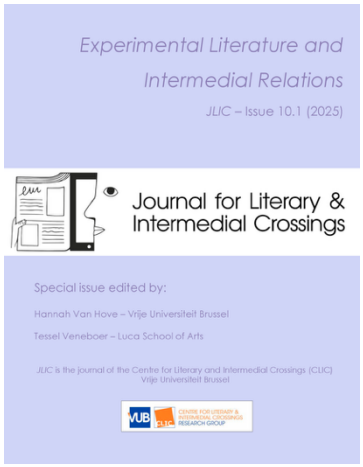

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The Politics and Poetics of Intermedial Sentimentality in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)

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This paper examines Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) through the intersecting frameworks of intermediality, genre theory, and sentimentality to explore how the text enacts a poetics of resistance against systemic anti-Black racism. Rankine's hybrid work mobilizes a lyric essay form that brings together poetry, prose, documentary materials, and visual art, producing what the paper terms *intermedial sentimentality*—a mode of affective communication in which textual and visual forms collaborate to render the lived experience of racialized embodiment both affectively immediate and politically legible. Synthesizing Irina Rajewsky's concept of the media border as an "enabling structure[s]" ("Border Talks" 66) with Lauren Berlant's theorization of the sentimental and the "impasse[s]" (*Cruel Optimism* 199), the analysis demonstrates how intermedial sentimentality transforms private registers of racial injury into collective modes of critique and witnessing. The sentimental—often dismissed as excessive or manipulative—is reconfigured here as a relational and communicative code that fosters identification, discomfort, and critical reflection. By invoking shared cultural scripts of grief and trauma, *Citizen* constructs a sentimental space of resistance that reveals affect as inherently political. *Citizen* resists the spectacle of Black suffering while calling attention to its invisibility. It disrupts simple empathy, creating instead an impasse that implicates the reader in a difficult mode of witnessing by withholding the visual spectacle of Black suffering while textually invoking its somatic reality. In doing so, it forges what Zizi Papacharissi terms "affective publics," linking private experience to collective critique. The paper concludes that Rankine's intermedial sentimentality expands the possibilities of genre and political feeling, positioning *Citizen* as a powerful intervention in both contemporary literature and racial discourse.

Keywords: intermedial sentimentality, sentimentality, lyric essay, hybridity, resistance

> "[Lyric essay] is a form that has always resisted easy classification, and as such, its very definition is an act of resistance."
>
> — LaTanya McQueen, "The Lyric Essay as a Mode of Resistance"

Introduction

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) is a hybrid work that blends poetry, essay, visual imagery, and cultural critique to interrogate the enduring structures of anti-Black racism in contemporary American life. Through its intermedial construction, *Citizen* stages a confrontation with the ways race is lived, mediated, and represented across cultural and institutional registers. Nowhere is this confrontation more palpable than in

Chapter 6, where Rankine writes in memory of Trayvon Martin. In this passage, Rankine evokes the visceral imagery of lynching, describing "the tree inside us, its roots our limbs, a throat sliced through" (90). On the opposite page, she juxtaposes this text with an archival photograph from 1930 depicting a white crowd gazing at a tree. However, Rankine uses a cropped version of the image in which the lynched bodies are removed. This intermedial gap—between the text that speaks the violence and the image that erases it—forces the viewer to confront the social mechanisms that allow such violence to be erased or overlooked in American history.

In this sense, the politics of intermediality in *Citizen* refers to the work's capacity to disrupt established media boundaries in order to critique the social and ideological frameworks that sustain racial inequity. As such, *Citizen* offers an incisive case for rethinking the critical potential of intermedial practices. This paper argues that such moments do not merely interrupt the text; they enact what I term *intermedial sentimentality*—a mode in which affective communication emerges through the interplay of textual and visual media. By withholding the visual spectacle of Black suffering while textually invoking its history, Rankine creates a structural rupture that implicates the reader in a difficult mode of witnessing. To theorize this, I propose reading *Citizen* through the lens of the sentimental, grounded in Lauren Berlant's theorization of sentimentality as a "mode of relationality" ("Depressive Realism"). Berlant argues that genres operate on an "affective contract" (*Cruel Optimism* 66), promising to connect readers to historical experience through feeling. However, for marginalized subjects, this promise of national belonging often proves illusory. Rankine mobilizes the sentimental not to offer comfort, but to create what Berlant might term "impasses"—affective interruptions that expose the inadequacy of simple empathy in the face of systemic racism (*Cruel Optimism* 199).

Recent scholarship has illuminated the intermedial strategies of *Citizen* from multiple perspectives. Catherine Gander shows how the juxtaposition of photographic imagery and lyric address produces a topography of disorientation that unsettles normative orientations of whiteness and reconfigures the act of looking itself (519–522). For Gander, *Citizen*'s visual-textual field compels readers to inhabit an uneasy space of visual and ethical accountability (523–525). Mary-Jean Chan has similarly foregrounded *Citizen*'s hybridity, describing it as a work of "lyric hybridity" in which the interplay of poetry, essay, and uncaptioned images generates a "poetics of racial trauma" (162). Chan argues that by refusing interpretive closure, Rankine positions the reader in a mode of ethical responsiveness (149–150). Building on these accounts of disorientation and hybridity, John K. Young has examined the multiple published versions of *Citizen*, demonstrating how even seemingly minor textual and typographic revisions reshape the book's memorial and political force. As Young notes, changes such as the alteration of "black men" in the first edition to "black people" in later versions broaden the scope of racial violence that the text registers. Likewise, typographic and spatial adjustments across editions shift the presentation of racial violence and memory, drawing attention

to the ways the book's material form shapes its engagement with historical violence (10–11).

While Gander emphasizes disorientation, Chan highlights lyric hybridity, and Young foregrounds archival revision, my analysis extends this field by identifying sentimentality as the affective hinge through which *Citizen*'s hybrid strategies operate. In theorizing what I call intermedial sentimentality, I aim to show how Rankine's integration of text, image, and page space translates private registers of racial injury into collective affective contracts, thereby reclaiming the sentimental as a resistant and disruptive structure of relation. I use the term "lyric essay" to describe *Citizen*, as it is a lyrical text that also includes "essayistic qualities in thought and language" (Chan 141). Although there are various classifications, this term has been widely adopted by scholars in discussions of the work (see Askew and Chan).

Intermediality and Genre

To understand how *Citizen* resists conventional literary forms and creates new possibilities for meaning-making, it is essential to examine its intermedial strategies—that is, the ways it brings different media into interaction. *Citizen* not only reconfigures established genre conventions but also challenges assumptions about the boundaries and functions of media themselves. This convergence of forms draws attention to the interpretive role of both genre and mediality, highlighting the need for a theoretical framework that attends to their mutual entanglement.

This paper draws on a selective and focused set of theoretical tools chosen specifically for their ability to elucidate the politics of Rankine's hybridity. For genre theory, the paper is grounded in the understanding of genre as a dynamic, historically contingent mode of reading, as proposed by scholars like Deborah Tall and John D'Agata. In their foundational description, Tall and D'Agata define the lyric essay as a hybrid form that "partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness […] and of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts" (7). Its fragmentary structure and non-linearity mirror the intermedial operations in *Citizen*, where poetic language, visual art, and documentary materials merge to create layered, affective meaning. Judith Kitchen adds that what distinguishes the lyric essay is its "ground"—an underlying coherence that binds its disparate elements into a unified experiential and intellectual whole (118). In this way, genre itself becomes intermedial: a space of convergence between modes, materials, and readerly expectations.

However, to analyze precisely how the visual and textual elements interact within this lyric space, a more specific framework is required. While Lars Elleström offers a broad definition of intermediality as "the phenomenon whereby the properties of all media partly intersect" (4), his formulation remains conceptually diffuse for a text that relies heavily on the friction between distinct forms. For this reason, this analysis relies on the work of Irina Rajewsky, particularly her argument that intermediality depends on the visibility of borders. Rajewsky's framework is uniquely illuminating for *Citizen* because it

moves beyond the simple observation that media can be mixed. Instead, she argues that the "functioning of intermedial configurations is always based on relations between media […] that are *conventionally perceived as distinct*" (61, emphasis in original). Even though media borders are constructed, Rajewsky insists we must perceive them to understand the artwork; she redefines these borders not as barriers, but as "enabling structures" that allow for "transcending, subverting, probing or highlighting" conventions (64-65).

This focus on the "enabling structure[s]" of the border makes Rajewsky's theory essential for reading *Citizen*. Rankine's project is deeply concerned with the policing of social and racial borders—who belongs, who is visible, and who is recognized as a citizen. By mobilizing Rajewsky's concept, we can see how Rankine uses the formal separation between text and image to mirror the structural separations of race. In *Citizen*, the text and the image do not simply blend into a seamless whole; they often stand in tension, separated by white space or page breaks. This formal gap functions as an "enabling structure[s]": it is the space where the reader feels the dissonance between the caption and the photo, or the lyric voice and the visual evidence. Thus, Rajewsky allows us to read Rankine's formal hybridity not just as an aesthetic experiment, but as a political enactment. Just as the reader must negotiate the "conventionally perceived" borders between the lyric and the picture, they are forced to negotiate the conventional perceptions of Blackness and whiteness that structure the American social landscape. This structural friction prepares the ground for the affective work of the text, leading us to the second theoretical pillar of this analysis: sentimentality.

Sentimentality

Sentimentality has often been treated with suspicion in literary and cultural discourse, burdened by associations with excess, simplicity, and emotional manipulation. As James Chandler observes:

> The sentimental […] has long been regarded in a pejorative light, almost from the moment of its coinage in the mid-eighteenth century. Works that have come to be associated with the nominalized form of the term 'sentimental'—sentimentality—have, over the ensuing two and a half centuries, been considered by many critics to be the very bane of culture. (35)

This critical stance continues to shape how sentimentality is received and evaluated. Burnetts expands this history, noting that the term sentimental is "[n]ow widely used to connote a sense of its own excess, as in the attribute of the 'grossly sentimental' deployed by so many critics," and that it is "often enough deemed manipulative" (*Concept* 2; *Improving* 4). These dismissals obscure the complexity of sentimentality, which, as I argue, can function as a relational and communicative mode—a structure of feeling capable of fostering identification, ethical responsiveness, and political engagement.

My use of the sentimental departs from its conventional stigmatization. Rather than treating it as a sign of excess or manipulation, I understand the sentimental as a

"communicative and relational code" ("DFG Research Training Group")—a structure that facilitates connection between individuals and broader communities. If Rajewsky provides the structural framework for analyzing the borders between media in *Citizen*, Lauren Berlant provides the vocabulary for the affective work that occurs at those borders. Berlant redefines sentimentality, distancing it from its reductive associations with nostalgia or overwrought emotion. As she argues:

> Sentimentality is not just the mawkish, nostalgic, and simpleminded mode with which it's conventionally associated, where people identify with wounds of saturated longing and suffering, and it's not just a synonym for a theatre of empathy: it is a mode of relationality in which people take emotions to express something authentic about themselves that they think the world should welcome and respect; a mode constituted by affective and emotional intelligibility and a kind of generosity, recognition, and solidarity among strangers. (Berlant, "Depressive Realism")

It is this sentimental mode of affective communication that is at work in Rankine's *Citizen*. Crucially, Rankine mobilizes sentimentality not as a retreat into emotionalism, but as a politically charged mode of address—one that invites ethical attention and identification without offering resolution or catharsis. This sentimental structure works in concert with the text's intermedial strategies: the juxtaposition of text, visual image, historical documentation, and blank spaces produces moments of affective intensity that are neither purely textual nor purely visual. Instead, they create affective openings or impasses that provoke the reader to pause, feel, and reckon. While empathy is certainly one dimension of this affective response, *Citizen* also produces discomfort, moral self-examination, and a sense of implicated witnessing. In this way, the sentimental in *Citizen* is not nostalgic but disruptive and critical—reclaiming the affective power of sentimental form for a poetics of resistance.

To create a link between genre and sentimentality, as Berlant discusses the historical novel as an affective genre, I see the lyric essay in the same manner. As Berlant argues, genres are defined not only by formal conventions but by "the affective contract they promise," shaping how readers are sutured into historical experience through emotion rather than exposition. In her account of the historical novel, Berlant writes that such genres "[produce] a capacity to sense historical experience in an aesthetic feedback loop," embedding "persons in the historical in ways that only the aesthetic situation could really capture" (*Cruel Optimism* 66). *Citizen* operates through a similar dynamic. While not a historical novel, it creates an atmosphere in which the long afterlife of racial violence is made experientially present. The text does so not by narrating history directly, but by constructing an affective terrain across genres and media—poetic fragments, visual art, documentary traces—that enables readers to inhabit intermedial sentimentality: a mode in which aesthetic and affective forms converge to make systemic violence felt in personal and bodily terms. This sentimentality is not consolatory, but structurally resistant; it activates empathy, discomfort, and recognition through the very interplay of media that constitutes the work's form.

Intermedial Sentimentality in *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Lyric Form, Dissociation, and Structural Violence

Citizen interweaves the personal and the political, drawing connections between individual experiences of racial embodiment and broader structures of social and cultural violence. Through intimate, often second-person narratives, Rankine situates Black subjectivity within a national context shaped by systemic racism and the everyday psychic toll it manifests. The designation "An American Lyric" signals a deliberate engagement with the lyric tradition, which Rankine reconfigures through essayistic techniques such as citation, fragmentation, and reflection. These formal strategies allow the text to oscillate between affective immediacy and analytical distance, enabling it to function simultaneously as poetic expression and cultural critique. Crucially, *Citizen* enacts what Lauren Berlant describes as a "dissociative poetics"—a form that registers the psychic disorientation and affective fragmentation produced by structural violence and racialized life (*On the Inconvenience* 134–35). The text is composed of episodic encounters that begin *in medias res* and resist narrative closure, what Berlant calls "the genre of the encounter," in which "there are no beginnings, only scenes to be in the middle of" (*On the Inconvenience* 134). These lyric fragments reflect a state of ordinary dissociation, which is "a predictable effect and nonexceptional experience of living with, in, and under biopower's structural disciplines and historical aggressions" (*On the Inconvenience* 118). Rankine's poetics thus reflect not just moments of injury but the ongoing affective condition of negotiating visibility, misrecognition, and vulnerability. Dissociation is not pathologized here but rendered as a survival strategy—"a standard clinical referent" that manages psychic overwhelm, wherein "the impersonality of structural violence becomes personal" (*On the Inconvenience* 118). In this way, *Citizen* not only represents racial violence but formally performs the affective atmosphere of living within its ongoing conditions.

The Lyric Essay and Postlyric Poetics

The lyric essay allows Rankine to discuss how the personal is inherently political, as she articulates in her assertion that "there's no private world that doesn't include the dynamics of my political and social world" (Rankine, "The Art of Poetry No. 102"). The lyric essay's flexibility and hybridity provide Rankine with the space to navigate these complex dynamics, blending personal reflection with broader social critique. The concept of "ground," as used by Kitchen, is clearly exemplified in Rankine's *Citizen*. What unifies this work and presents it as a cohesive whole is its resistance to racism, expressed through its content, form, genre, and intermediality. *Citizen* navigates the tension between lyrical expression and factual evidence, resisting the conventions of realist narration and linear coherence. By doing so, Rankine challenges dominant cultural narratives that seek to contain or rationalize racial violence, using formal disruption as a means to expose the fragmented and cumulative nature of racialized experience. This disruption is further

emphasized through the use of fragmentation, varied page designs, and large expanses of white space, all of which contribute to the subversion of normative structures both in literature and society.

Anthony Reed's arguments are highly relevant here, as he states that "Rankine […] [has] developed a 'postlyric' poetics to break the hermeneutic circle of lyricized and racialized reading" (97). Reed also emphasizes that Rankine's "postlyric poetics represent a dialectical interruption of the lyric mode" (97). Reed's concept of postlyric refers to a form of poetic expression that moves beyond the traditional conventions of lyric poetry, particularly in its relationship to the speaker and the subject. This approach forces a re-evaluation of the singular poetic voice and confronts readers with the complexities of Black identity and expression. However, Reed also notes that, for Rankine's previous work titled *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004), many critics avoided engaging with the subtitle "an American Lyric" and they have instead classified the work either as "poetic prose" or a "multigenre" text based on the sheer level of integration and interplay between the visual and textual elements that define the work. Reed says that this critical resistance is because Rankine complicates the traditional, universal notion of lyricism, an idea that she figures in "postlyric" form and thus defies the consistent speaking subject and regular legibility assumed to be embedded in the lyric mode (108). Rankine used the same subtitle for *Citizen* which was published exactly a decade after *Lonely*. The understanding of private and public spheres as well as the thought of combining the essay with (American) lyric have radically changed over time.

Affective Publics and the Politics of Address

To further contextualize the intermedial and affective dimensions of *Citizen*, it is useful to consider the text's formation of what Zizi Papacharissi has called "affective publics" (125). These publics are constituted not through rational deliberation but through shared emotional intensities and networked forms of articulation. As Lünenborg explains, affective publics emphasize the "relational, processual, and performative character" of public communication, especially in media-saturated environments (319). *Citizen* participates in and shapes such publics through its polyphonic blending of personal narrative, visual media, and political commentary. The cumulative effect of microaggressions, archival images, and poetic fragments forges a collective affective space in which "individual articulations – which cannot always sharply be distinguished as either private or public – can become starting points of joint action" (Lünenborg 325). In this way, *Citizen* performs a type of affective publicness that bridges private experience and public discourse, generating a shared sensorium of racial injustice and inviting solidarity and critique.

Rankine's mobilization of the second-person pronoun "you" is the central mechanism in this formation of an affective public. By avoiding the lyric "I" in favor of the "you," Rankine detaches the narrative from the specific autobiography of the author and the speaker, instead creating a structural position that accumulates various

anecdotes of microaggressions from diverse sources under a single address. This refusal of the first person serves a distinct political function: it reframes racial injury not as a private, singular event, but as a collective, repetitive condition. The "you" in *Citizen* is not merely a direct address to the reader, but a prosthetic identity into which the reader is sutured. This strategy creates a complex mode of identification for Rankine's potentially diverse audience. For the racialized reader, the "you" offers recognition of shared, often unspoken experience; for the white reader, the "you" forces an embodiment of the racialized subject, compelling them to inhabit the disorientation and psychic exhaustion of navigating anti-Black spaces.

This dynamic is starkly visible in the drugstore scene, where the politics of address collide with the text's intermedial themes of visibility and erasure:

> In line at the drugstore it's finally your turn, and then it's not as [*sic*] 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. (*Citizen* 77)

Distinct from the material juxtaposition of text and image found elsewhere in the book, in this passage, Rankine enacts intermedial sentimentality by translating a visual failure—the man's inability to see Black presence—into a textual repetition. The interaction begins with the narrator attempting to uphold the affective contract of citizenship through a sentimental gesture of politeness: "You must be in a hurry." This offer attempts to smooth over the rupture and maintain social cohesion. However, the man refuses this repair, insisting, "No, no, no, I really didn't see you." This refusal creates an "impasse"—a moment where the conventional expectations of social recognition break down.

It is here that the connection to W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness becomes crucial, moving beyond mere allusion to a structural enactment. Rankine does not simply reference Du Bois; she forces the "you" to perform the affective labor of double consciousness in real-time. The "you" is compelled to see herself through the white man's eyes—as invisible, as an obstacle, as nothing—while simultaneously managing his embarrassment. The "you" attempts to rationalize his behavior ("You must be in a hurry") to alleviate the tension, illustrating the psychic burden placed on the Black subject to maintain the comfort of the white observer, even during an act of erasure.

By forcing the reader to occupy this "you," Rankine creates a collective mode of witnessing. The diverse audience is brought together in this space of the impasse: the white reader is implicated in the "I" that fails to see, yet trapped in the "you" that is unseen, creating a jarring, dissonant empathy. The racialized reader witnesses their own experience externalized and validated. Through this accumulation of experiences under the "you," Rankine transforms the private registers of racial injury into a public, structural critique. The "you" is no longer just one person in a drugstore; it is a collective body subjected to the recurring violence of invisibility. Therefore, *Citizen*'s intermedial poetics

extend resistance into the very structures of form and sentimentality, transforming the act of reading into an ethical confrontation with the limits of recognition in American society.

Intermediality as Political Aesthetics

The intermediality of *Citizen* is not merely an aesthetic choice but serves as a powerful political tool that amplifies the book's critique of systemic racism and its exploration of Black identity. It creates a fragmented, multifaceted representation of the Black experience in the U.S. The juxtaposition of different media elements mirrors the complexity of the issues addressed in the book, illustrating how race, identity, and power are constructed and contested across various cultural and social contexts. Through its use of intermediality, *Citizen* not only articulates the lived realities of racial oppression but also destabilizes conventional forms of representation, thereby opening up new spaces for critical reflection and resistance. The multiple interactions of diverse media inside a single work of art results in an overly complex communicative act, where the meaning is not carried by each individual medium, but by their union and the interplay among them. This is precisely the case with *Citizen*.

Rankine opens the book with a quote from Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*: "If they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black" (*Citizen*). The line is sharply ironic, suggesting that viewers are often quick to register Blackness as a visual marker while remaining indifferent to the subject's emotional life or humanity. By foregrounding this quote, Rankine signals her engagement with the politics of racial perception, in which Blackness is hypervisible yet affectively illegible within dominant cultural frames. Throughout the book, Rankine uses several images, sometimes juxtaposed with text, sometimes occupying the whole page. The juxtaposition of text and visual image, according to Chan, "creates a space for dialogue between two forms of art – a space which the reader is invited to enter, thus effectively destabilizing the text and preventing what Roland Barthes saw as a kind of interpretive 'closure [that] arrests meaning'" (149-150). She also argues that "by leaving her images uncaptioned, […] Rankine offers an incisive social critique of the use of images in a world dominated by visual media" (Chan, 152). Additionally, the absence of captions heightens the impact of the images by requiring the reader to actively interpret their relationship to the surrounding text. This creates a powerful juxtaposition between the written narrative on one page and the visual image on the following page—each element retaining its own medium-specific qualities while jointly contributing to the construction of meaning. This arrangement exemplifies *Citizen*'s intermedial poetics, where meaning emerges not from either medium alone but from their spatial and conceptual interplay. As Chan notes, such juxtapositions produce a "polyphonic effect" and contribute to a sense of "complex subjectivity" and "the possibility of intimate address and eventual dialogue" (141).

On pages 52 and 53 of *Citizen*, Rankine presents two works by Glenn Ligon, a contemporary African American artist known for his text-based paintings that critically engage with race, identity, and language. These artworks are themselves bi-medial

compositions, combining visual abstraction with verbal text. On the left page, Ligon repeatedly inscribes the phrase "I do not always feel colored," which becomes increasingly illegible as layers of black paint obscure the text. Opposite this, the phrase "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" appears, a direct reference to Zora Neale Hurston's well-known reflection on racial consciousness in her 1928 essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (535). By incorporating these already bi-medial works, Rankine does not merely cite Hurston or Ligon; she renders the difficulty of historical transmission. The increasing illegibility of the text on the left page enacts an affective impasse: the viewer struggles to read the sentiment just as the racialized subject struggles to make their interiority legible against the "black noise" of stereotype and projection.

Furthermore, this juxtaposition constructs a sentiment across time, linking Hurston's early 20th-century modernism, Ligon's 1990s conceptualism, and Rankine's 21st-century lyric. This genealogy underscores that the feeling of being "thrown against a sharp white background" is not a singular event but a recursive historical condition. This connects directly to Rankine's assertion that history is not past, but visceral: "Those years of and before me […] accumulate into the hours inside our lives" (89). The "sharp white background" in Ligon's work visually manifests this accumulation, serving as a graphic echo of the "white spaces" Rankine documents throughout the text—such as the drugstore, where the narrator stands out yet remains unseen. In this way, the artwork functions as a pivot between the personal anecdotes of microaggression and the collective history of anti-Blackness. By situating Ligon's visual text within the book's sequence of encounters, Rankine suggests that the "you" in the drugstore is inhabiting the same "sharp white background" that Hurston described decades earlier. Thus, the intermedial inclusion of Ligon's art validates the transhistorical nature of the book's sentimentality: the pain of hyper-visibility is shown to be a shared, enduring structure of feeling that binds the "you" of the present to the "I" of historical memory.

Visual Archives, Erasure, and Historical Memory

In Chapter 6 of *Citizen*, Rankine writes in memory of Trayvon Martin:

> Those years of and before me [*sic*] and my brothers, the years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs, boy, hey boy, each a felony, accumulate into the hours inside our lives where we are all caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its roots our limbs, a throat sliced through … (89-90)

In this passage, Rankine vividly evokes the imagery of a lynching, capturing the historical and ongoing violence inflicted upon Black bodies. On the opposite page (91), she juxtaposes this powerful text with an archival image—a black-and-white photograph from 1930. The combination of written and visual forms produces a powerful commentary that transcends the limits of either medium on its own. The photograph depicts a group

of white people gathered in the dark, gazing at a tree that is only partially visible. However, Rankine presents a cropped version of the original photograph, deliberately excluding the lynched Black men from the scene. This cropping fundamentally shifts the image's sentimental operation. By removing the victim, who would typically serve as the image's sentimental center, Rankine denies the reader the release of simple pity or horror. Without the spectacle of the body to consume, the viewer is forced to look instead at the white spectators. We are confronted not with the physical act of murder, but with the social act of witnessing it. The terror of the image shifts from the violence inflicted on the body to the casual curiosity of the crowd. Rankine forces us to engage with the underlying violence by making the white gaze the subject of the photograph. The text supplies the visceral reality of the "throat sliced through," while the image supplies the social machinery that normalizes it. This act of showing by hiding serves as a powerful commentary on the historical erasure of Black lives; the viewer sees exactly what the American public archive has preserved: the white crowd, intact and watching, while the Black subject has been rendered invisible.

Crucially, these distinct media mobilize different affective registers to deepen the confrontation. The lyric text privileges interiority, eliciting a somatic identification with the victim's pain through lines like "the tree inside us" and "a throat sliced through." In contrast, the visual image asserts an evidentiary distance, confronting the reader with the external reality of the social world and the cold, analytical horror of the spectators' gaze. The intermedial sentimentality relies on the friction between these modes: the text pulls the reader inward toward intimate grief, while the image pushes them outward toward critical implication. The combination forces the reader to hold these contradictory affective states—internal empathy and external witnessing—simultaneously.

In this sense, Rankine's intermedial approach mirrors the ways in which the personal and political intersect throughout *Citizen*. The removal of the lynched bodies can be seen as a metaphor for the way Black individuals' personal experiences of trauma and violence—such as Trayvon Martin's—are systematically erased or minimized in the public and political sphere. The private pain of racial violence becomes a political statement, exposing the hidden layers of oppression that remain even when the violence itself is unseen. Rankine's intermedial sentimentality, therefore, does not merely convey racial suffering; it also critiques the societal forces that silence and obscure that suffering. The interplay between text and image in this passage not only evokes emotional and intellectual reflection but also aligns with Rankine's broader aim to blend the personal and the political, making the invisible visible. At the same time, the politics of intermediality in *Citizen* become evident in how Rankine uses the tension between media forms to challenge dominant narratives and power structures.

The use of visual images disrupts the conventional reading experience, forcing readers to confront the fragmented and pervasive nature of racism in everyday life. The images encompass mixed media, performance, and visual art from various time periods

and transnational geographies. Rankine's choice to blend these various forms mirrors the fractured identities and experiences of those who live under the constant pressure of racial scrutiny. This approach not only emphasizes the complexity of the themes but also engages the reader in a more dynamic and participatory manner, inviting them to question and reflect on their own perceptions and biases. The book itself is like a big collage of microaggressions, and everyday experiences. The visual art that Rankine incorporates conveys the unspeakable, including David Hammonds' *The Hood* (1993), which appears on the cover. Additionally, Rankine uses archival media, ranging from a 1930 photograph titled "Public Lynching" to more contemporary images, such as a 2012 photo of Danish tennis player Caroline Wozniacki's minstrel imitation of Serena Williams.

At the end of *Citizen*, Rankine includes Joseph Mallord William Turner's 1840 painting *The Slave Ship*, along with a zoomed-in detail showing fish feeding on the body of a drowned slave. The original painting commemorates the killing of 133 enslaved Africans. By closing the book not with text but with visual art—specifically, a canonical work of European painting recontextualized through the lens of racial violence—Rankine stages an intermedial gesture. The image is not merely illustrative but operates dialogically with the preceding text, extending the book's engagement with racial history into the realm of visual representation. This juxtaposition of poetic narrative and historical painting exemplifies what Chan describes as the book's "lyric hybridity" (162), using visual art to invoke the longue durée of anti-Black violence and to force a reflective, affective confrontation with its enduring legacy. The shift from word to image intensifies the work's intermedial poetics, where meaning emerges through the cumulative interaction of visual and textual forms. As Chan suggests, Rankine's use of these images creates "a poetics of racial trauma" aimed at transforming readers into allies in the ongoing struggle for racial justice (162). In this way, *Citizen* shows how intermediality can add to the inquiry of social themes, such as race and identity. Through the coherent integration of visual art, text, and archival media, Rankine has not only broken usual chains but also forced readers to interact on more than one level with the material, in a deep and active reflection of the pervasive nature of racial injustice.

Citizen merges racial critique and political testimony into a sentimental space of resistance—one shaped by intimate address, historical consciousness, and affective vulnerability, where the private registers of pain and visibility become forms of public, even collective, political expression. As Rebecca Wanzo notes, "[s]entimentality circulates through representations and narratives that become reference points for how people communicate their suffering" (13). *Citizen* engages precisely these reference points, drawing on familiar cultural scripts of grief, empathy, and trauma—while also interrupting them. It is not to universalize or resolve suffering but to stage it as socially embedded and politically unresolved. The reader is not given closure, but is instead drawn into the ongoing work of recognition, witnessing, and response. As Wanzo further argues, "[c]ontemporary sentimental political storytelling often demonstrates a dialectical relationship to representations of excessive suffering—'too much' suffering

can cause people to shy away from the representation, and yet excess also compels" (36). *Citizen*'s intermedial sentimentality navigates this tension carefully, representing the suffering of racialized existence without falling into spectacle.

Conclusion

Citizen's formal hybridity does not merely blur genre boundaries but operates as a deliberate aesthetic strategy to represent the fragmentation, repetition, and accumulation that structure racialized experience in the United States. Intermediality together with sentimentality captures the affective and structural dimensions of anti-Black racism. For example, the juxtaposition of textual and visual elements in key passages enacts a rupture that mirrors the dissonance between public narratives and private experiences of racial violence. The interplay of forms therefore becomes a critical mechanism through which the thematic concerns—such as invisibility, hypervisibility, and historical memory—are made legible. The formal strategies in *Citizen* not only foreground the materiality of media but also intensify the affective and political force of the text's critique. In doing so, *Citizen* mobilizes intermediality and sentimentality to produce a poetics of resistance grounded in the lived realities of racial injustice.

This paper argued that Rankine's use of intermedial sentimentality and a hybrid mixture of genres and forms serves to create social criticism through lyric essay. Thus, she uses intermediality and lyric essay not just as aesthetic choices, but as potent political tools. *Citizen: An American Lyric* embodies resistance against racism through its content, form, genre, and intermediality, representing a long-standing experience in the U.S. Rather than offering the sentimental as consolation, Rankine's work reclaims it as a mode of critical relation—a way of forging connection through shared vulnerability, discomfort, and recognition. Rankine's work goes beyond the confines of genre or medium, opening new possibilities for critical reflection and resistance, which extend far beyond the traditional function of medial boundaries. In doing so, *Citizen* not only critiques the conditions of racial injustice but also models a transformed mode of political feeling—one that insists on visibility, responsiveness, and collective responsibility. This approach forces readers to engage with the material on multiple levels, encouraging them to confront the pervasive nature of racial injustice and to question dominant narratives.

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