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Introduction

Claudia Rankine's acclaimed book,¹ *Citizen. An American Lyric*, published in 2014, ends on the word "lesson". This article contends that what the collection of prose poems offers is a pragmatic lesson in racist thought, attitude and language. Although in press when Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, the book can be read in light of the Black Lives Matter movement² even if its 'hood' cover is not a direct reference to Trayvon Martin's hoodie which became a civil rights icon after the death of the 17-year-old boy. It is in fact drawn from a 1993 'in the Hood' work in the context of the beating of Rodney King by members of the L.A.P.D. For the making of this book Rankine asked friends to tell her about moments when they felt they were reduced to their race or when race came in the way of any possible pursuit of interaction. It is therefore a communal work, based on real, personal interviews, that Rankine's poetic talent turns into fictional vignettes. The different episodes or interactions highlight what people don't say in what they're saying or say while not saying it, which is conducive to a pragmatic analysis. By underspecifying pronominal, gender and racial reference, Rankine's text requires inferential work from the reader. In so doing, the poet demonstrates that the racial component is not a mere parameter that only externally affects sense-making, it is at the very centre of interactions in *Citizen* which stages how preexisting assumptions and examples of implicit racism sustain these exchanges. Letting the reader make the inferential work by themselves and "attuning" to the silences and awkwardness of interactions is meant to elicit ethical reflection. Using the tools of pragmatics, this article will highlight the pragmatic processes and effects which the text gives rise to in order to help readers grasp the nature of racism more fully.

We'll see first how, through what I will call a grammar of racism and the exploitation of pragmatic principles, Rankine's poetic prose purposefully foregrounds the colour issue. What the next section will strive to show is how the body must be part and parcel of any pragmatic analysis, the poet emphasizing the affective effects of racism on black bodies, disciplined as they are by white space. Lastly section 3 will delve into how implicit racism hampers conversations and how *Citizen* pragmatically invites the reader to experience racist positioning. The article ends on the specific effects of *you* in Rankine's second-person stories.

¹ It was ranked as a New York Times Bestseller in 2015 and won several awards, including the 2014 National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry and the 2015 NAACP Image Award.

² On page 134, Rankine makes the list of black people who died because of the colour of their skin, starting with the death of another teenager, Jordan Russell Davis. The words 'in memory of...' fade away the more we read down the pages, until after the final mention of a name (Sandra Bland); only 'in memory' remains till the end of the page, suggesting that the blank space won't remain empty very long.

1. The racial unsaid

This section focuses on the way Rankine's text exposes the racial unsaid. Indeed in their elucidation of un-referenced, ungendered or unracialized pronouns and noun phrases, readers are brought to make sense of who speaks to whom by assigning a skin colour to the speakers. The following subsections show how essential pragmatic theories are to grasp the microaggressions that affect black people's ordinary interactions (with white people). Readers are encouraged to draw what is called in pragmatics "implicatures"³, that is what is implied with a speaker's utterance but that is not overtly expressed in the words used. In the very uncovering of the implied meaning leading them to attribute a specific colour to a speaker, white readers are likely to reflect on their own racist assumptions while non-white readers might see captured in Rankine's vignettes much about racism that does not get openly said but may be daily experienced.

1.1. Foregrounding colour

In the stories Rankine recalls, characters are not personalised or singularised: no proper names are mentioned nor are characters fleshed out. They are referred to with an indefinite article and a noun reduced at best to the indication of gender ("a woman" p. 13; "a man" p. 17, "the man" p. 54). Sometimes the relationship to the speaker is mentioned under the form of an un-gendered "friend" determined either indefinitely as "a friend" (p. 14, p. 41, p. 46, p. 151), "another friend" (p. 55), or definitely as "the friend" (p. 54). The definite article is also used when referring to a generic trade or professional skills ("the new therapist", p. 18; "the real estate woman" p. 51, "the woman with the multiple degrees", p. 45, "the waitress", p. 149) in the opening of stories, presupposing the readers are already familiar with these characters. These definite referents plunge them into the very middle of a scene that is already under way. The underspecified noun phrases are taken up by anaphoric personal pronouns 'he' or 'she'. Some stories can even start right away with the personal pronoun indexing gender but saying nothing else about the relationship of the referents of these pronouns to the speaker. The text is written in the ungendered second-person pronoun with shifting reference, which makes identification of referents even more complex (see part 3).

The bare semantics based on generic labels is meant to give prominence to one aspect of interactions: the racial component. Rankine compels readers to disambiguate pronouns and determine references of noun phrases in a racial way. Indeed readers can only make sense of the malaise created in situations by apprehending them in terms of race. Example (1) is a case in point:

- (1) The man at the cash register wants to know if you think your card will work. If this is routine, he didn't use it on the friend who went before you. As she picks up her bag, she looks to see what you will say. She says nothing. You want her to say something – both as witness and as a friend.

³ In Grice's account of meaning, an "implicature" is closely connected to a speaker's intention, the implied meaning is "intended by the speaker to be so recognized by the hearer" (Terkourafi, 'Inference and implicature', 33). See examples in section 1.3.

She is not you; her silence says so. Because you are watching all this take place even as you participate in it, you say nothing as well. (Rankine 54)⁴

The reader is led to draw the implicature that the differential treatment of the customer has something to do with the colour of her skin. The cashier's suspicion is predicated on the racial presupposition⁵ that black people need to be checked for money supply. The idea that they are inevitably associated with poverty-related scheming is presented here as not at issue. Racial discrimination is embodied in this pragmatic presupposition. "The man" automatically applies a racial "script",⁶ positioning the addressee as a potentially problematic customer. The racial prejudice that underlies the cashier's question is made prominent through the contrast of treatment received by the previous character who happens to be the narrating voice's friend. The silence of "the friend" is what reveals her whiteness: "She is not you; her silence says so". Through the question addressed casually and exclusively to the person of colour, Rankine makes readers experience the force of racial positioning, reducing the addressee to silence through lack of words or support from undiscriminated others.

The attribution of skin colours to protagonists as inferred from what they say or how they behave is the pragmatic work Rankine wants us to perform. Even people whose work could be said to be to care for others (of any race) can be guilty of racial prejudice. Extract 2 recounts the speaking voice's first encounter with "the new therapist", specialised in "trauma counselling", after an appointment taken over the phone. The new patient walks through a "side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients" (18) and presses the button:

- (2) When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard? It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German Shepherd has gained the power of speech. (18)

The reader is invited to make the inference that the therapist does not see a new patient but a person of colour to whom she automatically ascribes malicious intentions. Though scared, the new patient manages to remind her of the appointment, then "everything pauses":

- (3) Oh, she says, followed by, oh yes, that's right. I am sorry. I am so sorry, so, so sorry. (18)

Whilst the path trodden by the black woman is the one taken by all the patients, the therapist instinctively and viscerally frames the woman as an ill-intended intruder.

⁴ The references to Rankine's text that appear in the body of the article refer to the following edition: *Citizen. An American lyric*. London: Penguin Books, 2014.

⁵ A presupposition in pragmatic terms involves a piece of information whose truth is taken for granted. The main function of the presupposition is to act as a precondition for the use of that piece of information.

⁶ I'm using the term in Schank and Abelson's sense (*Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding*) as synonymous with "frame" or "schema" or "scenario" (Sanford and Garrod, *Understanding Written Language*). A script is based on previous experiences (or brought on by our readings) and describe events or activities implicating actors in a stereotypical way.

This cognitive frame based on pre-existing assumptions prevents her from apprehending the presence of the black person in the professional frame with which she apprehends white patients. This spontaneous reaction scaring the patient that is in need of help and care indicates that colour always seems to come first, disrupting the patient-therapist interacting schema that seems predicated on the whiteness of the interactants. In ironical reversal of the (white) fear that may be triggered by blacks, the white woman is the one presented as the scary, menacing, less-than-human animal. The final speech act of the apology can hardly work as what conversation analysts call “repair work”⁷ to a relationship always already tarnished by the original positioning.

1.2 The syntax of racism: implicitness in coordination and subordination

Rankine stages racism in subtle ways, leaving it for the reader to make inferences based on apparently inconspicuous grammatical markers. Examples (4) and (5) make use of the apparently neutral ‘and’ coordinator⁸, inviting the reader to (re)construct the meaning implied in the very connection between the two utterances. In (4), the persona speaks about ‘the girl’ at school who requests the black pupil to let her cheat:

- (4) You never really speak except for the time she makes her request and later when she tells you **you smell good and have features more like a white person**, you assume she thinks she is thanking you for letting her cheat and feels better cheating from an almost white person. (5, my emphases)

The coordinator connects the two clauses in bold in a way that seems to imply that the black person is ‘closer’ to a white person as she smells too good (for a black person). The white girl’s compliment (attributing white features can only be perceived as a compliment from her perspective) seems to be interpretable as an indirect way of thanking the black girl for letting her cheat. This can only be done if the black person is given near-whiteness attributes, making the cheating acceptable. Besides direct thanking (with a conventional ‘thank you’) would imply too much of a debt that cannot be owed to a not entirely white person without loss of respectability.

The apparently insignificant ‘and’ coordinator carries race-related meaning in a forceful way in (5) as well. The connective rings racial in what appears as the pride of a stranger showing a picture of his wife to the (black) narrator:

- (5) She is beautiful **and** black, like you. (78)

That this “man, wanting to make conversation” is white is predicated on the fact that only this assumption can make his utterance relevant to the situation. Otherwise if he were himself black, the mention of his wife being black as a marked feature would be

⁷ Apologies are speech acts that aim at erasing the harm done (see Grainger and Harris, Special issue on apologies). In conversation analysis, repair is the process by which a speaker tries to bring some correction to a mistake or a speech error, for instance, that they have committed (see Schegloff, *Sequence organization in Interaction, volume 1: A primer in Conversation Analysis*).

⁸ Sentential coordination with ‘and’ is the object of many a pragmatic analysis. I refer the reader to Carston’s “Conjunction, explanation and relevance” but also Blakemore and Carston’s “The Pragmatics of sentential coordination with *and*” that go beyond the traditional pragmatic accounts of the coordinator.

awkward. We can only draw implicatures as to the reason why he reveals his wife's skin colour to a black person. If this is to prove some form of openness about race relations to another black person, it paradoxically foregrounds the colour issue in a most unnatural way. Rankine does not guide her readers further. Letting them draw racial inferences by themselves enhances the force of the racial unsaid.

But in Rankine's grammar of racism, there are also explicit subordinators reflecting racial attitudes and profiling.

- (6) He tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color **when** there are so many great writers out there. (10, my emphasis)

In (6), the racial violence of the statement is contained in the contrasting subordinator 'when' making it impossible for a "person of color" to be one of the "many great writers out there". Hiring a person of colour unequivocally means depriving great (white) writers of their legitimate place. In example (7), the subordinator 'despite' similarly reveals the paranoid logic of racism:

- (7) **Despite** the fact that you have the same sabbatical schedule as everyone else, he says, you are always on sabbatical. You are friends so you respond, *easy*.

What do you mean?

Exactly, what do you mean? (47)

The subordinator 'despite' expresses the irreconcilable opposition between the fair, mathematical, colour-blind distribution of sabbaticals and the (white) subjective perception: "you are always on sabbatical". The hyperbolic use of the temporal adverb 'always' can be seen as containing an implicitly racial meaning, as it seems to imply undeserved benefits or favouritism. A fact (equality of treatment) is implicitly redescribed as preferential treatment. Her reply ("easy") both leaves the friend an out not to carry on down that path and exposes the concealed racist taunt. The man's question as a reply "what do you mean?" serves as a way to pretend there was no implicature to be recognized by the hearer in his remark. He therefore denies having meant anything, leaving the responsibility of the interpretation to the black person. The repeated question to the very same question "Exactly what do you mean?" - most probably by the black person herself - is a way to call out the intention behind his words, making him own up to his insinuation that he pretends to be unaware of. This is a subtle way to turn the tool of plausible deniability against itself.

Rankine's use of the markers 'then' and 'still' is interesting in the context of race relations, as they both point to paradoxical situations that rational logics won't explain away. In (8) for instance, the consecutive marker 'then' expresses the incoherence of police arrest in spite of the black man having done nothing wrong.

- (8) **Then** why are you pulling me over? (106)

The antonymic cause-effect relation between the absence of infraction and the arrest is foregrounded by the 'then' clause, calling for an explanation.

The impossibility to break out of the racial circle that condemns you before being proven (non) guilty is embodied by the double use of 'still' in (9):

- (9) And **still** you are not the guy and **still** you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description. (106, 108, 109)

The repeated adverb 'still' both ambiguously communicates the permanence of pre-existing assumptions and functions as a "concessive cancellative" discourse marker. Cancellation markers have been shown to be "cutting tools" with two distinguishing features: they signal "the speaker's acceptance of the truth or validity of the previous discourse segment [P]" and express that "an expectation or effect derivable from the previous discourse P is canceled in the upcoming message Q".⁹ In spite of the established validity that you are not the guy and you are not fitting the description, racial arrest cancels this expectation in making you fit the description all the same.

In (9) 'still' both expresses the temporal idea of a persistent condition and functions as a discourse marker cancelling the effect that could be derived from the first utterance ('you're not the guy'). This cancellation defies the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction according to which it is impossible to hold the same thing to be A and not to be A - you're not the guy and still you are the guy. Racial logics seems to function backwards: the black man is arrested in order to "fit the description". What is interesting in Rankine's repeated use of the cancellative marker is the total erasure of the whole black body it signifies, 'still' pithily evoking "the anomalous situation of acknowledging the truth of P while claiming the truth of Q".¹⁰ Like the contrastive subordinator 'despite' (see example [7]), the adverb captures the predicament of the black person that stands no (grammatical and logical) chance to fight a structure that has always already snared him into fitting the description.

1.3. Expressing racism through pragmatic flouting

Rankine conveys racism pragmatically through the exploitation of some pragmatic conversational maxims as described by Grice in his famous Cooperative Principle. In Grice's well-known study, conversations are governed by rules oriented toward cooperation that take the form of four maxims (Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner)¹¹. Interlocutors expect these conversational norms to be respected or flouted but when they are (flouted), speakers intend their addressees to understand the reason behind the flouting. By saying "I'm starving", the speaker will bring the co-speaker to understand that her utterance is not to be taken at face value. Working on the assumption that the speaker wants to be cooperative at all times, the co-speaker will draw the implicature that the speaker is very hungry, not starving. As Terkourafi puts it, maxims are "typically honoured in the breach, meaning it is their (real or apparent) non-observance by the speaker that licenses the derivation of an implicature by the listener".¹² In the following examples, Grice's maxim of quantity (according to which

⁹ Bell, *Nevertheless, Still and Yet: Concessive Cancellative Discourse Markers*, 1920.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1914.

¹¹ The maxim of quantity concerns the quantity of information provided. Speakers are expected to make their contribution "as informative as is required" and not to make it "more informative than is required". The maxim of quality relates to the "truthfulness" of the contribution, while the maxim of relation concerns the relevance of the contribution to the conversation: "contributors are supposed to contribute to the conversation in an appropriate and pertinent manner". Lastly the maxim of manner commands speakers to "be perspicuous, avoid obscurity of expression, be brief, be orderly" (Grice, *Study in the Way of Words*, 26-7)

¹² Terkourafi, 'Inference and Implicature', 38.

the speaker gives just the amount of information needed, not more nor less, to get their meaning across) seems to be breached, generating implicatures. In vignette (10) indeed, one element strikes as excessive information or salient stimulus.

- (10) Your friend is speaking to your neighbor when you arrive home. **The four police cars** are gone. Your neighbour has apologized to your friend and is now apologizing to you. (15, my emphasis)

The poetic narrator is on her way back home after an evening with her husband. Her neighbour calls to tell them that “a menacing black guy” is “casing both your homes. The guy is walking back and forth talking to himself and seems disturbed”. Rankine tells him that the man must be their friend that babysits their child while they are out. The neighbour is adamant this is not their friend whom he has met and informs them that he has called the police. The mention of the number of police cars in (10) attracts attention while reading as it seems to flout the maxim of quantity: why should the number be made salient by the narrator especially as the cars were gone when she arrives? The absent police cars are paradoxically foregrounded. The knowledge of the number is an after-the-event reconstruction which implies that Rankine did ask for or was told about this numerical detail and thought it was worth mentioning. Rankine could have used an unmarked “when you arrive, the police are gone” but there is relevance to be derived from this precise number of cars in a race-related context. One (weak) implicature¹³ might be that Rankine wishes the reader to infer the disproportion between ONE man speaking on the phone and the mobilisation of FOUR police cars to deal with the problem, enhancing the issue of race relations in the US.

In fact, in saying “the four police cars are gone”, the speaker does not merely or primarily convey information that can be of relevance to the situation, she communicates information about her emotional state, producing an interpretative effect that might be called, following Wharton and Saussure, an “affective effect”. Adopting a relevance theoretical account¹⁴, the authors state that in parallel with or as a result of the conceptual processing, affective effects can be cued by propositional information, arising “on the basis of preexisting psychological material”¹⁵. Indeed the sentence in bold conveys emotions that “activate experiential, memorial traces in the

¹³ Drawing on Grice’s implicature, relevance theorists have established a continuum between at one end “strong implicature” favouring a range of interpretations that are more likely to be derived by addressees while “weaker implicatures” on the other end of the spectrum apply to utterances which convey more open-ended interpretations granting the speaker with plausible deniability (Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*). As Allott (‘Conversational Implicature’) recalls, weak implicatures often occur while interpreting literary texts and figurative speech which have a certain open-endedness: the hearer is not strongly led to grasp one implication as intended by the speaker but rather “is encouraged to consider at least some of them and see them as part of the speaker’s meaning” (Sperber and Wilson, ‘A Deflationary Account of Metaphors’, 101).

¹⁴ The authors admit that expressive meaning has not been addressed sufficiently by pragmatics, and “affective effects” should be better integrated to relevance theory: “we believe the role of the expressive dimension is central to human communication rather than merely supplementary: emotion, and the communication of emotion is hardly an incidental part of human mental life.” (*Pragmatics and Emotion*, 106). In relevance-theoretic terms, the Communicative Principle of Relevance is apprehended in terms of cognitive effects and processing efforts: we are looking for enough effects to justify the processing effort involved (Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*).

¹⁵ *Pragmatics and Emotion*, 114.

minds of numerous readers".¹⁶ Making sense of the overspecific detail is not driven only by intellectual inference but by affect. It carries, without any expressives, Rankine's dread at the presence of so many police cars in front of her home. Indeed the visual image of the four police cars is likely to evoke other similar mediated police intervention. Picking out the cardinal number as worth processing is to attend to Rankine's unexpressed emotion. Beyond or combined with the propositional meaning of the utterance, an affective dimension is pragmatically and implicitly conveyed through the simple mention of the numeral.

Manipulatively exploiting cognitive salience has racial underpinnings. In the media description of James Craig Anderson's white murderer who proclaims 'I ran that nigger over' after carrying out the murder, the guilty party is not described in the same way as their black counterparts would be:

- (11) The announcer patronizes the pickup truck, no hoodlums "just teens", no gang, "just a teen," "with **straggly blond hair**," "a **slight blond man**". The pickup is human in this predictable way. (94)

Rankine's reports of direct quotes foreground details in the description that convey implicit meanings. The 'blond hair' implies 'non black'. The insistence on the colour of the hair serves to mitigate the crime carried out. The poetic voice's redescription of the mediatic quotes (no hoodlums "just teens", no gang, "just a teen") highlights the racialised way of influencing perception. As has been shown in stylistics, negation tends to emphasize what is denied, as the negated information is not discarded but retained in the mind of the reader. Negation paradoxically imposes the denied information onto the reader's mind.¹⁷ By negating 'hoodlums' and 'gang', the poetic narrator is bringing into relief the words often used to describe the guilty party when they are black.

As will now be explored further, racial positioning affects bodies. Indeed racism has physical consequences that Rankine powerfully exposes in *Citizen*.

2. Disciplining the body

This section will focus on the bodily experience of racism, Rankine highlighting what racism makes, literally and metaphorically, internally and externally, to bodies who are disciplined by white space and stereotypes.

2.1. The effect of racism on the body

Rankine shows the painful effects performed on the body by explicitly or implicitly racist language in *Citizen*. Insults simultaneously cut bodies and conversations. In (12) the speaking voice is talking about a friend who has been impatiently awaiting her and when she finally arrives the friend greets her with "You

¹⁶ Wharton and Saussure, *Pragmatics and Emotion*, 119. The authors admit that expressive meaning has not been addressed sufficiently by pragmatics:

¹⁷ Nahajec, 'Negation and the creation of implicit meaning in poetry', 115.

are late, you nappy-headed ho”,¹⁸ referring to her in such terms for the very first time. Pragmatic interpretations thus unfold:

- (12) Maybe the content of her statement is irrelevant and she only means to signal the stereotype of “black people time” by employing what she perceives to be “black people language”. Maybe she is jealous of whoever kept you and wants to suggest you are nothing or everything to her [...] You don’t know what she means. You don’t know what response she expects from you nor do you care. (41-2)

The pragmatic inference as to what the “illocutionary force” of the utterance is, to use Austin’s terms, gives way to a perlocutionary effect¹⁹ that resound in the body, although metaphorically here. In the silence of the moment immediately following the insulting act, the bodily effect is in fact so strong as to override any sense-making:

- (13) For all your previous understandings, suddenly incoherence feels violent. You both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, you watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture. (42)

Rankine brings readers to visualise the metaphorical tearing of the skin and imagine the hurt as never-healing sutures are revealed: “you watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture”.

Supplementing Grice’s Cooperative Principle, Leech puts forward a Principle of Politeness that would explain utterances for which cooperation is not the main aim of the speakers, their aim being to be merely polite. If the Principle of Politeness in turn is breached, it may be because the speaker is either ironic or uses banter: “Irony maintains courtesy on the surface level of *what is said*, but at a deeper level is calculated to imply a negative evaluation. Banter is offensive on the surface but at a deeper level is intended to maintain comity”.²⁰ Banter is also called “mock impoliteness” as it seems to be impolite on the surface but is not meant as such by the speaker. In (13), the racial perlocutionary effect on the addressee clearly cancels any interpretation of the message as banter or “mock impoliteness” in spite of the friend trying to play the “only joking” card that is meant to repair the harm done or “de-escalate a potential confrontation”.²¹ In Culpeper’s terms, “the contextual conditions that sustain [mock] impoliteness” cannot apply.²² The joking card cannot cancel the underling violence of what is perceived as genuine impoliteness on the friend’s part. The reason why a “humour excuse” of this type can never be successful, according to Alward, is that it includes “harmful or demeaning stereotypes of members of oppressed or vulnerable

¹⁸ By using these terms, the friend recirculates the disparaging language used by talk radio host Don Ismus against the Rutgers University Women’s basketball team calling them “nappy-headed hos” on the April 4 edition of MSNBC’s *Imus in the Morning* (2007).

¹⁹ In pragmatic terms, the illocutionary force of an utterance is what is done in saying what is said (for instance the speech act of apologising, of thanking, of insulting) while the perlocutionary act is what happened as a result of what is done. It is the effect triggered by the utterance on the addressee (which might not be intended by the speaker).

²⁰ Leech, *The Pragmatics of Politeness*, 100.

²¹ Alward, ‘Just Kidding: Stand-up, Speech Acts and Slurs’, 13.

²² Culpeper, *Impoliteness. Using Language to Cause Offence*, 208.

groups”.²³ The friend’s remark has nothing “witty” nor transparently “humour-oriented”, which could have elaborated a gap between “the literal content” and “the speaker’s communicative illocutionary intention”²⁴ – it merely repeats an insult that has already been pronounced against black women.

As Haugh puts it, the role of “claims to non-serious intent” goes further than being meant to “disclaim” or “disaffiliate from” what one has just said: “Through claiming non-serious intent, the producer implements the implicit claim that the recipient does not have an affective entitlement to take offense at the tease”.²⁵ He gives examples of certain recipients being “sanctioned” for taking themselves “too seriously”.²⁶ Haugh’s analysis is interesting in the context of race relations. What Rankine exhibits in *Citizen* is that in relabelling blacks’ reaction as “too angry”, whites reverse performativity, turning themselves into victims of black anger. Calling blacks “oversensitive or misunderstanding” (152) is depriving them of any “affective entitlement to take offense”. In denying them the very possibility of disputing the claim of non-seriousness, black feelings are being violently ignored.

Yet the insult in (13) has already taken flesh in the body. The wounding has been performed as an effect of the saying. Because of the wounds they leave, Rankine shows, these insults cannot be resdescribed as “mere jokes” that the addressee would just fail to grasp nor can they be reduced to misunderstandings. Speaking in terms of misunderstanding is, as Cantero-Sánchez rightly puts it, to isolate the utterance as a one-time, context-free utterance, saving the insulter from accountability:

It is vital to foreground the symbolic violence that stems from conceiving of these aggressions as plain misunderstandings. A misunderstanding or a joke is disconnected from the structural, the symbolic and the political dimension. One does not hold responsibility for a misunderstanding whereas one holds responsibility as an aggressor.²⁷

Within the whole economy of racism, jokes or “jocular pretence”²⁸ work as a “silencing tool”²⁹, leaving wounds open between friends.

Not only does Rankine show us the way racist language hurts, but she instantiates the bodily and emotional effects of repeated racist “diminishments”, taking the famous tennis player Serena Williams as example. The poet accounts for Serena’s outburst in the 2009 Women’s US Open semi-final, construing it as a traumatic reenactment of the injustice lived through, five years before, in the 2004 US open, resulting in her losing the match after repeated unfair calls by the referee Mariana Alves. The tennis player did not say anything at the time but in 2009 when the lineswoman finds fault with the position of her body at the service line, Serena just snaps and violently insults her. What was cast in the media as excessive anger bordering on craziness is reanalysed by Rankine as the belated response of a

²³ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁴ Dynel, ‘No Aggression, Only Teasing: The Pragmatics of Teasing and Banter’, 255.

²⁵ Haugh, ‘“Just kidding”: Teasing and Claims to Non-Serious Intent’, 130.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁷ Cantero-Sánchez, ‘On Racism and the Impossibility of Mourning: A Critical Reading of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen, An American Lyric*’, 91)

²⁸ Haugh, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Judd, ‘Sapphire as Praxis: Toward a Methodology of Anger’, 185.

traumatised *body*. The poet highlights how the white stereotype of the angry black woman displaces and delegitimises the real, visceral cause of anger. The invective is Serena's body speaking – a body that has undergone many a diminishment and intimidation and toiled to absorb them all. However, being the threshold between the outside and the inside, the body never forgets. The attempt at keeping all inside “does not erase the moments lived through” (28):

- (14) Serena in HD before your eyes becomes overcome by a rage you recognize and have been taught to hold at a distance for your own good. Serena's behavior, on this particular Sunday afternoon, suggests that all the injustice she has played through all the years of her illustrious career flashes before her and she decides finally to respond to all of it with a string of invectives. (25)

The tennis player's reaction exemplifies how black (known or unknown) bodies try “to hold everything black” (70), Rankine's coined phrase capturing the necessary containment or repression of any word/thought/act that could come in the way of blacks' survival.

The effects of racism more or less contained by black bodies like Serena sometimes take a more external and literal body effect. The physical (internal) exhaustion of always trying to “hold everything black” takes the bodily shape of the sigh – an almost uncontrollable exhalation of breath coming from deep inside and signifying much more than empty air:

- (15) The sigh is the pathway to breath; it allows breathing. That's just self-preservation. No one fabricates that. You sit down, you sigh. You stand up, you sigh. The sighing is a worrying exhale of an ache. You wouldn't call it an illness; still it is not the iteration of a free being. What else to liken yourself to but an animal, the ruminant kind? (60)

The sigh is the language of the unfree person who does not dare speak her mind and holds everything b(l)ack, ruminating, until it explodes à la Serena. The breath mentioned in (15) evokes other external attempts at blocking this basic bodily act of “breathing”. In a racist context, natural breathing acquires a political dimension.

Rankine demonstrates the exhaustion entailed by implicitly racist encounters, affecting intersubjective relationality in social space as the next sub-section will further explore.

2.3. Bodily space

In some vignettes, Rankine describes how black bodies make white people uncomfortable.³⁰ This experience of white discomfort often entails the disciplining of black bodies by black people themselves. In example (10) given above about the black friend babysitting for the speaker's family who was taken as a hoodlum by the

³⁰ Here's an example taken from *Citizen*: “A Friend tells you he has seen a photograph of you on the Internet and he wants to know why you look so angry. You and the photographer chose the photograph he refers to because you both decided it looked the most relaxed. Do you look angry? You wouldn't have said so. Obviously this unsmiling image of you makes him uncomfortable, and he needs you to account for that.” (46)

neighbour, the speaker has a (shameful)³¹ reaction contributing to the self-inflicted invisibilisation of black bodies:

- (11') 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 for a long minute before saying he can speak on the phone whenever he wants. Yes, of course, you say. Yes, of course. (15)

The solution found to appease the neighbour's fright is to conceal black bodies from white view. The pause of one minute between two turns at speech (the suggestion and the reply) is anomalously long. By choosing a dispreferred answer,³² the black man signifies his refusal to discipline his body that would satisfy the white gaze and act out his own subjection.

Either the black body is too visible to the white gaze or completely immaterial in white space. The irrelevance of the black body to the white man in (16) highlights the transparency/erasure of the black person:

- (16) In line at the drugstore it's finally your turn, and then it's not as he walks in front of you and puts his things on the counter. The cashier says, Sir, she was next. When he turns to you he is truly surprised.
Oh my God, I didn't see you.
You must be in a hurry, you offer.
No, no, no, I really didn't see you. (77)

This exchange emphasizes not once but twice the invisibility of the black body in a queue. Politeness theory may help us make sense of what is going on in (16). As Chapman puts it, politeness theory tries to "explain the social motivations for speaking to each other as we do".³³ In order to save the face³⁴ of the white man who has invisibilised her, the black woman offers a reply that abides by politeness maxims according to which one should be generous and tactful with the Other by minimizing one's own wants, qualities, opinions and feelings and maximizing those of the Other (while diminishing the Other's obligation to the Speaker)³⁵. When most generously the black woman offers to account for the uncivil behaviour in an unracial way, somehow coming to the rescue of the white person ("you must be in a hurry, you offer"), he does not seize this polite offer leaving him the possibility to save the black person's face as well but merely repeats in all honesty the reality of the black person's total invisibility

³¹ Rankine confesses as much in her 2015 interview in which she states that she really said that to her neighbour.

³² In conversation analysis, offering a "preferred" answer is pairing a first pair part with a relevant second pair part, such as greetings to greetings and answers to questions. Here the black man offers a "dispreferred" second turn in responding unfavourably to the suggestion made to him.

³³ Chapman, *Pragmatics*, 132. See also Chapman and Clark, *Pragmatic Literary Stylistics* for an exploration of pragmatic theories in literature.

³⁴ Politeness theory as developed in Brown and Levinson's seminal work is based on the Goffmanian notion of face: they put forward politeness strategies aiming at redressing the potential harm done by what they call "Face-threatening Acts". Leech's work is based on Brown and Levinson's work and takes up Goffman's concept of face as well.

³⁵ Leech, *op. cit.*, 91.

in his eyes. What is enacted in this little vignette is black people's lack of power to affect social (white) space. In being ghosted or "shadowed" (132), the polite black woman is given what Rankine calls elsewhere the "nothing gaze" (141), leaving her "on the verge of sociality".³⁶

Bodily space is also to be construed as linguistic space. Taking up space is taking up conversational room. Seeing a free seat on a train that the standing white person won't occupy because it is next to a black man, the (white?) woman in Rankine's text makes it her duty to fill in the space as one would fill silence in a conversation in a generous attempt at face saving:

- (17) The space next to the man **is the pause in a conversation you are suddenly rushing to fill**. You step quickly over the woman's fear, a fear she shares. You let her have it. (131, my emphasis)

The other (white) woman's fear of being near a black person is an emotion that must be spatially walked over ("you step quickly over the woman's fear") in order to reclaim space even if it has already performed its poisonous effect ("a fear she shares. You let her have it"). The bodily filling of discriminated space by the generous woman is a way to make the man feel less coloured, recalling Zora Neale Hurston's "I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background", taken up by Rankine page 25. But the generous woman's intervention is a mere gap filler that can't last:

- (18) your body speaks to the space you fill and you keep trying to fill it except the space belongs to the body of the man next to you, not to you.
Where he goes the space follows him. (131-32)

When the black man leaves, the (white?) woman becomes only a person on the train again who does not need to fight for anyone's space. By evoking the fixity of her space that is everywhere hers, Rankine powerfully highlights the vulnerability of black space ("where he goes the space follows him").

By showing what racism really feels like, the poet gives an addressee to her characters' reactions. As the last section will move on to explore, this addressee is also the reader that she invites to become a metapragmatic listener in the silence of her narration.

3. Experiencing racism through reading

Section 3 delves into how implicit racism hampers conversations and how *Citizen* pragma-stylistically invites the reader to experience racist positioning. It shows how the white reader is likely to become a (complicit or uncomfortable) witness to the racist interactions all the more so as Rankine adopts the second-person pronoun whose fluctuating function, hovering between reference and address, mirrors the different positioning that subjects ascribe to others or have ascribed to them by others.

³⁶ Palmer, "What Feels More Than Feelings?" *Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect*, 40-1.

3.1. Counter-interpellation attempts

To experience racism through the reading of Rankine's anecdotes is to become aware of how every interaction is laden with the weight of a race relation heritage that America has not come to terms with in spite of claims of a post-racial America. Rankine powerfully performs how it still affects intersubjective relations. Extract (19) is an illustration of what happens when the racial implicit, usually held in check, rises up to the surface of the conversation and the black woman acts on the racist assumption.

- (19) At the end of a brief phone conversation, you tell the manager you are speaking with that you will come by his office to sign the form. When you arrive and announce yourself he blurts out, I didn't know you were black!
I didn't mean to say that, he then says.
Aloud, you say.
What? he asks.
You didn't mean to say that aloud.
Your transaction goes swiftly after that. (44)

This exchange that is based on the pre-existing assumption that black people cannot have a good bank account and be in need of financial deals ends "swiftly" when the racial unsaid gets "blurted out" unbridled. The black bank account owner completes the white banker's sentence by an adverb that is not meant to save the banker's face this time but instead shatters his attempt at repairing his uncontrolled outburst. The simple addition of the adverb transforms the negation of the utterance "I did not mean to say that" into some metapragmatic negation³⁷ whose goal is not to deny what is said but the way it is said: "You did mean to say that aloud". The awkwardness of the shared knowledge results in a mere transactional relationship between the two protagonists, putting an end to small or relational talk.

There are in fact different ways of reacting to a racist innuendo, you may want to swallow it all and pretend you haven't heard, repressing the awareness in order to stay alive (see Section 2), or "counter-interpellate"³⁸ and refuse the position that it assigns you, thereby holding the speaker accountable.³⁹ In *Citizen*, this counter-interpellation takes the form of recurrent metalinguistic questions addressing "the meaning behind the words" that have just been pronounced (126), although some do not get past the speaker's mouth:

- (20) What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? (9)
What did you say? You ask, though you have heard every word. (41)

³⁷ Metalinguistic negation is defined as "a means for objecting to a previous utterance". Horn draws here from Oswald Ducrot's distinction between a descriptive negation ("a comment on fact", preserving presuppositions) and metalinguistic/polemic negation ("a comment on utterances", challenging presuppositions). (Horn, 'Metalinguistic Negation and Pragmatic Ambiguity', 38)

³⁸ Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, 1999.

³⁹ In an interview with Jenise Hudson and Janeen Price, Rankine speaks in terms of guilty collusion if nothing is said: "If we, as witness or victim, speak out and say, 'No, no, I don't accept that, that's racist,' that is a competing narrative. You walk away having regained your stability as a person having rejected that moment of racism. If you say nothing, then you are in collusion with the aggressor." (Hudson et al., 'Interview with Claudia Rankine', 11)

What did you say? (43)

Hold up, did you just hear, did you just say, did you just see, did you just do that? (55)

What did he say? (151)

Rankine repeatedly displays that a racist implicit is likely to be conversation-ending. Extract (21) is an instance of the conversation between a woman having lunch with the black narrator visiting her campus.

- (21) In the café you both order the Caesar salad. This overlap is not the beginning of anything because she immediately points out that she, her father, her grandfather, and you, all attended the same college. She wanted her son to go there as well, but because of affirmation action or minority something – she is not sure what they are calling it these days and weren't they supposed to get rid of it? – her son wasn't accepted. You are not sure if you are meant to apologize for this failure of your alma mater's legacy program; instead you ask where he ended up. The prestigious school she mentions doesn't seem to assuage her irritation. This exchange, in effect, ends your lunch. The salads arrive. (13)

What strikes in this interesting passage is that the conversational floor is overwhelmingly occupied by the woman deploring the fact that her son has been denied admission in order to favour a person of colour. The conversation is reported in Free Indirect Style, aptly and synthetically mirroring the spillage of recrimination in the question-answer mode the woman adopts, never once acknowledging the other's presence as a black person or selecting her as a real addressee to her rhetorical question: "because of affirmation action or minority something – she is not sure what they are calling it these days and weren't they supposed to get rid of it?".

The force of the irritated, domineering tone that seems to assume support against the outrageous decision, leaves the black interacting partner uncertain as to how to react to the woman's positioning. This pragmatic positioning is discussed internally by the black woman: "you are not sure if you are meant to apologize for this failure of your alma mater's legacy program". Rather than apologising, which would have acknowledged her part in this failure, the narrator seems to prefer a more ironical question that brings the woman to recognize that in the end the son did get a prestigious school, but this does not help the white woman appreciate the racial dimension of her insistent irritation, invisibilising further her conversational black partner. The hypotactic style in the last two sentences "This exchange, in effect, ends your lunch. The salads arrive" performs conversational disconnection. The beginning of lunch is preceded by its end.

If the woman in (21) does not pay attention to the effect of her own words (on a black recipient), the next subsection shows that *Citizen* is designed to make readers see, hear, feel, as they are invited to "listen" to racism.

3.2. Participating in the positioning through *you*

As seen in the two previous sections, rather than describing, Rankine communicates what racism feels like in an embodied manner, leaving it to the reader to appreciate its force and effect. The elucidation of pronominal reference (see section

1) in the absence of any racial cues invites them to constantly monitor the situation. The pragmatic inferential work requires processing effort on the part of the reader that is likely meant to resemble the exhaustion experienced by black people (see Section 2). Besides, Rankine lays bare the racial prejudice for the reader to experience as *Citizen* is all about inferring attitudes of the speaker, working out what is going on and how to respond to and feel about it. I would contend that the reader is given the very specific position of the one who is both participant and observer in the little scenes played out for them. Rankine exposes discrepancies between words and thoughts or words and context, bringing the readers (of any race) to reflect on the subtle inner workings of racial positioning.

The second-person pronoun also contributes to reflexivity. Indeed in *Citizen*, Rankine relinquishes the traditional first person of the lyrical mode in order to question “the assumed solidity of the speaking, universal ‘I’”.⁴⁰ In the pronominal paradigm, *you* comes second. The choice of this pronoun thus reflects the impossibility of fully inhabiting a speaking *I*, when black people are assigned the nothing gaze and prevented from speaking back on equal pronominal terms:

(23) And still a world begins its furious erasure –
Who do you think you are, saying I to me?
You nothing.
You nobody.
You (142)

In the *New Yorker*, the poet mentions the contemporary imperative to “pull the lyric back into its realities”,⁴¹ thus renewing the lyrical form in the twenty-first century. *Citizen* sees the first person as unable to “hold” and “pull you together” (10), to “hold what is not there” (71), unless it is dragged “out of the social death of history, then we’re kin” (72). The second-person pronoun both reflects the impossibility for a black person to embody a fully-fledged subjective position but also the dysfunctioning of the I-you dyad in interpersonal racial relations.

The second-person pronoun is also a fitting choice in other regards in the book. Because of its dramatizing power, the pronoun is conducive to the creation of different personae for the self, allowing for the “dissociation” Rankine diagnoses in the “newly contained” Serena in 2012, supporting the player’s claim that “she has had to split herself off from herself and create different personae” (35-36). The self-referring second-person pronoun would be a grammatical embodiment of the possibility to refer to oneself under the form of another. This act of detaching oneself from oneself, at a further remove from the *I*, is a means to render oneself immune to racial daily diminishment, to be able to deny one’s own erasure. Furthermore, the second-person pronoun has the effect of displacing the egocentrism of the speaker. Unlike the lyrical *I* promising direct effusion of feelings, the distancing *you* makes it possible to dissociate affect from subject, enabling both author and reader to more objectively assess the causes of the emotions. To give only one example already mentioned, Serena’s anger is analysed not as an act of craziness by the speaker but as something that the speaking voice shares with her: “Serena in HD before your eyes becomes

⁴⁰ Palmer, *op. cit.*, 48.

⁴¹ Chiasson, ‘Color Codes’.

overcome by a rage you recognize and have been taught to hold at a distance for your own good”(25, example [14] above). In this instance, although the second-person pronoun refers to the *I* speaker, it plays on the generalising power of the pronoun:⁴² *you* is the speaker but it can potentially refer to readers who align with the speaker’s perspective, as many a black person may recognise themselves in Serena’s rage.

Indeed in this example and many others, *you* is not merely a concealed *I* in *A Citizen*, it also creates involving “effects of address”. Although the call to the reader is only indirect, he or she is the ratified recipient of the dramatisations staged by Rankine in the different vignettes. Rankine capitalises on what I perceive as the specific linguistic potential of the second-person pronoun: its reference can be simultaneously specific and generic.⁴³ Although Rankine may communicate very specific situations, through the generic potential of the second-person pronoun, she manages to hoist them up to the level of typical or transferrable situations to which all black (and non-black) subjects can relate. *You* creates multiple direct and indirect audiences that allow different members to align or disalign with the *you* perspective. Through its specific-generic potential, the pronoun foregrounds systemic racism, bringing readers to a fuller understanding of its forceful institutionalised effect. Rankine invites them to visualise linguistic positions in full awareness of how racism is performed. The white readers will either have to awkwardly refuse to occupy the place the poetic voice assigns them or secretly recognize the ingrained prejudice and entrenched habits of the privileged people described here that they may be guilty of themselves.⁴⁴

Part of the reader’s inferential task is to determine who this *you* refers to. The reader must constantly be on the alert as to who is who. It can be a clear marker of police interpellation in the ‘hey you’ phrase (140, 142). It is also used by the speaker to interpellate the blond murderer of James Craig Anderson to ask him if he fits the media’s description: “Do you recognise yourself, Dadmon?” (94). But sometimes the reference is more difficult to establish and requires the reader’s ability to grasp who speaks to whom. This is specially confusing when *you* appears in (free) indirect style, as the pronoun retains the same form in reported speech. In example (4) quoted above: “she tells you you smell good”, the second ‘you’ is the pronoun of direct address “you smell good”, the first one refers to the speaking voice “she tells you”. This is part of the cognitive dynamics of the second person whose subtly moving reference invites the reader to adopt different positions successively or even simultaneously.

By relinquishing the position of the lyrical speaking *I*, she brings her readers to listen in a renewed way, putting into poetic practice what Lipari calls “interlistening”, as a particular mode of intersubjectivity. By making them the silent witnesses of interactions, she invites them to “lose” their (white) eyes and ears and become aware of entrenched (white) ways of perceiving and judging.⁴⁵ As Lipari puts it, “to be listening is to refuse to control or master”: “listening can be understood as a kind of dwelling place from where we offer our hospitality, to others and the world. It is an

⁴² Sorlin, *The Stylistics of ‘You’*. In this book I propose six potential references for *you* depending on the level of genericity and the degree of inclusiveness of the pronoun.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ I need here to confess my own guilty perspective as a white reader: for each new reading of *you* in *Citizen*, I attribute a white reference by default before this interpretation is cancelled by context, colluding with the racial way of seeing *you* as referring to a universal entity that is necessarily white.

⁴⁵ Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being: Towards an Ethics of Attunement*, 30.

invitation – a hosting”.⁴⁶ The second-person pronoun has the effect of affecting listening in breaking down the binarism between first and second person, subject and object, addressor and addressee. I would put forward that it is particularly conducive to “interlistening”.

The *you* perspective invites readers to pay attention. The work Rankine asks from her reader in the pragmatic inferences and pronominal disambiguation prompts them to be fully present to the scene, mindful of who is attending the conversation from what point of view, origin, race, social background, foregrounding background in a most unusual way. In emphasizing listening through the *you* effect which eases attentive attunement to the telling of an other, *Citizen* exposes the pronoun’s ethical dimension.

Conclusion

Rankine attunes the reader’s ear to places of silence or awkwardness, making them experience the pragmatic workings of racism. This attunement is realised through the reader’s very own inferential work, which is a way to more powerfully elicit reflection. This is the poet’s means to express what is concealed without verbalising it, making the veiled racist attitude stand in the air in an even more powerful manner. Rankine displays a similar attitude in real life, as she recalls an incident in an interview. At an airport with her husband (who is white) and daughter, a man taps on her shoulder and asks her to come with him. Her daughter sees her going away and asks where she is going. Rankine replies “I’m being racially profiled” and the guy says to her “why are you saying that?”, she answers with a smile “I don’t know, I don’t know why I’m saying that”. This episode epitomises for Rankine the importance of making others “go forward with intention”⁴⁷ by pointing to underlying meaning.

Citizen embodies a literary theorisation of what I have called a “pragmatics of racism” that rests upon ascription of places and communication of affective forces. The more or less implicit racist attitudes/utterances and acts of denial exposed by Rankine are meant to make her readers metapragmatically aware of – and thus accountable to – what racial positioning entails mentally and physically.

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⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁷ “The making of citizen: Claudia Rankine, Woodberry Poetry Room”, 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RyIFX9OG54>. 19’20-19’51.

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