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"Our American Optimism": Race, Recognition, and Belonging in Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*

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This paper explores Claudia Rankine's representation of the feelings of racialisation in her 2004 poetry collection Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*. Contextualising this work within wider debates in Afropessimist philosophy, it considers how the poet's portrayal of emotional pain, depression, and numbness exemplify a form of 'social death' instigated by the ubiquitous violence of antiblackness. Through close readings of select sequences, it argues that Rankine frames death as an ongoing structure of African American experience, rather than a singular event. In turn, this paper also considers how her innovative and hybrid "American Lyric" form functions to create a new grammar for Black self-expression in an ostensibly 'post-race' culture that obfuscates contemporary systems of racial inequality. It argues that Rankine's collection cultivates an ethics of attention to the experiences and pain of others, offering poetry as a form of "exhausted hope" to challenge the dehumanising force of White supremacy.*

Don't Let Me Be Lonely: such is the title and imperative of Claudia Rankine's 2004 poetry collection, the first of her critically acclaimed *American Lyric*s.[1] Feelings of loneliness are undoubtedly at the centre of Rankine's text, as she depicts lives emotionally and ontologically immobilised by the dehumanising processes of racialisation. Prefacing the collection with an epigraph from Jill Stauffer's *Ethical Loneliness* – which describes the "isolation" felt at being "abandoned by humanity", "compounded" by that pain "not being heard" – Rankine foregrounds the urgency of recognising the lived experiences and feelings of others, an ethos necessary to intervene in the alienating force of antiblackness (Stauffer 1). Certainly, *Lonely*'s publication is contextualised by the rise of so-called 'post-racial' or 'colour-blind' thinking: the belief that race is no longer "an obstacle to a successful life" in the United States, and in which disadvantages experienced by African Americans are deemed the result of individual actions, rather than systemic bias in law and policy (Taylor 16). In her

[1] Hereafter, the title of the collection is abbreviated to *Lonely*.

attention to paradoxically spectacular and quotidian instances of racism, Rankine's collection presages the emergence of the 'Black Lives Matter' protest movement in 2013, which brought into mainstream public awareness, in Minkah Makalani's words, the "racial reality that black lives *do not* matter" (emphasis in the original) in contemporary American culture (533). Taking seriously the ethical impetus of attending to the affective encounters that shape one's sense of belonging to a social world (Gregg and Seigworth 2), this paper explores Rankine's depiction of negative feelings, such as pain, depression, and numbness, as a strategy for counteracting the lived affects and effects of White supremacy in the twenty-first century.

Many of the critical responses to *Lonely* frame the text as a meditation on America's postmodern condition, defined by the widespread epistemological crises linked to the unravelling of assumed truths depicting the nation as an exemplar of domestic egalitarianism and peaceful diplomacy. Emma Kimberley, for instance, links the collection to the "cultural trauma" and "fear" engendered by 9/11, and the subsequent political movements (such as racial profiling and military interventions abroad) that established scepticism towards the credibility of US democracy (777). Meanwhile, Rebecca Macmillan has argued that *Lonely*'s hybrid form works to counteract and archive the "racialized excesses and omissions" of "conventional TV news media" by attending to its superficial mediation of racist violence (179). Such readings align the text with postmodernity's "narratives of decline", felt as a "cultural pessimism" that saturates everyday life (Bennet 1). Indeed, these feelings are attuned to what Lauren Berlant describes as the "cruel optimism" of the culturally entrenched ideals, emotional attachments, and models of sociality that structure one's sense of what "being in the world" means, yet act as the very barriers to their prosperity (24; 7).

Drawing on Raymond William's definition of cultures as "structures of feeling", which are organised around the "affective elements of consciousness and relationships" (*Marxism and Literature* 132), and produce a "particular sense of life" or "community of experience" distinct to a historical-spatial context (*Long Revolution* 48), this paper considers how the negative feelings of racialised experience are obfuscated in the promotion of a colour-blind

national imaginary.[2] As Xine Yao argues, "disaffection", or the "negation of feeling", is the "unfeeling rupture that enables new structures of feeling to arise" (6). Certainly, negative feelings are a mobilising force within the text's content and form, revealing not only the state's investment in and tolerance of antiblackness, but contradictions within the American national ideals of universal freedom and equality. In turn, this paper explores Rankine's employment of (un)feeling as a means for bearing witness to racism in the post-race US, and for countering the dehumanising structures of antiblackness. It begins by contextualising the links between affect and Afropessimist philosophy to situate its analysis of *Lonely,* before undertaking close readings of sequences that reveal the a/effects of contemporary racism. Thereafter, it closes by regarding the text's innovative lyric form, and how Rankine's use of direct address subverts generic conventions to, as Jennifer Shook claims, recast the "fixed narratives" by which US citizenship is defined, and "[resist] closure" against the modes of subjectivity and expression that the lyric typifies (31-35).

(Afro)pessimism and US Racial Politics in the Twenty-first Century

Lonely and its 2014 follow-up, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, bookend a critical moment in American racial politics, in which the systemic force of antiblackness was made visible as a foundation of US culture, even as the ability to protest and critique the institutions of racism has been met with fierce resistance. The work of Afropessimist theory helps to contextualise the pervasiveness of racial inequality in the present. A school of thought influenced by thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, it examines the construction of race as a social phenomenon, and the ontological impacts of race as it exists "inside and outside" individuals to shape the "social and political landscapes" that the self is contingent upon (Alexander and Knowles 16). Schopenhauer defines pessimism's affective mood as a "death-in-life", wherein the individual, caught in an "endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth",

[2] Ann Cvetkovich notes that affect is a disputed term, as some scholars differentiate affect as "precognitive sensory experience" from emotions as "cultural constructs and conscious processes" (4). As deeper interrogation of such terms exceeds the reach of this paper, I follow her example in using affect and emotion interchangeably as keywords that invite a certain methodology: one that uses emotional orientations to explore relationships between individuals and their social environments, which she encompasses in the sense of "feeling" as both indistinctly "embodied" *and* "cognitive" (4-5).

becomes unresponsive to the world in their "annihilation of the will" (Bennet 6). Afropessimist thinkers draw on this invocation of the negative feelings and cyclical temporality of pessimism, using them as motifs for understanding the relationship between emotional and political life in the construction of race, and the ways in which antiblackness evolves in different cultural contexts.

Afropessimism indeed recognises the "undying 'after-life' of slavery" in present-day antiblack "violence" and "inequality", seeking an intellectual response to the "false optimism of post-racialism" that ostensibly marks the post-Civil Rights era (Gordon et al. 119; 128). In so doing, it expands slavery from a historical "event" to a "condition of ontology" – an enduring epistemology that has "stuck" to Black bodies to legitimise the subjugation of non-White beings throughout American history (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 18). Orlando Patterson provocatively ties slavery in the US to "social death", a form of ontological death evinced in the dehumanisation and isolation of enslaved Africans (38). The modes of "social death" Patterson describes as occurring on the plantation are typified post-slavery by what Tyrone Palmer terms the "unthinkability of Black feeling" in modern "onto-epistemological" notions of "civil society", wherein the structural othering of African Americans functions to sever them from the national imaginary and body politic (32). Thinkers in this field thus show how racialisation – the production of racial categories – acts as a biopolitical tool that determines the "distribution of death", not only through the physical domination of plantocracy but through social and cultural alienation that, as Achille Mbembe writes, produce the feeling of "death-in-life" by rendering the enslaved person "phantom-like": "kept alive but in a *state of injury*" (17; 21).[3] Indeed, as Frank Wilderson puts it, the "structure of Black suffering" reveals the inherent contradictions within the very ideal of "universal humanity" and is thus "pessimistic about the claims theories of liberation make"

[3] Though this paper explores the cultural construction of Blackness within the twenty-first century US, it is important to note that racialisation is not a static process, and is experienced differently according to one's environment and identity. Likewise, the racialisation of one demographic or community is inextricable from the construction of other racial identities: the theorists discussed here explore how Blackness is pathologised in the formation of a plantocratic economy, which by extension, enables Whiteness to attain a normative status within the same racial hierarchies, even as Whiteness often evades discussions of race. Writing on the affect and phenomenology of Whiteness, Sara Ahmed, for example, notes that Whiteness is *equally* racialised as "invisible", thereby further establishing other racial identities as "points of deviation" ("Phenomenology" 156).

(*Afropessimism* 14-15) when Black Americans continue to experience disproportionate violence, incarceration, poverty, and mortality (Taylor 20). Crucial to the project of Afropessimist philosophy, then, is a critique of the existing structures of knowledge that have been used to dominate and dehumanise racialised subjects, and a recognition of the tangible ways in which Black beings continue to be depicted as, per Wilderson, "structurally inert props, implements of the execution of White and non-Black fantasies" (*Afropessimism* 15).

"Breaking or Broken": Death and Mourning in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*

In the opening sections of *Lonely,* the speaker contemplates the ubiquity of death as she shifts from a focus on the passing of her infant sibling and grandmother to her own feelings of social death inspired by the mediation of Black suffering. In this way, Rankine evokes the claim put forward by Afropessimist thinkers that Blackness is a subject position in which, as Tommy J. Curry states, "the very condition of living is formulated on death" (263-64). The text opens, "There was a time I could say no one I knew well had died", drawing on the distinction between past and present knowledge to evoke a specific instance of death that, in turn, reveals the impermanence and precarity of life itself (5). While alluding to death as a singular event, however, the line is complicated when the speaker next relays her father's grief at her grandmother's passing. Rankine describes his incomprehensible emotional response to this loss, as his "unfamiliar" and "flooded, so leaking" facial expression signifies an affective state that cannot be recognised or quantified in language (5). This description works to juxtapose the literal death of the speaker's grandmother with the metaphorical death of her father, the latter revealing the sense of social death and isolation that occurs through the obfuscation of Black affect. Indeed, the poet's allusion to "flooded" and "leaking" liquid suggests a painful and destructive accumulation of grief. Whereas liquid might usually denote mobility or transformation (as water naturally flows and recycles across space and form), here that mobility is thwarted; as the feelings build up, they begin to 'leak' out uncontrollably as grief becomes a state of being. As Palmer argues, racialised individuals become "fungible object[s] upon, around, and through which affect accumulates, yet whose own affective power is of no consequence" (37). Indeed, in a 2015 op-ed, Rankine states that the "condition of black life is one of mourning", as the knowledge of the quotidian threat of racial violence and inequality renders Black life perpetually vulnerable to death, and demands

the permanent act of mourning an always anticipated and premature loss ("Condition"). Rankine suggests in *Lonely* that as these feelings become a static "flood", they threaten to figuratively drown the speaker's father. She thus implies that the epistemological shift suggested in the past "time" in which she "could say no one I knew well had died" is catalysed not only by the event of her relatives' deaths, but the realisation of the 'death-in-life' caused by the unrecognised pain and "loneliness" of grief that overwhelms the living (5).

Rankine returns to the motif of flooding later in *Lonely*, in a sequence concerning the 1998 lynching of James Byrd, Jr., to further suggest the saturation of antiblack violence in the United States, and its deadening effect on the speaker. Exemplifying the poet's use of hybrid form, she incorporates an image depicting the legs of several people standing around a puddle of unspecified liquid (21). Following the photograph, Rankine describes the "sadness [that] lives in the recognition that a life can not matter" – as evidenced by then-President Bush's inability to "remember if two or three people were convicted for dragging a black man to his death in his home state of Texas" (23; 21). This grief draws parallels with the acts of mourning described in the collection's opening, further aligning the notion of flooding with the incommunicability of pain, and the distinct anguish evoked by racist violence. Here, too, the speaker describes how her "mother's voice swells and fills my forehead. Mostly I resist the flooding, but in Bush's case I find myself talking to the television screen: *You don't know because you don't care*" (21). Unable to "resist" the overwhelming grief of antiblackness, the feeling emerges in a futile outburst. The pooled liquid in the photograph thereby conjures this literalised eruption of Rankine's emotional metaphor, while, at the same time, it is suggestive of a forensic image of Byrd's blood at the crime scene, showing how the brutality of White supremacy is enacted affectively *and* corporeally. Through the image's obscurity, Rankine effectively draws a continuum between the outburst of negative feelings regarding this White supremacist violence and the killing itself. In so doing, she suggests that it is the suppression of Black feeling, the failure of the nation to appropriately mourn victims like Byrd, that enables the dehumanisation of African Americans, which, in turn, becomes part of a larger cultural apparatus used to legitimise acts of racist terror.

In both readings of the image, Rankine suggests how Black suffering is rendered a spectacle; the bystanders are both passive and proximate, suggesting how this violence is

compounded by wider political apathy. We might thus consider the juxtaposition of text and image as an attempt to instigate a deeper engagement with the specificity of Byrd's murder – an attempt to elegise him and prevent the trivialisation of his death into a generic instance of American racism. Indeed, the sequence also includes an image from the scene of his death, depicting the label "head", the location of Byrd's head within a two mile "trail of [his] blood, body parts, and personal effects", juxtaposed against a portrait of Byrd, alive, facing towards the camera (22; 136). The repetitive "head" imagery demonstrates the transformation of a living being into an object and evidence of atrocity; as Byrd's portrait faces, and thus confronts, the reader, his visage and the scene of his murder are presented as testimony of his life and death, rendering both states indivisible. As the photograph presents a moment fixed in time, however, it reinforces the incommunicability of pain that Stauffer outlines as the fundamental barrier to the victim's inclusion into the social world, reinforcing the Afropessimist notion that Blackness is a "structural position of noncommunicability" unable to affect the forces that silence it even in the scene of murder (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 58). Thus, as Byrd effectively 'stares back' at the reader, Rankine subverts the spectacle of his death: putting the reader on display, she provides a meta-textual encounter that implores them to recognise the very structures of racism by which, as Curry notes, Blackness is "always associated with oppression, pathology, [and] suffering" (263).

Certainly, just as Rankine's meditations on death reveal the "noncommunicability" of racial grief, they also work to unravel linear chronologies, further suggesting how death exists in two temporalities as both a singular event and an ongoing state of being for the racialised subject. Following the speaker's recognition of loss and mourning as, per Rankine, a "condition of black life" in *Lonely*'s opening, the text poses a refrain of rhetorical questions that, continued throughout the collection, gesture towards the disorienting ubiquity of Black death. As the speaker recalls their emerging concern towards morbidity, inspired by the televised deaths of fictional characters in the media, she begins to ask "Is he dead? Is she dead?" to various figures on screen (6). Television, the speaker learns, allows her to view recordings of actors who are no longer alive, and the fictional deaths of characters whose actors survive; the juxtaposition between reality and artifice confuses her ability to delineate between the living and the deceased. Yet, this anxiety is further directed towards her growing realisation that if those who "died on television […] weren't Black, they were wearing black

or were terminally ill" (5). Even at a young age, Rankine's speaker cognises the link between the characters' race, disease, and their dress choices, and thus how Blackness is conceptualised through the proleptic motifs of morbidity and grief. As the rhetorical questions "Is he dead? Is she dead?" become a fugue that punctuates the text, they increasingly destabilise the status of life itself, performing the feeling of social death that occurs through racism (61; 117; 129). To similar effect, the speaker's description of her father as "breaking or broken" likewise conveys the conflation of past and present temporalities within the poem's grammar to suggest the ongoing and quotidian violence of Black inaffectability: his status between life and death (5). Offering a direct address through rhetorical questions, Rankine invites the reader to intervene in the process of dehumanisation to recuperate these personae into the position of the living subject, and to contemplate their own participation within the structures of feeling that conflate Blackness with suffering and, hence, exacerbate racial inequalities.

While the questions "Is he dead? Is she dead?" are offered first in relation to other beings, Rankine continues that "one begins asking oneself that same question differently", subsequently rephrasing them as the speaker asks, "Am I dead?" (7). By counterpointing the "same question" asked "differently", she suggests the feelings of existential alienation felt by the speaker as she questions the very nature of her reality, as the conditions of White supremacy threaten the security of her status as a sentient, animate citizen. She goes on, "I feel like I am already dead [...] I am in death's position", exacerbating the paradoxical opposition inherent to "feel[ing]" that one is "dead" (and, logically, unable to feel) to convey the affects of nihilism and impotence cultivated by the overwhelming alignment between Blackness and death (7). This line's use of simile further suggests the speaker's inability to fully articulate her emotions, as metaphor becomes the only means of expressing the absurdities of racialised experience. Indeed, to similar effect in *Citizen*, Rankine writes that the "throat closes" beside "[clogged] lungs", and one's "words hang in the air" uselessly as language is insufficient in vocalising the everyday violence of antiblackness, and the speaker is slowly suffocated by their incapacity to have their experiences recognised (156; 7). Through disaffected language that defies the binary between life and death, Rankine's lyric reinforces the overwhelming and destabilising sense of isolation: being in "death's position", the poet uses spatial language to emphasise a sense of exclusion from humanity, and the

phantasmagorical feeling of being outcast from the boundaries of America's affective and national communities. Much like the "flood" of grief described in relation to the speaker's father and to Byrd, Rankine gives the overwhelming negative affects of racism a physical form as they accumulate and atrophy the victim's sense of self. Rankine thereby draws attention to the matrices of antiblackness that occur through physical and psychic violence, and how they collectively function to render the Black body an object of, per Wilderson, White racial "fantasies" in the 'post-race' state (*Afropessimism* 15).

The temporalisation of death as it expands from event to state of being and, in turn, the impossibility of articulating the grief of racial violence, is further suggested in Rankine's grammatical structures, as they elide logical arrangement. As *Lonely*'s speaker continues her questioning of the division between life and death in the opening sequence, she recounts an occasion in which she phoned a suicide hotline, before diagnosing her own "momentary lapse of happily" as the cause of her pain and suicidal ideation (7). The poet manipulates the grammar in this statement, decontextualizing the adverb "happily" from its absent qualifying verb, thereby reflecting the disorientation of her deadened affective responses. As the phrase lacks a tangible action, the speaker's racialised position is rendered inert and powerless, their experience made merely reactive. The "lapse" of the speaker's "happily" in turn omits grammatical clarity to show the impossibility of articulating the destructive a/effects of racism, precisely as she attempts to identify the problem as her own failing, rather than America's systemic investment in White supremacy. Indeed, Rankine suggests later in the passage that her confused syntax is necessary because the very "noun, happiness" is flawed: it is a "static state", a "Platonic ideal you know better than to pursue" (7). In describing "happiness" as "Platonic", Rankine suggests it is merely theoretical, a desire rooted in the Revolutionary promise of the nation's founding, privileged alongside "life" and "liberty" in the Declaration of Independence (US 1776) even as, at the same historical moment, slavery was becoming entrenched as the undercurrent to America's economy and politics, and the foundation of White freedom. Indeed, as Palmer notes, Blackness is "marked by an unmoving suspension" as it is aligned in the US national imaginary with the conditions of plantocracy, a phenomenon that renders the racialised subject out of place and out of time within a contemporary structure of feeling invested in post-race ideology (48).

In Rankine's framing, "happiness" is thus suggestive of the "cruel optimism" Berlant locates in the abstract yet culturally valorised fantasies of possibility that bind individuals to conditions that further harm them (2-3). As Rankine continues, the speaker's "lapse of happily" occurs as her "modifying process had happily or unhappily experienced a momentary pause" (7). The poet suggests that "happiness" is an unobtainable ideal for the racialised subject interpellated and threatened by the overwhelming violence of antiblackness. Rather, their affective states are dominated by the "modifying process" of continually reacting and renegotiating their behaviour to survive in a hostile world. As the text continues, Rankine states, "this kind of thing happens, perhaps is still happening", evoking the etymological relation and internal rhyme between "happiness" and "happening" to suggest the causal link between fixed national ideals and the enduring mechanism of racism that has made 'life', 'liberty', and 'happiness' the domain of White supremacy (7). Indeed, in *Lonely* Rankine critiques what she terms "our American optimism", an enduring and futile belief in the nation's democracy that, in turn, conceals the systemic failures of racial equality and the "lives [that] never mattered" (23). Thus, just as events such as the violent murder of Byrd reveal how the racist terror of lynching is "still happening" long after the end of Jim Crow, so too are the modes of social death, originated under slavery, "still" occurring as forms of cultural oppression. As Rankine proposes that "black people today" are, against the ongoing threat of antiblackness, "too scarred by hope to hope, too experienced to experience, too close to dead", she demonstrates how ostensibly positive affects like "American optimism" are structures of feeling that cruelly obscure the profound and tangible experiences of racial inequality and violence, and thus prevent them from being confronted (23). As the grammatical order of her lines unravels, Rankine demonstrates the need for a new, disaffected language for depicting the overwhelming a/effects of racism in the present and to counteract the exclusionary force of post-race thinking.

"Exhausted Hope": Recognition through Poetry

While Rankine's use of illogical syntax, hybrid form, and atemporality combine to suggest the saturation of antiblackness and the devastation of racism at the turn of the twenty-first century, *Lonely* nonetheless uses these experimental techniques to find a means of continuing to "hope", "experience", and "live" beyond the parameters ordained by White

supremacy (23). Indeed, in a later sequence addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa in the 1990s-2000s, Rankine repeats her refrain of questions, asking, "Is she dead? Is he dead?", answering this time, "yes, they are dead", and articulating a "distress [that] grows into nothing" that "move[s] in with muscle and bone" and becomes lodged in the body (117). At the same time, however, she writes, "its entrance by necessity slowly translated my already grief into a tremendously exhausted hope" (118). As the act of translation is one of putting an idea into words, the speaker suggests that it is through language, or indeed through poetry, that she finds the means for communicating that pain, and to be recognised in a way that might resolve her loneliness. To be sure, in the collection's final sequence, the poet writes, "the world, like a giant liver, receives everyone and everything", yet "moves through words as if the bodies that words reflect did not exist" (129). As Rankine emphasises the ethical urgency of acknowledging the "words" and, by extension, the "bodies" and lived experiences of others, she frames the act of poetic composition as the process of "fit[ting] language into the shape of usefulness" (129), of establishing what Palmer terms the "grammar" for "Black feeling" that cannot exist under the White gaze (54). Noting that this "translation […] occurred simply because I am alive", and "occurs as a form of life", *Lonely*'s speaker suggests that poetic self-expression, the construction of her "American Lyric" grammar, offers a potent counter to the annihilatory force of social death (118).

As this paper has argued thus far, *Lonely* is deeply invested in the contributions of Afropessimist philosophy and its proponents' attention to the manifold ways in which Blackness is constructed as a subject position that substantiates White supremacy. Yet, Rankine's text also evokes the growing call, both in and against Afropessimism, that reorients the framework towards what Fred Moten calls "black op", a mode of optimism guided by a recognition of Blackness as "the mass improvisation and protection of the very idea of the human" (1746). While taking seriously the ongoing and entrenched structures of antiblackness in the present, such thinking nonetheless seeks to redefine Blackness as a position of "resilien[ce]", a striving towards the "human that's possible" (Curry 265-6). "[B]lack op" thereby "escapes" from and "lives" in the "postfatal assertion of a right to refuse" and "the resistance to the regulative powers that resistance, differing, and refusal call into being" (Moten 1746-47).

Rankine performs that assertion acutely in her conflation, inspired by Paul Celan, of the poem and a handshake. She writes, "the handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that – Here. I am here" (130). The poem-handshake metaphor progresses this sense of contingency beyond mere vulnerability to the other as a passive inhabitant of an oppressive culture, instead reframing it through poiesis as an active position that creates an opportunity to impress upon – to affect –the world. Indeed, Sara Ahmed reminds us that emotions do not simply "reside within objects or subjects" that conform to prescribed patterns of behaviour but are the "precarious" consequences of the "impressions" made by one's interactions with the world (*Promise* 44). It is when one is unable to make their own "impressions", but is continually impressed upon by others, that they are disaffected and disempowered. Fanon, in turn, positions this process of "reciprocal recognitions" as the affirmation of Black "human reality", "achieved only through conflict" and the "risk that conflict implies" (217-18). Thus, in offering a textual handshake to the reader, Rankine demands that they too recognise the real experiences that inform the text, bringing speaker and reader into what T.J. Welch terms a "trans-corporeal ethics" of "accountab[ility]" to the other (127).

Lonely ends with the speaker's final act of handing themselves over to the reader and the world, aware that they might not be received on equal terms, yet recognising that this act of hope is the only means of moving beyond a sense of 'death-in-life', of stilling the flooded feelings of racialisation. As Giorgio Agamben notes, the act of communication reveals not "something in common" between individuals but the shared capacity of "communicability itself" (21), it becomes a means of asserting Black humanity "in this world in this life in this place" that both speaker and reader occupy (*Lonely* 131). *Lonely*'s aesthetic creativity follows Paul Gilroy's view of "poiesis and poetics" as methods of escaping the linguistic and ideological containers within American culture that inhibit Black freedom (40), as Rankine cultivates, per Macmillan, an "affective catalog" (175) that experiments with form, grammar, and chronology to document the experiences of antiblackness simultaneously elided by, and proliferated through, mainstream media. Through her representation of the negative a/effects of racialisation, Rankine in effect performs a lyric modality that reifies the impossibility of Black affect within the structures of White supremacy. Envisioning the lyric as a tool for asserting life in the face of social death, her portrayal of disaffection refuses to

submit to the obfuscating logics and aesthetics of an “American optimism” rooted in White supremacist nostalgia, and, in turn, creates a new grammar for racialised feeling cognisant of the evolving structures of antiblackness in the twenty-first century.

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