Lyric*? Because the lyric is a prison in a video.

Conclusion: Lyric as Sousveillance

Enactment of a lyric version of sousveillance occurs in the changing pages of 134 and 135 of *Citizen*, which attend to the current context of police brutality. With

¹³ See Hunt and Lerner.

¹⁴ The term *sousveillance*, coined by Steve Mann, denotes an inversion of the power relations of surveillance that comes from above (Browne 18–19). Where surveillance would refer to the security footage from the prison video, sousveillance refers to the cell phone audio recording of the gunshots that killed Michael Brown, for example.

each printing of the book, these pages are altered. The first couple of printings listed names of men who were killed by police brutality and drew attention to the lack of justice for their killers. For example, the second printing reads:

November 23, 2012/ In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis

August 9, 2014/ In Memory of Michael Brown

(Rankine, *Citizen* 134)

February 15, 2014/ The Justice System

(Rankine, *Citizen* 135)

The dates listed next to names indicate when the young men were killed and the date next to “The Justice System” memorializes when the prosecution of Davis’s murder ended in a mistrial (the justice system’s death is implied). The first printing did not include the Michael Brown dedication, and as the printings continued, more names appeared including Eric Garner, John Crawford, and Sandra Bland. In the third printing the “February 15, 2014” changed to “Because white men can’t/police their imaginations/black men are dying” (135). That phrase stayed in many subsequent printings until it changed to “Because white men can’t/police their imaginations/black people are dying.” And it seems that every printing after the second, page 134 provides fading blanks—or, open areas on the page—for us to fill in more names ourselves. In other words, through an openness and a blur technique, the book foresees that more black people will be killed by police brutality and it suggests that this killing is happening right now. These blanks invite us not only to consider past police brutality but also the context of police brutality as it happens often and during each reading, and between each printing.

These changing pages point outward, proliferating each year, and yet they are untraceable (they are not different editions). The publisher, Graywolf Press, devotes some space to this issue on their website, explaining that in reprintings authors often change details to “refine or clarify” their texts. They sum up the issue this way, “Rankine is further underscoring the devastating urgency of *Citizen’s* message” (“*Citizen in the Classroom*”). The publisher also includes a downloadable PDF of page 134 of multiple printings of *Citizen*, one after another, giving the impression of an archive of the changes. The book demands to be contextualized in a radically contemporary environment and gestures that it cannot ever be exhaustive of our moment. This does not clarify the message as much as it teaches us the temporality of antiblack violence, which is destined by print to continue. The structure here is set quite clearly in “yes, and”; it is a future without alternative routes. Like surveillance apparatuses, it is waiting for the event to occur (again). Despite Graywolf’s archive highlighting 134, it seems that page 135 changes as much as 134, and 135 does the interpretative work. First, we are given a final date for the justice system, then a sort of punning riddle that expands in scope. By referring to white men’s “imagination,” Rankine recalls recent studies of “implicit bias” as well as

¹⁵ As Rankine mentioned in an interview for the *Guardian*, Darren Wilson told the jury that he shot Michael Brown because he looked “like a demon.” He also claimed that Brown, whose stature was similar to his own, was like Hulk Hogan. These are clear examples of what Rankine calls “blackness in the white imagination” (“Claudia Rankine: ‘Blackness’”).

conjures the echo of those biases in recent murders.¹⁵ This punning statement—where “police” is used as a verb but implied as a noun—seems to work on a different logic. If only white men *could* police their imaginations, it implies. Rankine suggests that police are not the problem of racial violence; the problem is that *police*—the concept, the signifier—is directed the wrong way. Policing should be turned on white men, specifically their imaginations, their very consciousness. This recalls the Black Panther Party philosophy of “police the police,” and it gives us a radical suggestion toward sousveillance.

The combination of this line and the techniques of these pages suggest a reorientation of not just the lyric but also the surveillance apparatus that runs everyday life. In other words, if the structure of 134-135 is in “yes, and,” it calls for something other than “yes, of course” as the response. Lyric here is not simply overhearing, but rather actively allowing, even enforcing. Mark Greif writes that police violence is different from other forms of violence because “the police measure out in public what the society will tolerate, even to our shame” (Greif). Pages 134-135 give us a clear portrait of what we tolerate. To come back to various metaphors of the lyric, the police might not be performing for an audience, but they are policing “for” the public. In White’s notion of lyric shame, this figuration of readership, immobilized by this truthful expressivity, engenders shame. Rankine illustrates that we are a readership inside of Mill’s cell.

This passage on 135 and the techniques of 134 are important for connecting the microaggressions of the earlier parts of *Citizen* to the institutional brutality that surfaces as its central message in the second half of the text. The “American lyric” relates the imagination shaped by white supremacy, or “the system of race-based biases we live within,” to both small, banal social interactions and the large events that structure politics (hooks 28–29).¹⁶ As Rankine explains to Lauren Berlant:

the scripts in chapter six seemed necessary to *Citizen* because one of the questions I often hear is “How did that happen?” as it relates to mind-numbing moments of injustice – the aftermath of Katrina, for example, or juries letting supremacists off with a slap on the wrist for killing black men. It seems obvious, but I don’t think we connect micro-aggressions that indicate the lack of recognition of the black body as a body to the creation and enforcement of laws. Everyone is cool with seeing micro-aggressions as misunderstandings until the same misunderstood person ends up on a jury or running national response teams after a hurricane. (“Claudia Rankine by Lauren Berlant”).

Both Berlant and Heather Love are interested in Rankine’s use of a detached tone and her attention to the quotidian alongside the catastrophic. Love argues that Rankine uses “micro-observational techniques developed in the social sciences” (424). These observational techniques are clearly mapped toward the larger pedagogical function of the text, to suggest a reorientation of not just the lyric but also the surveillance apparatus that runs everyday life and is sanctioned and informed by larger systems.

¹⁶ Here I echo bell hooks, who uses the term *white supremacy* not only because it refers to the way people think, not just their behavior, but also because this term is inclusive of everyone.

The book ends with a conversation between intimates taking place in bed. There is perhaps some hopeful imagery with a “slow” sunrise as a speaker recounts a scene in a parking lot outside a tennis court: “Did you win, he asks? It wasn’t a match, I say. It was a lesson” (Rankine, *Citizen* 159). The scene of tennis echoes the Serena Williams episode from earlier in the book, and it recalls all the moments in the text that could be combative—as matches—but are now framed like a primer against racist acts or a primer on how to cope with racist acts, merely as lessons. *Citizen* gathers context into its form, not just by embedding current events but also by making us think carefully about the form of the cell phone video and other types of hypermediation of our moment. We saw this with the way that puns and their logic are used throughout the text to jumble, overlay, and obscure, and how devices create a danger of erasure or mutation. These techniques of reorientation, some of which I referred to earlier as hallmarks of experimental literature also have, as Browne’s work shows, a rich and complex history as ways of living and ways of knowing for black people through the transatlantic slave trade and its afterlife.

So what then is the “lesson” of *Citizen*? *Citizen* enforces one context as it allows other contexts to emerge. The work suggests not only a heightened form of seeing but also a way of dealing with that seeing that is already around us, a reorientation in order to cope. To return to the scene that began this article, Johari Osayi Idusuyi read *Citizen* at a Trump rally both to read it and to be seen reading it. After she was disgusted with Trump’s bullying, she not only used Rankine’s book to tune him out, but she also wanted others to see that Rankine’s book was serving this purpose. She explained, “I just started to read it. Then I was like, I’m in the middle, I’m on camera, so why not use the opportunity to promote a great book?” A book that is framed as a lesson becomes a lesson itself. The fact that she covered her face with the book she is promoting echoes Browne’s dark sousveillance—Idusuyi rendered herself “out of sight,” as a strategy to critique the way she was being racially surveilled in the VIP seats and to resist the way protesters were bullied. She used *Citizen* not only to cope with her surroundings but also to change them, for despite all the factors of Idusuyi’s immediate surroundings saying “yes and” to the situation that disgusted her, she did not say “yes, of course.”

Like Jackson and Prins, *Citizen* illustrates how the lyric as we know it is a “product of twentieth-century critical thought” (7). It also illuminates and ultimately manipulates various historical structures of the lyric in order to expose systemic racism in everyday language, thereby revealing connections between lyric structures and what we might otherwise know as “the public.” Trafficking in rhetorics and grammar of unmarked temporality and unmarked subjecthood, Rankine’s work illustrates Dorothy Wang’s argument about the whiteness of the lyric form: if critics agree that a poetic subjectivity can stand alone, unmediated within an exceptional temporality, it is usually because that subject is white (xxii). By manipulating these “white” technologies of lyric to help police the police, Rankine undermines what most lyric theories agree upon, that lyric is separate from public. Lyric cannot

combat public forms of racial violence, but it can, as sousveillance does, suggest “productive disruptions” in order to cope (Browne 164).

University of Maryland, Baltimore County, USA
kfinberg@umbc.edu

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