

LONELINESS, GRIEF, AND THE (UN)CARING STATE: COLLECTIVE AILMENTS IN CLAUDIA RANKINE'S *DON'T LET ME BE LONELY: AN AMERICAN LYRIC*¹

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004) from the perspective of "ugly feelings" (Ngai 2005), such as disavowed mourning (Butler 2004) or loneliness, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Following Judith Butler's contention about the hindered possibility for community in the recognition of US national vulnerability, I will argue that Rankine's work underscores the disparities in public recognition of grief and private care for Othered subjects' pain in contemporary American society. In particular, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* displays a series of physical and mental collective ailments in US citizens, such as medicalized depression, as Rankine attempts to bear witness to the institutionalized injustice and erasure of the violence exerted upon America's precarious bodies. The text enacts a form of recognition, only if temporary, through the fragmented use of the narrative/lyric 'I,' performatively demanding action from the reader.

Keywords: Claudia Rankine; 9/11; neoliberalism; lyric essay; affect theory

INTRODUCTION

In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004), Claudia Rankine explores what American citizenship means after 9/11. Mediated by loneliness, grief, and racism, depression is presented as a pervasive illness throughout the country, as the narrator recounts the lack of trust and recognition that she encounters in others in the atomized neoliberal state. In her essays on 9/11 and US citizenship, Judith Butler (2004) conceptualizes vulnerability as "an ethical encounter" with the Other (43), for it is an intrinsic human experience. For Butler, vulnerability is rooted in the realization that "we can be injured, that others can be injured, that we are subject to death at the whim of another, all reasons for both fear and grief" (xii). Vulnerability also brings about the

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idea that some lives are more grievable than others, and thus, some lives are more livable than others (Butler 2004, 30-1). Therefore, in a situation of generalized grief and mourning, it is not always the case that a collective sense of belonging and new notions of care emerge; rather, exclusionary and violent structures may be reinforced.

This essay analyzes how Rankine posits collective depression and a generalized feeling of affective, social, and political detachment as a result of the precarity of life in America. As will be explored, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* criticizes neoliberal healthcare practices, particularly the lack of mental health provision, and structural racism, calling for a collective recognition of grief. Engaging aesthetically with negative affect, as Sianne Ngai (2005) argues in *Ugly Feelings*, may be politically productive, for it lays bare “a general state of obstructed agency” (3), both individual and collective. Indeed, a resistance to ambivalent attachments to the “good life,” or to what Lauren Berlant (2011) has termed “cruel optimism,” may foster alternative ways of imagining belonging and the community, or, at least, resituating the narrator’s agency by putting the subject’s vulnerability at the center. In this paper I will argue how, by refusing a return to a sort of “good life” from the past, Rankine’s lyric essay opens up a space for “reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss” (Butler 2004, 20), letting go of monolithic experiences of Americanness and mourning, whilst aiming to speak from the individual to the collective through the multimedia lyric essay form.

A COLLECTIVE DISEASE: THE POLITICS OF (UN)CARING

As Richard Gray argues (2011), what the 9/11 attacks brought about in the United States was not only the generalized feeling of crisis and loss of innocence, as it had happened with previous major events such as the Civil War (2-3), but also the new fear that America itself “was no longer secure and, to that extent, no longer home” (5), disregarding the fact that it was already not home for some. According to Butler (2004), the 9/11 attacks unveiled an unprecedented vulnerability in the nation, as the common condition of the potential to be injured is what defines us as humans (xii). However, the big-scale event of individual and national injury and grief, rather than providing a space

to rethink and imagine ways of belonging to a “global community,” turned to state-legitimized violence as a form of retribution (Butler 2004, xi).

The failure of mourning caused by retributive violence as an attempt of “getting through the crisis” has left “an open wound, a gap or emptiness in the psychic life of the nation” (Gray 2001, 9). Further, it also failed to acknowledge previous and new forms of erasure of the grief of certain individuals, such as racialized Others, who were “deemed dangerous” in the light of the attacks (Butler 2004, 78), or even lives whose vulnerability was never recognized in the first place, and whose injury could, therefore, not be grieved (43). Butler’s conception of life as ultimately defined by vulnerability, thus, radically challenges the neoliberal governmentality of the self-regulated individual, who becomes an “entrepreneurial actor[] in every sphere of life” (Brown 2005, 42). Neoliberal configurations of a rather individualistic and self-managed approach in all realms of everyday life set forth a politics of uncaring, whereby every individual is supposed to fend for oneself. If individuals fail to do so, they become a failure, undeserving of care from the state, for if health can be performed, its failure can also be deemed a moral failure (Brown and Baker 2013, 32). The ill citizen, then, must rely on personal support networks which, as Rankine poses, are fragile and temporary.

In particular, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* focuses on the unrecognized pain and everyday violence exerted upon racialized bodies, to the point where this violence translates into “physiological and psychological” damage (Dobbs 2020, 168) that could lead to understanding racism and systemic injustice as “a public health issue” (173).² As the narrator explains, ever since she could remember, she has been presented with an image in the media that equated black with death: “The years went by and people only died in television—if they weren’t Black, they were wearing black or were terminally ill” (Rankine 2004, 5). The conflation between black and terminally ill lives underlines their being read as somehow expendable, following Butler (2004), “always already lost, or, rather, they never ‘were’” (33). This account of sick and wasted bodies—including the

² As Kevin Quashie (2021) points out, “black humanity”—and aliveness—“has to be argued over and again” (2), as black life is repeatedly conjoined with images of death.

narrator's—exposes a social investment in white American pain and grief, disregarding longstanding forms of intra-national exclusion and injury. This results in what Angela Hume (2016) equates with Berlant's "slow death" (87): a slow wearing of racialized bodies through institutional malpractices, health inequalities, and medical negligence "that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence" (Berlant 2007, 754). That is, lived experience is historically and materially grounded in unequal specters of recognition, sovereignty, and the right to care in the national space.

Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* enacts a retrieval of disavowed mourning as fabricated in public discourses, addressing how the community has failed its most precarious subjects. By making use of the narrative/lyric 'I,'³ Rankine recounts apparently disconnected events of individual mourning and grief in the aftermath of 9/11, pointing at the violence that was already taking place within the US before and after the attacks, especially against racialized citizens. The fact that their lives were not grievable essentially counters the epitomizing American optimism: "sadness lives in the recognition that a life can not matter" (Rankine 2004, 23). As Rebecca Macmillan asserts (2017), sadness in the text becomes "a feeling or mode of understanding that literally resides in the physical body" (191). Acting as a sort of epistemology, depression, an ailment that affects numerous subjects populating the text, including the speaker, also functions as a political tool to foster social change. As Ann Cvetkovich (2012) has argued, depression, though it may be considered ordinary in contemporary neoliberal society, "is relevant not just to queer politics; it also pertains to the politics of race in the wake of the incomplete projects of civil rights and decolonization. ... A depressive antisociality can accompany an insistence that the past is not over yet" (7). In other words, depression, understood as a source of knowledge about the surrounding reality, can become a tool for imagining a different future and propelling change, insofar as it does

³ I will use 'narrative/lyric 'I'' interchangeably because I consider *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* a lyric essay, a hybrid genre whose name was coined by John D'Agata and Deborah Tall in the Fall 1997 *Seneca Review* issue. It refers to a combination of media and literary devices whereby the text combines elements from poetry and non-fictional prose, such as quotations, images, use of verse, etc. Although her work is often labeled as "poetry," Rankine's text can be argued to fall into this category that accounts better for the hybrid nature of her writing. Reed (2014), instead, has approached the text as what he terms "a postlyric poem" (108).

not yearn for an idealized past, as state-approved forms of grieving may turn to. In this sense, Rankine (2015) herself has elsewhere advocated for public forms of mourning that counter hegemonic discourses. For instance, she has posited the Black Lives Matter movement (para. 11) as a way to reimagine community, belonging, and the national space by mobilizing negative affects.

Don't Let Me Be Lonely is a multimodal lyric essay that combines stories of people close to the narrator, along with cut-ups from pieces of news and adverts on TV, and other real-life documents such as X-ray, drug labels, and billboards. This way, Rankine aims to highlight how material conditions and public discourses of belonging are legitimized through media, and how they inform subject-formation, our collective, and material understanding of reality. This “archival poetics,” as Macmillan (2017) has described Rankine’s writing, calls for “the cultivation of awareness to structural conditions and awareness to how these conditions are recorded and passed on” (176). That is, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* provides different materials for the reader to engage with and reflect upon their way of relating to others. As will be explained in the following sections, it is through these textual interactions that social change can be put forth, although whether the performativity of the text is effective or not is left open on a hopeful note at the end.

Although Rankine has claimed that the categorization of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* as a lyric essay was due to “the marketing process,” her notion of the lyric as “the intimate” (quoted in Macmillan 2017, 197) reveals how the lyric essay connects traditionally public aspects of the essay with a more intimate notion of the private self in the lyric. This ‘public lyric’ acknowledges both the historical and the emotional dimensions of the subject’s coming into being. As Amy Bonnaffons (2016) explains, the combination of the terms ‘lyric’ and ‘essay’ suggests “the notion that a poem’s speaker can transcend the boundaries of the poet’s actual, historical self,” even allowing for the “choral plurality” that a ‘lyric I’ may entail (para. 4.2). Further, as Jonathan Culler affirms, the ritualistic dimension of the lyric “positions the reader as the speaker” (2015, 24), exchanging and destabilizing the categories of speaker and addressee. Rankine’s lyric ‘I,’ grounded in national US space, explores its own emergence through

relationality and its shortcomings. Like Rankine's 2014 renowned work *Citizen, Don't Let Me Be Lonely* bears the subtitle "An American Lyric." Both foster an account beyond the self, implying a sort of national lyric in the Whitmanesque tradition.⁴ However, as Hume (2016) affirms, this subtitle also "invokes a contested genre history" (104), where what it means to be an American citizen is questioned and examined, contesting hegemonic narratives. In fact, both texts end up "exposing the interrelation and co-constitution of race and environment" (ibid.). In other words, they shed light on how subjectivity emerges from an embodied relation between unequal individuals, where certain modes of subjectivity are more recognized than others. As the narrator ironically highlights, the seemingly liberating narrative of American individualism has become monolithic, entrapping, a form of surveillance in itself: "Now it is the twenty-first century and either you are with us or you are against us. Where is your flag?" (Rankine 2004, 91). Thus, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* undoes an idealized idea of community, belonging and the "good life," which may in turn "posit alternative forms of community," given that "the ways such saying of 'I' marks at once the precondition for belonging—it must be spoken in a necessarily shared language—and the impossibility of that belonging because belonging individuates, separates the speaker from the 'we'" (Reed 2014, 110). That is, American community as imagined by Whitman, for instance, is rendered impossible, as Rankine's struggles to articulate a coherent 'I' demonstrate: "Is 'I' even me or am 'I' a gearshift to get from one sentence to the next? Should we say we? Is the voice not various if I take responsibility for it? What does my subject mean to me?" (Rankine 2004, 54). The 'I,' then, is not part of a subjective 'we,' but rather part of a so-called body politic, which in Rankine's speaker is sick from the disconnection between its parts, sick from loneliness. How, then, do we account for the 'we,' how can we even imagine this 'we' if there is not such a thing? How do we account for the pain of others if there are no public discourses to articulate the pain of the self?

⁴ Antonella Francini (2015) links Rankine's *American lyrics* to the inheritance of great American poets such as Walt Whitman or Williams Carlos Williams, establishing a connection between *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen* (178). Andrew Gorin (2019) also argues in favor of reading the two texts as part of a wider, post-confessional take on American citizenship and American poetry (98).

Rankine's method consists of juxtaposing mixed media, such as news, footnotes that expand upon the news stories, proofs or *realia* from stories close to the narrator, and the narrative thread of the I itself. This "archival poetics" (Macmillan 2017, 176) unveils and accounts for the "implications of how combinations of words and images construct the world, taking in the virtual and material nature of contemporary existence as well as questioning the commercial and political image-texts that constitute reality for most people" (Kimberley 2011, 777). The addition of such material documents, as in the case of her deceased friends—the mammogram of a friend who died after a delayed diagnosis of breast cancer (Rankine 2004, 8) and the chalkboard from a friend who died from Alzheimer's disease and who wrote, "This is the most miserable time of my life," after being moved to a care home (17)—bear witness to the voices whose grief was never acknowledged during their lifetime. The speaker curates, as it were, her own way of *producing* media through literature, "refract[ing] the lyric 'now' into a more capacious time rooted in language's mediality" (Reed 2014, 118), and also opens up a public space to grieve. That is, the pieces from real life are situated next to mediated stories and writing in verse in order to attempt to understand—or not—how we make sense of reality. Reality, in sum, is always already mediated, and the text "call[s] us into new forms of association" (Reed 2014, 121) and recognition of the Other.

The stories collected throughout the different lyric fragments try to provide an answer to the question "Why do people waste away?" (Rankine 2004, 11). By collecting seemingly disconnected pains and giving voice to individual ailments in the backdrop of 9/11, together with the narrative 'I's medicalized depression, the text brings to the fore the uncaring nature of the neoliberal state in the early 2000s, which aims for citizens' functional productivity, rather than collective care, even to the point where life is endangered. For instance, the text recounts the late breast cancer diagnosis of one of the narrator's friends, as the narrative 'I' confronts for-profit healthcare as one of the hazards of precarious life in the US: "The lump was misdiagnosed a year earlier. Can we say she might have lived had her doctor not screwed up? If yes—when does her death actually occur?" (9). Who is to be held responsible for caring for the life of the Other in such an atomized society that relies on individual self-management? As Hume (2016)

affirms, Rankine's "wasting body" is "made sick under capitalism and the state, while simultaneously being regarded as surplus by these same structures" (79). Thus, institutions not only do not help patients, but Rankine's account involves a pervasive sense of loneliness, one where suicide helplines and anti-depressant ads target TV viewers late at night, aware of their loneliness (Rankine 2004, 7). Even the narrator's management of her depression by the doctors is presented in economic terms: "I was switched from Prozac to fluoxetine. Prozac's patent is up, and now that the generic brand, fluoxetine, is available, the insurance company will only cover that, my editors say casually" (53). The narrator herself is medicalized, the solution found in a society that wants to keep productive citizens running in the most optimized way without questioning its power dynamics, and where structural injustices become health problems that in turn stigmatize and pathologize precarious bodies (Dobbs 2020, 73).

Rankine's engagement with depression as a public and collective feeling thus denounces the "crisis of care" (Fraser 2016, 99) in contemporary US society, whereby care has become commodified and unaffordable in many cases, endangering social reproduction. Without support networks—usually comprised by women—willing to care for others for free, many are devoid of care provision, becoming especially vulnerable if illness precludes paid work. Though there are small acts of companionship and care in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, such as the narrator's husband checking in on her late at night (63), or the narrator visiting her depressed friend (42), the text highlights that loneliness is the most pervasive ailment in contemporary America—a result of a lack of care is what eventually brings about death, portrayed as a sort of death-in-life state as well as an omen: "You'd let me be lonely?/ I thought I was dead" (16). Circumventing loneliness can, then, become a first step to solve the crisis of care, by prompting a recognition of the suffering of the Other: "Then all life is a form of waiting, but it is the waiting of loneliness. One waits to recognize the other, to see the other as one sees the self" (Rankine 2004, 120). But not caring is also a form of harm: the text emphasizes Butler's contention that "we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well" (Rankine 2004, 24). Unrecognized vulnerability, thus, also prompts a politics of uncaring, but caring cannot be imposed upon the subject: it

must be reworked, reclaimed, and enacted. As I will show in the next section, this task is attempted through what Cvetkovich (2012) calls “performative writing” (15): a writing that explores the conditions that lead to collective depression and that can foster, or at least stand in proximity to imagining the possibility of change by working around the lyric ‘I’'s private sadness as a site of knowledge.

BODIES OF FEELING: THE LYRIC ‘I’

My contention is that *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* aims to reinstate, or, at least, to lay bare the structures that preclude a politics of caring by deconstructing the narrative/lyric ‘I,’ showing “how images and objects have begun to stand in for aspects of what we are” (Kimberley 2011, 786). In her essay “The First Person in the Twenty-First Century,” Claudia Rankine (2001) explains that language is grounded in lived experience (132). Thus, her writing aims to bridge bodily experience with “the languaged self” (ibid.). This self, however, needs to be “investigated,” dismantled, and questioned, for, otherwise, “[n]ot to investigate subjectivity is to reinforce cultural stereotypes, erasing the compromises and assertions that compress the languaged self. All assertions of the self have consequences of meaning greater than the typographical space and ‘I’ inhabits.” (Rankine 2001, 133). For Rankine, the use of the ‘I’ carries with it a responsibility, that of understanding where that ‘I’ is speaking from, and deconstructing it: the “languaged self, then, in order to keep itself human, in order to cohere, has to fragment.” (132). Rankine then undoes the ‘I’ as an authoritative element, and, instead, turns her writing into an investigation of how this ‘I’ comes to be: the assumed private lyric of an ‘I’ is made public. This ‘I,’ therefore, does not aim to speak for others—not even for itself. Rather, it aims to understand how subjectivity becomes a site for enunciation and entrapment at once: “In truth, no one exists behind the languaged self. I myself am nothing, though *feeling* everything. It is this nothingness that tries to cement itself into a singular subject position” (Rankine 2001, 134; emphasis added). If the languaged self is constructed, it is done so through feelings and affects that arise from material experience and configure its understanding: the languaged self is at once historical and emotional. By undoing these automatic assumptions about reality and the self, the lyric

'I' challenges the readers to take responsibility in understanding the grounded determinants of their subjectivity, so that awareness may arise in their relation to others, including seemingly private feelings and emotions.

The lyric 'I' of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* mentions that she is writing a book on the liver (Rankine 2004, 54). The liver, thought in medieval medicine to constitute the seat where passions were fabricated (Hendrie 2021, para. 4), serves as a starting point for the lyric 'I' to search for a common origin of feelings. Affects and feelings construe attachments that shape the social space. As Sara Ahmed (2004) has argued, feelings "*do things* . . . they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space" (119). That is, feelings become affects by attaching themselves to bodies in one way or another, constituting markers of political and social meaning. The narrator suggests that looking at feelings—her own and others'—may provide further insight into the reality of bodily experience, and thus, of political experience: "it finally occurs to me that feelings fill the gaps created by the indirectness of experience" (Rankine 2004, 89). Following the metaphor of the body politic, hence, American society is posited as suffering from collective loneliness, from a sense of disembodiment and unbelonging, which, in turn, causes all sorts of physical and mental illnesses. Private ailing is, therefore, public and collective. In a picture of the human body, the narrator connects the liver and the stomach to a great US-shaped organ. This points directly to American society's collective ailment—the fact that the liver of the US may not be processing emotions. The liver, as "the largest organ next to the soul, which looms large though it is hidden" (Rankine 2004, 54), embodies the ability to understand and search for the Other's soul as well as for the narrator's.

But reaching and understanding the Other's difficult emotions, or "ugly feelings," in Sianne Ngai's words (2005), is not an easy task. Our current contemporary culture refuses to recognize feelings such as sadness, believing instead that the pain of others can be easily erased by changing a TV channel: "Sad is one of those words that has given up its life for our country, it's been a martyr for the American dream, it's been neutralized, co-opted by our culture to suggest a tinge of discomfort that lasts the time it takes for this and then for that to happen, the time it takes to change a channel. But

sadness is real because it once meant something real” (Rankine 2004, 108). Recognizing others’ pain entails more than superficially glancing at the news: sadness takes material form and is embodied by those suffering from it. This is why the text provides endnotes to the news stories, expanding upon historical events and injustices, and emphasizing “the discrepancies between this form of literary assemblage and the contained format of TV news media, promoting the former as an antidote for the failings of the latter” (Macmillan 2011, 175). Rankine’s use of the television as a media for collective communication sheds light on the trivialization of certain experiences, and on the impossibility of going beyond a homogenized discourse that reaches people. As signaled by the images of a TV with white noise at the start of every fragment, mediated accounts of suffering may actually provoke disconnection and desensitization, not only from seemingly distant incidents, but also from our most immediate, everyday reality.

The effects of monolithic rendering of events and the lack of a public account and recognition of grief are subverted by the fragmented layout of the lyric essay as deployed by Rankine. The text directly demands both physical and intellectual engagement from readers in the construction of meaning, as Macmillan (2017) explains:

readers may engage with *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* by regularly flipping between the full pages and the endnotes to see whether a note accompanies and extends the poetry, or they may wait until the end of their reading to take in the additional information—likely needing to go back and carefully match up the latter material with the former. Either way, readers end up gaining perspective on their own habits of focus and information management. (186)

Thus, readers may be invited to research the stories presented by themselves (Welch 2015, 134), to respond to and challenge racial injustice, either in real life or at least in the stories they see on TV, by piecing together the different stories presented by the narrator. Of course, this performative aspect of the text may fail if readers choose not to engage with it. Despite the hope that it may happen, the narrator is also aware of the possibility of failure, as will be later explained. As Rankine (2015) affirms in an article for the *New York Times*, public grieving may be disregarded, and the showcasing of a suffering body may even be reified and used as a cautionary tale, but the making of private experiences public also implies resistance and a demand for recognition (para.

14). Speaking about Black Lives Matter, Rankine claims that “[n]ational mourning . . . is a mode of intervention and interruption that might itself be assimilated into the category of public annoyance. This is altogether possible; but also possible is the recognition that it’s a lack of feeling for another that is our problem. *Grief, then, for these deceased others might align some of us, for the first time, with the living*” (para. 23; emphasis added). Public mourning may be political insofar as it inquires on the conditions that sustain the aforementioned “slow death” and may incite change and new forms of connection. As Tana Jean Welch (2015) explains, the blank space in between the fragments in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* “allows for meditative analysis—one might even use the space for jotting reflective notes. There is no channel to switch, no link to click, no cable news ticker floating across the bottom of the page” (130). The text’s uncomfortable interruptions engage the reader in meaning-making, by compelling them to turn the page, decide to look deeper or even write their thoughts on the page, or give up reading altogether. The fragmentary nature of the text does not allow for comfort or distraction, while at the same time its blank spaces provide the reader time to digest each fragment.

Following the performative quality of Rankine’s lyric essay, the lyric ‘I’ enacts this recognition of others’ pain herself, by juxtaposing the narrator’s and her friends’ diseases, medical negligence, and loneliness with institutional violence and racial inequality. Further, the narrator reacts to the countless news about racial violence, showing what seeing the pain of other people provokes in her: “Sometimes I look into someone’s face and I must brace myself—the blow on its way” (Rankine 2014, 56). This looking into an Other’s face, however, is mediated by the TV, as the poetic voice acknowledges how much harder it is to look and recognize someone in real life: “if I catch someone’s eye, I quickly look away . . . In real life the looking away is the apology, despite the fact that when I look away I almost always feel guilty” (Rankine 2004, 98). Looking at the Other, in real life, proves too difficult, for it brings about guilt—the guilt of not wanting to see someone else’s grief and pain because they demand action from oneself. Unlike TV channels that can be chosen, tailored, changed for comfort, seeing a

person in pain from a close distance demands our involvement, going beyond “the paradox of spectating,” which results “into a shirking of responsibility” (Welch 2015, 132).

The fragmented discourse of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* resists a linear reading while indirectly demanding action from the reader: associations between texts and stories must be made, gaps need to be filled in by the reader. The complex structure of the text may at once produce alienation—if a reader chooses not to engage, or not to react emotionally or physically—while it attempts to find a way to connect with the Other. By means of its reflexive structure, the reader sees the narrator watch and react to an Other's pain. It is precisely this constructed artificiality of the encounter with the Other that brings the narrator back to realize her own materiality, which may, in turn, be mirrored in the reader.⁵ For example, when reading a piece of news about AIDS activism in South Africa, where President Mbeki had long denied antiretrovirals before five million people became infected with the virus, the narrator says:

My body relaxes. My shoulders fall back. I had not known that my distress at Mbeki's previous position against distribution of the drugs had physically lodged itself like a virus within me . . .

It is not possible to communicate how useless, how much like a skin-sack of uselessness I felt . . . One observes, one recognizes without being recognized. One opens the paper. One turns on the television. Nothing changes. My distress grows into nothing. Thou art nothing.

Such distress moved in with my muscle and bone. Its entrance by necessity slowly translated my already grief into a tremendously exhausted hope. The translation occurred unconsciously, perhaps occurred simply because I am alive. The translation occurs as a form of life. Then life, which seems so full of waiting, awakes suddenly into a life of hope. (Rankine 2004, 117-18)

Hence, this encounter is physical, embodied, and signals how the subject is changed by this interaction through a recognition of the Other's pain: embodied emotion becomes a site for knowledge and recognition, at the very least an “annoyance”—as Rankine referred to BLM protests—that the reader must work through. However, the encounter is also brief: the lyric ‘I’ explains that her TV is always on because she cannot sleep

⁵ See Rita Felski's theory of recognition as a form of epistemology in literature (2008).

(Rankine 2004, 29). The TV cannot listen to or reply to the speaker, and she is left to her own musings. For instance, watching a commercial of antidepressants, the words “Your life is waiting” appear on the screen. In the text, an image of a TV screen with those words is inserted, doubling the speaker’s discourse. The narrator comments to herself, “I wonder, for what, for what does it wait? For life I guess” (ibid.). Later, the narrator will turn the slogan around: “Then all life is a form of waiting” (120), where waiting stands for loneliness, for the lack of recognition of someone else’s life. The commercial’s catchphrase keeps “staring back” at the narrator until she falls asleep (29), mirroring the way the text may be seen by readers—the response cannot be taken for granted. At the same time, the text does not give away neat, simple messages like TV commercials trying to sell their products, but demands the active involvement of the reader to make sense of the different texts, media, and discourses intertwined. As Rankine (2001) has asserted, “responsibility on the page is what makes use of the first-person social. It recognizes that we are always being broken into (visually and invisibly) by history, memory, current events, the phone, e-mail, a kiss, calls for nature, whatever” (132). Thus, Rankine’s text investigates experience and subjectivity as grounded in the material self of everyday experience.

In order to understand how we come into subjectivity—i.e., how the ‘I’ becomes a different ‘I’—, the text foregrounds the pivotal difference between looking at or away from the Other in the making of the subject. In fact, the lack of responsibility toward one another is what makes the subjects of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* sick: the act of looking away means I will not be looked at in turn. The lyric ‘I’ delves into the 9/11 terrorist attacks, pondering on how someone who stops fearing death and therefore caring for their own life, does not care about other people’s lives. In a collective sense, responsibility and accountability for oneself and for others are what may heal a sick community: “The minute you stop fearing death you are no longer controlled by governments and councils. In a sense, you are no longer accountable to life. The relationships embedded between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ unhinge and lose all sense of responsibility. That ‘you,’ functioning as other, now exists beyond our notions of civil and social space” (Rankine 2004, 84). Looking away is a form of uncaring, by

unburdening the subject's social responsibility. Consequently, not caring for others also implies letting one's own life go, to inhabit a feeling of loneliness that is posited as a state close to death: "I felt it too./ The loneliness?/ I let it happen./ By feeling?/ By not feeling./ That's too much.../ Like dying?/ Maybe, or death is second./ Second to what?/ To loneliness./ Define loneliness" (Rankine 2004, 58). This idea is repeated throughout the text, like a refrain, probing onto the reader's ability to react in order to avoid their own death in life, as well as the narrator's. Death in life entails a complete disavowal of life, a non-recognition of the Other and, subsequently, an erasure of the self. This is further emphasized by the verse form of the idea, which is presented as a sort of internal dialogue, but can also be read as an exchange between interlocutors, if the reader wishes to be hopeful—it is not possible to know. The hope of this encounter with the Other is encapsulated in the writing, where the borders between a possible interlocutor and the lyric 'I' are blurred: "Or maybe hoping is the same as waiting. It can be futile/ Waiting for what?/ For a life to begin./ I am here./ And I am still lonely" (119). The 'I' cannot exist without the 'you.' Yet, the text also posits that an encounter where historically grounded forms of institutional violence are overlooked will not provide an end to the speaker's "slow death" in this encounter and, therefore, to collective depression.

THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF AN ENCOUNTER

Even if an encounter with the Other cannot be fully accounted for in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* through its purposely mediated accounts, the trace of this encounter can be retrieved through Rankine's writing. The sharing of other people's stories, the sharing of grief and how subjects are shaped by it, performs an ethical encounter with the Other who listens and who is affected by this listening. As Butler argues (2004), when a subject tells a story, "the very 'I' is called into question by its relation to the Other, a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing" (23). That is, the very speaking 'I,' as well as the listening Other, are undone in this encounter of the recognition of vulnerability. This encounter, as we see, is fragile, precarious, afforded only in glimpses and "glitches" and

deferred approximations: “sadness is real because it once meant something real” (Rankine 2004, 108). The signified is substituted by the signifier in the text, emptied of meaning so that the act of uttering it can become meaningful again. But the reader is meant to look for the meaning of this “realness” themselves, in an act of hope, or, perhaps, of cruel optimism.

Don't Let Me Be Lonely engages with what Berlant (2011) has termed “cruel optimism,” for, Rankine considers, “it talks back to the unreadable or unbearable encounter . . . [Berlant] offer[s] pathways to consider, sidestep, and groove into disruption” (Rankine 2014a, para. 23). That is, realizing that what one desires is what is actually hurting may become liberating, showing or creating diverting paths that might have gone unnoticed before. Rankine herself has acknowledged her interest in the term “cruel optimism” in an interview with Berlant (Rankine 2014, para. 23). Cruel optimism can be defined as desiring something that in fact prevents achieving the very ideal that the subject desires (Berlant 2011, 1). In this sense, the text desires the encounter with the Other even if it acknowledges its impossibility, and thus dwells in liminal spaces that open up this encounter. As Rita Bode and Kristin J. Jacobson (2018) explain, the concept of liminality goes back to Arnold van Gennep’s anthropological research on “ritual patterns that societies commonly invoke to identify the process of transitions” (3). The “in-between” stage in a rite of passage, once the subject has departed from the original state and before the transition has been fully completed, is called the liminal state. Later, Victor Turner applied Gennep’s idea of the liminal space to “societal and communal shifts” (ibid.). Rankine’s textual strategies that demand the reader’s involvement are invested in the search for liminal moments of encounter that linger between abandoning cruel optimism and holding onto it. These liminal moments of encounter can propel new ways to account for the Other’s illness, pain and grief, and thus elucidate other forms of belonging and caring. In another interview, Rankine (2014b) has posited citizenship and belonging as the forms of investment that hurt her the most: “In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant talks about things that we’re invested in, despite the fact that they are not good for us and place us in a non-sovereign relationship to our own lives. And I thought, on a certain level, that thing that I am invested in that is

hurting me would be this country” (para. 17). Indeed, authors such as Andrew Gorin (2019) posit the difficulty of Rankine’s text as a mimesis of the sort of “noise” that the experiences of racialized subjects are taken for, being misunderstood and not listened to (124). Still, Rankine affirms that she still believes in the possibility to connect and belong: “You want to belong, you want to be here. In interactions with others you’re constantly waiting to see that they recognize that you’re a human being . . . you’re constantly waiting for the moment when you will be *seen*. As an equal. As just another person. As another *first* person” (Rankine 2014b, para. 58; emphasis added): the fragmented yet enunciated first person in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* that creates a thread through the fragments of the poem, and becomes therefore, the means for connection in disconnection.

According to Butler (2004), in recognizing an Other, the subject also emerges as an ‘I’—thus positing the paradox of the impossible “we”. Further, this moment of recognition also entails realizing the limits of the self, and the ways in which selves are collectively bound to each other, as Butler argues: “I cannot muster the ‘we’ except by finding the way in which I am tied to you” (49). As Reed has suggested (2004), Rankine’s use of the lyric ‘I’ seeks “to break the common sense link between poetry as personal and group expression without claiming some reified notion of the ‘universal’” (97). The encounters with the Other, along with the notion of the subject, are grounded in “the precarious space and time—the ambiguous ‘here’” (Reed 2014, 118) reproduced in the billboard of the last pages (Rankine 2004, 130). This “here” is the “here” of the performative text, which ends when the reader stops reading, and the lack of a linear conception of time creates an effect of disconnection in the text, thereby erasing the possibility to imagine a future in a narrative sense. As Rankine explains (2014b), a linear narrative creates the sense of progression in temporality, although in real life, “[i]t’s disappointing to find out that the past is the present is the future. Nobody wants that. And yet, that’s what it is” (para. 46). If there is no past or future with which to fix the present, the text indefinitely lingers on the present moment, as a sort of waiting, a waiting for an Other, for change that preempts the repetition of the same events that have turned the present into a sort of impasse: “Then all life is a form of waiting, but it

is the waiting of loneliness. One waits to recognize the other, to see the other as one sees the self” (Rankine 2004, 120). This awaited encounter with the Other—temporary, fragile, longed for but unexpected—lacks simplified expectations or projections of what the encounter must look like or what it must turn into. For instance, the narrator recounts a story told by a friend about the cousin of an Auschwitz survivor, who recognizes another for having the same tattoo as her cousin (Rankine 2004, 99). There is a great element of chance in this encounter, starting from the age difference of the narrator’s friend and the old woman with the tattoo, to finding each other in a city as big as LA. Though the meaning of the tattoo is mistaken by the narrator’s friend—it represents the function of the prisoner, not the name of the camp, which makes the recognition even more casual—recognition is prompted in a liminal state of paying attention to the other:

What my friend wanted to communicate to me about that conversation was that “Frieda Berger and I had defied history in order to have it. She was supposed to be dead, and I was supposed to have never been born. And we both lived, and found each other in LA, and she was able to tell me this detail about the letter A. A detail that allows me to begin to be true to her life as precisely as it is lived. (Ibid.)

This encounter seems to imply that recognition relies on looking at another person for long enough so as to acknowledge their existence. That is, the encounter encompasses bearing witness to another’s life. The narrator explains that she finds it hard to do this in real life because looking at would entail to be looked at. This may explain the elusive quality of the text: “I never feel as if I can say, Look, look at me again so that I can see you, so that I can acknowledge that I have seen you, so that I can see you” (Rankine 2004, 98). The impossibility to look at an Other, which translates into the lack of recognition of “ugly feelings” (Ngai 2005), such as grief, anger, or sadness in contemporary US culture, reflects the fragmentary nature of the book. Ironically, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* attempts to perform a recognition of fragmented experiences of grief, even if only to acknowledge that full recognition is not possible or fully realized at this time. The recognition of the condition of vulnerability might not be possible because it is threatening. For instance, when the speaker dials a suicide helpline seen on a TV ad

late at night, the encounter is presented as failed: “Do you feel like killing yourself? the man on the other end of the receiver asks. You tell him, I feel like I am already dead. When he makes no response you add, I am in death’s position” (Rankine 2004, 7). The condition of grief and the sharing thereof may imply the undoing of the self (Butler 2004, 30), but it is not necessarily followed by a recognition of an Other. In this encounter, the script appears to be mediated and fixed, hailed by economic interest and not by the sincere desire of listening. It is the operator’s job, after all, and going off the script would require the operator to recognize his or her own vulnerability, besides that of the caller. Therefore, the act of communication fails. Recognition of an Other’s grief cannot be mediated by economic interest, despite the narrator’s surprise at her father’s death when “no grieving service is available” (Rankine 2004, 122) and dreams about having someone mourn her father for her instead. Pain cannot be bought or sold, only shared. However, Butler (2004) explains that recognition is an act when the self and the Other come undone:

When we recognize another, or when we ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are, as we already are, as we have always been, as we were constituted prior to the encounter itself. Instead, in the asking, in the petition, we have already become something new, since we are constituted by virtue of the address, a need and desire for the Other that takes place in language in the broadest sense, one without which we could not be. To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. (44)

Therefore, recognition brings about unforeseeable change in the self and in the Other. By extension, a public recognition and sharing of grief may transform society into new forms of caring and belonging. For instance, the encounter between the cousin of the Auschwitz survivor and the other survivor meant changing her idea of what the tattoo meant. The encounter between the narrator and the grief stories from the news affects her in a bodily way. Thus, these encounters allow for transformation, of the self and the Other, into new ways of subjectivity. Through Rankine’s utterly performative text the reader is asked to look at the mediated accounts of pain—both a bodily and a detached experience, for it is perhaps the closest that language can come to it. As the narrator

asserts, “I tried to fit language into the shape of usefulness” (Rankine 2004, 129). This means that, in the same way that the Auschwitz tattoo did not “stand for location, but it stands for function” (Rankine 2004, 99), the stories told in the text also stands for function, not for location, in what Reed (2014) has defined as a sort of citation mechanism where meaning is displaced (117). In one of the final poems, Rankine offers the possibility of hope in recognizing the Other in the here and now—which she extends to the poem. Quoting Paul Celan, the narrator equates a poem and a handshake: “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. This conflation of the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive” (Rankine 2004, 130). A handshake, like Rankine’s performative lyric essay, needs to be embodied, and can only be experienced momentarily, liminally, in the “here” only referenced in the photograph of a billboard in the last page. This uncertain sharing of grief may provide a way of illuminating new forms of caring by acknowledging the human condition of vulnerability.

CONCLUSION

In *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, the displacement of a coherent, unified subject and the narrator’s giving in to the lack of a linear structure may be read as an opening towards new possibilities and forms of living and writing about lived experience. The text bears witness to conversations held in breaks and fragments, to the search for intelligibility in unintelligibility, to a speaker trying to listen without knowing if there is a way out of the loneliness of the subject and the overarching loneliness that is making neoliberal America sick. Through undoing and unmasking the conditions that take part in the making of the narrative/lyric ‘I’ as a subject, Rankine unveils how structural inequalities hinder the recognition of said vulnerability, giving way to a deadly politics of uncaring that cannot heal the nation. In this sense, the text enacts the desire of an encounter with the Other while it acknowledges its impossibility, and thus dwells in the liminal spaces open for this encounter, in a here and now that may or may not overlap. However, as Kevin Quashie (2021) affirms in his discussion on a politics of black

aliveness—that is, one that celebrates and fosters black life through relation—“the focus is on one’s preparedness for encounter rather than on the encounter itself” (21). In *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* the encounter cannot yet be grasped, while at the same time it is acknowledged that it involves change, and that it will not happen as expected.

Thus, by giving up the coherence of a single, cohesive narrative of the self, and refusing fixed expectations, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* rejects what Lauren Berlant (2011) has termed “cruel optimism,” as mediated by discourses of “the good life”. The text recognizes that a sustained encounter or that full recognition is not possible yet, ultimately giving up reified accounts of experience and opening up the possibility of a new becoming in the desired encounter. The text itself resists a single interpretation or a single authoritative voice, and rather demands involvement from the reader in bearing witness to the voices of the different stories presented: “We must both be here in this world in this life in this place indicating the presence of” (Rankine 2004, 131). Therefore, bodily presence and attention, like the attention that the text demands from the reader to make sense of it, may become the only ways for recognition. Quashie’s “preparedness” in Rankine’s text may be read as an awareness of where our subjectivity emerges, then handing it over to an Other, realizing our own vulnerability, and waiting—optimistically, perhaps cruelly—to be transformed in the here and now.

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