Reading, writing, and re-writing : the black body in contemporary African-American literature

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**Reading, Writing, and Re-writing: The Black Body in
Contemporary African-American Literature**

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Reading, Writing, and Re-writing: The Black Body in Contemporary African-American Literature

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Abstract

Through an examination of three contemporary African-American writers, this thesis seeks to explore the ways the black body is constructed through their negotiating of their own corporeal vulnerability to racial discourse. Turning to Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*, this thesis will examine the ways in which these writers have attempted to craft the black body as a site of challenge to these discourses, and how it, even in its failure, still engenders new ways of thinking about blackness. If racism is a rhetoric that has been written upon the black body, I argue that contemporary African-American writers, in complicating the relationship between the reader and the black writer, re-negotiate the power dynamics involved in the reading and writing of black bodies to engage in an unceasing re-writing of it.

Introduction

In an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* entitled “The Surrogate”, we see an important exchange between Larry David and Wanda Sykes regarding race. This particular scene begins with Larry David walking past a black man in the parking lot after parking his own car. At the moment both of them cross paths, David decides to press the button on his car keys, locking his car as the black man happens to walk beside it. As David’s car beeps shut, the black man instantaneously stops and turns towards David. “Think I’m gonna steal your car?” he asks David with an incredulous look on his face (00:24:31). David realizes what has transpired in that moment. He attempts to salvage the situation by explaining that he forgot to lock his car, implying that it was a mere coincidence that he happened to walk past. Amidst David’s desperation and the black man’s unwavering disbelief, his last resort was to repeatedly utter the phrase “no race thing!” (00:24:42), but to no avail.

As the black man walks away, Wanda Sykes appears on screen, the look on her face clearly indicating that she has witnessed the whole situation. After chiding David for his behavior however, the ensuing conversation turns into a bit of an irony. After David tells Sykes that her film script was rejected by an acquaintance, she asks him: “well did you tell him I was black?” (00:25:46), and harshly explains to a confused David that “you don’t know when to play the [race] card” (00:25:55).

There are two observations in David’s encounter with the black passer-by that will frame the introduction to the current study. Firstly, regardless of whether David was acting with a racial intent in putting the car alarm on, the manner in which the black man responded points to a tension that exists between him and David—a black man and a white man—that persists in spite of their actual personal motivations. Secondly, in Wanda Sykes’s ensuing conversation with David, she purposefully brings attention to her body with the response “Tell him I’m like a brown-skinned black, not light skinned. Make sure he know I’m *real* black” (00:26:10). Putting

both these instances together, there is thus a relationship between a silent racial dynamic and a body that is visibly black.

The black man reacted with great conviction and automaticity, convinced that he had been the target of David's racism. Cognizant of the colour of his skin as well as the stereotype of the black criminal, he is reacting with the full force of his experience and history with the social construct of race. The cue of the car alarm coming from somewhere near his body is an all-too familiar reminder of a black body often juxtaposed against police sirens, and prison cells. The black man is therefore attempting to distance himself from a discourse of the black body as criminal by pre-emptively introducing the white gaze as complicit—David's awareness of the presence of his black body—figured as racist.

When Sykes mentions playing "the race card" however, she is taking advantage of the presence of a more progressive discourse of racial equality and liberalism. It is one that competes against the black man's consciousness about the legacy of racism his body has placed him into, one which he inherited. Even though the former has more benevolent outcomes than the latter, both these modes of engagement with race contend with the dynamic of reacting to the blackness of a body in predictable, scripted ways. Both Sykes and the black passer-by are acting in anticipation of what those scripts engender. The former acts in cognizance of how the black body can become an emblem for liberalism; "whoa look at me I'm liberal, helping the black person" (00:26:00), Sykes mockingly imitates the white liberal who spuriously believes he is acting in altruism. The black passer-by is similarly reacting to the same threatening social script he has felt before, of a white person's trepidation around the presence of his black body. An important difference however, is that playing "the race card" is also to invoke the dynamics of race at will, a luxury that the black passer-by did not have when being dealt the hand of racism in that moment. His tentative question of "think I'm gonna steal your car?" (00:24:31)

and the long-drawn moment of him at silence while David hastily explains himself, betray a kind of difficulty in grappling with the situation.

Racism in the contemporary thus finds new ways to manifest itself as America attempts to move away from a history deeply rooted in it. It appears in ways that both hearkens to that past and instantiates itself in the present. Nevertheless, this scene from *Curb Your Enthusiasm* affirms that the relationship between the body and race is still as present now as it was in the 20th Century where writers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston endeavoured to examine the experience of being black. The issues they reckoned with resurface here in this scene as part of a quotidian language of what it means to be black in the twenty-first Century, that it is now articulated in terms of the playing of the race card and the locking of car doors. In this framing of African-American race and identity within the unspoken conversation between David and the black man, and Sykes' claim to the race card, I will thus examine the idea of the black body as the locus of racial discourse, with a particular attention on how this is reflected in the works of contemporary black writers who have inherited the tradition of writing that Du Bois and Hurston were a part of.

"No Race Thing"

Larry David insists that there was no racial bias in his action; at least, not one that was intentional. With the understanding that the circumstances of the situation implicates him as a racist person, he emphasizes to the black man that there was "no race thing". It is tempting to begin a reading of the scene by trying to scrutinize David's line of defence and question its veracity—was David just another person caught up in racism, or was he just another racist that happened to have been called out? Regardless of the fact that it is virtually impossible to determine this without an admission of guilt by David himself, the ambiguity nevertheless acts as a useful illustration for the dynamics that is present in racial encounters. The question of whether David's actions were racially inflected is irrelevant; the rhetoric of disavowal is

always in the vicinity, ready to obscure the racial motivations behind any pejorative act. Instead, what this scene most crucially brings to the forefront is the inescapability of the question of race in America—that in every interracial interaction, there is *always* a “race thing”.

David’s denial of the presence of this “race thing” is both a reactionary utterance and an implicit reckoning with the larger state of race relations in America, the latter of which deserves to be parsed out. It is clear that he is trying to explain that his locking of the car was not racially motivated by a belief in the stereotype of the criminal black man. Yet, in spite of its straightforwardness, he relies on the word “thing”, a noun that engenders vagueness and ambiguity. It points to something that David does not want to invoke, implications that he feels the need to deny and defend himself from even without being verbally accused of anything. In any other situation, the black man’s response of “think I was going to steal your car?” would have been considered a non-sequitur, but the fact that the man and David both recognized the racial tension present in that moment suggests that a greater dynamic is afoot, precipitated at the point at which they apprehend each other’s blackness and whiteness respectively. Reading this in concert with the “thing” that David chooses to leave unsaid and unnamed, his silence can be understood as his realization that he is, in that moment, prefigured in and incriminated by a tradition of thinking about black bodies as dangerous and criminally inclined. It is a desire to extricate and exonerate himself of that by suggesting that the racial tension does not exist and cannot exist because he is not a racist, an impulse to render this “thing” as trivial and unsubstantial enough to be ignored. As the black man walks away and mutters an insult under his breath however, the realization is that race is a spectre that inevitably hangs over the black and white bodies that meet within the American social climate.

History of The Black Body

The spectre of race enshrouds the black body and continues to follow it even through America's most pivotal moments. Even after The Declaration of Independence in 1776 in which "all men" were presumably affirmed as "equal", and abolition of slavery in the 19th Century, the corporeal past still lingers within the present. These important moments are captured in the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington D.C., curating them amidst the legacy of blackness. Established in 2016, the museum is a retrospective eye into the foundations of America's past from the African-American perspective. Not merely a collection of relics of a past left behind, the museum reflects what the current discourse on African-American history is interested in, and the events that have come to shape the legacy of blackness in America.

The act of curation, of condensing history into a narrative, implicitly acknowledges the events that contemporary discourse recognizes as crucial in shaping our dialogue with the past thus far, centuries' worth of looking back into how racial conflict has been negotiated in America. For the NMAAHC, this begins in chronological fashion at its building's basement floor. Its lowest level, themed "Slavery and Freedom 1400 – 1877" (NMAAHC, "Museum Maps") immediately confronts the viewer with recollections of the black body in physical abjection. In what may be felt as a "claustrophobic" space (Dufresne 21), the NMAAHC's museum trail first places them in a subterranean space akin to slaves held captive below the decks of slave ships, drawing visceral echoes between the viewer in the present-day and the incarcerated bodies of those slaves. The freedom of viewer to traverse through the museum space thus all the more acutely reminds him of the disparity between himself and the people whose erstwhile lives he is observing, that any sense of freedom now was paid for in bodies either complicit in racism, or aggrieved by it.

Regardless of the colour of one's skin, bodies both then and now inevitably fall somewhere along either side of America's racial divide, and the NMAAHC makes it clear that time has not absolved America of its conflicted past. In spite of its label as the site of a "history", the museum is not merely as a show of homage to the enslaved bodies of African-American forebears. The museum makes it clear that its interests lies not in portraying the past as brief anachronistic encounters to provide a sense of solace for the present, but in emphasizing the way history pursues one's body into the present. As the viewer makes his way through the museum and hence, figuratively, across time, recollections of America's racially-fraught past into an examination of more recent movements challenging the status quo of race-relations in America. The lines that the NMAAHC has drawn here map out the black body's its evolving political status from object to subject whose corporeality remains contentious. Events like the transatlantic slave trade and Underground Railroad at the beginning of this chronology are a reminder of bodies struggling with its place both literally and metaphorically. Just as how crossing the wrong path could easily result in a black person's persecution before the 13th Amendment was established, no amount of navigation could end his search for a place in an America that is still engulfed in its whiteness.

No amount of running can get the black body beyond the reach of a systemic racism that has continued into the present. Neither is any attempt at escaping able to prevent gunshots from hitting the unarmed black body or future black bodies to come. It is precisely in reaction to the persistent criminalisation of these bodies that the "Black Lives Matter" movement emerged, a reaction against the visceral exchange of black for white bodies. As African-Americans are unjustifiably profiled, targeted, and written off as criminal based on appearance and the juridical response only goes as far as to acquit their perpetrators, the black body becomes a blood sacrifice for the ideas of whiteness. Whiteness is less about the colour of one's skin than a collective desire to keep the social construct of race and the systemic

inequalities that come with it intact, the same ideological machine that perpetuated slavery for centuries before abolition. In Teresa Guess' words, whiteness emerges from "custom and tradition" (651), and persistence of systemic racism today is testament to the fervour with which some will protect this "heritage", even if they refuse to acknowledge its malice. The NMAAHC's "Black Lives Matter" exhibit insists on re-opening up this national wound, echoing Guess' previous assertion that the black body has always known and still is in peril since the very beginning of American history. Likewise, Angela Onwuachi-Willij, writing for the Iowa Law Review, explicates on this by observing a troubling similarity between the lynching of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin's death at the hands of white men. Martin and Till, both black youths who were unjustly brutalised in 1955 and 2012 respectively, came from different temporal sides of the Civil War. Yet, regardless of the difference in contexts of their murders, Onwuachi-Willij locates the tie that binds in the main thrust of her exposition. Beyond the immediate facts of both these cases, she reads their underlying impulses as ideological attempts to "polic[e] the boundaries of whiteness" (1119), to keep whiteness intact.

Sara Ahmed uses Edmund Husserl's thoughts about a phenomenological "orientation" to understand whiteness as "[a] point from which the world unfolds" (151). Whiteness engulfs the individual from where he is standing, with the world unfolding from him only making sense insofar as it is either white or not-white. In the case of Emmett Till, the desire to operate within the structures of whiteness is revealed through the impulse to keep America segregated (Onwuachi-Willij 1135), black distinct from white, essentially maintaining Du Bois' proverbial "colour line" (9). Till, falsely accused of harassing a white woman, was kidnapped and murdered to demonstrate the price the black body will have to pay if it skirts the threshold of that line and threatens to disrupt and orientate whiteness. Just as Till was brutally punished for not keeping his body in check, the murder of Trayvon Martin was another exercise in maintaining that status quo. George Zimmerman, made paranoid by a whiteness that coloured

the black body as threatening, revealed in his 911 call that it was Martin's combination of being black and wearing a dark-coloured hooded sweatshirt that proved fatal (Onwuachi-Willij 1161-1162). Whiteness rendered Martin's black body that day a "prisoner" of an imago', "imago" being George Yancy's term for the black body corrupted through its lens, the white gaze (110). Zimmerman, presumably acting in the interest of self-preservation, declared with the shot of his gun that his embodied and ideological freedom were both worth Martin's life, that the incontrovertibility of his erroneous belief was not even worth questioning if only blackness was merely at stake.

Black history in America thus began with a great displacement, and even the relative freedom that African-Americans have today still is not enough to escape a condition so firmly lodged within the corporeal. The death of black bodies quickens the ideas of whiteness, and reinforces the gulf between black and white bodies that has persisted since America's inception. America's corporeal past and present are thus closely interlinked regardless of the time that has transpired, and reckoning with the latter necessarily entails a retrospective look at the former. It is therefore no surprise that Sara Ahmed, while thinking about whiteness in the contemporary context, also reflects on the historicity of bodies.

Bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them. Such histories, we might say, surface on the body, or even shape how bodies surface (see Ahmed, 2004a). Race then does become a social as well as bodily given, or what we receive from others as an inheritance of this history. (154)

The vocabulary of history, remembrance, and inheritance that Ahmed uses thus echoes with the NMAAHC and Angela Onwuachi-Willij's impulse to examine race-relations today by demonstrating its resonances and relevance across time. Likewise, contemporary black writers today have also demonstrated in their works the way history cannot be escaped because they have inherited it through their bodies that inevitably have to reckon with racism in America.

This is particularly pressing considering the tendency is for people living in whiteness to lapse into an amnesia, a convenient neglect of the truth because their bodies can afford to forget that fact. The delusion of a post-racial American society is corroborated by incidents of African-Americans being told to “get over” slavery (Patterson 212) or Mark Orbe’s 2010 study reviewing three hundred individuals’ opinions on then-President Barack Obama which showed a consistent patterns of disavowal and insistence on an indiscriminate racial colourblindness because race “doesn’t matter” (93). Most dangerously, Orbe’s data also revealed incredibly misguided notions about what a post-racial society entails in which the concept of “post-race” here is thought of as synonymous with “not black”. What is most concerning in this case however, is the respondent’s lack of awareness to the irony of his or her statement: that in speaking of Obama’s “whiteness”, they have already and explicitly started a conversation about race.

Challenging the idea of post-race thus needs to begin with a reminder of the physical price that it comes with. If Ahmed asserts that “bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them” (154), then the NMAAHC’s emphasis on the contentious bodies of people like Queen Nzinga, O.J. Simpson, and Trayvon Martin make discursive sense. They have also become corporeal emblems that form an important part of the contemporary works of African-American literature that this thesis will examine, an exercise in extracting and unravelling the historical tracks that have been etched upon each black body. As these writers reflect upon their own corporeal blackness and that of others around them, the result is a discourse too acute to be let slip from memory.

Theoretical Foundations

In talking about the meeting of racial bodies, Gail Weiss' examination of the relationship between bodies becomes pertinent. In her book *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*, Weiss puts into conversation predominant embodiment theorists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Judith Butler within a taxonomy of ideas that seeks to establish bodies and the inherent interaction between bodies as the site of identity formation—the creation of what she calls, along with other theorists, “body images”. In reading Merleau-Ponty, Weiss describes body images as “actively integrat(ing) parts of the body” (1) in which the intensity of this integration is mediated by the individual's purpose and circumstances, all converging towards the establishing of a “project” (1). The connotations of the word “project”, originally posited by Merleau-Ponty, is perhaps telling of the work that he feels individuals do in the process of negotiating identity, especially that which is idiosyncratically tied to the inhabited body (e.g. gender, race, age [Weiss, 1]). Weiss' examination of the role of body images explicates the word “project” in both possible senses as a work, first as an act of craft and construction as illustrated by her own description of body images mentioned previously, and the second as the idea of a viewing, of a projection akin to an image. The oxymoron here is somewhat troubling: in the former, the autonomy of the individual is implied as the author of this “project”, yet the latter conception destabilizes his agency and puts him in the position of subject to be seen and interpreted, both in the sense of being the discursive focal point, as well as the image of someone else's gaze. If body image, at once, functions as an active, participatory process of creation and is also the subjective process of being created, then the body can be looked upon as both canvas and tool that enacts and is enacted upon, often in an oscillating fashion that traverses between the status of object and subject. In both these aspects there is a necessary component: the agent, the aforementioned authors of their own “project”.

How is the work of this “project” understood in the racial context for America in which black bodies lie in state of precariousness? It is a state of precariousness that, as articulated by Isabell Lorey, describes an inescapability of the individual from the coalescing influences of government and society that confounds expressions of autonomy (11). More specifically, Lorey’s conception of precariousness demands that it has to be understood not as idiosyncrasy, but as an individual condition contoured by its relation to other similar bodies which, consequently, also marks out the dissimilar other (19). The word “precarious” already suggests some bodies as being more vulnerable than others, and Lorey qualifies this formulation by adding that precariousness is not a condition that can be isolated and particularized as an individual experience, but one that inevitably resonates with other precarious beings as a collective encounter of vulnerability (19). Part of this depends on a delineation of similarities and differences along corporeal lines (11) which gives rise to “an endangerment of bodies” (12), a split between bodies that are more vulnerable and those that are not. This resonates with the conditions of blackness; the corporeal experiences of those who inhabit black bodies are constrained by a sense of precariousness shared by other similar bodies—other black bodies that are also indubitably at risk of being marginalized through the notion of race and the presumptions that accompany it. When the black man in that scene of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* reacted in a way that anticipated a racial undercurrent, he is deferring to a cumulative, script shared among black individuals that has engendered a conditioned expectation; as a person who shares the experience of blackness with others, there comes an understanding that if a white man locks the car as you walk past, it is quite likely done in fear of the supposedly “criminal” and “dangerous” black body. The word “endangerment” here thus seems to describe the black body in a precarious state of existential danger, and also more significantly, how it is read as the site of ostensible danger.

Going back to Weiss' discussion of identity formation from a discursive angle, the "project" can therefore be seen as arising from interactions between bodies that are inured towards precariousness, and bodies that are free from it—the corporeal lines delineated by black and white. The position of the black writer however, is a more complex one than merely taking on the authorial stance and voice of the marginalized. Lorey points out an oversight in Foucault's conception of individual autonomy in relation to larger, hierarchical powers in which she emphasizes that "imaginings of the capability of self-creation" should not be overlooked as an attempt to resist such influences (33). She also speaks of contemporary biopolitics as being predicated upon creating an illusion of agency amongst citizens (30). Because this illusion of a cohesive and autonomous sense of self thrives best in "the construction of a male, white, bourgeois subject" (30), those who inhabit black bodies are precluded from an existential security in which an autogenous sense of self can be comfortably developed in relation to the larger society it is in. If this is the case, then the black writer's discourse in writing seems to be acting in Lorey's call for instances of "self-creation", potentially revealing the reality of this illusion. Weiss likewise calls for "new images of the body, dynamic images of non-docile bodies that resist... corporeal inscription" (67). Here, her urge is for bodies to participate in their project, in the negotiating of their body images while resisting the hegemonic forces that circumscribe it within the static frame of a singular, unchanging image of a body. The anxiety with the specular image of the body is profoundly felt amongst those who inhabit black bodies, with the metaphor of colour associated with being black reinforcing the conspicuity of the image and particular readings of it. In writing about blackness therefore, the static image thus comes alive, talks back, resists the illusion of its givenness, and calls metatextual attention to its constructed nature which will be examined later in this essay. Nevertheless, the struggle between a discursive resistance against the frame and the gaze that renders it an image will remain as the source of contention.

The Authors of This Project

The project of black authors like Ta-Nehisi Coates, Claudia Rankine, and Suzan Lori-Parks therefore, can be seen as attempts to engage in the discursive means of talking about the experience of blackness, and revealing the precariousness it engenders through the image of the black body as perceived by the relatively less precarious white majority of America. As such, there is a negotiation of not just the black identity derived from a communal struggle against precariousness, but also of an intercorporeality that involves the transaction between black and white bodies; a parsing out of that moment in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* where the black man looks at Larry David's whiteness, and realizes his own blackness. It is a blackness that Sykes attests to, and an encounter not uncommon to those who have to contend with the whiteness on a quotidian basis, but it is in this reckoning that a discourse of resistance becomes the most potent. In their act of discourse, African-American authors who share in the experience of blackness and, seek to upset the ways in which the black body has been subjected to racialized interpretations that are a seemingly inescapable, inherited condition. Common to Coates' *Between The World and Me* and Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, and Parks' *Topdog/Underdog* is therefore a concern with demystifying the black body by talking and writing about the African-American condition in relation to the larger social climate it is in. Coates makes his foray into discussions of blackness through the personal and autobiographical, and in this we observe a conversation that Coates has with himself through a letter to his son as a method of examination. Rankine plays on this through a narrative perspective that puts the black subject at the forefront with the use of the first-person as Coates has, but re-enacts the black phenomenological experience in a way that positions the persona obliquely, often giving way to a critical second-person voice that encroaches upon the interstitial, hyphenated space between "African" and "American". *Topdog/Underdog* condenses these anxieties into a physical manifestation of intercorporeality on stage between

two brothers who are black. Parks thus claims metaphorical space of the theatre as the site of resistance.

In all of these texts, we see an expression of the black self, a “writing” that, taken collectively, outlines and fills in the phenomenological gaps in the black body that we are otherwise precluded from. The import of this lies not only in these kinds of expressive and illuminating potentialities engendered in the discursive act of writing, but also carries with it the weight of avowal, or taking on the burden of representation within the contentious arena of identity politics. It is a burden that draws from the self as a phenomenological experience that informs the struggle with and against the body it inhabits. Weiss would not have us forget however, that this struggle is an intercorporeal one that necessarily contends with other bodies. This is not to say however, that the colour of skin is the only dividing line drawn; racism is an instantiation of precariousness that is constructed and supported in a multitude of ways in which phenotype, an individual’s observable appearance as opposed to genetic traits, is but one particular manifestation of it. Often used as pejorative shorthand to designate precariousness onto others and exclude themselves from that condition, a body distinguishes itself as white only after it establishes black as the site of alterity. As the line between black and white is constituted and also reconstituted by those in power to keep them at the margins therefore, the black identity also moves and changes according to those lines. While this hearkens back to the idea of the black body image as a projection subjected to external gaze, this does not necessarily concede the black identity as perennially entrenched in this state of subjection: the intercorporeal lines that circumscribe it are after all only delineated according to constructions of blackness and whiteness whose edges meet at its seam. To refigure blackness through negotiations of the black body image pushes back against those same boundaries.

In thinking about the optics of intercorporeality, Du Bois’ concept of double-consciousness begins to return to us in a different tenor. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he

articulates blackness as “[the] sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” and a “two-ness,—an American, a Negro” (2). His choice of words joins together the phenomenological experience of being black and American with the dynamics of sight played out against a multiplicity of bodies, an intercorporeality that deals with other gazing bodies outside of the individual and also seeps inwardly into a feeling of “two-ness”. The result is of a black body at the threat of “being torn asunder” (2), a phenomenological conflict felt viscerally. Yet, the sense of the duality of double-consciousness is capacious enough to be re-interpreted as a bidirectionality instead of a divide. As “the eyes of others” are trained toward the black body, the latter is also able to morph, distort, and reveal itself as a product of a skewed sight. Just because the black body is a seen object therefore, does not disable it from unhinging the gaze by unexpectedly distorting the final image, the projection. Exposing it as an illusion ultimately unsettles the mind of the beholder.

Through the act of writing about the black experience navigating the field of what it means to be a black person living in America therefore, these authors also engender the possibility for a “re-writing” that resituates this morphology in less pejorative terms—hence the title for this thesis. The three texts chosen exemplify this impulse but to different degrees: Coates’ introspection brings explicit attention to a writing that depicts the state of his black body; Rankine riffs off of Coates’ emphatic explication, but uses the second-person to begin a refiguration of the black body; Parks lastly, could be seen as attempting an adventurous rewriting of black and white intercorporeality with her staged play on bodies. In all of these texts, there is the attempt to displace false readings of the black body through reimagination, and to return back to the project of self-creation as resistance to hierarchical powers as emphasized by Lorey. In the process of resistance, there is also the implicit endeavour to examine what the resistance is against, and therefore a discursive return to the self that stands at odds with it.

Both the terms “writing” and “re-writing” here are used metaphorically because they emphasize the duality that one has as the author of the self, occupying both the role of the subject and subjected. To put this across in literal text therefore reifies this relationship as a discourse open to public: playing upon the role of the reader that individuals automatically assume upon encountering the text, we are not merely invited to more intimate examinations of the black body image, but making use of our default position as outsiders gazing upon the black body, forces us to engage in an intercorporeal conversation in which we reckon with their voices—a conversation that gets taken to more uncomfortable territories as these authors call out, resist, and estrange the racialized impulses instinctively directed towards the black body through a rewriting of it. On a more affective note, it is perhaps worth mentioning that all three texts, though emphatic about their resistance, still seem burdened with an inexorable sense of disillusionment, unrelenting in spite of their attempt to challenge existing contrived notions of blackness: Coates concedes that freedom of blackness from these discursive misconstructions seem inescapable and blackness is perhaps a perennial attempt to contend with these pressures; Rankine’s *Citizen* turns the reader into a witness of a constant barrage of microaggressions from which there is no discursive respite; *Topdog/Underdog*’s tragic ending also seems to preclude the possibilities for hope—a concept latched onto by many who are disillusioned, but one that Coates is nevertheless sceptical about and has given up on. To advance these texts as mere illustrations of the status quo is too narrow, and neither are they merely panacea from the burgeoning instances of racial violence and police brutality that has overwhelmed America in recent times. Coates in particular would argue vehemently against gleaning any sense of optimism from his book. Rather than them being isolated, discursive acts that are at the reader’s disposal, I argue that these works of Coates, Rankine, and Parks engender a qualitatively greater power than they might perhaps give themselves credit for, especially when discussed through the lens of Weiss, and Lorey. Explicating and expanding on Lorey’s

argument that self-creation and imagination can be an effective tool for resisting precariousness, I argue that when put in the context of contemporary America, these African-American writers can be seen as engaging in a mode of intercorporeal discourse through their texts: to instantiate the self as the originary site of a project that begins with a phenomenology of blackness and travels outwards to incorporate other bodies; the autonomy of African-American writers as instantiating the black persona in the public eye thus becomes important in the “construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction” of the black body image (Weiss 86). Whether it is written from their own introspection like Coates or a more distal one like Parks, these contemporary black writers grapple with this through a rhetorical repertoire that involves an overt play on black bodies and experiences both real and imagined, bringing together the reader and writer, the core and its precarious periphery together within the field of discourse and embodiment. In the words they have written, there exists the possibility of rupturing of the morphological seams that have kept the black body and body image within abjection.

Chapter 1: Embodied History in Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*

When Colin Kaepernick chose to kneel during the American national anthem prior to the game between the 49ers and the San Diego Chargers (Witz, “This Time, Colin Kaepernick Takes a Stand by Kneeling”), he brought the country back to the 1968 Summer Olympics. Nearly fifty years after Tommie Smith and John Carlos’ controversial Black Power Salute at the Olympic podium, the 49ers quarterback abandoned the arresting presence of the salute’s recognizable and imposing form for the diminutive lines of the genuflecting figure. To break down the verticality of the erect figure on the podium, arms raised and fist gloved and clenched in the power salute, into the angular folded position Kaepernick assumed when he took a knee, is perhaps an apt visual metaphor for the state of race relations in modern-day America. As a protest against the prolific violence enacted against African-Americans by law enforcement officials, Kaepernick’s athletic stature, bent into submission and purposeful acquiescence in refusing to join in the anthem, presents a figure chillingly reminiscent of Trayvon Martin, Alton Sterling, and other African-Americans subjected to violence – black bodies in a lithified state, bent out of shape.

While many other athletes were inspired to emulate the Black Power salute in support, Kaepernick’s original gesture evolved into something more evocative than any re-enactment of Smith and Carlos’ display could. Distancing himself from the authority of the clenched fist, he physically approximates the image of a black body in post-turmoil resignation, with this juxtaposition between a submissive stance and an authoritative gesture made all the more stark given the expectations of Kaepernick’s body on the field as a quarterback awaiting instruction. Conflated within this is his role as a body among other supposedly like bodies all decked-out in the 49ers’ red and gold. To dissociate himself from all of those constructs is to present himself in singularity without recourse to The Black Panther Movement or his teammates, without any appeal to solidarity. At that point in time, Kaepernick was seen by the white American public

as a black body in defiant repose at the sound of “The Star-Spangled Banner”, a black body in treachery.

A treachery of what exactly? Kaepernick’s detractors call on him to consider war veterans and injured soldiers, the implication being that he is acting in ignorance of the flag and anthem that those Americans have sacrificed for. This accusation however, carries an import that hearkens not just to the symbolic position of flags and anthems in national consciousnesses, but illuminates a tension located within its ontological origins. While an economy of bodies can be found at almost any site of national genesis, the way in which its manifestation in the American context can double both as war and as slavery complicates the relationship between country and countryman, particularly the black countryman. While the end of war ideally grants the promise of sovereignty and membership, this transaction does not translate smoothly when the context of slavery is brought in. A comment made by a football fan, Jay Curtis, exemplifies this further: “If Kaepernick walked through a military hospital with people, black and white, missing limbs, then he’d soon realise he should stand up for the anthem” (Allen, “Colin Kaepernick”). The accusation levelled here is that Kaepernick, in an enactment of personal liberty, has ironically and essentially undercut the idea of hard-fought freedom and sovereignty that was paid for by these war-torn bodies. It is a freedom and sovereignty presumably enjoyed by every American. But while the battlefield might treat war-torn bodies of any kind with little difference, Curtis, in exchange, forgets about the enslaved black body and ignores the fact that the taxonomy of bodies applies differently off the battlefield. This is precisely what Kaepernick is was attempting to gesture to, that back home, a war-torn body either is or is not white.

1.1 The (American) Dream

Kaepernick’s alleged treachery is therefore a treachery not against the nation itself, but against the idea of the nation as progressive and post-racial. Ta-Nehisi Coates, journalist for

The Atlantic, author, and writer for the new Black Panther comic book series also echoes Kaepernick's provocative demonstration on the football field. In his autobiographical book *Between The World and Me*, Coates reflects on his experience of blackness and meditates upon the way racism has eroded, displaced, and encroached upon his life and that of other African-Americans around him. Its title, taken from Richard Wright's 1935 poem of the same name, places *Between The World and Me* in conversation with Wright's visceral illustration of a lynching. Drawing from the image of the lynched black body in profound agony, Coates also reflects on his corporeality as well as that of his son, Samori. Writing the book as a long, personal letter from father to son, Coates further ensconces himself within a multitude of emphatic, indignant African-American voices as he borrows the epistolary structure of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, a discussion about race in America also addressed to his teenage nephew. In reaching towards other black voices and other black bodies while attending to the affinity with embodied fear that he shares with his son, Coates thus engages with a twofold sense of inheritance, to echo the word Sara Ahmed uses once again: that of being the next generation of black writers seething against racism, and that of a father who is trying to reckon with the fact that his son will come to know the same embodied fear that he has known as a black man in America—the fear of “The Dream” and what it entails.

“The Dream” is Coates' sardonic take on James Truslow Adams' proverbial “American Dream” (214-215). Adam's quote has made its foray into public conversation as political rhetoric, pop culture trope, and literary discourse. While the former affirms it as an idea that can be pursued and achieved, it is the latter that seeks to dislodge it from reality and unveil it as a ideal of equality and progress for all Americans, the kind of ideal that many people, like Curtis, have bought into. It is merely a utopic vision that, like all utopias, cannot escape from its own fictive quality. Indeed, the veracity of the “American Dream” has reached a threshold

in light of recent events, and while people like Kaepernick have decided to overtly demonstrate against it, literary actors like Coates have chosen to confront it within its discursive domain.

Co-opting the same, obsolete vocabulary, Coates drops the prefix of “American” to reject the concept of the “American Dream” as a shared national consciousness that everyone can participate in, at the same time unveiling it as true to its namesake: an illusory dream, a comforting reverie, a symptom of transient, epistemological sleep. Coates describes the temptation to indulge in this dream as an ambrosial experience that “smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake” (11), a gentle undulation of pleasure upon the reader’s senses. As we read from Coates’ perspective however, there is always a distance between us and that sensory moment. “I have seen that dream all my life” (11), Coates declares, and we realize that the optics of the situation is turned inside out in spite of the use of the first person: no matter how convincingly and evocatively he can describe the “Dream” to us, the fact remains that it is always seen from afar, a thing to be witnessed, never to be experienced by him because he exists outside of it. Where the vicariousness of the first-person “I” is usually thought to come with privileged insight, Coates’ use of it begins to make it seem more like a stifled one. It is with this uneasy visual motif that Coates opens up the first chapter of his autobiography. He begins this conversation with him with a recount of a satellite interview with a television news show host in which he is called upon to discuss his views on race relations in America. The scene he has chosen as an illustration serves as a frame for the rest of his book in which he structures his thoughts around the racialized interactions between black and white people that he has seen unfold throughout his years, offering his own as a prelude to the rest in this brief encounter.

1.1.2 The Discourse of The Dream

Coates opens up the scene with a question about “what it meant to lose my own body” (5). Originally written by Coates himself earlier in the same week, the words revisited him in

the form of a televised projection as the image of the host fades from the screen. As he listens to her read out his own words to an audience he cannot see, the situation reveals the complicated position that Coates inevitably inhabits as both a journalist, and more apparently to those watching him then, as a black man living in America. Coates wields immense discursive power as the former, having had a prolific career at *The Atlantic* since 2008 as a columnist whose repertoire of articles often features discussions of race in American culture and politics informed by current events as well as his own experience growing up in Baltimore. As a prominent African-American participating in a form of public discourse, it would not be inaccurate to thus say that Coates in some capacity represents, together with other black writers, a people whose voices are constantly at the risk of being stifled under the pressure of racism, and disenfranchised of their subjectivity. Especially since his work as an essayist and columnist largely participates in an economy of truth and authenticity, his forthcoming explanation of the metaphor “lose my own body” promises the audience watching the news show that something particular about his black experience, and perhaps that of other African-Americans as well, will soon be revealed to them as well as us.

Instead of satisfying us with an immediate answer however, he focuses on illustrating the discursive sequences happening between him and the host that threatens Coates’ authority as the subject of this interview, and this begins with the provenance of the question that the host began with, of Coates losing his body. These words were first given life by him, but as the host echoes them back at him in the form of a question, Coates’ original articulation starts to become estranged from him as it takes on the shape of her voice in that moment. This transposition of one voice to another is not uncommon in the context of an interview, but when rendered against the backdrop of racial tension in which both the voice and words of a black man has been explicitly summoned and then suppressed under another, the host’s oratorical voice belies a certain antagonism, even if only inadvertently. Introspection turns into

provocation as Coates is made to confront himself discursively in front of a literal audience; the question he was called on to answer in the first place no longer appears to be an innocuous request for Coates to clarify, but a self-effacing catechismic performance as marked by his words: “she turned to the subject of my body” (5). No longer is he the subject of the interview; instead, his body is called upon to dislodge himself as the discursive point of interest, threatening to slip him out of focus all while under the unmoving gaze of the audience and the host who continues to maintain the facade of the ordinary. Coates’ displacing of the primary noun with “body” acknowledges this slippage as complete in the sense that the body, once only part of the subject of Coates as well as his subjectivity, has now become coterminous with it.

Trapped in the conspicuity of his body, Coates is unable to act against it in that moment even though he senses a familiar schema kicking in. He describes this to us in retrospect:

But by now I am accustomed to intelligent people asking about the condition of my body without realizing the nature of their request. Specifically, the host wished to know why I felt that white America’s progress, or rather the progress of those Americans who believe that they are white was built on looting and violence. (5-6)

Again, something amiss happens when the black body is discursively called upon, and Coates characterizes them as a response angled toward the question of the “subject” or “condition” of the body—qualifiers that distance the body as an artefact or phenomenon, an object of curiosity that charms the eye only insofar as it can continue to promise something of interest to the beholder. In this case, it is the myth of “hope” and progress at stake here that ultimately resides in the pliability of the black body. What these people seek, according to Coates, is not an interest about his experience as a black man, but of the way the black body functions as part of white America. In the microcosmic moment of the interview, it is not Coates’ words that matters, but the presence of his body in that studio that legitimizes this interview as part of a

seemingly constructive conversation about race. Beneath the facade however, is a myth of “hope” and progress that the host creates by juxtaposing the picture of the black child hugging a white police officer after the Ferguson shootings with Coates’ experience of racism. The idea of progress, after all, can only work when there is something to progress from, and it is in Coates’ disillusionment that such a myth can be made convincing and compelling—a co-opting of both his voice and body. The words on screen were thus not a reflection or illumination of Coates’ feelings for the benefit of the audience, but a wall that was put in place for him to run up against.

The audience in the studio at that moment remains watching, expectantly awaiting to see how the black body will respond and react in this unrehearsed performance in which it is forced to confront its discursive self. As the television screen transitions into the scroll of words written by him before, Coates is visually assailed by what seems like his discursive self. Yet, it is not quite himself; the sound of the host’s voice renders the words strange and estranged from him as it gives breath to utterances and ideas that are not its own; a voice thrown that ultimately silences Coates’ own. To the reader, Coates details an elaborate and eloquent response to that question in retrospect that touches upon the emptiness of the illusory Dream, the burden of which is placed upon the black body. To the audience that day however, Coates was rendered helpless in his voicelessness. “I tried to explain this as best I could within the time allotted” (10), he unceremoniously summarizes his attempt at salvaging the conversation in front of the scrutinizing audience. In spite of his efforts however, it was clear that the audience and the host were less interested in engaging with what he has to say than indulging in a performance that reassures them of the integrity of the Dream. The studio and the screen form a house of mirrors in which a disjointedness in the relationship between the body, voice, and writing occurs. Instead of truly apprehending the sound and meaning of Coates’ voice in all its sonority, they prefer the comfort of the image of the child and the police

officer in embrace. It is an image that is compelling but static, ultimately ignorant of the disillusioning moments that came before and comes after; they are moments that, for black bodies, become the silent quotidian.

1.2 The Acousmatic Voice and the Body

The failure of Coates' voice here is interesting considering how race is primarily concerned with the body; Coates was present both physically and in writing during the interview but neither of those presences were enough to make up for the absence of his voice which becomes the deciding factor between the host's discursive power and the way he is subjected to it. There is something in the verbal articulation of words which involve imbuing them with a sound that has relation to both the material body and immaterial thought through language, yet does not exist solely as part of one or the other. Something else has to happen before sound can be transformed into the voice that has the overtones of identity, subjectivity, and autonomy. It is this gap that Coates has difficulty negotiating during the interview, which philosopher Mladen Dolar seeks to bridge in his examination of the properties of the voice, and its relation to the body and language.

In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Dolar locates the voice not as an extension of the corporeal or its sonic counterpart even if it originates from the body as a product of its mechanical function, but as a vessel that "*holds bodies and language together... their missing link, what they have in common.*" (60). It is as if without the voice, the materiality that we are firmly secured in through our bodies can never be more than a physiological construct; neither can language mean anything more than a participation in a series of ciphers. The meaning from which subjectivity is derived therefore requires a tension between the two—the voice not as an object but as a process of negotiation between body and language.

When the space for this negotiation to happen is disrupted, then subjectivity no longer has room to operate, as we see here in Coates' explanation of a frustration that he could not

express during the interview. “I knew then that I had failed” (10), Coates confesses to the reader as he pauses his recollection of the interview and meditates instead upon the host’s apathetic response. In spite of the impotence of his voice then, his thoughts come through more emphatically when stops reliving the memory, and enters into the intangible, present moment of conversation with his son. He begins by pointing out the racism in the discourse of disavowal that has become the bedrock of American history, leading with the example of the Gettysburg Address in which Abraham Lincoln’s assertion for a “government for the people” has been misunderstood by the public as a challenge for equality; in fact, he claims, it is the actual definition of “people”, one that has never included himself and other black people, that makes Lincoln’s words more disquieting than it appears to be (6). It is this notion of “people” that the host was largely ignorant of when she insisted on having the audience focus on the bodies on screen. Her fixation on the blackness of the child and the whiteness of the police officer in embrace instantiated that moment as one skewed towards the corporeal in which Coates’ attempt at a discursive intervention was ignored and simply glossed over with the single word of “hope”. The reason why Coates’ voice here seems unable to establish itself is therefore because the conversation that day was too far slanted towards the colour of their body. Seeing the blackness of the child and the whiteness of the police officer in embrace was enough to convince the audience that optimism was the only conclusion to the conversation they needed, and Coates was unwillingly made complicit in this plan through the blackness of his skin. Language as a way of turning unobservable thought into representable meaning was curtailed because of the conspicuity of the body that could not be seen as anything else but black.

Going back to the metaphor of the voice as a vessel, the over-emphasis on the body has caused an overflow that drowns out and thus garbles the voices—Coates can be as emphatic and articulate as he wants, but he will not be heard. It is perhaps in writing however, that he

will find more success. *Between The World And Me* can thus be seen as an attempt to redeem the conversation that he failed to have then with the host, to articulate entirely what he could not articulate before. If the host that day was trying to turn the voice and body of a black man against himself, then Coates is refusing to play by those rules, choosing instead to rely on the veracity of the written word. In writing, the image of his own body dissipates, allowing space for the other black bodies that he wants to give voice to—especially that of his son whose body is Coates' responsibility. Writing engages as a kind of “acousmatic voice”, to use a concept by Michel Chion's that Dolar invites into his discussion (60). The term hearkens back to Pythagoras and his disciples in which he sat behind a curtain and only taught them through the use of his voice (Dolar 61). The body here is thought of as an impediment to learning and listening, perhaps both to the individual as well as the person he is conversing with. Self-consciousness of one's proprioceptive presence, an awareness of the body, detracts from our apprehension of the voice as does the consciousness of someone else's body and his kinesthetic behavior. More importantly however, the presence of the curtain signifies a concern with the body's gripping visibility, its overt and palpable nature. The body is a diversion and a distraction that needs its conspicuity curtailed if the significance of the voice were to be apprehended clearly, like the way closed eyes helps the ear to listen more closely.

Dolar explains the power of the acousmatic voice as such: “the visible can establish the distance, the nature, and the source of the voice, and thus neutralize it (79). Conversely, the invisible precludes the voice from being placed and recognized, allowing the voice to thrive precisely because of the way its source need not be lodged in a particular temporality or geography. For Coates who feels the blackness of his body as entrapping, “constraining [his] sense of the galaxy” (85) to the streets of West Baltimore (20) instead of the expanse of the country that those who are dreamers have the freedom to access. Although the schools and classrooms of his childhood become stifling, the first time he encounters this sense of

“vastness” is in Howard University which he refers to as The Mecca (40). It is The Mecca because of its illustrious alumni of black thinkers and writers like Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston, and the enduring legacy of black excellence that he feels through the people around him. Reading and writing, for Coates, is a cerebral escape from the limitations of his ontology, a way out of the metaphorical shackles that he feels so palpably. This comes through especially in his comparison between him and Malcolm X: “Malcolm, his body bound in a cell... And I too felt bound by my ignorance” (48). The feeling of being “bound” is the thing that creates a symmetry between him and Malcolm X, but more significant is the comparison between his lack of knowledge and being in captivity—between being cerebrally unconscious and the physical seizure of the body, both in the immovable sense and that of being unwillingly captured.

It is the experience of seizure that Coates seeks to illustrate to his son in all of his descriptions of the way the black body is woven into the social fabric of America. Early on in the text, he illustrates this with a ruthless imagery: “the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies” (11). The black body holds the Dream together; “plunder[ed]” (21). “pillage[d]” (65), and “stolen” (101), Coates thinks of the co-opting of the black body into the discourse of the Dream as an act of surreptitious thievery in which the victim only realizes what they have lost in hindsight. “[R]obbed me of what? Time? Experience?” (24) Coates reflects, as he recalls the moment when Samori leaves the room with a terse “I’ve got to go” (21) at the news of the release of Michael Brown’s killer. That was his son’s coming-of-age in which he is wrested from this myth, coming to the realization that it is a fiction that instantiates itself at the expense of his body. Even though Coates neglects to offer an explicit reply to those questions that he posed, he nevertheless already provides an answer that has been echoed by other black individuals: in an interview, Kaepernick reveals the thrust behind his decision to kneel when he admits that “I can’t see another Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Eric

Garner...; one black body being taken and beaten begin to seem similar to the next in a kind of *mise en abyme* that no amount of social striving can upheave. Perhaps that was Kaepernick's realization when he decided that the bent knee was more appropriate than the clenched fist, perhaps it too, was Frank Ocean's realization when he sang the lyrics "R.I.P. Trayvon, that nigga look just like me, and perhaps Samori Coates was echoing the same sentiment when he reacted to the acquittal of Michael Brown's killer with "I've got to go" (21) His reaction, brimming with determination and conviction but betrayed by a lack of direction, reflecting Coates' view that the question of "how [to] live free in this black body" is one that has no answer to it. What is lost is thus their bodies, as fodder for the Dream's compelling fiction.

1.3 Bodily Affinities

Coates holds on tightly to the written word as his refuge against the Dream's insidious fiction, describing it as an "interrogation, of drawing myself into consciousness" (29). Writing was something he was taught to do by his grandmother who pushed him to write as form of reflection, a response to any troubles he faced (29). It is in this same vein of inward dialectical examination that he chooses to take on as the front for this corporeal "war" (18). Having lost faith in the effectiveness of a public racial discourse after the disingenuous interview, he abandons the rhetoric of social justice, choosing instead to rely on the more universal language of violence that everyone understands. If Barack Obama himself, in an interview also with Coates, admits the difficulty in initiating a discourse "that could actually capture reality" (Coates, " 'It's What We Do More Than What We Say' "), Coates takes up this challenge and advances the idea that there is nothing more comprehensible, recognizable, and veracious than the primitive threat of a body in trauma. He does so by illustrating it through a vocabulary of violence opening up the first chapter with a heavy visceral quality as he describes the consequences of the Dream as it "dislodges brains, blocks airways rips muscle..." (10); in this, Coates may be speaking both metaphorically and literally, but it is the language of the literal

that he engages in his second chapter, one that he cannot help as the verisimilitude of the memory leaves no room to describe the violence in more figurative and euphemistic terms. Recalling the incident of a friend who was the victim of police brutality in Prince George's County, Coates translates those words into a reality shared amongst those who knew Prince Carmen Jones, those who understand the economy of a death very intimately as they witness "all the love poured into him", of memories had, things given and taken, and experiences shared, all being drained away (81). In one instance of violence we see the plunder reach further than that single fallen body as it means that every other black body that comes after it will be held captive by the increasing need to be disciplined—to keep the body in check, draw the lines more clearly, and measure their stride more astringently; to be "twice as good" (90).

The threat and pressure of corporeal assault forges the black body into taking on another form, just as the more familiar athletic body has to train itself into shape. The tearing of muscle and regimentation of the body characterizes both corporeal forms, and allows Coates to analogize them. In doing so, he suggests that the image of a body in trauma is ubiquitous, encounters of an everyday basis. The affinity between the two is not as disparate as some might imagine them to be; the public eye is enthralled by such corporeal images as violence in sports, in media, and in history that it has become a quotidian language; the sundering of bodies have become a business and an enterprise, the kind of spectacle that entices the viewer's eye and renders the recollection of violence as an abstraction. Those living in the Dream have the luxury of treating violence as a concept rather than a reality. It is a reality that Coates experiences in this time in Baltimore as a child, where he has seen teenage kids pull guns upon each other in an inadvertent re-enactment of a situation they might very possibly face as a black adult in the future (19).

1.3.1 O.J. Simpson's Criminal and Athletic Body

Although Coates is not particularly interested in convincing the Dreamers of this fact—he thinks it's hopeless even, hence directing this letter to his son—*Between The World And Me* resonates with some of his other articles that he addresses to the wider audience in which examines blackness. In his article about the acquittal of O.J. Simpson in particular, Coates estranges the violence by asking what happens when the body of the child who fails to be “twice as good” (90), who needs to be disciplined in order to live, meets that of the athlete who makes a living out the disciplining of his own body. These constructs come together in the form of the black athlete, and he presses the question further to ask: what more the black athlete who is also a criminal? He illustrates this more explicitly in the article, commenting on the irony that black football players, particularly those in the running back position like Simpson whose role is to “to escape”, strangely mirroring the black body in criminal pursuit, to always be on the run (Coates, “What O.J. Simpson Means”). The body of the black athlete and a black criminal might be constructed similarly in that they have to behave according to stricture, and are assigned a specific space, boundaries delineated for them that they have to follow. The criminal body is both out of place because it is isolated from society, as well as in place, where the judicial system has determined his body deserves to be at according to his crime. Likewise, the athlete has a position he must take up in the playing field. Not remaining static however, he must also run to keep up with his position in the play amidst the crowd of spectators, as the criminal runs, although instead, *from* the surveilling eye. In spite of their similarities, the way viewers engage with their black body in each of these instances yield a lot of difference; the gaze takes on different valences.

The case study of O.J. Simpson offers a lot to think about in concert with Coates' anxiety in *Between the World And Me*. Accused of a double murder, the Simpson saga spiralled into controversy, but is, among other things, infamous also for the extended car chase that went

on the 405 freeway. Simpson, evading arrest, allegedly held a gun to his head as his friend drove across the freeway with police cars on his tail for about ten hours (Wells, “20 years ago today”). Amidst all of this, millions of eyes tuned in on television screens across America looking at a black man being chased across the map. The gaze became a sort of Panoptical as Simpson’s black body was subjected to the attention of the police, of people gathered on the freeway, and captured on helicopter cameras above ground. Those watching are omnipresent, unable to be placed; the spectators run further and deeper than the football stadium that Simpson is accustomed to. The difference between both corporeal engagements however, that the black athlete is acting willingly while the criminal body is wilful; the ability to move quickly is lauded in the former, but becomes a threat in the latter. For Simpson who happens to be both, the gaze is confounded and confused. Nevertheless, it still holds potent and inscrutable power to determine the future of Simpson’s body, and its response was to attend to its perceived blackness, made blacker in the aftermath of the Rodney King riots (Coates, “What O.J. Simpson Means to Me”).

Coates vehemently asserts in his article that “O.J. Simpson *wasn’t* black”; “black *skin* wasn’t even black” he argues in *Between The World And Me* (55). His analysis of Simpson was derived from an interview in which Simpson declared that he wanted to be perceived as a man without recourse to the adjective “black” (Coates, “What O.J. Simpson Means”). While Coates is arguing that blackness is a fictional construct, Simpson is acting upon the veracity of that fiction and insists that he is beyond that; he is at once affirming blackness and distancing himself from it thinking that he has “made it” into the Dream. It is precisely this belief that Coates wants to protect his son from. “I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made,” (82) he confesses to his son. Being seen as a wilful body is the worst thing that can befall a black body not only because of its physical ramifications, but also because of the discursive one as it feeds the myth that destroyed it in the

first place. To see Samori's body claimed by the Dream is to allow it a chance to corrupt it in validation of itself as truth, that they have taken another "dangerous" black body off the streets, an illustration of Sarah Ahmed's idiomatic phrase "the willful arm becomes the straightening rod" (139). Not only has the Dream constricted space for those who are black in skin, but it also relishes the opportunity to take them out entirely, insisting that the black body will always be at the precipice of displacement and ultimately a "[dis]possession of his body" (Coates 81).

Coates endeavours for a reclaiming of a body that is not just lost in the unwitting sense, but dispossessed and taken, something that has been forcefully wrested, the pursuit for the freedom to be able to "speak—no, act—as though [his] body were [his] own" (Coates 37). His verbal redaction here—yet one that he leaves in the text—reveals the proximity between the verbal speech and the somatic act, yet insists on a distinction between the two. This juxtaposes a thought he expressed about Malcolm X who he admired for having found an almost otherworldly ability to "ma[k]e him speak as though his body were his own" (36). He is not satisfied with this being a mere semblance of the self. "As though" still implies a disparity between the voice and body in which it is being ventriloquized and made to seem animated through a possibly ersatz and unseen voice. Coates envisions a body coterminous with will and enacted by the self inhabiting it, but his hope is also indicative of the unfulfilled fact that he has yet to arrive at this state. Nevertheless, he reveres Malcolm X's ability to at least act the part in spite of his captive body, mythologizing it as "some old power" (36), an esoteric voice that might one day evolve into an unassailable voice emanating from a free body.

1.3.2 Historical Bodies

In an attempt to evoke Malcolm X's seemingly otherworldly power, Coates in his younger days sought to find a similar authority by making recourse to the illustrious history of Africa, and the storied past of its grand figures. In response to the myth of the Dream, Coates decides to offer a counternarrative of his own, and the 16th Century Central African Queen,

Nzinga, became the thrust of it (45). Nzinga's power as the monarch was tested in a political dialogue with the Dutch ambassador who belittled her authority. In an attempt to ridicule her, he refused to give her somewhere to sit, expecting her to be silenced and helpless in the face of this egregious act of disrespect. It was a challenge to her as a person of authority and to the position of Central Africa in relation to Western powers, and most importantly to Coates it was a challenge to the dignity of those who inhabit black bodies. It essentially rendered Queen Nzinga trapped within the dilemma of whether to risk a political upset at the expense of asserting her authority and demanding a seat, or to allow the ambassador to mock her and her people and challenge the sovereignty of the black body while negotiating the sovereignty of her country. Undeterred by this double-bind however, the immensity of her power is witnessed when she demands for one her of advisors to get down on his hands and knees, forming a human chair for her to sit on. In one move, she has outwitted the Dutch ambassador and signified the extent of her control over her body and others subjected to her will.

Queen Nzinga assumes the authority over bodies that Coates can only aspire to have, and it is thus unsurprising that he holds on to this counternarrative fervently as proof that black people should not give in to the Dream, that they need not accept the fear and the disciplining of their bodies as the status quo because they have the blood of their mythologised ancestors running through their veins and fortifying their bodies. As much as he would like to indulge in this romanticised view of his culture however, he comes to the jarring realization that his affinity was not with Queen Nzinga, but her advisor. It is a corporeal affinity that they share, both having been bent out of shape and broken down as pedestals for the the sake of uplifting or aggrandizing another. It hearkens back to Coates in his youth, this time recalling an encounter that he is experiencing in the second person (19): he is standing beside a boy coming face to face with another boy holding a gun. The boy with the gun removes it from behind his ski jacket, and repeatedly sheathes and unsheathes it as he stares down the boy next to Coates.

He essentially toys with him, demonstrating the power he has to, in a split second, take his life and destroy his body; the concealing of the gun, only to take it out again, is an unsolicited show of benevolence that appears at his whim. The boy's life, contained in his body in that moment, was not in his hands, and neither was his will—pleading mercy was never an option that he had, but one decided for him. Similarly, Queen Nzinga's advisor never had the chance to renounce her authority as one her subjects, his body decisively made an accessory to Nzinga's legacy as shown in that display of supremacy.

1.3.3 The Figure and Form of the Silent Protest

Black skin, to reiterate Coates, might not be black (55), but the black body certainly is. Black bodies are that which are subjected to someone else's will, and can be recognized by the image of the crumpled body which has been a recurring image in both public discourse and this discussion. The bodies of those mentioned so far—Queen Nzinga's advisor and the boy silently staring at the gun in front of him—all suffer from a vulnerability that puts them in a dismantled state in body and in voice. Both these figures hearken back to the genuflected form of Colin Kaepernick that we began the section with. Yet, there is a subtle difference in Kaepernick's reenactment of the body in distress. The paradox in his kneeling body is that it originally signifies a relinquishing of power, a conceding of the body to a greater power as it is done in rituals prayer, penitence, or paying respect. The act of lowering the body into discomfort and thus narrowing the visual field is a proprioceptive reminder that the person being knelt to has full view of the body, a sense that the directionality of the gaze is coming from the outside while the eyes can only apprehend the ground before him. It is also the physical manifestation of vulnerability in that the body is curled up and constrained in anticipation of a threat, an awareness of someone with a greater corporeal authority.

The kneeling form is thus a corporeal acquiescence. "We would not stand before their anthems. We would not kneel before their God," (28) Coates declares in an emphatic refusal to

do exactly what Kaepernick has chosen to do physically—kneel before the American national anthem. Yet, Kaepernick’s intentions were precisely the opposite, co-opting the physical manifestation of acquiescence into his own personal protest. The seemingly willing body has now become wilful in spite of the same enduring image being used, what Kirk Savage refers to as the “iconography of abjection” (52) which invokes Julia Kristeva’s conception of the *deject*, the individual who experiences abjection. In *Powers of Horror*, she uses the language of thresholds and boundaries in her own interpretation of abjection as “what disturbs identity, system, order; what does not respect borders, positions, rules; the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Kristeva thus points towards the threshold between the subject and his other—between the world and the black body at odds with it. This can be manifested as the ontological anxiety that exists for those inhabiting black bodies in America, and this can be succinctly depicted in the hyphenated designation of African-American. The implication here is that who are black need to qualify their citizenship, that they are not absolute Americans but merely an approximation of one. The hyphen is thus indicative of a liminal space between black and American that Coates calls back to in the title of his book in which the prefix of African and suffix of American are at constant odds, the threshold between the world and the black body. We can thus read Kaepernick’s kneel as an image of vulnerability translated into protest, as an attempt at perturbing the lines that work to constrain the black body and keep it circumspect. It can be read as the endeavour to resituate the veil, colour-line, and the “curtains drawing down between the world and me” (Coates 28). The question is *how* he does this.

Kaepernick’s detractors accusing him of disloyalty to his country, of disrespecting the nation that has given him the opportunity to even be on the field that day. Their response reveals an investment in that political discourse which seeks to reassert America as the land of the free and also an isolating one which pries apart that hyphenated space. A ‘split subject’ occurs here, which is Iris Young’s shorthand for the experience of the individual having to

engage with this own body in conflicting ways (qtd. in Weiss 49). She gives the example of a female athlete who is subjected to holding the view “I can” and “perhaps I cannot” simultaneously (qtd in Weiss 49); the female athlete knows she has the ability to perform, yet second-guesses herself after all the experiences of being told that they cannot perform as well as their male counterparts due to their gendered bodies. For the black body in America, this can likewise be translated into “I am” and “perhaps I am not”, that the black individual knows indubitably that he identifies as an American, yet the pervasiveness of racism constantly undercuts that conviction. Kaepernick’s kneel is an expression of the latter notion of “perhaps I am not” in response to the brutalising of black bodies by law enforcement—bodies that, in that moment felt that more aggressively than ever. Critics of Kaepernick however, are operating without awareness of this ontological dilemma, taking for granted that the Emancipation has disavowed them of the traumatic past and turbulent present. This articulation of disavowal is informed by Saidiya Hartman’s articulation of this in *Scenes of Subjection* where she aptly describes the gap within “African-American” as a space to be “navigated between a travestied emancipation and an illusory freedom” (119). By insisting that Kaepernick’s expression of doubt and apprehension is a sign that he has renounced his loyalty, those critics are preserving the illusion and protecting the Dream, insisting that it is “just, noble, and *real*” (Coates 106, emphasis mine).

The gap within “African-American” is thus also a gap between what is real and not real, a real history stifled under the fiction of the Dream. Kaepernick’s strategy to dislodge that fiction is to almost anachronistically instantiate the historical black body within the contemporary moment of the football match. Through the tableau of his genuflected black body, he reckons with the historical bodies of all other kneeling, chained, and enslaved black folk, and those who are oppressed in more subtle ways. Kaepernick takes that figure back to all the things that other black bodies are subjected to—discipline, obedience, docility—with the

only thing that Coates admits any black person has control over: his “struggle” (107). Those critics see him as a kneeling body rather than a kneeling black body. For once, the blackness of the body needs to be invoked so that the eye can apprehend the familiarity of an image they have once encountered in history books and news reports as a real figure before them at that very moment.

Kaepernick remains silent on the football field, his voice too small to be heard through the vastness of the field and the chaos of the spectatorial crowd. Yet his body speaks louder than his voice can, inviting the vocal ire of those who are appalled by his boldness, as well as rejoinders of support by those invigorated by his bravery. His body becomes the subject of controversy; the gaze of the spectators whose eyes are inevitably drawn to the anomaly on the field, the body that is, to them, being wilful and insubordinate. This is in spite of the fact that the kneel has been recognized as a position of submission, like that which Queen Nzinga’s advisor had to perform both symbolically and literally. Both Coates and Kaepernick partake in that myth in different ways, with Coates realizing that the invoking of grand narratives still fails to undercut his corporeal condition, that his body was the only affinity he had to the story. In the wake of Coates’ discovery, Kaepernick sought to make recourse to the genealogy of black bodies by drawing upon its enduring and abject form. He echoes Coates when he concedes: “I was black because of history and heritage” (55), demonstrating that it is a corporeal heritage that African-Americans must reckon with.

The heritage of the black body in trauma is also often filled with silence. Returning back to earlier moments of this chapter, Coates himself had difficulty finding his words to explain all that he needed when questioned about losing his body; Queen Nzinga’s advisor never had his story told. In *Between The World And Me*, Coates recalls his own experience with having his voice curtailed. Coming out from a film screening with his son in the Upper West side of New York, a white woman brusquely brushes past his son, knocking him out of

the way. Coates understood this as the woman “pulling rank” (94), that she could intimidate his son because he was black, and because she knew that she would not have been stopped in that part of New York for doing so. Coates’ exchange of words in defence of his son however, was interrupted by another white man who came to protect the woman with the words “I could have you arrested” (94-95). The man’s words were a claim upon his body; that he, like the woman who pushed Coates’ son, aside could do whatever he wished to their bodies without consequence, and even be vindicated for it as he vindicates the woman. Coates, seething with indignation, anger and the desire to do much more [which] was hot in [his] throat” (94), held back his words when he realized that his son was looking at him at that moment. The man’s words, read by Coates, were a posturing of his power over his body, threatening to sink his body into being read as a dangerous and threatening black body, into the confines of the “angry black man” trope. Only silence, to “walk in single file. Work quietly,” (95) will keep his body sovereign and beside his son. Returning back to the beginning of this chapter, the desire for the black body to operate acousmatically is fruitless. To liberate it and place it with the rest of America by creating something that “qualif[ies] [his] lineage for the ranks of civilization” (Coates 45), does not work; rewriting the value of blackness is not enough to reconfigure his relationship with the world because the optics of the black body is too apparent to be ignored. “[T]here is no real distance between you and Trayvon Martin,” (25) he says to his son, and neither is there distance between him and all others who are subjected to blackness. Coates ends his book without any panacea apart from the advice to his son to keep the “struggle” (151).

1.4 The Enduring Struggle

Even if Coates leaves us without an answer to the question of “how do I live free in this black body” (12), many of those who inhabit black bodies have taken up the struggle of keeping the black body free. A BBC article written as a retrospective to the 1968 Olympics was

headlined as such: “1968: Black Athletes Make Silent Protest”. The silent protest encapsulates the voicelessness of black bodies in its corporeal form whether it be the kneel, the bending-over, or the outstretched arm and clenched fist; it has been the recurring image of black resistance. Silence here might seem like, but is not, an act of resignation. In Erin Fitz-Henry’s reading of Gilles Deleuze, she suggests that it is this quietness that “the ceaseless clatter of contemporary political discourse” (13) can be interrupted—a space claimed that acts as a lacuna in the discourse of the Dream. It is a form of dissent that subverts the optics of rigor and discipline that have shackled black bodies; engaging in a performance of acquiescence and obedience creates resonance precisely in the way it imbibes a historical discourse that cannot be censored or denied because of its corporeality. It is a corporeality that takes us back to Mladen Dolar, who argues, in concert with Jacques Lacan, that the act of gazing upon an object does not put the viewer at a distance. It is quite the opposite in fact, as ‘the gaze is itself inscribed into the picture, as the point where the image “regards” us, looks back at us’ (Dolar 79). The compelling form of the black body in silent protest thus pulls the viewer in, bridging that hyphenated gap between the white gaze and black bodies. It suggests to those in view that they are in fact complicit in constructing the corporeal image of silent protest.

Yet the image, like its real counterpart, is still always at threat. In the O.J. Simpson trial, one of Simpson’s lawyers, Robert Shapiro, recalls giving Simpson the advice to “hold up your hand like you’re holding the olympic torch” (Fox News, “Robert Shapiro reveals what OJ whispered after verdict”) if the prosecution ever asks him to put on the infamous gloves. Through Shapiro’s language, we are inadvertently returned to Mexico City, to the 1968 Olympics. Simpson held up his palm with the black glove on to demonstrate how it did not fit, and in doing so, coincidentally put his body in a position that also resembles Smith and Carlos’ Black Power salute with a gloved hand raised in front of an audience. The only differences were in Simpsons’ opened, unclenched palms, and the reaction of the public. Simpson

essentially performed his own innocence that day in court, while Smith and Carlos were looked upon as guilty; the former solicited acquittal, while the latter incited anger. Simpson inadvertently co-opted the black figure of silent protest that day, an ironic moment considering his rebuff of Smith and Carlos' protest at the Olympics (Coates, "What O.J. Simpson Means"). In spite of his pursuit of whiteness, Simpson—as Wanda Sykes would put it—played the corporeal race card that day, and did so with great aplomb. That is perhaps what is entailed of the "struggle" that Coates refers to; the recognition of the fiction of the Dream, and the desire to tear it asunder. "The illusion of distance has to be unmasked as an illusion," (79) Dolar emphasizes, and here we see Simpson not bridging the gap, but traversing between his black body and white America with ease. To protect his own body, he has called upon that of people like Rodney King who have been the subject of physical violence at the hands of Los Angeles's law enforcement; he was vindicated at the expense of King's brutalized body that marked the climate of fear against the police. Simpson's physical posture that day was an anomaly in the genealogical iconography of black bodies, serving only to corrupt the image of the black body in silent protest. He is the "abject spectre" (Weiss 90) to the black body image that necessarily has to reject the corporeality of its duplicitous posture in order to maintain its own integrity; unveiling the illusion in its image is a realization that Simpson's body that day was not part of the "struggle" that Coates urges Samori to engage in (151). It is in this delineation that the black body image can come to a sense of itself through recognizing that which is outside of itself. This resembles Paul Schilder's idea of a "body-image intercourse" encountered earlier with Weis (33). As the phrase suggests, Schilder here envisions body images in conversation with each other, being cognizant of my body as it appears to me while remaining conscious of how it is apprehended by others; Weiss clarifies this as a "mutually-constituting dialogue that provides the space for individuals to curate their body image by coming into contact with other bodies and body images (33). Yet Weiss argues, alongside

Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, and Julia Kristeva, this Other will unrelentlessly “erupt” and “disrupt” the body image (90) which coincides with the hyphenated space “between the world and me”.

Coates sought knowledge and history to allow him to live unconstrained as the acousmatic veil to his voice, his body in its visibility as an impediment to that freedom. It is a visibility that he cannot escape however, and the veil ultimately fails because the body is still too readily apprehended. The inherited condition of blackness is thus a condition of discomfort, of being at odds with your own black body in the way it is construed as a spectacle without sound, and “the old fear” (Coates 152) that resurges with it.

Chapter 2: Voice and Image in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*

Coates began by questioning what it meant to fall outside of the “Dream”, reacting against the hypocrisy of the term “American” that he is assigned. The vague and confusing sense of nationalism that accompanies it also functions as the heart of racial trauma amongst those who want to be accepted as both black and American. If he was speaking from the perspective of what life is like on the other side of this paradox, at the threshold of “American” and all it encompasses, Jamaican-American poet Claudia Rankine insists on remaining on the inside where she asserts her right to remain. The silence this usually comes with is denied by Rankine who chooses to directly speak from the intersections of race, gender, and nationality even if means having to face the ineluctable violence of the everyday, a violence that all black bodies experience regardless of whether they made the choice to be part of America, or lived their entire lives within it.

In her book entitled *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2015), Rankine writes across the different genres of poetry, commentary, memoir, and through various kinds of multimedia like photographs, digitally manipulated images, and video references. Largely written in short bursts of prose divided into episodes of microaggressions, *Citizen* often places the reader in medias res of these moments or within her own spontaneous exposition of racialized events without much preamble. With the absence of a narrative, the unpredictability of *Citizen* also allows Rankine to thrust readers into an eclectic discourse that she weaves across time and genres as she samples works from new and old black artists as well as established African-American literary figures like Zora Neale Hurston.

It is thus difficult to say what kind of book *Citizen* is, but the confluence of styles is nevertheless clear on what it is about. The title very much echoes Coates in using the term “citizen” and “American”, but considers them with irony and not the cynicism and resignation Coates would feel towards his country. He would feel the same cynicism towards Rankine,

seeing as how the implication of the title “Citizen” suggests an anxiety with possibly being considered “American” in spite of being constantly denied that place. Denial, in fact, forms a huge part of Rankine’s concern in the book as she, perhaps stubbornly, insists on picking out instances of microaggressions that challenges the validity of African-American citizenship on a quotidian level. Nevertheless, Rankine’s choice of title also suggests a hesitance to include “American” in the same breath—that there is something amiss in a declaration of citizenship that most can take for granted as part of their own identity. Already, we see the beginnings of Rankine’s self-reflexive impulse in unsettling the ease with which the phrase “American Citizen” comes, splitting it across the two rows of title and subtitle rather than allowing the reader to apprehend it as a whole. “American Citizen” has to be put together in the reader’s mind as a product of their mental association. Before this can happen, however, the reader also has to contend with a photograph of David Hammons’ 1993 installation titled *In The Hood* that takes up most of the front cover of *Citizen* (see fig. 1). In this image, the decapitated hood of a black sweatshirt is suspended against a white wall or, in this case, a white background. It is a provocative emblem that hearkens back to a history of slavery and lynchings, and foreshadowed the murder of Trayvon Martin, whose hoodie became a symbol of racialized violence almost a decade after Hammons’ installation. With this image, Rankine directly places the issue of race within the declarative statement of individual citizenship. It is a necessary part of constructing an American identity, Rankine insists, and even those who believe in America’s post-racial state will have trouble ignoring the visceral resonances of Hammons’ evocative image. For those who are black, the voice that demands to be seen as American belongs to a body that is broken by the very thing it calls upon.

Fig 1. Cover of *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Graywolf Press, 2015; featuring *In The Hood* by David Hammons, 1993.

Rankine thus approaches the term “American Citizen” with suspicion, yet she also refuses to relinquish it or deny herself that designation as Coates does. Her scepticism also reveals an implicit desire to have the confidence to claim that status for herself, and this ambivalence is also expressed semantically throughout the text. At first glance appearing to be the prelude to a personal and patriotic exaltation of America, she abandons the first-person “I” and the lyric form entirely as if to say that her experience of citizenship is always qualified by the second-person “you” that she articulates her critique with instead. As to who “you” or “I” actually refers to however, Rankine refuses to satisfy us with an answer as the figure of the citizen becomes more indeterminate, an overflow beginning to happen as she oscillates between speaking from her own perspective and that of the poetic persona; we are not entirely sure as to who is speaking at which moment. The use of the second-person as well as the reference to various public African-American figures throughout the book adds to this confusion, but it is ultimately the way in which she has collected the observations and events

that occur in *Citizen* that forces us to rethink the idea of a totalizing, singular mode of citizenship. In an interview with “The Guardian”, Rankine claims this as forming the main thrust of her book in her discussion of its title: “I called it *Citizen* because I wanted to ask: who gets to hold that status—despite everyone technically having it? How is it embodied and honoured? The title contains a question.” (Kellaway, “Claudia Rankine: Blackness In The White Imagination Has Nothing To Do With Black People”). Rankine’s deliberate and inquisitive pause here provides a space within which we can hear echoes of Coates’ “how do I live free in this black body” (12), an echo without a reply.

2.1 A Return To The Acousmatic Voice

At the end of *Between the World and Me*, Coates does not arrive at a solution to the question he posed at its inception. Rather, his answer to “how” is intended as less of an instruction than an examination of his own reckoning of the question, a struggle that he now passes along to his son. Coates’ message to his son was for him to protect himself from the threat of the Dream, an insidious rhetoric in the disguise of the idyll. The Dream lures people into being unsuspecting and lulls them into a sense of false comfort, a heaviness upon their eyelids that renders them dull to its illusion. The Dream implies a kind of sleep, which is where Coates and Rankine come together in a confluence of metaphors that they open their books with. While Coates uses the Dream as a metaphor for ignorance in the present, Rankine uses it as a metaphor for the encountering of a past that is accompanied by a sense of clarity and self-awareness. Rankine begins with a vignette of four short paragraphs, a prelude in which she in which she places the second-person persona in meditative solitude as she writes “you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows” (5). The mental images come to her on its own in the comfort of her isolation, away from the presence of others who might be the perpetrators of racism and the source of her racial anxiety. In fact, it is precisely this illusion of

safety in which these scenes find their way back to her, or rather her to them as she inadvertently “fall[s] back” into this past (5). This motif is carried throughout the whole of *Citizen*’s first chapter, in which almost every page encloses a vignette of racial microaggressions told in the second-person without much preparation or preamble.

To refer to a “past” points to both a temporal connection as well as a phenomenological one that can only operate when there is a subject who owns and performs the recollection, the root of a personal and therefore subjective experience. Coates characterises this subjective experience as one that gets lost in the term “American” whose unevenness and inconsistency is often ignored, and attempts to reinstate that through a kind of cautionary tale that affirms the separation between him and his country. Rankine however chooses to use that very same rhetoric that Coates thinks of as self-effacing, and invokes it explicitly in the title of her book *Citizen: An American Lyric*. The title is unequivocal in its calling upon of America and those inhabiting it, the word “Citizen” appearing matter-of-factly alongside the adjective of “American”. It not exactly an appeal for the state of being “American”, and neither is it an escape from the condition; it is as if Rankine demands that wherever she is, even if it is in the gap between her feeling American and being acknowledged as one, that she will hold on to the claim of being American regardless.

As to who is making this claim however, the issue of perspective is complicated with Rankine. The title of *Citizen* directly reckons with the role of the narrator or, in this case the persona, and destabilizes that role because of how it can operate as both a singular and collective noun, as individual or as concept. This is further complicated by its status as a lyric which suggests that it will be written in the first-person, yet *Citizen* consistently makes recourse to the second and third instead. For Coates, the apprehension of his ontological state in America stems from a disconnect between his inhabiting of the singular noun as a citizen of America, and how he has difficulty translating that into the collective. Rankine however,

eludes that altogether by creating an unidentifiable and indeterminate persona. The events described in the book are told to us by a voice that refers to us as “you”, placing the reader within the text, and itself on its periphery. She is never referred to within the text itself but is nevertheless responsible for directing it, and in this manner, elides the reader’s sense of autonomy that exists outside the realm of the text. The reader’s subjective experience, the only kind of experience he can have, has been replaced by the awareness of someone else’s self, their phenomenological experience. Returning to the first vignette, the persona describes:

“You smell good. You are twelve attending Sts. Philip and James School on White Plains Road and the girl sitting in the seat behind asks you to lean to the right during exams so she can copy what you have written.” (5)

The comparison of her diction to the language of hypnotic induction is unavoidable here. Again, behind closed eyelids, the hypnotist’s patient stares into the veil of darkness as an acousmatic voice provides the “guidelines of the gaze” (Dolar 66), of the reader’s gaze in this instance. The voice supplants the patient’s awareness of their body in repose with the visceral experience of another which Rankine begins with the olfactory “you smell good”. Engaging the sense of smell is also an experience of a body that the smell emanates from, even if unseen; to qualify it as a good smell further attests to a consciousness that is aware of the presence of its own body, yet still remains unable to visually apprehend its own materiality. It is a figurative disembodiment, a blinding of the reader to their own bodies in a corporeal elision that introduces, in its place, the re-embodying of a “citizen” according to the persona.

2.1.1 The Invisible, Faceless Persona(e)

The reader’s discursive experience of the text is thus oriented towards the persona’s voice. Michel Chion elaborates on the mechanics the acousmatic voice as it appears in film, but it nevertheless yields some resonances with the act of reading which involves the imagined image. He describes the acousmatic voice occurring in a couple of ways, one of which being a

previously acousmatized sound before revealing him in image and thus “de-acousmatizing him” (72). Likewise, the persona in *Citizen* assumes a largely unseen position in which the readers are first made privy to her phenomenological experience before being able to identify her as a person; the vignettes in *Citizen* turn the reader into a witness of *what* has happened to the persona rather than a testament to *who* she is. Yet, Steven Naylor gives the reader reason to anticipate that by the end of the book, the identity of the persona—the titular “citizen”—might be clarified. He suggests that the acousmatic voice acts “as an invisible source, rather than an unidentifiable or ambiguous one” (207), that the persona occupying the acousmatic role is not interested in making herself unknowable, but just unseeable; to have her body recede as her voice resounds. Likewise, the use of the second-person voice estranges the reader from their own phenomenology and effaces their sense of an autonomous self so that the visceral accounts of racism can come through more emphatically. This comes through particularly in light of Rankine’s revealing of the fact that:

Many of the anecdotes in the book were gathered by asking friends of mine to tell me moments when racism surprisingly entered in when you were among friends or colleagues, or just doing some ordinary thing in your day. (Rankine, 00:03:25-00:03:44)

Identifiability thus does not come in the pursuit of a name or a face. The persona consists of a multitude of voices, each reckoning with the quotidian racism that attempts to unveil the subjective experiences that form the concept “citizen”. Nevertheless, Rankine, in collecting these anecdotes, frames the project of *Citizen* as one that is still in the process of figuring out the question of “who gets to hold that status [of being an American citizen]” rather than imposing a specific interpretation of it. *Citizen* thrives in its frequent moments of ambiguity and inchoateness in spite of the discursive authority of the acousmatic voice; the events in the

texts are often brought forth with more questions than explanation, a recollection of visceral rather than cerebral reactions that sometimes catches even her by surprise.

The persona thus appears to be apprehensive or even unsure of what these subjective experiences entails in a reading of what a “citizen” is; she cannot help but unconsciously reveal her own anxieties in doing so. Returning to an instance in the first vignette that exemplifies this, the persona recalls a situation in which a classmate asked “us” to help her cheat in an exam, and gets away with it even under the strict supervision of Sister Evelyn. “Sister Evelyn must think these two girls think a lot alike... or she never actually saw you sitting there” (5). These are neither suggested thoughts for the reader, nor are they facts. The hypothetical “or” also reveals this comment as part of the persona’s own extrapolation and evaluation of the situation, even if she insists on articulating them in the second-person. In the span of that brief sentence then, the persona assumes that narrative space as an almost confusingly autobiographical moment in which her sarcasm transitions into the realization that Sister Evelyn’s ignoring of “you” is also potentially an unwillingness to acknowledge her. The persona is thus not an omniscient narrator, but experiences the very same epistemological limitations she accuses us of having—limitations that she tries to reveal. “And you never called her on it (why not?)” (7), Rankine challenges in her description of a different episode of conflict, a response that often surfaces when the familiar suddenly becomes unexpectedly discomfiting, like when a seemingly benevolent figure like Sister Evelyn unknowingly reveals a callousness towards race and a susceptibility to whiteness. However, this parenthetical aggression makes no sense in a hypothetical scenario that the reader cannot possibly offer an answer to. It is only the persona, the one who has invoked those moments to begin with, who can offer us an answer to that question. As with the case of Sister Evelyn however, she relinquishes that discursive authority and leaves us in a questioning silence that no one can

seem to answer. Yet, the space of a question also impels the reader to consider the difficulties in filling that silence and experience the psychological impasse it presents.

2.2 The Form in *Citizen*

In a lot of ways therefore, *Citizen* is about being captured off-guard and acknowledging the possible vulnerabilities that arise in reaction to racism, and more importantly the vulnerabilities that are engendered within one's reaction to racism. Oftentimes the underlying question in each of these episodes is "Is this racist behaviour?", or "Why am I feeling this way?". It is the destabilising of that phenomenological sense of judgment that ultimately makes the individual feel vulnerable, a constant second-guessing and undercutting of the self. The quotidian nature of racism makes it startling and catches us off-guard, as we attempt to read the situation, and it is in the manner of microaggressions to present its threat more covertly as an aggression that toes the line between ignorance and derogation. It is precisely the indeterminateness of the situation and in the giving of the benefit of the doubt that a black person is reminded of the possibility that someone might have just called him or her out for their race

Citizen also embodies that unrelenting sense of the unavoidable in its very form. Unlike Coates' slow unfolding recollections of his youth or his encounters with racism which he dedicatedly weaves together for his son, *Citizen* is largely written tersely and straightforwardly. The vocabulary Rankine uses of "reconstructed" and "associative" (7) to describe it is reminiscent of the way memory is called upon in an often incoherent and spontaneous way that eludes forewarning or prefiguration, even to the persona herself. It happens anonymously even, as she hastily refers to them as "certain moments" (7) in one of the early scenes; there is no time to contextualise what that moment is as both persona and reader are immediately thrust into that instance with nothing to grapple with apart from the physical discomforts of a parched tongue and a suffocated voice (7)—a language of trauma that will be revisited later.

2.2.1 Complications in the Second-Person

For now, it is apparent that the formal patterns emerging here in *Citizen* do not conform to the narrative structures of sequentiality and chronology. Yet, it insists on maintaining a consistent prose within each of those scenes while still resisting a complete identification with the more fluid structure of a narrative. Rankine thus writes from somewhere between the poetic form and narrative form to achieve a narratological ambiguity that has implications on the status of the speaker, narrator, or persona. The term “persona” seems the most suitable in the case of *Citizen*. This is because in spite of the role as a heterodiegetic narrator, she participates in the conversation with the reader in an immanent way. The use of the second-person “you” is particularly revealing of this: the speaker and addressee implied by “you” can be formulated as multiple permutations, one of which can be read as the persona—as the singular voice of a collective—leading the reader through past events that she has encountered either personally or vicariously; events that she has had a personal stake in. Monika Fludernik, in her narratological explication of the second-person narrative, articulates this relationship as such: “the narratee acquires a fictional past... [the narrator/speaker] has personally known the ‘you’ in the past (how else would [the narrator/speaker] have learned the story ‘he’ is speaking?)” (288). *Citizen* takes each of premises implicit in Fludernik’s claim, and complicates it. The first premise that “the narratee acquires a fictional past” is convincing in the sense that narratives can, through the interaction of plot and expression, establish themselves as an experience separate from the reader’s own. To say that the reader “acquires” that distinct experience however, *Citizen* sets this up as a point of resistance through the use of the second-person that alienates the reader just as much as it includes them. This confusing tension is also embodied in the persona herself, who seems to harbour an implicit desire to distance herself from it by refusing to operate in the first-person. Instead, the first-person role is assigned to the reader who has to imagine the scene unfolding. Furthermore, the language of spontaneity and association that we

encountered in the beginning of the *Citizen*, points toward the vulnerability of the persona who is as susceptible to the unpredictability of these upwelling memories as we the readers are, almost as if the persona herself is experiencing it for the first time. These occur disparately and outside of the persona's control, even though she calls upon them as if they were her own.

The oscillation of the persona between operating as a character and a device therefore happens not discursively, but stylistically as she is participating and reacting within it. Here, Fludernik's expression of the persona having "known the 'you' in the past" (288) becomes particularly resonant as it gestures to a moment of possible self-consciousness, not within the present self but conjuring and confronting the past discursively. This comes through in greater force in the third chapter of *Citizen* which marks a discursive return to the second-person, and stylistically continues the same pattern of exposition she began with in the first chapter with the pronoun "you". The main difference however, is that this chapter is directed more towards an optics of the black body, its oscillation between the state of invisibility (43) and hypervisibility (49), and the physical slippage between the two. Figuring the visual within the verbal, the persona calls upon Judith Butler and reiterates her idea that language and "the condition of being addressable" is a point of hypervisibility (49) and thus vulnerability because it opens up the possibility of being called out, insulted, and ignored.

2.3 Precarious Words

Words become unintentionally precarious as illustrated by the persona in the first of these scenes. It begins in the third chapter under the pleasant circumstances of a meeting with a friend in Santa Monica. Barely two sentences in however, the moment gives way. As the persona walks up to this friend, normalcy is torn apart when the friend exclaims unthinkingly: "you are late, you nappy-headed ho" (41). The unexpected encounter with the racial epithet of "nappy-headed" gives rise to a string of associations that the "you" navigates as possible ways of understanding her friend's response. Echoing the challenge of "why not" that we

encountered earlier, Rankine opens up the same self-inflicted wound when she prompts with “what did you say? You ask, though you have heard every word” (41). In this episode, the persona finds herself dissatisfied by every attempt to comprehend it as benign discourse: as an act of camaraderie in using black vernacular, as mocking a particular stereotype of black people, as a way to suggest a closeness in their friendship than they do not actually have, and as an opening to a discussion about Don Imus, the radio talk show host who derided Rutgers University’s women’s basketball team with that same expression. The friend attempts to qualify her remark as “a joke” (42), echoing the same attitude Imus has when he defends his as “some idiot comment meant to be amusing” (Carr, “Networks Condemn Remarks by Imus”). As a radio personality and shock jock hosting his own radio show, Imus’ primary agenda is incitation and provocation. While discussing the score between the Rutgers and Tennessee, he refers to Rutgers’ team members as “nappy-headed hos” in a bit of a non-sequitur for this rhetorical purpose. The “friend” however appears to have incorporated the phrase in her address as a feeble attempt at joining in that fraternity of blackness. Interestingly however, both converge: Don Imus eventually claims, as does the “friend”, that their epithet was meant to be a “joke” (42). Both Imus and the friend engage in a kind of absolution that cripples the persona’s ability to articulate. The point of incision here in *Citizen* is not in having to come terms with her friends’ racism, but the indeterminateness of it all. Perhaps she is attempting to use “black people language”, as the persona suggests, or perhaps it was a bad attempt at initiating a discussion about race (41). The persona describes a number of possible readings of the situation, but never manages to arrive at conclusive one. Here, the ambiguity of her friend’s meaning is debilitating more than it is comforting because the persona’s desire to read this instance as something other than racial takes an almost physical toll on her. She experiences the unintelligibility of the situation somatically as a “violent...cut” (42), and each of her

friend's attempt at rationalizing the moment cannot end in anything but the vacuity of "maybe" and "you don't know" (41-42).

The scene can be read as Rankine's reaction to Judith Butler when the persona speaks of a "condition of being addressable" (49). We can understand this in two ways. Firstly, it can be read as a question of what addressability entails for those who experience blackness, and secondly it can also be read as question of what are the qualities that make someone addressable. Here, Rankine has answered both. For those who experience blackness, being addressable entails the sensation that is reminiscent of physical trauma. It is a sensation that returns us to Judith Butler in *Precarious Life*, in which she speaks of an addressability that opens into vulnerability:

We all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt...becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions. (29)

The "violent...cut" (Rankine 42) places the persona's body into the condition of precarity that Butler describes in the quote. It is one that reminds the black body its own conspicuity, of its own inescapable blackness. It resonates with a moment that occurs earlier in the text in which the persona relates a claim someone makes, "that Americans battle between the 'historical self' and the 'self self'" (14). This is a claim that the former, the presumably antiquated ideas of blackness and whiteness, often surfaces and turns contemporary interactions into a racially-inflected event. The adjective of "history" and "self" occupy the same syntactical position, collapsing past and present, and eliminating the distinction between the two. It points to the conception of an ahistorical individuality as a myth—the "historical self" and "self self" are, in fact, indistinguishable. Addressability thus contains the sudden threat of returning the

black body to the “historical self” and effacing the “self self”, the subject in this present and ordinary moment.

This is not to say that the “historical self” can completely be dislodged. Those like O.J Simpson who wanted to be seen as a man but never a *black* man (Coates, “What O.J.Means”), who attempt to relinquish one over the other, cannot escape falling into a contrivance; for all of Simpson’s success on the field and at trial, the body he wills to escape his blackness will nevertheless go down in history as one that embodies the tenuous struggle of being black and American. The “historical self” will always remain a spectre because it is the quality of blackness that makes someone particularly addressable, the quality of having a black body. The friend’s epithet of “nappy-headed ho” is particularly revealing of this as the description of the persona’s hair texture becomes a way to identify the persona and differentiate her body from that of others. There is also the expectation by the friend that the persona will recognise the term “nappy-headed” as a description of herself and thus acknowledge the call. The body is therefore seen by the friend as a shorthand for blackness that arises as a method of making quick address to a black person. Thus, the persona cannot muster an appropriate response to her friend because to acknowledge the address would be to implicitly accept “nappy-headed ho” as acceptable, while disparaging her remarks will implicate the persona and not the “friend” as being responsible for turning that moment sour, for labelling it as an instance of racism. As someone who is forced into the discursive role of having to provide the benefit of the doubt, breaking the silence means putting the conversation at risk of breaching precarious racial lines.

The consequences of stepping over these racial lines returns us back to a scene in the first chapter in which the “you” encounters a stranger at Starbucks who derided a group of noisy and presumably black teenagers as “niggers” (16) without realizing that there was a black person, the persona, within earshot. The persona attempts to defend the teenagers by comparing the stranger’s actions to the Ku Klux Klan, this hyperbolic comparison being a way of

suggesting to him that his comment was an overreaction. This ironically strikes a racial nerve within the stranger instead of the persona whose anger, in that moment, would have been a reasonable response. In an almost pre-emptive manoeuvre, the stranger quickly tries to disavow himself of his spontaneous racist utterance by sarcastically remarking “now there you go” (16), insinuating that it was the persona and not him who was the one playing up the racial connotations of “nigger” all along, as if “nigger” was already divorced from its racial connotations in the first place, and as if taking the conversation “there” was a choice that could have been avoided at the invocation of that word. To the stranger, language can be easily racialized as it is de-racialized; racial epithets take on an unusually mutable quality, functioning as derogation or facetious humour. The line between the two however, is often not clearly drawn. Regardless of what the stranger, the friend, or Don Imus intended to convey when these contentious words were called upon, they inevitably begin to profile the situation as a possibly racialized one, and takes the persona back to an awareness of her own body as one that is similar to those teenagers at Starbucks—black.

The malleability of language is thus experienced differentially. Someone who experiences blackness has to contend with its discursive consequences, while others who do not experience blackness remain invulnerable to it. Those like the friend or the stranger at Starbucks can manoeuvre themselves out of addressability through equivocation: In using the excuse of a joke, the friend’s implicit accusation here is either that the persona is the one oblivious to its humour, that the joke was not badly intentioned, but just not well-received or operating on different sense of humour. Likewise, the stranger at Starbucks divorces himself from the situation by directing focus back at the speaker who, at that point, begins to draw the unwanted attention of everyone else in the vicinity. Blackness is usually found at the receiving end of addressability in a way that precludes one from returning that address, from getting out of this hypervisibility.

2.4 Hypervisibility of the Black Body

This experience of hypervisibility is astringently described by the persona as a wound that opens itself up like a “rupture along its suddenly exposed suture” (42). The imagery here, emerging in response to the casual derogation of “nappy-headed ho” that we encountered earlier, is not one of a fresh cut, but a lesion from an old injury that has left the body exposed, and a familiar pain reignited. The persona’s sudden loss of discursive power happens simultaneously with a metaphorical asphyxia that she describes in aggravatingly corporeal terms as “a joke stuck in her throat” (42). The moments of racialized experience curtails the voice in a way that leaves the body grasping wildly either for a voice or for air, and through this confusion begin to resemble each other. The throat here is thus figured as the site of conflict, and this portrayal unites the examination of both voice and body. Again, Butler is helpful in uniting this as she speaks of a “vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt” (29), calling back to the acousmatic voice. Rankine approaches the intersection of voice, body, and sudden address through an examination of female tennis champion Serena Williams and her encounters with racism in the US Open (28), a lengthier exposition than what the readers would have encountered so far, but still maintaining the same discursive tone and voice. In the space of a tennis court where the umpire has to pay attention to the “wrongness” of athletes’ bodies, the calls made against Williams’ body elicits the question of whether they were drawn along physical or racial lines. At the 2004 US Open, this tension came to a breaking point when Williams refused to accept an egregiously bad call by the umpire, believing it to be a judgment upon her race rather than her athletic performance. As an athlete, Williams has no power on the court to reverse a decision made in front of millions. As a black woman however, she chose to reject the validity of those claims made regarding her body as heard in her emphatic refrain of “no, no, no” to her smashing of her racket (27). Her repeated cries strain against the enormity of the crowd and the relative anonymity of the

umpires; her body thus bears the discomfort of this racial scrutiny as the throat that holds the joke. In her voice and body of objection, she takes on the terms the “angry nigger exterior”, a term Rankine borrows from YouTube personality Hennessey Youngman in the following vignette (23). Youngman, an online persona created by Jayson Musson, is important to Rankine for his satirical video tutorial series *Art Thoughtz* that offers advice and criticism about the creation and production of art in contemporary society. In one of these videos titled “How To Be A Successful Black Artist”, the first step he asserts is to “be angry” (00:01:14), a state of mind that can be achieved by exposing oneself to spectacles of violence inflicted upon black people like videos of Rodney King’s beating or images of Emmett Till’s corpse. The implication is that the consuming experiences of the black body in trauma will sublimate into a performative outrage that can be channelled into art (00:02:00-00:02:15). Youngman’s premise is that with this “angry nigger exterior”, the condensation of a rage fuelled by an embodied understanding of what racism can do to the black body, is exoticized in the eyes of the white gaze. It is a reproduction of racialized violence that undergoes a transmutation through the black artist as he externalises it in a different form.

Even though Serena Williams was engaging in the athletic rather than the artistic, her physical and verbal outburst on the court resonates with the “angry nigger exterior” in the performative sense. In her vigorous display of indignation against what she felt was the umpire’s white gaze bearing upon her body, Williams inevitably feeds the audience a spectacle of a black body in paroxysm. It further inscribes herself into the racial discourse she is trying to resist in the first place, a discourse that is already fixated on the stereotype of black bodies as having a greater predisposition to violence. Williams here is reduced to an exteriority, the appearance of blackness, a corporeal rendering of it that arises within the image of Williams’ body against the white lines of the tennis court. Williams’ solitary figure against the crowd of spectators who are there to observe her physical performance makes her hypervisibility all the

more acute, and neither silence nor emphatic resistance are able to extricate her from the scrutiny of the white gaze—the black “imago”, in George Yancy’s words (110).

2.4.1 Black Bodies, White Backgrounds: A Return to Zora Neale Hurston

The hypervisibility that Williams’ body underwent is echoed in the design of *Citizen*’s cover. The singular image of the hood of a sweatshirt melded with the symbolic impression of decapitated head appears immensely stark when suspended upon its white background. The wire that extends past the bottom of the hood is reminiscent of a collar, echoes of the austerity and rigidity that comes from being incarcerated. Similarly, the black body comes forth, only to feel viscerally how it is entrapped within the phenomenological impasse of being black in America: incredibly scrutinized, yet inevitably constrained by their visibility.

It also reveals how the idea of the “American Citizen” has been constructed and the artifice that it engenders. It is then at the end of the third chapter where Rankine continues this endeavour, explicitly framing the relationship between black bodies and white America as an image-object with an explicit attention to the agents responsible for its creation. Here, she turns to another artwork: two out of four drawings made by Glenn Ligon in his 1992 work, *Untitled: Four Etchings* (see fig. 2).

Fig 2. Detail of *Untitled: (Four Etchings)*, 1992 by Glenn Ligon; 2 of 4 etchings.

This image features two sentences in bold font, each occupying facing pages across a full spread: the left is occupied by the phrase “I do not always feel coloured”, and the right by “I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (52-53). These quotes come originally from Zora Neale Hurston’s essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” in which she recounts the moment in her childhood where she realizes what it means to be “coloured” for the first time (828).

This is not to say that she lived for a time without being conscious of her appearance. Hurston was always cognizant of the differences between her and white people, but these are coterminous with other distinctions, mainly that of place and belonging. The white folk she encounters are usually travellers passing through the predominantly black town of Eatonville, and implicit in Hurston's recollection are multiple racial cross-sections that can be adapted into the different vocabularies of traversal versus stillness, and interior versus the exterior. In her words, "white people differed from coloured to me only in that they rode through town and

never lived there” (826). Here, Hurston puts it across simply, inflected with the naïveté of a child with no concept of race; whiteness is something that passes her by without disrupting the integrity of her own world and the homogeneity of Eatonville. Rather they are looked upon as a strange and intriguing phenomenon to be “peered at cautiously from behind curtains” (826). These travellers, in their state of constant kinetic flux, have become an anomaly in a landscape that is demarcated by the boundaries between the domestic home and the world beyond it—the porch being its frontier.

Residents who are more apprehensive occupy the space behind the curtains, while the bolder few take their places along the porch. These are different ways in which they responded to the same visual event; all of them however, are looking. The white travellers here become the visual focal point, a crossfire of gazes converging upon them. In speaking about their act of looking however, we are also making implicit references to the way in which the looking is performed, and more pertinently, from *where* it is performed. Space mediates the manner of their spectatorship: our attention is drawn not to the travellers or tourists, but to the voyeurism of those clandestinely peering from the curtains and the unapologetic gaze of those on the porch. The latter, whose placement at the front house demarcates the boundary between the audience on the inside and display of bodies outside, is poised for a better view. This is not merely in the sense that they are unobscured, but that their gaze is more acute and direct in its spectatorial intent. As we move further inwards into the house beyond the porch, we simultaneously delve deeper into the spectatorial audience. Here, the reticence of those watching hidden behind cover turns their act of observation into an act more surreptitious and sinister, hence the previous description of them as voyeurs: the space they are in is complicit in their viewing, and the covertness of the gaze contains within it a certain sense of power that comes with being unseen, unknown, and unable to be fended off.

In speaking of any sort of gaze, we are thus also directed to think about how crucial space is in mediating that relationship between the spectator and the spectated. The way the body interacts with space allows it to condition its own visibility or invisibility in relation to the observed subject, as well as the disposition and function of the gaze. Hurston here suggests that it is an indulgent gaze in which the black residents got “just as much pleasure out of the tourists as the tourists got out of the village” (826), and we see that the directionality of gazes goes both ways. Mere gaze alone is thus not always coterminous with power, and it would be contrived to read Hurston’s descriptions as a seeming reversal of white gaze upon black, as merely a counterpoint to the oft-cited examples of minstrelsy, blackface, or any iteration involving the black body as spectacle. This is not to say that the implicit power dynamics involved in the act of watching are not worth discussing. Rather, it is more so that we should recognize how the power dynamic undergoes an augmentation that is not confined to just a *reversal* in a straightforward sense. Whether power comes in the form of trivialising bodies, fetishizing them, or subjecting it to helpless scrutiny, inherent in the gaze is also a concern of spatial relations and circumstances under which it is being carried out. The gaze is constructed like an image in which the act of apprehending the subject is bound by its composition—the way the one is placed in relation to the other, whether one is cognizant of the other, whether one is accessible to the other.

Here, it is both black and white bodies that are presented by the space they are in as visual phenomena to be indulged in, each apprehended by the other in a sight as unvarnished as the flat and unobtrusive landscape of Eatonville’s “sandy village road[s]” (826). Hurston however, forces these conventions of spectatorship to unfold differently for herself, and she does this by renegotiating the space. With the top of the gatepost claimed as her self-proclaimed “gallery seat...for a born first-nighter” (826), she transforms the Eatonville landscape into that of the theatre. In contrast to the apprehension of those in the house and the

conspicuity of those on the porch, Hurston establishes herself in a position of greater verticality, overlooking the “proscenium box” (826) in which the traffic of white bodies is displayed. If spectating is usually thought of as something originating from outside looking in, here we see an act of looking being performed from the inside out instead—the word performing appears a shade less metaphorical now that Hurston has claimed the entire landscape as her theatre. Assuming the role of the expectant audience, Hurston sees the white travellers as participating in a kind of inadvertent choreography. White bodies move across the landscape while black bodies remain in repose. The line that divides the proscenium box from the audience thus appears to be constructed as a result of a kind of enclave in which their bodies share a physical affinity with each other. As such, there is a more literal colour-line (Du Bois 9) occurring at the threshold of spectator and spectators both in terms of the way they engage with the space they are in, which in turn also affects how individual bodies can be construed as part of a larger performative entity.

Disrupting the precarious equanimity of the visual colour-line (Du Bois 9) is thus less about who is performing the observation than the bodies among which they find themselves in. Spectatorship demands that there be a clearly delineated line between the individuals watching and the subject being watched. It starts at the porch in Hurston’s description, but only insofar as that is the furthest someone black could venture before they would be leaving the comfort of Hurston’s metaphorical audience for the scrutiny faced before the spectators—before they would be black entering the “white background” (828). If Hurston was illustrating what happens when the colour-line remains intact, the latter part of her essay disrupts that equilibrium and asks what happens when the colour runs outside the lines.

To have colour outside the lines is, implicitly, to have colour where it should not be. Hurston restates this idea more eloquently in her iconic quote that we will revisit later on, but first illustrates this with another anecdote, this time capturing a “coming of age” moment.

While such moments are usually milestones to be celebrated, Hurston's experience of it is marked by the unsettling awareness of her blackness. It is not merely acknowledging that there exist phenotypical differences, but the realisation that these differences will inevitably demarcate the boundaries of her experience. This comes to her unexpectedly in the innocuous setting of a jazz club in Jacksonville. In this scene, she is sitting in the midst of another audience—this time a more literal one as she watches an orchestra of musicians perform. Alongside her is another member of the audience who is white; their bodies, in spite of their appearance, are intertwined in the same ritual of spectatorship. In listening to the same music, observing the same people and participating in the conventions of musical performance, the comportment of bodies assimilates more than it dislocates, and a corporeal parity is created when one decides to collaborate with other bodies. Unlike the confidence she had in feeling like a “born first-nighter” (826) in her memories of Eatonville, feelings of unease begin to set in here in the jazz club in spite of her occupying that same vantage point as the audience. She compares that anxiety to instances in which her presence as a black person stands out too starkly in the midst of a white majority.

Hurston's iconic “I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (828) thus makes sense as an analogy that captures the feeling of being outnumbered and outed; it is the discomfort of being seen too much, and the nakedness at being unable to control this hypervisibility. The metaphor's interplay on optics and space here begins to make sense when considered alongside Hurston's recollections. Her next anecdote however, complicates it:

Sometimes it is the other way around. A white person is set down in our midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for me. For instance, when I sit in the drafty basement that is The New World Cabaret with a white person, my colour comes. (828)

Hurston's reaction to her blackness, she explains, comes through when her excitement in reaction to the music is reciprocated by her white acquaintance with only a terse and unenthusiastic "good music they have here" (828). Hurston cannot help but desire for her body to respond to the performance and embody the capricious rhythms of the jazz orchestra, to "dance wildly inside [herself]" (828). Her urge is instinctively kinesthetic, a translation of the sensations of sound into the somatic. In comparison, her acquaintance's nonchalance throws her visceral instinct into sharp relief, and revealing the differences between them that were previously inconspicuous. The desire to embody sensation displaces her from being part of the same spectatorial body as the rest of the audience, and for a moment it seems as if the composition of spectator and space changes into one that holds Hurston at the reverse end of the theatrical space, as performer instead of observer. We see this when the music ends; Hurston is no longer suspended in this imagined state of kinesthetic freedom, but has to meet the silence with a retreat to a "veneer we call civilisation" (828), as if her embodied expressions of ecstasy were incomprehensible acts of philistinism that should be constrained. Even in this brief metaphorical moment, the word "veneer" immediately hearkens back to our discussion of space and sight. Hurston first speaks of a revealing, and she does so by relying on the language of optical composition, of sharpness and contrast. In doing so, she is already foregrounding herself as a part of an image, the same image that she reckons with the phrase "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" (828)—the subject of the image being not just her, but more so a blackness that is overlaid upon her. "My colour comes" (828), she says, speaking of blackness as a transient state rather than a permanent trait; part of an ebb and flow in which blackness can surge and recede. The imagery persists:

He has only heard what I felt, he is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am *so* coloured. (828-829)

Blackness is thus formed as a reversed negative space. Its background recedes into whiteness, and the neutrality of a blank canvas inadvertently turns even the slightest pigmentation into a garish display because of its overwhelming contrast. The tendency of whiteness is to betray everything else as blemish, and this is the sensation Hurston becomes cognizant of—herself as an indelible stain on the proverbial white background, a helplessness that Hurston almost confesses to by disconsolately conceding that she feels “so colored”. The “veneer” then speaks of a concealing, an attempt to alleviate this acute self-scrutiny and attenuate the intensity of the contrast. To control space by mediating what is perceived and obscured is therefore also to control sight and the disposition of the gaze. In this case however, the gaze that needs to be negotiated is Hurston’s own; awareness of her blackness occurs not when the white friend Hurston was with at the jazz club points out her blackness to her, but happens inadvertently because of her own awareness of their differences; a crippling self-consciousness augmented by an unyielding disparity between foreground and background. In the act of constraining the self as part of a composition we thus see that the most insidious gaze is not one that originates from someone else, but that of her gazing upon herself.

2.4.2 Rankine and Hurston in Metatextual Confluence

As an attempt to speak of blackness from a personal perspective, Hurston’s essay fits in with the rest of *Citizen*’s biographical leanings. Both texts converge in more ways than one, however. Our discussion of Hurston’s essay so far is heavily concerned with the interplay of space and optics in the tempering of the racial gaze. While she could only attempt to inscribe this in words, Rankine, through modern forms of representation, gives us a reinterpretation of Hurston’s dyadic refrain, “I do not always feel coloured” and “I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (828). Rankine often deviates from the written form throughout the text, interpolating her short bursts of prose with various kinds of visual media

like photographs or digitally manipulated images. We encounter Hurston in another one of these instances near the end of the third chapter. Her words are printed across two pages with each phrase occupying facing sides, recursively printed down the page as a seemingly endless string of text. Here, the conventions of typesetting we have been following up till now begin to fall away. The words in their repetition immediately run onto the next line once they hit the margins. Unpunctuated and uninterrupted, they carry with it a momentum that insists upon not adhering to the formal structures of poetry or the progression of prose—there is no visible end or beginning.

Set in a bigger and bolder type, they are typographically stylised to look like spray-painted lettering that has been stencilled upon a surface. Representing the words as a physically printed object gives the words a certain texture, and the illusion of being written on a wall and its resemblance to graffiti resists the flatness of the page it is marked upon. It is in this moment that *Citizen* shows its temerity as it uses Ligon's work to play with the conventions of textual production with which *Citizen* must reckon as a book of poetry. We observe, turning the page, how the words we were reading previously are now starting to operate beyond a merely textual level in which the reader is made aware of its existence as printed matter. Adding to a sense of tactility, the words eventually blur in a manner that resembles the smudging of ink. In this way, Rankine brings our attention to the constructed nature of the image by incorporating it within the moment of failure when the creator's artistic vision is compromised: when the smudging of ink reveals the unintentional brushing of hands, the moment when that perfect image on the page fails.

Here, the text calls for us to attend to the way it is presented on the page as an overtly aesthetic composition produced through typography and visual manipulation. It is almost tempting to call it an image, but the recognizable echo back to Hurston's essay also compels us to respond to its linguistic meaning. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it toes the

line between image and text, the words serving as foil to its visual counterpart to complete the composition. What we see in *Citizen*, therefore, is a visual representation of Hurston's written word, and Rankine plays on the dynamics of visibility and invisibility, of body, space, and gaze. It can also be read as her way of returning us back to that same conversation we had in "How It Feels To Be Coloured Me" in which she takes that metaphorical analogy of the body and gives it a literal slant. If there are moments in the body's relationship to space in which it is vulnerable to losing control of its visibility, Rankine splices out one of those instances and reifies it into this visual representation in which we have objects in the foreground contrasted starkly against the white background of the page. It a juxtaposition of black and white, but more significantly it is also a juxtaposition of Hurston body and her words, of body and text. When visibility is acute and unyielding, the body being to take on an unredactable immutability akin to ink printed on paper.

The resonances between the corporeal form of the black body and the image thus suggest the presence of greater forces at play that forcibly inscribe the body, like an image, onto a surface. The moments of microaggressions Rankine discusses in *Citizen* reflect the dynamics between foreground and background in which the black body comes forth more conspicuously. The confluence of mediums shared between her and Hurston now interact with each other to suggest that blackness is a product of reading and construction which can and should be dismantled, just as the smudging of the stroke and texture of the ink are indicative of the hands of the artist. It is not just an awareness of conspicuity as it appears to others however, but also an overwhelming perception of one's own blackness in a moment of double-consciousness (Du Bois 2), of reading your own specular image whose provenance is located beyond the individual—a "historical self" that has had to reckon with the racist discourses directed towards the black body across time. Nevertheless, following the earlier discussion of double-consciousness' double-edge in the introduction, it is when the image understands itself

as an image that it can begin to react against the sources of its control. *Citizen* is thus Rankine's attempt at finding a way to access the "self-self" through examining the various ways of living out blackness in the contemporary, an examination of the image of the black body and its malleable thresholds. Even if it finds itself inevitably re-countering the "historical self", *Citizen* is significant in the way it begins to call to attention the potentialities of a subjectivity that can exist beyond the body.

Chapter 3: The Black Body in Space in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*

Of her 2002 play *Topdog/Underdog*, Suzan-Lori Parks says this: "I think it's about what it means to be family and, in the biggest sense, the family of man, what it means to be connected with somebody else" (Reich, "Topdog/Underdog': A playwright interpreting her own words"). It might be surprising that her description of *Topdog/Underdog* circumvents a discussion of the politics that the play overtly invites. With her two main characters named after Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth, the allusion to Lincoln's assassination affirms our arrival at a rather postmodern attempt at reframing historical narrative. Rendering them as mere namesakes distance the names "Lincoln" and "Booth" from their originary counterparts and the mythological clout they carry as individuals who have singlehandedly changed the course of American history. *Topdog/Underdog*'s very own Lincoln (also endearingly referred to throughout the play as "Link") and Booth however, are revealed to be foils of great disparity. The latter lives a life of crime boosting or stealing whatever he needs while the former can only find work as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator at the local arcade. The unlikely sibling duo is made even more incredulous when their names contextualise them as part of a historical narrative rendered immensely ironic in light of the characters' races and that of their namesakes. This overwhelming disparity empties the names of "Lincoln" and "Booth" of their grandeur and resonance, and gives Parks fertile ground with which to work contemporary anxieties into a re-contextualised narrative.

The homage to these historical figures can never be completely evaded; a lingering reminder that the audience cannot escape because of its familiarity. Yet, throughout the play, Parks tests the integrity of these discursive attempts that have been the now-crumbling bedrock of an increasingly contrived sense of unity amongst the American public. Parks could not have done this more overtly or subversively by having the characters of Link and Booth be African-American brothers. As a stark juxtaposition to the white men they were named after,

introducing them as black makes the play poised to complicate America's already fraught relationship with its racial history. Instead of drawing upon the issues of race and racial identity which Parks chooses to reckon with in the play however, she avoids the temptation of immediately casting the play as an explicitly political manoeuvre. Considering today's socio-political climate, putting important historical narratives in the same conversation as the sensitive issues of blackface and whiteface can be read as impudent and controversial enough to galvanise public attention. However, instead of playing the race card—returning to the scene from *Curb Your Enthusiasm* we started off with—Parks, in that interview, suggests a way into the play that begins elsewhere: with the bigger and broader question of what it means to be connected to others.

Clearly, what was important to Parks was not the political statement the play could make, but a larger preoccupation with a more universal concern of coexistence. The difficulty with this is not merely found in the absence of a connection, but precisely in the surfeit and density of it. When Parks speaks of the ideas of “family” and “family of man”, she is speaking about the inevitable condition of humanity, of the individual having to negotiate the self alongside and in relation to the other. “This is a play about family wounds and healing,” she reiterates in her introduction to *Topdog/Underdog* (4), and in her body of work, *Topdog/Underdog* and *The America Play* come as a dyad of plays that is preoccupied with historical discourses so lodged within the national consciousness that they have been aggrandized into myths. The figure of Abraham Lincoln forms the lynchpin of both of those works which seem to arrive at a more specific interpretation of the phrase “welcome to the family” (4) that Parks ends her introduction with. It is a phrase filled with ambiguity, and within this unspecified interpretation of what “family” refers to emerges a question: whether any true sense of a shared fraternity, can ever be translatable or synonymous with “American”.

Her curious choice to rely on that image of kinship, so often idealised and made complicit in the rhetorical conceit of community and uplift, strains against the play at its very outset; its title of “Topdog/Underdog” already establishes an antagonism that turns into a refrain in the rest of the play as it foreshadows fraternity giving way to a more insidious hierarchy. The refrain is a thematic one in that it reverberates within the play’s structural frame of the 3-card monte game, but also instantiates itself sonically as an audible motif, a verbal chorus that both Link and Booth use as part of their hustling routine. “Theres thuh other loser and theres thuh red card,thuh winner” (Parks 81), their chant goes. The game is straightforward, and the rules non-negotiable: in this short street con, the dealer shows players a card, and quickly shuffles it and two other cards face-down around a table. Players win the game and earns the bet by choosing the designated card from among the three. The rules of the game go on to structure the dynamics of the play as it is condensed into a one-dimensional, hypercompetitive version of reality. In this austere world that is as spartan as Booth’s apartment which forms the setting of the play, its simple composition of a dialogue played out entirely in one act offers the opportunity for a similarly uncomplicated sense of a resolution: someone comes out of this play a loser and a winner in this foreshadowed zero-sum game, and the audience is here to witness the conclusion of not just something, but someone.

Yet, Parks derives a benevolent reading of her own play in spite of the uncompromising bleakness of what its title seems to point toward. In a performance consisting entirely of a dialogue carried entirely by two characters, extrapolating itself thematically to the larger communes of family and humanity might seem ambitious; how does the story of two brothers, at odds with the memories of their uneasy childhood and struggling against the reality of their disillusioning adulthood, say something hopeful and human about a world that seems to spurn them? This has echoes of Judith Butler’s idea of precarious lives discussed in chapter one in which her call to recognize those who live at the periphery is revisited in *Topdog/Underdog*.

This is not to say that Parks is misrepresenting her own play by speaking of a “family”, ostensibly suggesting a kind of ideal that includes those precarious individuals in this metaphorical fraternity. Certainly, in light of the lamentable state of American socio-politics that has become increasingly chaotic, the appeal to idealism becomes a convenient way to assuage a public that is at odds with itself. To exemplify this in a familiar encounter, there is no need to look further than where we started from. In the opening sequence of *Between The World and Me*. In Ta- Nehisi Coates’ encounter with the television news show host, her attempt to coerce Coates into response about “hope” was essentially a plea for a counterpoint to their disillusioning reality, a sense of uplift in the story, and an optimistic portrayal of progress.

Parks’ choice of words however, finds veracity not in any presentation of hopefulness as panacea to contemporary troubles, but in the way it acknowledges the difficulties of modern existence that everyone is predisposed to, though more profoundly for some. In *Topdog/Underdog*, the vicissitudes of brotherhood and kinship are entwined together within the struggle of poverty, but it insists on approaching this through a study of the black body in action and the discursive context it seethes against. It asks the question: what kind of connections does a body being black invite, and does it live because of or in spite of them? To see black bodies unfolding and being animated on stage in real time creates a visceral encounter akin to one that we concluded the section on *Citizen* with. If that discussion ended with considering the implications of being black against a white background and how that experience is rendered visually, *Topdog/Underdog* reifies that into a performative display of bodies. Instead of Coates and Rankine’s attempt to direct readers toward the phenomenological through a play of perspectives, symbolism presides over realism in Parks’ play, in which the bodies of Link and Booth imbibe a greater significance other than their own; placeholders for other forms of discourses and a site for meaning-making that originates from beyond the self.

3.1 Intersections of Corporeality and Fiction

The character of Link exemplifies this discursive role in particular. His job is to impersonate Abraham Lincoln's dying moment in which he sits unknowingly in Ford's theatre watching a performance of *Our American Cousin* before John Wilkes Booth shoots him from behind. The cheapened simulacra that the arcade provides is, however, more concerned with providing a thrilling sense of the illicit than the accuracy of its representation in recreating the fabled scene. Customers partake unscrupulously in presidential assassinations, assume the role of John Wilkes Booth without being physically tied to the scene as the body responsible for the pulling of the trigger, and are able to perform in the impossible act of participating in a historical narrative set in stone a long time ago. The arcade's only responsibility is to abridge history such that the scene is made more conveniently palatable to the average arcade patron seeking quick amusement. Cutting straight to the chase, no elaborate setup is put in place, and no attempt was made to encourage the viewer to suspend their disbelief apart from the lackadaisical decision to use whiteface on a black man to convince patrons of his character's whiteness. Deprived of any sophisticated display of costumes, staging, or acting, all there is to this sordid re-enactment is Link's seated repose on a chair, his crude Abraham Lincoln outfit, and a stranger's grip around a fake gun pointed to the back of his head.

Link's place in all of this is peculiar. His role is not to provide a convincing performance of Abraham Lincoln for each paying customer; the word "performance" here operates as a bit of an overstatement considering that all he has to do is sit in his chair and play dead when the customer pulls the trigger. It is precisely this blandness in the portrayal, its lack of verisimilitude and historical apathy that lends its appeal to patrons—or so Link claims:

LINCOLN: People are funny about they Lincoln shit. Its historical. People like they historical shit in a certain way. They like it to unfold the way they folded it

up. Nearly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming. You trying to get me fired. (57)

Link makes this observation in reaction to Booth's suggestion that he should dramatize his performance, especially since the arcade has threatened to replace Link with the more economical and convenient option of a wax dummy (48). Booth coaches Link toward a more slapstick rendition of things, encouraging him to flail his arms and scream in pain at the sound of the gunshot, but suddenly recoils from the viscerality of the scene as he gingerly admits that "I dunno. It was looking too real or something" (57). It is an admission particularly out-of-character for the usually confident and self-assured Booth, but goes to show how the reality when confronted is sometimes too immense. His admission of "I dunno" is particularly revealing of succumbing to a certain unknowable and unfathomable force that he could not predict would arise. The suspension of disbelief—and hence a compelling belief in the verisimilitude of Link's act—is rendered not a choice but an inevitability that Booth feels unable to be extricated from in this irrevocable scene; neither can he mitigate this inscrutable power that seems to be emanating from Link's body.

In Booth's moment of weakness and uncertainty, a pertinent question arises: what is he succumbing to? What exactly is "too real"? Certainly, physical trauma re-enacted onstage too severely can yield an aversive reaction, especially when it is of someone so revered, whose living form has been deeply immortalized and reproduced as an iconic national image. However, Booth seems less concerned about the tainting of Abraham Lincoln's image than with the body currently reliving the last moments of his life in morbid fashion. Indeed, Booth seems to have a general aversion to seeing his brother dressed as Lincoln, even demanding that he change out of his costume before arriving home in the future. His hostility thus seems to be directed to the theatrical black body, and in one particularly transparent moment makes the audience and Link privy to the reason why: his fear of the past, of "going all the way

back...when folks were slaves and shit” (27). His confession of it being “too real” is therefore a cue for Link to stop that transposition into the past, a plea for him to return to the present moment in which the body can assuredly pick itself back up and place itself into the same arcade seat, awaiting the next customer.

3.1.2 *Unfolding History Through the Body*

Link’s earlier remark makes itself resonant here, particularly in the metaphor he uses in describing a history neatly bound up, a history that can “unfold...the way they folded it up” (57). Booth seems to share a similar sentiment in his apprehension of the past’s spilling into the present, a fear that too heavy-handed an approach would risk dislodging from it something unexpected, and interrupting his experience of the seemingly equanimous present without “slaves and shit”. In a lot of ways, Parks is anticipating what Ta-Nehisi Coates would later articulate as “the Dream” in *Between The World and Me*. Booth carries the same kind of ideals that those whom Coates accuses of “believ[ing] that they are white” do (6)—what he described in terms of manicured lawns, celebratory barbeques and the taste of dessert (11) is reiterated by Booth in *Topdog/Underdog* as new suits (29), the luxury of owning a phone (36), and his girlfriend, Grace (14). A running theme throughout the play is Booth’s desire to be a successful 3-card monte hustler, often trying to coerce Link, once a skilful card thrower, into capitalising together on what he calls an “economic opportunity” (26). Like Coates’ “dreamers”, his brother’s refusal becomes a source of tension in the play as it threatens to send him back into a time when the idea of progress, of the American Dream, is still a myth that needs believing in order to exist. It is thus also a time in which that myth is at its most vulnerable; any hint of its contrivance is enough to sunder it as easily as it is constructed—a prospect that threatens to wake dreamers from their idyll. Coates’ emphasis to his son is that these people will protect the

idyll at all costs, and it is this same impulse that Booth imbibes when he suddenly demands for Link to stop writhing in his simulated death.

Link's body is therefore a way into that historical moment. His corporeality serves as a reminder of Emancipation and the Civil War of which Abraham Lincoln was a key figure of, wars fought for bodies with bodies. The theatrical imitation, no matter how crass, conjures an anachronism in having called upon an old and completed narrative of Lincoln's assassination which cannot be altered. Yet, there is something compelling about playing a role forbidden, and of a character so infamous. In the arcade, bodies are substitutable and estranged from their original identities. Patrons enter and assume the persona of John Wilkes Booth with unquestioned ease and anonymity. Likewise, Link's role was not to create a version of Abraham Lincoln, but to inhabit it. Replacing a previous employee who disappeared without a trace, the coat Link now wears is the exact same one that he left behind, a literal taking-over of his mantle. Beneath the iconic coat and top hat, and under the layer of whiteface, the conceit of the arcade is that no one can tell who it is playing Lincoln, or the difference from one body performing it to the next. Link himself appears to be cognizant of his transience and dispensability, and reveals a suspicion towards the circumstances he has found himself in: "they say the clothes make the man. All day long I wear that getup. But that dont make me who I am" (33). Link insists on the integrity of his identity in spite of his body being effaced every day, of having to slip into another body while suppressing his own.

In the spirit of his indignation however, we can likewise ask: what makes the man? A perennial question when dealing with identity politics, the question is too all-encompassing to be satisfied with a straightforward answer. But it is also precisely in the capaciousness of its unanswerability that *Topdog/Underdog* thrives in. The usual markers of identity—name, appearance, behaviour—are rendered farcical in the play. Hired by the arcade due to his likeness in name to Abraham Lincoln, Link's blackness becomes the punchline precisely due to

his physical unlikeness to his namesake. When stripped of his costume, Link's efforts at impersonating someone so vastly different from him in position and circumstance still cannot preclude him from suffering the same fate as many black men with black bodies do—get shot. He therefore simultaneously encompasses many coinciding juxtapositions of black and white, president and citizen, past and present. This amputation of self from body and the ensuing re-embodiment demonstrates a phenomenological fluidity that challenges the idea of the body as a static form, and returns us to the concept of body images in which the experience of the body is a constant construction. This marks a return to the beginning of this chapter and which was concerned with the significances a body imbibes beyond itself. *Topdog/Underdog* demonstrates the burden of being saturated with these discourses. Bringing to the forefront the heritability of history and bodies, Link illustrates the metaphorical plight of black bodies in America in which they inherit conflicting discourses as black and as American, a schism within themselves and expressed in the form of strange and estranged bodies. Clearly, Link is more than just his costume, but in *Topdog/Underdog* the difficulty is precisely that he is too many things at once.

3.2 Performativity and Space

Link's body is thus an intersection of discourses, from a historical tragedy revered and remembered to a contemporary one whose ubiquity has rendered it trite and unsurprising. Both of them however, like Link acknowledges, are clean affairs without the spurting of fake blood or the agonizing cries of imagined pain, "not raggedy and bloody and screaming". His swift and undramatic death is protected by the apparatus of the arcade where everything is an act of contrivance, a mere mechanism to satiate a thirst for quick and easy entertainment. Entrenched in artifice, it thus seems as if Parks is stubborn in allowing any headway into examine what the black body is by making it immensely unreadable under all of Link's performative layers. She does however bring the audience into an off-theatre moment. Present only as part of Link and Booth's conversation, as all other characters in this play are, the audience is told of a particular

patron whose eccentric behaviour actually reveals much more than just the strange characters who are drawn to Link's section of the arcade. A frequent customer, his routine is to whisper into Link's right ear and asking him the cryptic question that Link and Booth now echo on stage in chorus-like fashion:

BOOTH. What'd he say this time?

LINCOLN. "Does thuh show stop when no ones watching or does thuh show go on?"

BOOTH. Hes getting deep.

LINCOLN. Yeah.

BOOTH. Whatd he say, that one time? "Yr only yrself—"

LINCOLN "—when no ones watching," yeah. (38-39)

It is an unrelenting assault on the performative wall that Link has to build between him and those who partake in his imaginary murder. A metatheatrical moment is thus introduced here in which the customer forcibly separates Link from his character Lincoln. Spoken to the audience as well, it becomes a question that applies to this unspoken stage that Link and Booth are currently on—the show does not stop for them. It is also an off-theatre moment in which the audience is made to think about what happens off the stage, which is also a question of where the stage *is*. Link thinks the threshold of the stage is as far as the arcade goes, but clearly, he lacks the authority to determine that, and consequently to determine when he is read as his character and when he can be acknowledged as himself. While the whole play is set outside the performative space of the arcade and in Booth's apartment, this supposedly neutral space in which Link can be out of character is still part of the audience's gaze. It is, in fact, coterminous with all of the audience's gaze as the stage they are observing. Even in what seems to be an innocuous space where Link is untethered from the spectre of Abraham

Lincoln, he thus never seems truly free from settling into a clear identity. “yr only yrself when no ones watching” was the utterance, and unfortunately for Link he is never not being watched.

If Rankine sought to illustrate the hypervisibility of black bodies in textual form, then Parks is demonstrating its optics by instantiating Hurston’s refrain of “I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background” in corporeal fashion. The anxiety voiced within Hurston’s quote is that of being incessantly watched, and certainly Link knows this experience from his job at the arcade and especially in his background in 3-card monte. Playing the role of the dealer, the movement in Link’s hands appears to be the key to beating him. “Lean in close and watch me now” goes the refrain (81); the dealer moves three cards quickly around the table, and tracking his hands will ideally reveal the position of the winning card. Yet, his hands are also the most deceptive tools in the scam, and Link acknowledges this when he teaches his brother to “look at my eyes not my hands” (80). The authority he encapsulates in his body as a dealer is palpable, being able to direct or misdirect the player’s gaze with his dexterity. Link admits that even as a mere impersonator of Abraham Lincoln, there is some power as the intermediary between the folding and unfolding of the past, a kind of arbitrator over the way history is read or, more aptly, consumed.

Yet, he also finds that on occasion this authority escapes him, and he inadvertently becomes the body he clumsily assumes. Early in the play he recounts to his brother an incident that occurred on the bus on the way home from work in which a schoolboy, having just had a lesson on American history, recognizes Link’s costume and naively assumes he is actually Abraham Lincoln in the flesh (15). There is thus a slippage between Link’s own identity and that of Abraham Lincoln. Notably, this slippage has already occurred once in the play, though perhaps at too early an instance to be detected. Link’s first appearance in the play is an already tenuous moment in which he initially appears to the audience as Abraham Lincoln, traversing the stage silently in that few moments of silence before Booth sees him. He maintains that

illusion as well as the bewildering anachronism between Booth's modern home and appearance juxtaposed against the familiar figure of Abraham Lincoln, but only up till the point when he removes his makeup. As Booth is first startled by Link's appearance (13), the audience experiences a moment of disorientation as he removes the whiteface on stage in a purposeful break from character. Anticipating the sleight of hand that will be introduced more literally later in the form of 3-card monte, it is Parks this time who is responsible for this instance of confusion. A running pattern in the play thus seems to be the perennial difficulty of figuring out reality from illusion, or, in Link's words, "what is" and "what aint" (77). In dealing with how the black body is perceived and how it is constructed on stage, there is also the concurrent anxiety with the white noise surrounding it; the diversions that serve to occlude rather than to clarify. The audience is forced to think about what they are looking at, and what they should actually be looking at.

In *Topdog/Underdog*, the two bodies of Booth and Link are the only thing we can look at, overwhelming the gaze with a presence that consumes the whole stage. As the only two characters in the play, any sense to be made can only be derived from their corporeal ebb and flow on stage. Their bodies bear the responsibility of re-enacting and retelling their past on stage, and for Link especially, his body forms the centre of discourse that parallels the personal and the historical. As in the case of mistaken identity that Link experiences with his brother and the schoolboy, it is precisely in this conspicuity that a tension arises between the overt and visible body that the audience is compelled to look at, and the valence assigned to it through the figures they have to embody. Yet, by conjuring the ghosts of other characters that the audience never actually get to see on stage, they blur the distinction between their own corporeality and of those that they reckon with; the question of "does thuh show stop when no ones watching" (38) is not just a sundering of the boundaries between reality and fiction or between the stage and offstage, but also an incision into the threshold of where the body begins

and ends. We encountered this mapping of space and body previously in Claudia Rankine's visual representation of Zora Neale Hurston's metaphor of the white background. In that illustration, blackness takes on a more literal textual form in which the separation between text and its white background bleed into each other as blurs and smudges on the page. It is a phenomenological excess that Rankine is pointing to, yet the spill-over here is felt instead through the audience's gaze and their own experience of doubleness, illusions, and visual instability.

3.3 Metatheatres in *Topdog/Underdog*

Parks' project thus seems to be set on a different trajectory than Rankine and Hurston, even if all of them are speaking of ways in which the black body is perceived. Hurston describes the dynamics of spectatorship in a distant meeting of black and white bodies which culminates in a feeling of entrapment within the surface of the white background. Reckoning with a past that only she is privy to, Hurston deftly sums it up by bringing the reader back to the act of visual representation in which seemingly two-dimensional images are able to create a sense of depth between foreground and background; where the landscape recedes along lineations made by black on white allowing the symbol to present itself. Claudia Rankine deals with the same through an abstraction into an actual printed image. It is however inflected with her own metatextual attempts at demonstrating the overtness of the image and its artifice. Where Hurston calls for an empathetic assumption of the persona's perspective from the first person, Rankine is more concerned with how the image came to be rather than insisting upon its specific meaning as a signifier.

The self-reflexive treatment of the visual piece brings our attention to the collusive presence of the reader's own inadvertent gaze—a gaze that necessarily needs to pitch blackness against the “white background” in order to discern the visual object in the picture. Attempting

to simultaneously attend to it as both text and image however, leaves the eye bewildered and the mind unsettled; this is precisely what Parks conveys in the play through a second level of abstraction in which she introduces a performative layer. In each of these instances, the reader is forced to partake in the act of looking, but it is in *Topdog/Underdog* that the act of looking becomes unstable, almost untenable; instead of appealing to the audience's sensorial apperception, Parks' strategy is to corrupt the viewer's gaze upon the black body, a gaze which takes its integrity for granted. As a dramatic rendering of that image in *Citizen*, of black text on white paper, Parks casts shadows and spectres on stage that corrupts the clarity of the black body, akin to the smudges in the image from *Citizen*. In the same metafictional spirit that it engenders by calling upon the presence of the human hand that has smudged the words in the image, *Topdog/Underdog* figures the gaze as complicit in rendering the blackness of the black body, its hand present in its own creation.

3.3.1 The 3-Card Monte Hustle as a Structural Device

Using the structural device of the 3-card monte game, the play's attitude towards its audience involves a sense of ludic misdirection that warps the dynamics of the theatre between stage and audience. This begins with how the stage—as the main visual focal point—is set, and throughout the play we see different configurations of the theatrical space continue to unfold within the set of Booth's apartment that we began with in the opening scene. Consisting entirely of only one act, the momentum of the performance precludes the possibility of any elaborate alterations in staging. However, Parks betrays this general stasis by allowing another theatrical layer to subtly unfurl under the eye of the audience. She plunges them into this *mise-en-abyme* swiftly and unsuspectingly at the start as the play opens with Booth performing the 3-card monte hustle to an imaginary audience upon his imaginary card table (11).

Built from recycled milk crates, Booth's makeshift playing board makes for a microcosmic stage within a stage as he opens up a secondary theatrical space for his solitary card throwing practice. As much as the rhythm of his patter is stilted and his movements tentative, the audience still inevitably becomes part of the unseen gathering of onlookers that he is performing for. The fourth wall obscures them from Booth's view, and occludes their awareness of their own presence in the scene. Yet, the inevitable inscription of the audience as part of the act is affirmed by Link whose experience with card-throwing yields him this insight: "[d]ealer always sizes up thuh crowd. Everybody out there is part of the crowd" (78). To be part of the crowd is thus not a choice, but an immanent condition; it may not be overtly portrayed, but the audience is the one being sized up, worked on, and hustled. All it takes is for the gaze to be drawn in and beguiled before the body follows suit. The "out there", in the case of the theatre, is no longer indeterminate, but demarcated by how far the dynamics of sight is engaged upon. Booth, as the aspiring dealer, seeks to coalesce those who are tethered by their sight into an imagined mass of bodies that he is performing to. In this case, the black body thrives as the visual object. The black body wants to be the center of attention, yearns to be watched, and relishes the scrutiny directed upon it as the audience tries but struggles to parse out the performance amidst the misdirection. Link explains to Booth the mechanics and prowess of the body when placed in this performative vantage point:

LINCOLN. A goodlooking walk and a dynamite talk captivates their entire attention. The Mark focuses with 2 organs primarily: his eyes and his ears.

Leave one out you lose yr shirt. Captivate both, yr golden. (79)

Control over his physical form also determines the verisimilitude of the performance. This, according to Link, requires his voice and body to converge in a synchronized discourse that captures the audience's voice and body, rendering it captive to the undulations of a black body that turns scrutiny upon itself. For Booth, the initial struggle here in the opening scene is for the

mastery of his own body as he practices what is later revealed to be Link's original card throwing routine. His inexperience with it however, is clearly seen at the end of his rehearsal where it unravels. Even though the imagined crowd is his own conjuring, it becomes a presence that reacts and responds to him in ways that he seemingly cannot control:

BOOTH. ...Don't touch my cards, man, don't—

(*Rest*)

Dont do that shit. Dont do that shit. Dont do that shit! (12)

Booth's assertion of "dont do that shit" is an attempt at controlling his performance if said once. When emphatically repeated the second and third time however, it becomes a plea both indignant and desperate, signalling a loss of control over the bodies whose eyes and ears he was supposed to have sway over. This breaking point of his performance comes as a reaction to the wilful bodies of his imagined audience. Even though they spawn from Booth's mind, placing them as observers already distinguishes them as a corporeal other that has the ability to displace his performance and render what he does with his own body futile without even physically coming into contact with him. They mutiny against him as the director of his own performance, and here an expression used by Sara Ahmed in *Wilful Subjects* comes to mind. "Wilfulness refers to the part that in willing has forgotten it is just a part," (100) she posits, while thinking about the corporeal as a metaphor for different conceptions of wholeness and order. Here, the theatrical order has been abandoned as Booth's psychological manifestations seethe under the ineptitude of his unwieldy body that has yet to master the art of card throwing. The audience, originally a part of the theatre, now overwhelms it entirely, their gaze opening up a vulnerability in a performance that is tethered to his body.

To see the body flounder is thus to see it struggle to master the space they find themselves in, and in *Topdog/Underdog* the challenge to do so might just render it permeable to the gaze that seeks to upset this equanimity by attending to it with metatheatrical awareness.

If this is the disposition that Parks wants to colour her own audience's theatrical experience with, African-American philosopher George Yancy's reading of his own blackness, offers a lot of resonances to her approach and offers a way into understanding what she is trying to achieve through inducing a self-reflexive attitude while watching the play. In *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, Yancy quotes from Charles Johnson's essay 'A Phenomenology of the Black Body' and reflects: "Phenomenologically, I experience myself as 'the profile that their frozen intentionality brings forth'" (69). Through Johnson, Yancy speaks of the doggedness of the white gaze in carving out a "profile", in being the visual product of someone else's cognition, a palimpsest that is unyielding in its fixity. There is no room in the theatre, however, for flatness of the textual object and its static nature; out of all the black writers discussed, Parks is the one in the best position to salvage it through a dramatic demonstration of the dynamics between bodies and gazes and how it can articulate that relationship when the former is within the condition of blackness. While Hurston uses a metaphor for the petrifying power that the gaze has over the black body under scrutiny, Rankine begins to gesture towards the hand that created it as a visual image that can potentially be altered. *Topdog/Underdog* however, abandons the attempt at representation, opting instead to flesh it out fully in a visceral experience that seeks not to be understood, but to be felt. On Parks's stage, she prepares a place in which the gaze operates under a different climate, endowing this seemingly static corporeal image with a malleability that is too unwieldy to be pinned down. This happens not just visually with the optical sleight-of-hand that Link embodies in his likeness to Abraham Lincoln, but also in the body as site in which theatre fractures into the metatheatrical as previously discussed. If the gaze, as George Yancy claims, works by "distort[ing] the black body" (69), by manipulating its form according to their will, then Parks' strategy is precisely to challenge the potency of the gaze by opening the body up to an unprecedented kind of slippage

in which she abandons the pursuit of “what is” the black body for the more open-ended “what aint” (Parks 77).

3.3.2 What is and What Aint, Reality and Fiction

The question of “what aint” is a question of unreality, that which is not what it seems. Inadvertently, we are revisiting the device of misdirection in the play, and this begins with examining the metatheatrical body and its anxious relationship with reality. Thomas Rosenmayer, in his elucidation of the term “metatheatre” as first thought of by Lionel Abel, points out two of its characteristics that resonate here. Firstly, that its own artificiality is acknowledged by its own characters, a concern that they express regarding their own existential condition; secondly, that the characters have the capacity to override the conditions given to them by their own creator (88). Taking them together, these express a scepticism towards the theatre as being something that can be taken for granted, something that harbours no pretences. It is a refusal to completely suspend disbelief which, according to Catherine Gallagher, is “the condition of fictionality, prompting judgments... about its believability, its plausibility” (346). The tension between managing a critical distance and attending to what is being overtly presented is a choice the audience has to make, and cannot go unacknowledged if the play begins to behave provocatively towards itself. Nevertheless, the yearning for clarity and some sense of veracity as an epistemic foothold on the play is powerful. There is a sense of refuge in knowing “what is”, a potential egress out of the morass of signs and symbols that obfuscate and misdirect as it does in the 3-card monte card trick that Parks employs to translate that sensation into a visceral experience. In the act of misdirection, the apparent becomes the suspicious. Viewers are compelled to approach the obvious with apprehension, but the more astute among them will also consider that the reality powering the illusion is occurring elsewhere beyond their sight. The deception only works when it manages to keep the inner workings of its artifice under wraps even while nevertheless remaining seductive to the curious

and anticipating viewer looking for a chance to unravel it—the mechanism that will metafictionally unveil its own conceit always being under a veneer, hidden in plain sight, waiting to be found. Outsmarting the dealer involves parsing out the conceit contained in the movements of his body where every misstep reveals a sliver of reality, and it is precisely this rush to outwit and expose the apparatus behind the trick that drives Booth to challenge his brother in a 3-card monte duel.

Booth coerces Link into a match, him as the mark and Link as the dealer. At stake here is not just who gets the upper hand in their sibling rivalry, but also an assertion of their own identity. Recognized as a highly impressive card-thrower back in the day before quitting the cards, Booth thinks of his brother in his current state as washed-out, an underdog. He prefaces his challenge with the provocation: “no matter what you do you cant get back to being who you was. Best you can do is just pretend to be yr old self” (97). “3-Card” (24), the name of Booth’s newfound card-hustling persona that he coined for himself in the first scene, is a projection of his aspirations, an identity that he has created and found on his own while Link has lost his in the irretrievable past. All Link can do is to approximate his erstwhile self through a corporeal re-enactment, and Booth is convinced that his performance will capitulate and give out when faced with “3-Card” in his absolute state. Essentially, he is relegating Link’s ontological status to a performance that cannot escape its artificiality. It is akin to John Searle’s understanding of the dramatic performance which he describes not as an attempt at representing a set of circumstances, but as a “pretended state of affairs itself” (Searle 328). Bodies in the play might thus seem like they are engaging in a reiterative fashion by imbibing the past—Link of Lincoln, Link of his old self, Booth of Link, and the brothers of their namesakes. However, the recourse to history cannot preclude them from their own disillusioning struggle of having to be the visual spectacle on stage as actors; that is all that Link can ever amount to, according to Booth. Just as a flailing black body in an Abraham Lincoln costume still resembles a black

body—like many black bodies—in trauma, Link trying to re-inhabit the persona of the dealer will remain a vacuous juxtaposition of the past, merely a body shuffling cards on stage.

Booth imagines that he has Link figured out after he easily wins their first game. He chooses the correct card to reveal the deuce of spades, another subtle allusion to duplicity. Instead of stopping there and claiming his victory however, Booth admits in his ensuing conversation with Link:

BOOTH. I dunno. It didnt feel real. Kinda felt—well it didnt feel real.

LINCOLN. We're missing the essential elements. The crowd, the street, thuh traffic sounds, all that.

BOOTH. We missing something else too, thuh thing thatll really make it real.

LINCOLN. Whassat, bro?

BOOTH. Thuh cash. Its just bullshit without thuh money. Put some money down on thuh table then itd be real, then youd do it for real, then I'd win it for real. (101)

Now that Booth has beat his brother once, he believes he has the upper hand. Having Link's performance laid out completely in plain sight in his mind, Booth assumes that he has full reading of Link's body, enough to want to wager his inheritance in this bet. What he is after is the veracity to prove to Link that "I beat you for real" (107). The possibility of losing something transforms the corporeal motions of card-throwing into an act that has repercussions on reality; the money becomes a language to articulate the hierarchy of winner and loser, top dog and underdog—juxtapositions that we have encountered elsewhere in terms of foreground against background, black against white. Booth operates as if the metatheatricity of Link's performance has been flattened with nothing left to uncover; in his anticipation of the win, he treats Link's body as an open book that can be interpreted straightforwardly. It resembles the two-dimensionality of the as image we encountered in *Citizen*, a body delineated by its visual

juxtaposition against a frame it cannot escape. The lines of its form lie contiguously upon the page, and engenders an immutability that George Yancy described as part of his experience of blackness.

Nevertheless, Parks reacts against such overt readings and assumptions of the black body. Turning the tide, Booth's hubris ultimately leads to Link revealing himself as the titular top dog, outmanoeuvring him with a hustle of his own. Having been tricked by Link's deft hands and smooth tongue, he loses the game as well as his own inheritance that he bet upon. It is in fact Link who anticipates Booth perfectly, leaving him destitute, and his pride broken. Link therefore does a reading of his own, and in doing so upsets the narrative that his brother so firmly believed. Each misstep was perfectly orchestrated to offer Booth the feeling of confidence in his own gaze while being unsuspectingly misled by it. Here, the readable text responds back to the gaze, upsetting the narrative impinged upon it. It is in fact Link's body that is in control as he shuffles the cards on the table; he is directing the misdirection.

Putting his inheritance at stake was a decision Booth made to make it feel "real", but it ironically appears now to perhaps have made it—to use one of Link's expression that we have encountered at the beginning— "*too real*" (57, emphasis mine). We recall Link in that moment explaining the appeal of keeping the illusion of a history tightly woven within a public discourse that seeks to water it down (57). It is a discourse translated into the visual field, as both text and image and as text approximating image, as we see with *Citizen*. When this conceit is exposed however, the unbearable reality incites a reaction to protect it and keep it under wraps at all costs; in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates it is a desire "to preserve the [American] Dream" (33). As part of the group of people who have been written into that discourse, she like Link, has an insight into the trick that is keeping this discursive fabric intact. It is precisely her position within it however, that poises her to lift this veil in self-reflexive fashion. Drawing on the tradition of black writing with Hurston and foregrounding more

contemporary responses to that same conversation, Parks employs the semiotics of the image as a way to put the black body in a place to reckon with that. Whether it is in the form of a slapstick rendition of death or assuming a more dominant position as a card dealer, Parks demonstrates that the challenge to master the space that it is in is a difficulty faced by black bodies in any capacity it is in; the recourse to noble histories and alternative narratives of black bodies in control are merely contrivances that attempt to aggrandize the black body as Ta-Nehisi Coates did with the myth of Queen Nzinga in *Between The World And Me* (45). However, as Coates later realizes (54), this cannot extricate the black body from its vulnerable condition of being a constructed object that has its provenance elsewhere—a textual object whose architect is the ubiquitous and unflinching gaze.

3.3.3 *The Final Hustle*

A lot of racial discourse thus hinges upon the black body. In spite of its vulnerability to the gaze however, Parks' endeavour is to instill it with a wilfulness that starts a friction against the space it is inscribed in. Making a return to Sara Ahmed in *Willful Subjects* once again, she conceives of this wilfulness to be “a bodily experience of not being accommodated by a space” (147). Building on her observation, Parks approaches this from another angle instead. Her interest is to pursue this further and to ask what happens if a body is persistently placed in a space that refuses to accommodate it, being the object of scrutiny. Placing the black body of Link in *Topdog/Underdog* in the midst of this reflexive intersection, Parks denies the viewer that ease of access and obfuscates the very idea that the subject can be perceived singularly and straightforwardly—a scepticism of the question “what is”, and whether it can even be answered. She presents it as a threat, a pandora's box that attempts to destabilise these discourses by turning the body into an anomalous presence that cannot be apprehended by the eye. We see this in the figure of Link's fallen body when Booth shoots him in a vengeful rage after losing the final game. That provocative image fulfils many narratives at once as the

ending tableau to Abraham Lincoln's death, Link's cycle of performance at the arcade, and the physical trauma that many black men go through outside the theatrical space. Imbibing so many possible readings at once, if the body signifies everything, then it might also not signify anything at all.

Conspicuous yet also poised to fall into metatheatrical rupture, within the black body thus lies the opportunity to mutiny against the gaze that created it. Parks does not just stop there, however. She leaves us a hint by the way of Link: "That's thuh dealer's attitude. He *acts* like he dont wanna play" (78). Parks acts as if she wants to preclude the body from being read. Thinking back to *Topdog/Underdog*'s anxiety with things being "too real" however, Parks also visualizes the black body in a mode of excess. The adverb of "too" already signifies an immensity that overwhelms, an excess of verisimilitude that dislocates the performance rather than clarifies. These moments of overflow and rupture often involve the body being the opening into a metatheatrical space. We can think back to Booth's opening performance being interrupted by Link's uncanny presence in costume, the visual startle that puts him in visceral discomfort. Parks chooses to revisit this in the last scene of the play in dramatic fashion: Booth realizes the tragedy he has committed and the prophecy he has ironically fulfilled according to their namesakes. This causes him to collapse—both physically over Link's body as well as mentally in his anguish (114); more significantly however, the play itself collapses with him as it signals its closing, the unveiling of the play as a fiction after the fact. When the artifice of discourse is revealed, and the body apprehended as it is, what is observed is a body broken. Parks intends for the sight of it to overwhelm, disrupt, and disturb the viewer, treating the gaze as a channel in which the beholder is just as vulnerable as the visual object it is scrutinizing.

To end the play, she leaves the audience in a disconcerting void, filled only with the sound of Booth's screaming voice of "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" (115) reverberating throughout the theatre. It is "the face...the vocalization of agony that is not yet

language or no longer language” (Butler 139), a description that returns us to Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* in her thinking of Emmanuel Levinas’ idea of the “face” (131). Her discussion takes us to a consideration of the relationship between the subject engaged in discourse and the Other who, in his addressing of the subject, assails and places him into a kind of captivity. Booth’s prelinguistic expression of anguish is a symptom of being seized in that captive moment, the result of a tension between the competing ontologies of the subject and the Other, between him and Link. According to Butler’s reading, discourse rouses at once the temptation to murder and the interdiction against it” (139), a condition that arises in all discursive interactions. In translating the struggle of that ambivalence into the spectatorial space of the theatre, Parks compels the audience to consider the pillaged black body, in its veracity, against our acute sense of corporeality. As the playwright, Parks’s responsibility and power is to control the extent of the theatrical illusion. In *Topdog/Underdog* however she performs her own sleight-of-hand, tearing the illusion down as quickly as she builds them up in unpredictable layers—she is the ultimate hustler.

The slash in “Topdog/Underdog” thus appears to be more illusory than ever. The multiplicity of ways it could be interpreted no longer seem to function adequately. Link, the “top dog” that finally unleashes the superior card-throwing skills he has had all along, does not actually come out on top at the end as the title’s typography suggests. Its symbolism of choice or possibility also appears less meaningful, as neither supplants the place of the other. The language of winning and losing prefaced with the slash occurs throughout the play only up until the point in which Booth kills Link. At that point, the slash begins to appear as a mark instead of a symbol, proof of a sundering upon the bodies of both brothers, a violence enacted upon them by Parks’ unseen hand as she declares to the audience that the game is over, that the violence they are witnessing and the agony of the black bodies on stage is also to be found in their reality.

Conclusion

Coates' initial question of "how do live free in this black body" (12) in *Between the World and Me* still remains open ended and unanswerable. It entails either an escape from the blackness of the body, or an exploration of its condition in the hope of understanding how one is figured within racial discourse. It is for good reason however; to propose a definitive answer to it would have been counterproductive to the project of creating a black body image that resists being confined to a deceptively unvarying state. Each of these writers reckon with variations of this same question with an emphasis on the black body, with Coates beginning by delving into his own personal past as well as the grandiose myths he believes he inherited as part of the legacy of his black body. He realizes that the vulnerability of his body can never be elided and is an ineluctable part of his condition—escaping from the blackness of his body is not an option because it is impossible to dislodge yourself from your own corporeality. The figures of Colin Kaepernick and O.J. Simpson are testament to how the black body will always be the site of his conflict in the hyphenated space within "African-American". It is within that space however, that allows him freedom in the struggle. Even if it is not a physical untethering from those who have the power to subjugate his black body, Coates insists that the cerebral freedom of being disillusioned, of being aware of the discourses that overwhelm the black body, will be the ultimate exercise of independence.

In a lot of ways then, Rankine acts upon Coates' urging to be cognizant of racial discourses that impinge the body, presenting each event of microaggression in acute detail. Recollection is not her primary concern in *Citizen* however. Placing the reader in the second-person, Rankine translates the pressures of racial gaze into discursive incoherence that undercuts the persona's retrospective reading of the racial moment. Confusing more than it clarifies, it captures the anxiety of being a black body amidst other white bodies in which racial discourse accosts the black body through the voice and the gaze.

This marks a discursive return to Zora Neale Hurston which Parks re-interprets on the three-dimensional stage. Where Rankine ended with some metafictional gestures to the black body as image, Parks translates this into the language of space and performance through the microcosm of the 3-card monte hustle. The motif of illusion that has been a subtle undercurrent in this thesis thus resurfaces here in full force as Parks turns the black body unreadable, bringing together the confluence of gaze and discourse in a metafictional instance, and rendering them inchoate.

Putting these three African-American writers was, in a way, an intercorporeal act itself not unlike that which they collectively call for. As much as race can be argued philosophically and ideologically, these works demonstrate the undeniable fact that race is ultimately transacted through the physical, an embodied trauma that has a stake in what it means to be both black and white, and therefore one that has to be reckoned with as a collective rather than a blind assertion of one's singular individual identity. Barack Obama echoes this in his memoir *Dreams From My Father* in which he reflects on the emptiness of declarations like "I'm an *individual!*" (100; emphasis not mine) in response to racism. Such disavowals of blackness only serve to fortify race as it is currently operationalized. Rather, he asserts that "our sense of wholeness would have to arise from something more fine than bloodlines we'd inherited...in all the messy, contradictory details of our experience" (204). It is precisely this messiness that these writers implicitly demonstrate in their diversity in approach, genre, and the collective reach into the historical past. It is a messiness that arises out of a multitude of voices all trying to answer different versions of the same question that Coates puts down in words: "how do I live free in this black body" (12).

Throughout this examination therefore, we observe how these contemporary black authors make recourse to many similar strains of thought, themes, and images which they have inherited and re-interpreted from black writers that came before. In this confluence, what emerges is not another new myth about the black body or another solution to the problem of blackness. Instead, what we see emerging is a black body in constant ebb and flow; the image morphing in front of us.

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