It is as if every valorization and every “ politicization” of life [...] necessarily implies a new decision concerning the threshold beyond which life ceases to be politically relevant, becomes only “sacred life,” and can as such be eliminated without punishment. Every society sets this limit; every society — even the most modern — decides who its “sacred men” will be. It is even possible that this limit [...] has now — in the new biopolitical horizon of states with national sovereignty — moved inside every human life and every citizen. Bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category. It now dwells in the biological body of every living being. — Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer[1]

In Althusser’s notion of interpellation, it is the police who initiate the call or address by which a subject becomes socially constituted. [...] The call is formative, if not performative, precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject [...] If one comes into discursive life through being called or hailed in injurious terms, how might one occupy the interpellation by which one is already occupied to direct the possibilities of resignification against the aims of violation? — Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter[2]

and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid.

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

— Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival”

Little Girl

“To live through the days sometimes you moan like deer,”[3] writes Claudia Rankine in Citizen: An American Lyric (2014), her critically acclaimed book of poems regarding race in twenty-first-century America. Rankine’s book is a motley hybrid of text and image; its lyric verse, prose fragments, film stills, photographs, and other visual images all center, whether directly or obliquely, on the accumulative traumas of structural racism. This essay reads Citizen against longstanding tropes of the breath in American poetry and within its own cultural moment of arbitrary, state-sanctioned violence against black citizenship in America. In an era when no person of color presumes to breathe freely, Citizen proposes a new model for the American lyric, a poetics of the moan and the sigh, borne out by the complexly raced and multiply identified subjects that speak in these poems. The moan and the sigh, both labored and lowing kinds of breath, suggest a means of survival, but they also memorialize the subject in extremis, formed in and through “injurious terms” and discursive “violation.”

The opening section of Citizen narrates a battery of mundane, but exhaustive microaggressions, before closing with a photographic reproduction of Kate Clark’s unsettling sculpture, Little Girl (above). Half–infant caribou, half-human, Little Girl suggests the ways in which structural racism complicates commonplace notions of subjectivity, and it embodies the vulnerability and dehumanization to which people of color are subjected when confronted with their “less than” status in American history and contemporary culture. The figure of Little Girl is exposed, vulnerable, painfully tender: the caribou calf lies with its limbs folded inward toward the body, its head turned away so as not to meet the gaze of the viewer. Instead, the soft pelt of the caribou calf invites the viewer to look, touch, and categorize the calf as object rather than subject. The face, the sometime seat of identity, is an uncanny composite of open, but illegible expression. Clark has shaved away layers of the calf’s pelt to reveal a thin, mottled skin, with “porous and oily features” like those of a human face.[4] The taxidermy pins pierce the delicacy of Little Girl’s face, tracing fault lines across the cheeks, eyes, brow, and forehead. Pierced and pieced together, Little Girl offers up clear signs of the violence of its own making; both the countenance and the self are precarious, made things — assembled through and against forces of racial violence and trauma.

Survival for persons of color in Rankine’s uniquely American lyric means to “moan like deer,” but what sort of breath is a moan? A sigh? What sorts of survivals, what sorts of poems attend the wounded, not-quite-human self?

Projective barbarisms

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color’d sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,
The sound of the belch’d words of my voice loos’d to the eddies of the wind,
[...]
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.
— Walt Whitman, from “Song of Myself,” Leaves of Grass

The free and uncontested circulation of air between the speaker and his surrounds has long served as a productive trope for American poets, but it is a claim not equally available to all. For Whitman and others in his tradition, the breath is a token of the poet’s manifest destiny, signaling his self-possession, privilege, and power; indeed, the idle “ease” with which Whitman contemplates his own breath suggests a speaker untroubled by his place in the world. At home in the wood, he can “become undisguised and naked,” utterly vulnerable to nature, and still no harm comes to him. Through the exposure of his body he claims continuity with the natural world and takes possession of everything from “love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine” to the “dark-color’d sea-rocks” and “hay in the barn.”

The poet’s “respiration and inspiration” mark his pedigree, inheritance, and dominion in the American landscape: “it is for” him (my emphasis), he who is “form’d from this soil, this air.” Whitman expressly links his being (i.e., his “respiration”) with his poïesis (i.e., his “inspiration”); indeed, his very existence, in life and on the page before us, depends entirely upon the capacity and authority of “[his] own breath.”

For some American poets, perhaps America is still Whitman’s America, where to breathe freely in the open air, “mad for it to be in contact with [them],” seems as intrinsic a right as life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness. But America has also been, even long before it became a sovereign nation, an enduring chronicle of untold suffering and death for its indigenous and enslaved populations. The first “literatures” of early colonial America marketed the new world — its flora and fauna (including its indigenous human populations) — as commodities ripe for commercial development and religious conversion.[5] As Saidiya Hartman writes in Scenes of Subjection, the “passage through the blood-stained gate is an inaugural moment in the formation of the enslaved,” and the “‘terrible spectacle’” of the black body injured or killed constitutes a “primal scene” that “dramatizes the origin of the subject.”[6] The terrible spectacle of racial trauma and black death persists in all eras of American life, from the Middle Passage and human chattel slavery, through Reconstruction and the Jim Crow years, and relentlessly onward into the present day.[7] As late as the early twentieth century, images of black bodies burned, hanged, and riddled with bullets circulated through the US Postal Service in the form of postcards, photographs, and other lynching memorabilia.[8] Today the latest versions of these same images — photographs and recordings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Philando Castile — circulate on our various social media platforms. We #saytheirnames. When we circulate these images, perhaps in outrage or resistance, we share them and participate in the economy of the terrible spectacle nonetheless. Thus we learn — and teach — who our “sacred men” will be.[9]

It is not a difficult thing to find: a photograph or film of the black body undone, the self unmade, the vital breath extinguished.

In his 1950 manifesto, “Projective Verse,” Charles Olson famously called for “composition by field,” an American poetry measured and meted out according to the extent of the poet’s breath. “The line comes,” Olson writes, “[...] from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes [...] for only he [...] can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending, where its breathing, shall come to, termination.” Like Whitman, Olson couples his respiration with his poïesis, as the poet’s breath provides both the structure and the life force of the poem. The poet’s agency in Olson’s formulation is paramount: he declares the very existence of the poem and decides the threshold between its beginning and end, line by line and breath by breath.
Olson also implies that the unfolding of the poem happens in real time and in lockstep with the physical being of the man — that is, with the body of the male poet “who writes, at the moment that he writes.” Thus the projectivist poet is a heroic masculine authority who, through his very being and breathing, propels the poem or stops it, at will, with utter self-assurance and autonomy.

Like Whitman, Olson defines and tests the poetic self against nature and its creative powers. In particular, he complicates his account of projectivism through his call for “objectism,” or “the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the ‘subject’ and his soul.” To say nothing of the privilege of repudiating one’s own ego — one must first be a subject before one can reject that status — Olson argues that the poet should humble himself before nature:

[…] western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use.

Though Olson argues that the Western poet is “of use” only insofar as “he achieves an humilitas” and refuses false distinctions between himself and natural objects, this humility still serves the purposes of a lingering egoism. Indeed, Olson soon reasserts the special creative status of mankind contra nature. Object of nature or no, the male poet stands apart from other natural creations, emerging through his linguistic acts as a sovereign, heroic rival to nature’s creative force:

But breath is man’s special qualification as animal. Sound is a dimension he has extended. Language is one of his proudest acts. And when a poet rests in these as they are in himself (in his physiology, if you like, but the life in him, for all that) then he, if he chooses to speak from these roots, works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size.

Dominion over nature through sound and language, Olson implies, ultimately depends on the breath and the way a poet’s breathing harnesses the energy of nature from within “his [own] physiology.” Though nature “has given him size,” it is the poet who “chooses to speak” (my emphasis) and wields his “projective size” over the expansive compositional field of the poem. The poet and his poem appear, by Olson’s account, larger than life.

Neither Olson nor Whitman succeeds in divesting himself of the ego, though their shared desire to do so is a curious one. Not only does this desire indicate and reinscribe their privilege and authority, but it culminates in their mastery over nature — and, it must be said, other kinds of subjects. It is the same mastery that underwrites Whitman’s voracious appetite for otherness when he claims, apparently in earnest, “I am the hounded slave” and “I behold the picturesque giant [negro] and love him […] Absorbing all to myself and for this song.” In Playing in the Dark, Toni Morrison writes that “the major and championed characteristics of our national literature — individualism, masculinity, [and] social engagement” are shaped by “a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence.” Morrison further asserts that “the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population.” Morrison’s insight suggests that white, male writers whose poetic selves appear coherent, self-actualized, or even heroic, achieve their coherence and power against a backdrop of persistent, if seldom acknowledged, racial trauma. Thus Whitman and Olson cannot afford to examine their privilege or authority too deeply, lest they forfeit them. Each feels sure of his own subjecthood and body — certain enough, at least, to risk becoming “undisguised and naked,” or to make over the other in one’s own imperative, projectivist likeness: “get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen.” Both Whitman and Olson are unafraid — indeed, they are eager — to project themselves, discursively and bodily, into uncharted public spaces. Each feels certain, it must be, of his safety, belonging, and inalienable right to speak. In brief, they enjoy the full rights of citizenship in America.
On July 17, 2014, in the last moments of his life, Eric Garner uttered, repeatedly, the words “I can’t breathe,” words that would become a rallying cry for protestors in the days immediately following his death. A grand jury later declined to indict the officer responsible for Garner’s death, sparking further widespread outrage and demonstrations. In major cities throughout the United States, citizens staged “die-ins,” lying down in the streets, their bodies utterly exposed and vulnerable to traffic. Remembered here in Rankine’s poem, Garner’s name appears among the names of others who have suffered his same fate. The roll call summons the dead even as it vanishes into the whiteness of the page, anticipating untold others yet to come. The refrain “In Memory of” rings in the ear like an anguished mantra. Years later, Garner’s name recalls his dying words, which expressed — improbably, impossibly — his own breath and life as he was losing them. Those three words are an utterance to which one never quite becomes accustomed, nor wishes to — they are the words of the subject in extremis, reduced and deprived of bare life.

_Homo sacer: he whose life is judged not worth the living, and whose death is met with impunity._

_The horror of Eric Garner’s death rests in the untranslatability of his suffering, his stifled words falling to silence as he passed away in the officers’ chokehold._

_The horror rests in the arbitrary manifestation of the sovereign state’s lethal force against one of its own citizens. The shock of his death, in both its avoidability and its fatedness, indexes the pernicious, ever-present threat of structural racism._

Whereas Olson failed to recognize his exhortation of the breath as the particular privilege of a white, male poet — a barbaric yawn in the Adornian sense — Rankine’s poems demonstrate that the breath as poïetic originary no longer obtains. Rather, Citizen evinces unfathomable rage and sorrow at
generations spent in the bloody shadow of structural racism, and Rankine imagines a poetics, if such a thing is possible, of the moan and the sigh. In particular, the poems in *Citizen* contest the singular, autonomous poetic self as imagined in “Song of Myself” and “Projective Verse,” and they enact the double-bind of subjection, its promise of liberation and fatalism at once.

*What does it mean for a poet of color, now, to “breathe” — to moan like a deer, to sigh, to gasp for breath, to survive? How does a poet of color still speak, in spite of/because of, the throat choked and the breath strangled?*

The third section of *Citizen* recounts the speaker’s response to a public lecture delivered by Judith Butler, perhaps suggesting that this speaker, like Rankine, is an academic.[15] “Not long ago,” the text tells us, “you are in a room where someone asks the philosopher Judith Butler what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in”(49). Ironically, by leaning in toward Butler, the audience enacts the very condition of vulnerability to which Butler ascribes our suffering in and through language:

> Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this.

For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person. After considering Butler’s remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that is hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present. Your alertness, your openness, and your desire to engage actually demand your presence, your looking up, your talking back, and, as insane as it is, saying please. (49)

As reported in this passage, Butler’s remarks recall her reflections on subjection and Althusser’s concept of interpellation in *The Psychic Life of Power*. In Althusser’s allegory of subject formation, a subject comes into being as it is hailed by an agent of the law (i.e., a policeman) and turns toward the address of power. The individual, Butler explains, becomes a subject in two senses at once: the individual gains recognition in the eyes of the law as a subject, while at the very same time, the individual suffers subordination to the power of the law.[17] Throughout *Citizen*, the question of address — the way language constitutes a listener’s identity through the addressability of the body — is an ever-present concern. The poems’ conspicuous use of the second person troubles our conventional understanding of the speaker’s role in the poem: “you are in a room,” and “you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you” (my emphasis). You. We might read this “you” as a sign of the speaker’s self-othering — that is, that the speaker says “you” in place of “I,” perhaps reflecting alienation from a sense of belonging and sovereign being. Indeed, as Butler writes in *Precarious Life*, “[the body] is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do.”[18] But this strange mode of address also vacates the possibility of Olson’s heroic, projective self, yielding instead a shifting complex of intersectional subjectivities. Not unlike the injurious racist language that the speaker ponders, the poem hails the reader discursively, rendering “hypervisible” the inevitable discrepancies between the lived identity of the reader and the experiences, feelings, and understandings, however alien or familiar, attributed to the reader by the poem’s direct address.

Still, the poem’s address is neither “projectile” nor “injurious,” but rather insinuating and seductive: if we “suffer from the condition of being addressable,” it is because we are desirous and seek recognition in and through language. Though we are pained by the exchange, we cannot help but say “please” and “thank you” for it. Butler poses the question this way: we turn toward the policeman’s hail, but why?[19]

In a subsequent passage, the speaker recounts a conversation with a friend, in which they consider the same underlying question — why be vulnerable, why turn? The friend advises, in ways that indicate her naïveté and privilege, that one should simply reject any unwanted, external shaping of
One's identity:

Another friend tells you you have to learn not to absorb the world. She says sometimes she can hear her own voice saying silently to whomever — you are saying this thing and I am not going to accept it. Your friend refuses to carry what doesn’t belong to her.

You take in things you don’t want all the time. The second you hear or see some ordinary moment, all its intended targets, all the meanings behind the retreating seconds, as far as you are able to see, come into focus. Hold up, did you just hear, did you just say, did you just see, did you just do that? Then the voice in your head silently tells you to take your foot off your throat because just getting along shouldn’t be an ambition. (55)

In response to the friend’s advice, the speaker seems to turn away and inward, reflecting obliquely on the impossibility of resisting the “ordinary moment” of the microaggression, with its infinite regression of “targets” and loaded “meanings.” Butler argues that the individual cannot help but turn and become vulnerable to the address of power, a fact that reveals the individual’s prior and persistent “openness and vulnerability to the law.” Butler observes that “the turn toward the law is not necessitated by the hailing; it is compelling, in a less than logical sense, because it promises identity.” [20] Thus a subject who makes herself unaddressable and invulnerable to the law, or to others, is not really a subject at all. And even Butler’s telling does not account for the case that confronts people of color in America today: for the individual already judged homo sacer, the law may or may not hail, and the subject may or may not turn, before (and irrespective of these circumstances) the law opens fire and kills — or not. In any case, the subjecthood achieved by the speaker in this passage, who “takes in things you don’t want all the time,” is conspicuously incoherent. Confronted by the microaggressive hail, the speaker stands astonished and cannot help but stutter for lack of comprehension: “did you just hear, did you just say, did you just see, did you just do that?” The speaker’s efforts to rescue the self similarly result in further fragmentation, as “the voice in your head” splinters from the speaker and commands “you take your foot off your throat.” Still, if the subjecthood conferred by such injurious terms is pained and fragmented, it is also an imperfect replication of the power that occupies it. [21] Here the choked stutter, and later, the moan and the sigh, though they are attenuated and incoherent forms of breath, may provide one way for Rankine’s speaker to “direct the possibilities of resignification against the aims of violation.”

Even in its very first lines, Citizen alludes to the bone-deep exhaustion that comes from a lifetime of confrontation with structural racism, racial violence, and the extrajudicial killings of black men, women, and children. “When you are alone and too tired to turn on any of your devices,” the speaker admits (and we, also the “you” of the poem, tell ourselves), “you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows [...] and you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor” (5). Here the injuries of the past are waiting for the speaker (and us), even in the very place that should be both sanctuary from the world and succor for fatigue. “You” — the speaker, you, and I — “fall back” into the troubled complex of past memory. The exhaustion and the assault of the world are habitual, drawing one futile expression after another from the speaker:

To live through the days sometimes you moan like deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets. Perhaps each sigh is drawn into existence to pull in, pull under, who knows; truth be told, you could no more control those sighs than that which brings the sighs about. (59)

There is no acceptable way to express the exhaustion, difficulty, and pain of addressability, of vulnerability, to language, power, and the world. The ambiguity of the singular-plural position of the speaker in this passage — neither “you” nor “deer” resolves to either case — allows this speaker to express with great intimacy both a singular and a shared experience at once. There is no acceptable way, in this speaker’s telling, to be other, to be black. Instead, each sigh and moan is met with dismissal, scorn, and anger — anything but the empathy and the recognition of a shared, human condition for which the speaker yearns. The moans and sighs are involuntary, and though they may
therefore signal some lack of sovereignty (of the breath, the body, the poem), they also insist upon
and make visible the speaker's suffering.

Rankine reminds us that these exhalations, though made in suffering, also allow the subject to
breathe and therefore, to be. Still, the breath and breathing for Rankine are not, as they were for
Whitman and Olson, an uncomplicated source of “inspiration” and poetic agency, but rather the
minimum conditions necessary for the preservation of bare life:

The sigh is the pathway to breath; it allows breathing. That’s just self-preservation. No one
fabricates that. You sit down, you sigh. You stand up, you sigh. The sighing is a worrying
exhale of an ache. You wouldn’t call it an illness; still it is not the iteration of a free being.
What else to liken yourself to but an animal, the ruminant kind? (60)

The speaker is aware that they do not move through the world as a sovereign subject — they do not
inhale and exhale as a free being would, but rather as a subject in extremis. Ruminants, of course, are
mammals that subsist on vegetable foods, chewed and fermented in specialized digestive tracks; to
“ruminate” means to chew the cud, but also to ponder or worry at length — and so to suffer. As the
speaker explains, as they meet continually with the limits of their otherness and brood, they become
less than human.

_Sometimes you moan like deer. Sometimes survival is an animal, the ruminant kind._

In their totality, the episodic prose poems in _Citizen_ leave little hope or room for redemption. Once
asked why there weren’t any “hopeful moments” in the book, Rankine offered only the promise of
survival: “The book is full of people living their lives, and even if it focuses on the interruptions to
those lives, around the interruptions there are still lives. That, I think, is important to remember.”
[22] To offer more than this, in the face of structural racism and state sovereignty, would be a failure
of poetic witness. But there is also this: in the fractured positioning of the speaker, _Citizen_ places
each of us within the biopolitical apparatus of the sovereign state. It affirms those who know it well,
and reminds those who do not, of our shared, though differing vulnerabilities: “Bare life [...] now
dwells in the biological body of every living being.” But bare life may have to be enough, for now, a
way forward for us all, since there is no end in sight:

“I can hear the even breathing that creates passages to dreams. And yes, I want to interrupt
to tell him her us you me I don’t know how to end what doesn’t have an ending.” [23]


2. Judith Butler, _Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”_ (New York: Routledge,
1993), 121–23.


4. Kate Clark, “Artist’s Statement.”

5. See John Smith, _The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles_, 1624, as
well as John White’s watercolor illustrations, included in Thomas Hariot, _A Briefe and True Report
of the New Found Land of Virginia_, 1871, Documenting the American South digital library,
University of South Carolina at Chapel Hill.

6. Saidiya V. Hartman, _Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-
7. *Citizen* alludes to many of these racial traumas through visual images, including J. M. W. Turner’s depiction of the Middle Passage in his painting *The Slave Ship*, and a photograph showing a white mob gathered at a public lynching in 1930. Rankine juxtaposes these images with contemporary representations of black suffering (e.g., a street sign that reads “Jim Crow Rd.”, a photograph of the Rutgers women’s basketball team, whose members famously endured Don Imus’s racial slurs, and an unfinished list of the names of people of color killed by law enforcement officers), implying clear continuities among mundane and horrific examples of racial violence.

8. The passage of the Comstock Act in 1908 outlawed the circulation of such materials via mail. In recent years, many of these same photographs and postcards were shown as part of a traveling public exhibition, “Without Sanctuary,” and they continue to circulate in an extensive exhibition catalog of the same title. For more on the exhibition, see James Allen, *Without Sanctuary* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2000).

9. In her discussion of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Hartman explicitly declines to rehearse the brutal scene of Aunt Hester’s beating, in order “to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave’s ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation, too often they imbue us to pain by virtue of their familiarity — the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances — and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering.” See *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.


12. Olson, “*Projective Verse*.”


14. The late Erica Garner, who followed her father in death prematurely at the age of twenty-seven, staged one of several notable die-in protests in memory of her father. For more, see Kia Marakechi, “Erica Garner Stages Die-In at Site of Her Father’s Arrest,” *Vanity Fair*, December 12, 2014.

15. A contemporary American philosopher and professor of comparative literature at UC Berkeley, Butler is perhaps best known for her theorization of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). The concepts ascribed to Butler in this passage revisit a thread of argumentation concerning vulnerability and address that appears in several of her books, including *Bodies That Matter*, *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), and *Precarious Life* (2004). Perhaps coincidentally, Butler delivered a public lecture at the Claremont School of Theology in 2009, while Rankine was still on the faculty at nearby Pomona College.

16. Butler’s remarks also reference her observation that discursive violence works on the body because the body is, by definition, vulnerable to the address of others. “The body,” she writes, “implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life.” See *Precarious Life*, 2nd ed.(New York and London: Verso, 2006), 26.


21. Butler explains that although the subject is constituted by its turn toward power, it need not remain fully governed by it: “what is enacted by the subject is enabled but not finally constrained by the prior working of power. Agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled. One might say that the purposes of power are not always the purposes of agency. To the extent that the latter diverge from the former, agency is the assumption of a purpose unintended by power, one that could not have been derived logically or historically, that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which it nevertheless belongs.” *Psychic Life*, 15.


23. In this final lyric poem, Rankine finally permits her speaker the first-person pronoun “I.” *Citizen* ultimately concludes, however, on a close-cropped image of J. M. W. Turner’s *The Slave Ship*, with the still-shackled leg of an African woman visible above the ocean’s surface as she drowns. This juxtaposition suggests that any redemption we might locate in the speaker’s use of the first person is caught in the infinite recursions of *Citizen*’s complex visual and textual narratives. See Rankine, *Citizen*, 159 and 161.

*June 20, 2019*

TAGS: