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“What Feels More Than Feeling?”

Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect

TYRONE S. PALMER

INTRODUCTION: MERTILLA JONES'S LAMENT

Aiyana Stanley-Jones was murdered in her sleep. On May 16, 2010, in Detroit, Michigan, just past midnight, a six-man SWAT team, armed with automatic weapons and trailed by cameras for the reality show *The First 48*, stormed into her home under the pretense of accosting a murder suspect. They shot the seven-year-old child as she lay asleep on the living room couch, her grandmother nearby watching television. This occurred within a matter of seconds. The bullet tore through her head. Four years later, at the trial of Joseph Weekley, the police officer who killed her, Aiyana's grandmother Mertilla Jones was called to testify. As she began to recount the story, Jones cried out, “Why'd he do that? Why'd you do it? Please tell me why you came in my house. . . . You killed her and you tried to blame me.” She was subsequently escorted off of the witness stand while continuing to scream: “She was only a baby, she was sleeping . . . why did y'all do this to me? . . . I gets no sleep! The flashbacks, I wouldn't wish this on anyone in the world.”¹

The reaction to Mertilla Jones's lamentation—her outpouring of grief, her affective display—was curious, and telling. Media outlets, and the presiding judge, characterized her bearing of witness as an “emotional outburst.”² Such a characterization implies that Jones's response—a clear expression of grief, anger, and disbelief at the senseless, indefensible murder of her seven-year-old granddaughter—was somehow an unacceptable, *excessive* emotional response. The range of emotions at work in Jones's testimony—grief, shock, despair, rage, depression, vulnerability, disbelief—are reduced to a hysterical anger, flattened to “an outburst.” Furthermore, in a video of the court proceedings broadcast on local news channels, those in the courtroom seemed unperturbed by Jones's testimony—Weekley appears stone-faced and unmoved, while lawyers and officers can be seen smiling, rolling their eyes,

and checking their cellular phones. This case is of particular interest here because it clearly displays the central concern of this essay: the fundamental opacity and *unthinkability* of Black feeling within the onto-epistemological framework that structures civil society and the modern field of representation.³ As a result of the varying modalities of violence—epistemic, material, metaphysical, ontological—which produce blackness as a locus of incapacities, Black affective responses are only legible as signs of pathology, further reifying blackness-as-subhumanity; as a sign of both excess and lack.

Throughout her oeuvre, Sylvia Wynter provides a comprehensive history of the emergence of Western Humanism and its hegemonic hold on our collective conception of what it is to *be* human. Tracing the origins of the dominant conception of the Human to the era of colonial expansion and the “discovery” of the New World, Wynter indexes the invention of the figure of Man, a *genre* of the human that overrepresents itself as if it were the human in totality, marking other forms of being human as aberrant. In the aftermath of the invention of Man as the dominant conception of the Human, “the West would . . . remain unable . . . to conceive of an Other to what it calls human . . . all other modes of being human would instead have to be seen . . . as the *lack* of the West’s ontologically absolute self-description.”⁴ Since its initial invention, Man’s “descriptive statement”—that is, its undergirding logic and conception of Truth/Knowledge/Being—has shifted and evolved over time in accordance with developments in the sciences and political economy. Man’s present biocentric descriptive statement conceives of the Human as a “purely biological being,” and categorizes Man and his (sub-)human Others as comparatively “selected” and “dysselected” by evolution.⁵ Within the onto-epistemological order of biocentric Man, the Black is positioned as the constitutive outside of the Human⁶—the link between humanity and animality on the “chain of being,” the “actualized embodiment . . . of the human totally deselected [by evolution] . . . [which] each individual and group must strive to avoid, struggle to prove that they themselves are not, if they are to be.”⁷ The Black, then, stands not merely as an “other” within the order of Truth and Being of Man, but *the complete negation* of what it is to be Human under the terms of Man’s biocentric descriptive statement. The very meaning of what it is to be—and the value ascribed to being as such—necessitates the violent disavowal of blackness and Black people.

Concurrent with Man’s hold on what it means to be human is an *order of consciousness*—a way of seeing, knowing, and experiencing the world—that structures what is thinkable and knowable within the terms of a given system of knowledge. This is not, however, a purely epistemological concern,

since the Western order of knowledge constructs our very conception of what it is *to be*, hence the term *onto-epistemological*. Wynter's framework is invaluable for thinking through the "extreme epistemological and metaphysical violence" that characterizes Western modernity and "serves as the foundation of Western society and its politics."⁸ Under the auspices of Man's order of consciousness, Black being is always already marked as deviant and pathological.

Within the onto-epistemological order of the Human-as-Man, Mertilla Jones's grief can only be perceived as irrational Black anger, excessive affect. The current historical moment has seen an increase in attention to the widespread violence imposed on Black people, yet Black reactions to that gratuitous violence are consistently characterized as inappropriate, exorbitant, and themselves gratuitous. There is a fundamental disconnect between the perception of Black hyperemotionality and irrationality, and the reality of Black feeling. This operates both at the level of "individual" Black people—as the case of Mertilla Jones so clearly demonstrates—and in terms of *structures of feeling*. As Zakiyyah Jackson notes, "Man's culture-specific mode of identity, and the self-referentiality of its code . . . leads to cognitive . . . affective, [and epistemological] closures."⁹ Black affect, then, is *unthinkable*, falling within the epistemological closure of Man's episteme; buried beneath an overdetermined discourse that reads the expression and performance of Black affect as always already excessive, inadequate, or both.

Through a close reading of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, this essay further develops the above claim, arguing that Black affect/feeling is unthinkable within the onto-epistemological order of the Human-as-Man.¹⁰ Given the centrality of the social to theorizations of affect—as exemplified by Sarah Ahmed's assertion that affect functions to "mediate the relations between the psychic and the social"¹¹—taking into account the singular position of blackness within the social order and the pervasive anti-Black logics that structure the social world troubles notions of the universality of affect as a mode of intersubjective relationality.¹²

TURNING BACKWARD: SURVEYING BLACKNESS IN THE AFFECTIVE TURN

Contemporary critical theory is in the midst of what has been termed the "affective turn,"¹³ exemplified by the work of scholars such as Sianne Ngai, Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, and Brian Massumi.¹⁴ These scholars theorize affect—broadly construed as social feeling or bodily intensity—as central to understanding (post-)human relationality and political economy. Within

this body of literature there are a number of conflicting definitions of affect—as Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth state in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, “There is no single, generalizable theory of affect . . . there can only ever be infinitely multiple iterations of affect and theories of affect.”¹⁵ While there is great nuance within the extant literature, the field can essentially be split into two camps: those who see affect and emotion as structurally distinct, and those who conceive of them as essentially interchangeable.

Theorists such as Brian Massumi, William Connolly, and Lawrence Grossberg make a sharp distinction between affect as an autonomous, precognitive, prelinguistic, asocial,¹⁶ bodily intensity that functions as a “state of suspense, potentially of disruption,”¹⁷ and emotion as “the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically formed progressions . . . into functions and meaning.”¹⁸ In the Massumian conception, emotion stands as an attempt to narrativize and contain affect into an individuated, communicable state of being—however, as pure force, affect lies *beyond* language. As unmediated bodily intensity and potential, affect allows us to re-theorize the workings of power outside of ideology, shifting focus to the nonconscious, unnamable intensities that drive the political; moments wherein the virtual “leaks into the actual.”¹⁹ This theorization of affect—which is heavily indebted to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as recent developments in cognitive neuroscience—often assumes a universal humanist subject and body, and as such “depoliticiz[es] biology [and] physiology.”²⁰ Theorizing affect as an ontological bodily capacity, this work often elides the epistemological contingency of capacity (i.e., the ways in which “capacity” is written onto certain bodies differently within a given order of knowledge) and the fact that not all bodies are imbued with the same capacities for feeling, movement, or sensation. As Ruth Leys argues, the Massumian conception of affect reinscribes a Cartesian mind-body dualism, merely inverting it by privileging the body and its capacities over cognition and the “rational” mind.²¹

Contrasting Massumi’s formulation, others view affect and emotion as being along a continuum, following the same fundamental logic and structure. Sara Ahmed argues that “emotion is the feeling of bodily change . . . [and as such,] emotions cannot be separated from bodily sensations.”²² In this framework, the emotion/affect distinction is a nonstarter, as the two are so intertwined as to make strict differentiation impossible. Similarly, Sianne Ngai conceives of the difference between affect and emotion as “a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality

or kind."²³ Here, emotion and affect bleed into one another, signifying varying levels of intensity, structure, and "semantic density,"²⁴ which are constantly in movement and transition.

Following Ngai's conception of the relationship between emotion and affect, I am not invested in parsing the distinctions between "affect," "feeling," and "emotion." These terms are often used interchangeably within the corpus of affect theory, and a focus on such distinctions often serves to obfuscate rather than elucidate the object of analysis, reinforcing the slipperiness and indeterminacy of affect as an analytic tool. Instead, I look to interrogate what José Muñoz terms "the relational nature and social contingency of emotion" vis-à-vis racial blackness.²⁵ If one adopts the position that blackness stands as the embodiment of the antisocial within the symbolic order—as the constitutive negation of humanness—how does the fact of blackness impact intersubjective relationality and affective exchange? What does centering blackness's singular position vis-à-vis the social—essential to the coherence of civil society and the social world, yet violently barred from it—do to theorizations of affect as social material? If, as Patricia Clough argues, "attending to the affective turn is necessary to theorizing the social . . . [and redressing] the chaotic processes that currently constitute the social,"²⁶ how does one account for affect theory's lack of interrogation of the particularities of blackness and its circulation within affective economies? While Clough does acknowledge that "some bodies or bodily capacities are derogated, making their affectivity superexploitable or exhaustible unto death,"²⁷ her analysis of this particular dimension of affective circulation ends there, leaving the question of *which* bodies and *which* bodily capacities unanswered. As it stands, affect theory as an academic discourse has yet to substantially account for the problematic of blackness, the particular affective dispositions that emerge in reaction to processes of racialization and racial subjugation, or the ways in which affect serves as an exploitable tool of racial domination and anti-blackness.

This inattentiveness to racial difference and the particularities of (anti-) blackness is emblematic of the larger discourse of humanism, to which affect theory belongs. Predicated on a conception of the Human that has its roots in colonial conquest, racial chattel slavery, and Enlightenment-era philosophy, humanist discourse—an umbrella term that includes disciplinary formations as disparate as new materialisms, political theory, anthropology, sociology, and history—has long been the subject of sustained critique within the field of Black studies. Yet within humanist discourse, affect theory is especially noteworthy because it often positions itself as a solution to the problems

that have plagued critical theory to date. Clare Hemmings notes that affect is often positioned as a “panacea” that allows us to move past “our paranoid attachment to unfreedom and turn towards the possibility offered by feeling.”²⁸ This “paranoid attachment” is construed as a central element of poststructuralist thought, which in its focus on epistemology, signification, language, and structural power relations is said to elide the “experience” of systems of power and the materiality of embodiment.²⁹ Affect, as a turn away from the purely epistemological toward the ontological, is positioned as “free from the constraints . . . of social meaning . . . run[ning] counter to the causal linearity through which we make sense of the world.”³⁰ The implication running throughout this body of thought is that the “freedom” afforded by affect is a freedom from the trappings of (racial, sexual, gender) difference.

Perhaps the most overt instantiation of this resistance to difference can be found in the introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, where Gregg and Seigworth position affect (theory) as a transcendent force that allows us to move beyond the body’s “seeming surface-boundedness” by theorizing “bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope . . . but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect.”³¹ One can interpret this as a gesture toward, and a moving-beyond, the “surface-boundedness” of race, in general, and blackness in particular, which is always already inscribed onto the skin. Implicit in much of the work within affect theory—even that which explicitly engages “race”³²—is that an understanding of affect is central to moving *beyond* static conceptions of racial difference.

In her essay “Affective Economies,” Sara Ahmed mobilizes a Marxist framework in order to consider the ways in which affects/emotions circulate between bodies and objects. She argues that “emotions are not simply ‘within’ or ‘without’ . . . emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities . . . through the very intensity of their attachments.”³³ Ahmed continues, “Emotions work as a form of capital [and are] produced only as an effect of [their] circulation.”³⁴ In her move away from a conception of emotions as personal property—as residing *solely* within a subject—Ahmed posits a break from Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis through the decentering of the subject and the reframing of affective economies as social and material rather than solely psychic processes. She makes an important intervention by removing emotion from the realm of the individual, and pointing toward the ways in which feelings are “shaped by histories . . . of production, circulation [and] exchange.”³⁵ However, her appraisal of emotion as social material that circulates between subjects assumes an equal structure of relation between all subjects. Taking the metaphor of

emotion-as-currency a bit further, one might ask: What happens when one's form of currency is not accepted? Ahmed's affective economy is strained when one considers that "the Black has no social relation(s) to be either masked or unmasked . . . in a structural sense . . . the matrix of violence [in which blackness is imbricated] makes Black relationality an oxymoron."³⁶ The Black, instead, stands as a *fungible* object upon, around and through which affect accumulates, yet whose own affective power is of no consequence.

Black fungibility—the reduction of the Black to a commodified, interchangeable object that can be endlessly exchanged and made to serve innumerable purposes—is the product of the originary violence of transatlantic slavery. As Calvin Warren notes, racial chattel slavery marked the moment in which, for the African, "Being was objectified, infused with exchange value, and rendered malleable within a sociopolitical order."³⁷ This very malleability, or "fungibility," as an ontological fact of blackness, positions the Black body as an abstraction upon and through which the desires, feelings, and ideas of others are projected.³⁸ Within this schema, notions of Black sentience and Black interiority are foreclosed or heavily circumscribed, as social value lies in the Black's status as an implement; an instrument accumulated for the pleasure, enjoyment, and *feeling* of the Subject; a "being for the captor."³⁹ Surely, the object-status of the Black is produced, and kept in place, *in relation* to the Human-as-Man, but the fungibility of blackness precludes *inter-subjective* relationality, since it figures the Black as an endlessly accumulable object rather than a subject in/of civil society. This fundamental fact of blackness is lost in affect theory's (limited) engagement with race, and troubles Ahmed's affective economy.

Ahmed invokes Frantz Fanon to speak of the ways in which "the accumulation of affective value shapes the surfaces of bodies and worlds,"⁴⁰ demonstrating how fear circulates and constructs racial recognition. Reading Fanon's primal scene,⁴¹ she argues that "fear does not reside in a particular object or sign . . . allow[ing it] to slide across signs, and between bodies."⁴² Yet Ahmed's invocation of Fanon serves to undermine her argument—she gestures toward this when she asks, rhetorically, "But doesn't this example show us that fear does get contained by an object, in this case the Black man?"⁴³ Indeed, the fungibility of blackness positions the Black as the embodied object of fear within the onto-epistemological order of Western Man. In other words, fear does not merely "stick" to the Black body; rather, the Black body signifies fear at the level of ontology. Fanon notes this in his outlining of *negrophobia* and *negrophilia* as the two pillars of the libidinal economy of anti-blackness. As I will argue later through a reading of Rankine's *Citizen*,

the Black's structural position produces a crisis of affective recognition. As Ahmed acknowledges, "The white child [in the Fanonian moment] misrecognizes the shivering of the Black body as rage."⁴⁴ The Black body's shivering—because of the cold weather, but also arguably indicative of a complex affective response to being hailed a "dirty nigger"⁴⁵—is only legible to the white gaze as the sign of an irrational, violent anger. Due to the fixity of the Black's structural position, blackness's circulation within affective economies is characterized by a continual "misrecognition" and illegibility, and the nullification of Black subjectivity.

This "misrecognition" and misreading of the Black positionality also tends to characterize work within affect theory that dares broach the subjects of race and racialization. In her chapter "Animatedness," which appears in her text *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai attempts to theorize the ways in which affect can serve as a "racializing technology."⁴⁶ She argues that "the affective qualities of liveliness, effusiveness, spontaneity and zeal" become distorted in the case of the racialized other, and "the seemingly neutral state of 'being moved' becomes twisted into the image of the overemotional racialized subject, abetting [their] construction as unusually receptive to external control."⁴⁷ While she acknowledges that the Black is "especially prone" to cultural representations of animatedness and exaggerated emotional expressivity wherein "emotional qualities . . . slid[e] into *corporeal* qualities . . . reinforcing the notion of race as a truth located, quite naturally, in the always obvious, highly visible body," Ngai continually collapses the experiences of the racialized "other" into a people-of-color framework that does not account for the particularities of blackness and the Black's object-status.⁴⁸ In her estimation, "exaggerated emotional expressiveness . . . seems to function as a marker of racial or ethnic otherness in general," including Italians, Asians, and Latinos.⁴⁹ Such a reading of the relationship between affect and race—wherein the Black just happens to be "*especially prone*" to mischaracterization and exploitation—bespeaks a fundamental misunderstanding of the structural position of blackness. While it is certainly true that non-Black persons of color and "ethnic" white subjects are often mischaracterized through stereotype, the historical and ontological condition of blackness is one of *absolute fungibility*.⁵⁰ Ngai's conception of animatedness does valuable work, but it neglects to fully capture the extent of the affective manipulation and exploitation to which the Black is subjected.

While no scholarly monograph to date has done a comprehensive exploration of the intersections between blackness and affect (theory), Claudia Rankine's most recent collection of poetry, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, draws

on affect theory in order to think through the problematic of racial blackness in relation to emotion, interiority, and intersubjective relationality. Through its sustained consideration of the affective dimensions of Black life, *Citizen* reveals the necessity of a theoretical framework for engaging the question of Black affect. A critical reading of this text makes plain the inability of a universal conception of affect to account for the structural position of blackness.

"TRAPPED IN A RACIAL IMAGINARY": BLACK FEELING, OPACITY, AND EPISTEMIC
(EN-)CLOSURE IN CLAUDIA RANKINE'S *CITIZEN*

Published in 2014, *Citizen: An American Lyric* is Claudia Rankine's fifth book of poetry. Comprised primarily of untitled prose poems written from the second-person perspective, the text attends to the everyday experiences of persons racialized as Black. *Citizen* takes place in the historical present, an epoch that is often referred to as the "postracial era." This era is characterized by a colorblind ideology, wherein racial difference and racism are both seen as problems of the past that have no bearing on current social formations. Under the regime of the postracial, any invocation of (institutional, structural, interpersonal) racism is positioned as "divisive" and "regressive," while the consequences of systemic racism are cast as personal and/or "cultural" deficiencies.

Engaging with and deconstructing postracial ideology, Rankine is concerned with the "quotidian struggles against dehumanization" and innumerable moments of racial violence that characterize the lived experience of the Black.⁵¹ The poems that comprise *Citizen* all, in some shape or form, grapple with processes of racialization, racial violence, and microaggressions. Within the text, everyday quotidian racisms are placed alongside spectacular moments that are more legible as racial violence (e.g., the murders of Trayvon Martin, Mark Duggan, and James Craig Anderson), pointing to the ways in which Black life is beset by violence at every level of existence, and implicitly contesting the "micro"-ness of microaggressions. Rankine illuminates the affective dimensions of racialization—how being subject to varying modes of racial violence *feels*. By focusing on how it feels to be the target of everyday racial violence, and underscoring the psychic toll of living under the constant threat of erasure, *Citizen* deftly theorizes the affective reality of Black embodiment in an anti-Black world, demonstrating the fundamental unthinkability of Black affect, and as a result calling into question the efficacy and universality of affect as a mode of intersubjective relationality.

The speaker in these poems, a nameless “you,” is consistently confronted with and reminded of their racial blackness and its attendant structural position. Misrecognition, incomprehensibility, erasure, and illegibility plague the interactions of this nameless “you,” positioning their sense-of-self as constantly in flux. This racialized hailing occurs in every conceivable sphere—in the intimacy of home, at dinner with a friend, in the grocery store check-out line, in the classroom, at the doctor’s office—and effectively negates any sense of kinship among the nameless, racialized “you” and the surrounding world. In one instance:

Someone in the audience asks the man promoting his new book on humor what makes something funny. His answer is what you expect—context. After a pause he adds that if someone said something, like about someone, and you were with your friends you would probably laugh, but if they said it out in public where Black people could hear what was said, you might not, probably would not. Only then do you realize you are among “the others out in public” and not among “friends.”⁵²

Here, the nameless “you” is violently reminded of their blackness and their status of perennial otherhood, though the “man promoting his new book” frames his reticence among the “others in public” as an attempt to avoid offending Black people. The room in which the speaker is situated suddenly shifts into a hostile and violent space, as they are positioned as both the butt of the joke and unable to hear it. This experience of suddenly feeling one’s blackness as an impediment toward intersubjective relationality reoccurs throughout the book, in seemingly innumerable contexts. The speaker of another poem recounts:

Standing outside the conference room, unseen between the two men waiting for the others to arrive, you hear one say to the other that being around Black people is like watching a foreign film without translation. Because you will spend the next two hours around the round table that makes conversing easier, you consider waiting a few minutes before entering the room.⁵³

It is particularly ironic that the speaker will proceed to sit around a table that “makes conversing easier” after overhearing two (ostensibly) white men state that “being around Black people is like watching a foreign film without translation.” This moment underscores the ways in which blackness, and its perceived “foreign”-ness, precludes “conversation,” positioning the Black

speaker as always already on the margins of sociality. This notion that Black people speak another language—are inscrutable, illegible—is a constant theme throughout the text, though it is never as explicitly stated as in this instance. That blackness is equated to another language—“without translation”—speaks to the essential *opacity* of blackness within the onto-epistemic order of the Human-as-Man, and the ways in which that opacity functions as a precondition for exclusion and anti-Black violence.

On Blackness and Opacity

The (perceived) opacity of blackness has been a consistent thematic in theorizations of Black life. Perhaps the most sustained engagement with the concept can be found in Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*. Glissant identifies the impulse toward transparency—the reduction of the totality of the world into that which is knowable and understandable—as one of the primary tenets of Western modernity. Western epistemology is characterized by what he terms an “ontological obsession with knowledge,”⁵⁴ which is apparent in the mandate to translate, to make the innumerable opacities of the world legible. Glissant lays out the “requirement for transparency” as such: “In order to understand and thus accept you . . . I have to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce.”⁵⁵ Translation, or the attempt to make something legible, is a violently reductive act that serves to implement a singular mode of being, precluding an experience of the totality of the world in Relation. Glissant argues that “opacity must be preserved,”⁵⁶ demanding the right to opacity as something that should be embraced and celebrated, and arguing for an understanding of the world as a multiplicity of opacities in Relation.

Theorists of Black performance have mobilized Glissant's celebration of opacity as an essential performative strategy of Black “resistance.”⁵⁷ These theorists see the illegibility of blackness as a strategically deployable tool that allows Blacks to resist and escape ostensibly totalizing systems of domination. Unknowable and impenetrable modes of Black expression and movement, within this framework, create spaces of relief and undermine colonial mandates of legibility and transparency. Yet, as Rankine's text consistently demonstrates, Black opacity often serves as a prerequisite for violence and functions to further entrap the Black in objecthood. While strategic opacity often serves a crucial, invaluable function as a means of survival and psychic self-protection,⁵⁸ of getting by in a world that mandates your destruction, often what is made opaque—Black interiority, feelings, desires—already *cannot be thought* within the onto-epistemological order of the Human-as-Man.

As Jared Sexton reminds us, “The intramural affairs of the Black lifeworld . . . [are] invisible, inaudible, *illegible—indeed unthought*—in the world, to the extent that Black life unfolds ‘out of the world’ by definition.”⁵⁹ So while, in theory, Black opacity *could* function as a means of escape and resistance to the violence that structures and pervades Black life, in actuality Black opacity serves as a (necessary) precondition and justification for the enactment of violence—both interpersonal and genocidal—upon Black people. The refrain of “I didn’t see you . . . I really didn’t see you,”⁶⁰ which often follows the quotidian violence throughout *Citizen*, is indicative of this. The perceived opacity of blackness is intimately tied to the unthinkability of Black suffering, in particular, and Black feeling more broadly. One poem demonstrates this particularly well:

And when the woman with the multiple degrees says, I didn’t know Black women could get cancer, instinctively you take two steps back though all urgency leaves the possibility of any kind of relationship as you realize nowhere is where you will get from here.⁶¹

Here, the very notion that a Black woman “could get cancer”—a disease that kills millions of human beings every year—is unthinkable to an ostensibly highly educated woman with “multiple degrees.” The Black, in this woman’s imagination, is figured as superhuman, impervious to a disease that is notoriously fickle with regards to whom it targets. To think that one group of people cannot get cancer is, essentially, to place them outside of the Human. Black women, as a category, are in this instance written as completely opaque—which, given the fact that Black women die of breast cancer at an exponentially higher rate than any other group, makes these comments especially egregious.⁶² Yet this logic, which sees Black people as an opaque mass with superhuman qualities, is a central trope of anti-blackness.

Another poem demonstrates the ways in which the affective comportment of the Black is fixed within an anti-Black logic, utterly disconnected from the interior life of a given Black person. Rankine writes:

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.

If you were smiling, what would that tell him about your composure in his imagination?⁶³

In this instance, the nameless, racialized “you” is perceived through an anti-Black logic wherein the Black is always already unduly, irrationally “angry.” The projection of anger onto the nameless “you” cannot be written off as a mere misunderstanding, given the historical valence of “Black anger,” and the fact that, as Sue Kim argues, “The characterization of ‘angry’ can dismiss not only the content of that person’s thoughts and feelings, but also the entire person, in a sense erasing subjectivity.”⁶⁴ Instead, it should be seen as indicative of the fundamental opacity and unthinkability of Black affect. Regarding unthinkability, Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes that “when reality does not coincide with deeply held beliefs, human beings . . . devise formulas to repress the unthinkable and to bring it back within the realm of accepted discourse.”⁶⁵ The “realm of accepted discourse” prescribes Black affective expressivity within predestined racialized scripts and tropes—that of the “angry Black woman” is clearly at play in this particular instance. Trouillot continues, “To the extent that [signs] of humanity are acknowledged, they are acknowledged only as evidence of a pathology.”⁶⁶ When Black affective responses are acknowledged, they are done so in a distorted manner, which functions to further reinforce the purported abnormality of Black feeling.

Throughout *Citizen*, the interiority of the Black is constantly nullified by the projection of “commodified anger” onto the Black body.⁶⁷ The Black body comes to stand as the site of excess affect and hyperemotionality, while at the same time the actual feelings of the Black person in question go unrecognized. This “commodified anger” lies in contrast to the interior, “imploding” anger evoked by processes of racialization, which “can prevent, rather than sponsor, the production of anything except loneliness.”⁶⁸ If “feelings are what create a person,”⁶⁹ as Rankine states at one point, then Black personhood is consistently erased, invisible, unrecognized. The Black stands “trapped in a racial imaginary,”⁷⁰ or, to reference Fanon, “overdetermined from without . . . the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of [them] but of [their] own appearance.”⁷¹ Black anger, in response to the psychic (and physical) violence of anti-blackness, has no audience—instead, it is received as irrational, a sign of “craziness” and Black infrahumanity. As such, unable to be externalized, it morphs into “an imploding anger.”⁷² The metaphor of implosion is particularly apt here because it points to ways in which Black feelings, rather than serving as a mode of intersubjective relationality, function to further alienate the Black from the surrounding world. This self-alienation

is emblematic of Black life, as the world works to consistently negate Black being—to “blister the inside of you.”⁷³ Rankine details the overwhelming sensory experience of this violence as such:

You take in things you don't want all the time. The second you hear or see some ordinary moment, all its intended targets, all the meanings behind the retreating seconds, as far as you are able to see, come into focus. Hold up, did you just hear, did you just say, did you just see, did you just do that? Then the voice in your head silently tells you to take your foot off your throat because just getting along shouldn't be an ambition.⁷⁴

Here, the constancy of racialized violence in “ordinary moment[s]” forces the speaker to endlessly question their own sensory perception—“did you just hear . . . say . . . see . . . do that?”—trapping them in a cycle that makes “just getting along,” merely *living*, a Sisyphean task. This is emblematic of being “trapped in a racial imaginary,” buried underneath anti-Black discourse.

Against a Sharp White Background

Citizen's insights into the particularities of Black affective experience vis-à-vis gender and (hyper-/in-)visibility converge at the site of tennis player extraordinaire Serena Williams. In the text's longest piece, which presents a mélange of multimedia imagery alongside a long-form lyric essay, Rankine traces the cavalcade of racial violence that has accompanied Williams's illustrious career, and her varying reactions to this unending erasure. Considering Williams's hypervisibility and athletic virtuosity, Rankine asks, “What does a victorious or defeated black woman's body in a historically white space look like?”⁷⁵ She finds an answer through the work of Zora Neal Hurston, stating that “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.”⁷⁶ This quote operates on multiple levels within the text, both as an encapsulation of Serena's particular experience as one of the most well-known Black women in the world and as a summation of the affective experience(s) of a Black body in constant contact with a world structured by an overvalored whiteness—as “ad copy for some aspect of life for all black bodies.”⁷⁷ Williams's position as a singular, peerless Black athlete in a historically white sport makes apparent the stark contrast between blackness and whiteness as distinct, antagonistic structures of feeling, as she is consistently thrown into contact with “people who *felt* her Black body didn't belong on their court, *in their world*.”⁷⁸ In instances where Serena responds to slights

against her very being (e.g., racialized taunts, questionable calls, etc.) with anger, frustration, and/or annoyance, she is demonized and pathologized, “read as insane.”⁷⁹ Serena’s blackness casts the irrational emotionality ascribed to her body in these moments as distinct from that often ascribed to passionate women—she is always already aberrant in relation to her white counterparts. Rankine continues:

Serena’s frustrations, her disappointments, exist within a system you understand not to try to understand in any fair-minded way because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systemic, as ordinary. For Serena, the daily diminishment is a low flame, a constant drip. Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you. To understand is to see Serena as hemmed in as any other black body thrown against our American background.⁸⁰

The affective investment of “you” in Serena’s tribulations comes as a result of a shared experience of erasure. In spite of her fame (or, conversely, because of it), Serena essentially “stands in” for “any other black body.” This is due to the synecdochal function of blackness—the “part” (i.e., a singular Black person) always already stands in for the “whole” (i.e., the putative Black “community”)—and the impossibility of a Black claim to individuality.⁸¹ While Serena’s Black female body signifies in very specific ways—as a particular *form* of excess and lack, exemplified by her stereotyping as an “angry Black woman” and the reception of her body as insufficiently feminine—her experience is indicative of the ontological ungendering and deindividuation of the Black under modernity.⁸² Hyperemotionality has historically been written as a characteristic of the feminine, but the Black woman’s affective excess goes far beyond this. There is no gendered integrity to Serena’s affectivity; it is cast as brutish, wild, and untamed. In response to this persistent characterization, Serena, the nameless “you” observes, attempts to mask and suppress her anger. Rankine continues:

Watching this newly contained Serena, you begin to wonder if she finally has given up wanting better from her peers, or if she . . . is challenging [the] assertion that the less that is communicated the better. Be ambiguous. This type of ambiguity could also be diagnosed as dissociation and would support Serena’s claim that she has had to split herself off from herself and create different personae.⁸³

Reacting to constant vilification and erasure, Serena “splits herself,” performing aloofness and withholding. Yet her newfound ambiguity—what we might call her enactment of dissemblance—does not shift the symbolics of her “Black female body” against the world’s sharp white background. She is still contained, trapped in a racial imaginary. It is noteworthy that Rankine returns here to the language of psychopathology—dissociation and split personae—signaling that the Black is always already on the verge of madness within a world that is bent on the denial and erasure of Black interiority and personhood.

This inability to conceive of Black emotion, to imagine the Black as a sentient being with interiority, is rooted in the history of racial chattel slavery. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson speaks of the “eternal monotony” of the Black face, and “that immovable veil of Black which covers the emotions of the other race.”⁸⁴ The “immovable veil” of blackness, in Jefferson’s terms, precludes Black affective recognition within the onto-epistemological order of the Human-as-Man. This is mirrored in the Rankine text by the epigraph, attributed to conceptual artist and filmmaker Chris Marker, which frames the text and serves as a kind of mission statement. It states, “If they don’t see the happiness in the picture, at least they’ll see the Black.” Blackness overdetermines everything, rendering even “happiness” illegible. This is an especially sharp point given the role of (the pursuit of) “happiness” in the Jeffersonian model of American citizenship.

The figuring of the Black as both hyperemotional and unfeeling is comparable to historical constructions of Black sexuality. In “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” Hortense Spillers argues that the commodification of the Black body during chattel slavery turned the Black into a vestibular being through which humanness was defined by negation.⁸⁵ This, Spillers argues, coincided with the emergence of a dominant mythology in which “sexual experience among Black people . . . is so boundlessly imagined that it loses meaning and becomes . . . a medium in which the individual is suspended.”⁸⁶ The Black became “the imagined site of an illegitimate sexuality,”⁸⁷ imbued with “so much sexual potential that [they] have none at all that anybody is ready or able to recognize at the *level of culture*.”⁸⁸ Black sexuality, then, is so overdetermined in the realm of the symbolic that the actual sexual lives and experiences of Black people are inscrutable.

Spillers is useful here for thinking through the schism between what Rankine identifies as “commodified anger,” which sticks to blackness in the cultural imaginary, and “imploding anger,” to which the outside world is willfully blind. Much like “sexuality as a term of power belongs to the empowered,”⁸⁹

emotionality and affectivity belong to the empowered, the (fully) Human. The fungibility of blackness yields the "absence of articulation,"⁹⁰ wherein the very notion of Black interiority is foreclosed. The nullification and denial of Black interiority and Black sentience is particularly noteworthy because it precludes the possibility of the Black as an affective agent.

While she is not explicitly concerned with affect-qua-*feeling*, Denise Ferreira da Silva's conception of affectability is helpful for thinking through the inextricability of "affect" from power. Da Silva argues that Enlightenment-era philosophy effectively constructed the Others of Europe (racialized populations) as essentially endlessly affectable—in distinction to the transparent Subject (analogous to Wynter's Man), who is autonomous and rational. This logic, in da Silva's framework, governs the entire modern field of representation. She deploys the term *affectability* to refer to "the condition of being subjected to both natural (in the scientific and lay sense) conditions and to others' power."⁹¹ This framework demonstrates the ways in which "the capacity to affect and be affected," which Gregg and Seigworth offer as a baseline definition of affect, is not universal but, rather, is entangled in the matrices of power that (re)produce Black abjection. In other words, the Subject of affect theory is the Subject of transparency, endowed with the capacity to affect *and* be affected. The capacity to affect—to enact one's will, to *move* as a self-determined agent upon the Other—is inextricably tethered to the Subject, who possesses an interiority that is recognized as such, and a capacity for feeling that has sociopolitical value. This is in sharp distinction to the obdurate objecthood of the Black, who is positioned as purely affectable, "a thing whose essence and existence is determined from without . . . [possessing] no ontological significance."⁹² The Black stands as endlessly affectable but unable to "affect" or have agentive power within an affective economy. Within the onto-epistemological order of the transparent subject, the Black, as the symbol of pure lack and the negation of the Subject's capacities, is fixed in affectability.

"YOU MEAN A BLACK SUBJECT. NO, A BLACK OBJECT."
AFFECT, FORM, AND CRUSHING OBJECTHOOD

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, which Rankine cites in *Citizen's* appendix, Frantz Fanon's description of the condition of blackness is steeped in the language of fixity and stasis. In being made an object—made to carry the burden of responsibility for one's body, race, and ancestors due to the meanings attached to Black skin—the Black is locked in the *zone of nonbeing*,

“straddling nothingness and infinity.”⁹³ The Black, for Fanon, is shackled to a “history that the others have compiled,” fixed in time.⁹⁴ Fanon’s constant use of the word “fixed” is of particular importance, as the condition of blackness is marked by an unmoving suspension. Throughout *Citizen*, Rankine builds upon Fanon’s work by displaying the myriad ways the Black is hailed—not only through the direct linguistic violence of “dirty nigger,” but through the subtler, arguably more insidious violence of the everyday.

Rankine also builds upon Fanon’s notion of the fixity of blackness in relation to historicity. Elucidating how the past haunts and prefigures the present (and future), Rankine brilliantly states that “the past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow.”⁹⁵ Here, she gestures toward the carcerality of the past—the history of racial slavery, the “longue dureé of social death”⁹⁶—stating that “you can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; turned your flesh into its own cupboard.”⁹⁷ Throughout the text, the Black “historical self” often supersedes and nullifies the “self-self,”⁹⁸ foreclosing intersubjective relationality, reducing any encounter between Blacks and whites to “one between white persons and Black property.”⁹⁹ By tying the contemporary moment to the historical past, Rankine resists the narrative of progress that pervades postracial discourse, pointing toward what Saidiya Hartman terms “the history that hurts—the still-unfolding narrative of captivity, dispossession, and domination that engenders the Black subject in the Americas.”¹⁰⁰ For the Black, incorporation into “citizenship” and “personhood” is predicated on a denial of the past—a disavowal of blackness itself. “Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on.”¹⁰¹ This disavowal is emblematic of the structural impossibility of Black citizenship, since such an escape from the past is impossible for the Black, as blackness is imbricated in the history of gratuitous violence, pillage, and accumulation through which it was produced. As such, the Black stands perennially outside the social world; unable to claim citizenship or personhood within the onto-epistemological order of the Human.

Rankine theorizes this dilemma through her sustained deployment of the second-person perspective. Appraising Rankine’s previous book, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, Anthony Reed characterizes her work as “post-lyric poetics,” which he defines as a style that “use[s] received understandings of the lyric as a horizon of hermeneutic expectation, only to disrupt the very basis of that mode: the assumed solidity of the speaking, universal ‘I.’”¹⁰² To understand the significance of *Citizen*’s refusal of the lyrical “I,” it is necessary to situate the text within the history of Western poetics.

Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* provides a history of the lyric form in the Western poetical tradition, pointing to the fact that its emergence as one of the "three fundamental genres" of Western poetics was concurrent with the Enlightenment-era's "highly developed conception of the individual subject."¹⁰³ Culler notes that the lyric is defined by its mode of address and its general articulation in the first person by centering a speaking "I," though the function of that "I" has been the subject of debate across time. Initially seen to be purely mimetic—that is, representing the poet-as-individual, or the expression of an individual subjectivity—modern conceptions of the lyrical "I" tend toward thinking of it as either purely fictional or representational, still centering a "speaking subject." In current formulations, and in the thought of philosophers such as Heidegger and Hegel,¹⁰⁴ the lyrical "I" functions as the expression of a "universal" subjectivity and poetic consciousness. The lyric form—and the lyrical "I" in particular—has been theorized widely in the canon of Western philosophy, and as such is tethered to Man, or what da Silva terms the "transparent subject." These theorizations of the lyric form often foreground its "emotional intensity,"¹⁰⁵ placing the lyric as a central ground for theorizing affect.

This relationship between lyric, ontology, affect, and the Human has had troubling implications for the notion of a Black lyrical tradition, given the Black's entrapment in the zone of nonbeing. The history of Black poetics has, in large part, been an attempt to speak back against the perceived irreconcilability of blackness and lyricism. After prolonged struggle, the contemporary moment has been framed as the epoch of the "new African American poetry," in which Black poets, alleviated of the burden of the political, can finally "bear witness to the interior landscape of their own individual selves or examine the private or personal worlds of invented personae and, therefore, of human beings living in our modern and postmodern worlds."¹⁰⁶ If the contemporary moment marks the stage at which the Black is finally integrated into the modern world and can, thus, finally fully participate in the lyrical form, what does one make of Rankine's refusal of the lyrical "I"?

If the lyrical "I" is metonymical of the Human-as-Man, or the transparent subject, then Rankine's shift toward a sustained use of the second-person in *Citizen* can be read as theorizing blackness as the second person,¹⁰⁷ "situated a priori in absolute dereliction" and affectability,¹⁰⁸ in contrast to the transparent "I" of Western Man. The racialized, nameless "you" of the text marks blackness as a state of perennial objecthood—absolute affectability—unable to claim the subjective, lyrical "I" and therefore outside of the category of the Human-as-Man. This positions *Citizen* as a critique of the modern field

of representation, and lyric poetry's centrality in building the subject of transparency. The book's subtitle, *An American Lyric*, can then be read as an ironic gesture, indexing Black abjection as the underside of both the lyrical tradition and the American national project.

In two of *Citizen's* most abstract pieces, Rankine stages the antagonism between the transparent subject of representation and the affectable, abjected Other through a fragmented lyric rendering of "I" versus "You." She states:

You could build a world out of need or you could hold everything Black
and see. You give back the lack . . .
Sometimes "I" is supposed to hold what is not there until it is. Then *what is*
comes apart the closer you are to it.
This makes the first person a symbol for something.
The pronoun barely holding the person together.¹⁰⁹

And still a world begins its furious erasure—
Who do you think you are, saying I to me?
You nothing.
You nobody.
You.¹¹⁰

What Rankine indexes here as "furious erasure" can be read as analogous to what Fanon calls "crushing objecthood." This furious erasure entails the obliteration of the Black's subjectivity—the reduction of the Black to a fungible object. More pointedly, Rankine states, "You hold[s] everything Black."¹¹¹ Relegated to the status of the second person—the inhuman—the Black-as-second-person stands as a site of ontological negation.

In the above excerpt, and throughout the text, the obliteration of Black subjectivity takes varying forms. Affect figures into this negation through the inability to see or think Black feeling—through "the sheer denial of Black sentience."¹¹² While not all "sentient beings" are endowed with subjectivity, sentience is itself a precondition for subjectivity within the modern field of representation—the Subject has consciousness; is self-knowing, self-reflecting, *and feeling*. Denying and/or contesting the Black's sentience, then, has a dual function: to write Black people outside of the Human and position them as immutably affectable, unfeeling repositories for brute force. The Black body functions as a cipher within affective economies, effectively denying the Black's capacity to feel. In light of this, Rankine's imploring to "drag that first person out of the social death of history, then we're kin"

speaks, again, to the incommensurability of the Black within civil society, which is "held together by a structural prohibition against recognizing and incorporating a being that is [socially] dead."¹¹³ As such there is no grammar within the dominant order of being/truth/knowledge/freedom with which to speak or think Black feeling.

CONCLUSION: "THE WEIGHT OF NON-EXISTENCE"

In one of *Citizen's* key poems, the speaker inquires, "What feels more than feeling? . . . A feeling that feelings might be irrelevant if they point to ones irrelevance pulls at you."¹¹⁴ This poem, from which this essay takes its title, speaks to both the fundamental illegibility of Black feeling to the World-at-large and the need to re-theorize affect from the place of blackness. Implicit in this question—"What feels more than feeling?"—is a yearning for and imagining of a *grammar* for Black feeling, one that transcends the cage of History and the World of Man. However, Frank Wilderson's assertion that "feelings . . . cannot address the gratuitous violence which structures what is essential to Blackness . . . [or] alter the structure of the Black's seven-hundred-year-long relation to the world" haunts this passage.¹¹⁵ As it stands, Black feelings merely serve to reinforce the Black's "irrelevance"—or, non-being—within the onto-epistemological context of the Human. The systematic nullification of Black subjectivity fortifies this irrelevance.

This essay represents an attempt to think affect and blackness in tandem, and to make plain the anti-Black logics that undergird the extant academic discourse of affect theory. The point here is not to bemoan the lack of recognition of Black feeling, but rather to make clear the way that anti-blackness permeates even that which is seen to be a universal, prediscursive "human" capacity. Affect theory, in its recourse to the biological and the ontological, has been positioned as the answer to the trappings of "identity" and "difference," yet it offers no language with which to approach the sensorial dimensions of ontological negation. Blackness represents the unthought horizon of affect theory, and in order to understand the persistence of the anti-Black paradigm, we must begin to theorize affect from the position of blackness—to think the unthinkable.

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NOTES

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1. WXYZ-TV Detroit | Channel 7. *Chaos erupts in courtroom as Aiyana Jones' grandmother testifies*, YouTube video, 2:37, September 24, 2014, <https://youtu.be/IW2-UVskHUA>.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Following Rei Terada, I use *feeling(s)* to connote “both physiological sensations (affects) and psychological states (emotions).” See Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the Death of the Subject* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 4.

4. Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Toward the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3 no. 3 (2003): 282.

5. *Ibid.*, 325–26.

6. Following Fanon and Wilderson, I utilize “the Black”—as opposed to “the Black subject”—throughout this essay in order to denote “blackness” as a structural position of denied subjectivity, or *nonbeing*. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952), and Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

7. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” 325.

8. Calvin Warren, “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 1 (2015): 231.

9. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism,” *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2013): 673.

10. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014).

11. Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22 (2004): 119.

12. *Intersubjective relationality* indexes connectivity between subjects, a mode of being-with that the Black’s object-status precludes. The distinction between *intersubjective relationality* and *relation* is important here, as affect theorists such as Ahmed theorize affect as a conduit for relationality *between subjects*. Affect theory’s close relationship to psychoanalytic theory—which is centered on the intersubjective—is also worth noting.

13. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley, eds., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

14. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

15. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3–4.

16. Massumi contends that affect is “asocial, but not pre-social—it *includes* social elements but mixes them with elements belonging to other levels of functioning and combines them according to a different logic.” See Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 30; William Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Lawrence Grossberg, “Affect’s Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 309–38.

17. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 26.

18. *Ibid.*, 28.

19. *Ibid.*, 43.

20. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 29.

21. Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry* 37 (2011): 434–72.

22. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 5–12.

23. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 27.

24. *Ibid.*

25. José Muñoz, “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s *The Sweetest Hangover* (and Other STDs),” *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 1 (2000): 71.

26. Patricia Ticineto Clough, “Introduction,” *The Affective Turn*, ed. Clough and Halley, 2–3.

27. *Ibid.*, 25.

28. Clare Hemmings, “Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn,” *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 557.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 559–62.

31. Gregg and Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregg and Seigworth, 2.

32. See, for instance, Amit Rai, “Race Racing: Four Theses on Race and Intensity,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 40 nos. 1–2 (2012): 64–75.

33. Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 117–19.

34. *Ibid.*, 120.

35. *Ibid.*, 121.

36. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 251.

37. Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 237.

38. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 38.

39. See Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 203–29.

40. Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 120.

41. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952): 109–40.

42. Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 127.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*, 126.

45. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 109.

46. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 94.

47. *Ibid.*, 91.

48. *Ibid.*, 95. For an essential articulation of the "people-of-color" problematic, see Jared Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 28:103, no. 2 (2010): 31–56.

49. *Ibid.*, 94.

50. Ngai notes that "the 'thinging' of the body in order to construct it, counter-intuitively, as impassioned is deployed . . . as a strategy of shifting the status of this body from thing to human, as if the racialized, hence already objectified body's re-objectification, in being animated, were paradoxically necessary to emphasize its personhood or subjectivity" (Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 99). "Thinging" can be thought of as analogous to fungibility—the racialized/ethnicized subject, in her conception, is endlessly pliable. However, fungibility is the *ontological condition* of Blackness, as opposed to an experience.

51. Rankine, *Citizen*, 24.

52. *Ibid.*, 48.

53. *Ibid.*, 50.

54. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 19.

55. *Ibid.*, 190.

56. *Ibid.*, 120.

57. For two representative instances, see Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), and Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

58. Darlene Clark Hine's seminal essay, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912–20, is especially instructive here.

59. Jared Sexton, "'The Curtain of the Sky': An Introduction," *Critical Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2010): 22n4 (emphasis mine).

60. Rankine, *Citizen*, 77.

61. *Ibid.*, 45.

62. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Breast Cancer Rates by Race and Ethnicity," June 15, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/breast/statistics/race.htm>.

63. Rankine, *Citizen*, 46.
64. Sue Kim, *On Anger: Race, Cognition, and Narrative* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 1.
65. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (New York: Beacon Press, 1995), 72.
66. *Ibid.*, 83–84.
67. Rankine, *Citizen*, 23.
68. *Ibid.*, 24.
69. *Ibid.*, 64.
70. *Ibid.*, 30.
71. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 116.
72. Rankine, *Citizen*, 95.
73. *Ibid.*, 156.
74. *Ibid.*, 55.
75. *Ibid.*, 25.
76. This quote is from Hurston's essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," and is also referenced in Glenn Ligon's painting "Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)," which appears on page 52 of Rankine, *Citizen*.
77. Rankine, *Citizen*, 25.
78. *Ibid.*, 26 (emphasis mine).
79. *Ibid.*, 30.
80. *Ibid.*, 32.
81. See Hortense Spillers, "'All The Things You Could Be By Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother': Race and Psychoanalysis," in *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 376–427 (395). Spillers argues that rather than attempting to write the Black-as-individual, Black cultural theory ought to develop a conceptualization of "the one," which is prior to the Subject and delimits a collective conception of being.
82. See Spillers, "Mama's Baby."
83. Rankine, *Citizen*, 35–36.
84. See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998).
85. Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 155.
86. *Ibid.*, 164.
87. *Ibid.*, 165.
88. *Ibid.*, 164.
89. *Ibid.*, 157.
90. *Ibid.*
91. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xv.
92. *Ibid.*, 44–53.
93. *Ibid.*, 140.

94. Ibid., 120.
95. Rankine, *Citizen*, 72.
96. Jared Sexton, "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts," *Lateral* 1 (2012).
97. Rankine, *Citizen*, 63.
98. Ibid., 14.
99. Ibid., 34.
100. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 51.
101. Rankine, *Citizen*, 141.
102. Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 98–99.
103. Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1.
104. Hegel argues that the lyric is a "material representation of Spirit" and that its "content is *not the object but the subject*, the inner world, the mind that considers and *feels*." The lyric, as the ultimate expression of subjectivity, offers the possibility for "liberation in feeling," as Spirit attains absolute consciousness. This weds lyric form to the modern field of representation. See *ibid.*, 92–105.
105. Ibid., vii.
106. Quoted in Amiri Baraka, "A Post-Racial Anthology? *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*" (review), *Poetry*, May 1, 2013.
107. See Meara Sharma, "Blackness as the Second Person: Meara Sharma Interviews Claudia Rankine," *Guernica*, November 17, 2014, <https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/blackness-as-the-second-person>.
108. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 85.
109. Rankine, *Citizen*, 70–71.
110. Ibid., 142.
111. Ibid., 40.
112. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 51.
113. Rankine, *Citizen*, 72; Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 142.
114. Rankine, *Citizen*, 152.
115. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 142.