

# Citizen, Negative Capability, and the Poetics of Doubt and Discomfiture

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## Article abstract

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## *Romanticism on the Net*

### ***Citizen, Negative Capability, and the Poetics of Doubt and Discomfiture***

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#### **Abstract**

Juxtaposing two very different poets—Claudia Rankine and John Keats—this essay seeks a descriptive poetic practice that responds to our current moment in the long history of American anti-Black racial injustice while addressing the value of poetic work and public feeling in terms of discourses of public health. I reintroduce a sociolinguistic practice of discomfort into Keatsian “Negative Capability,” arguing that the outlook taken from Keats’s famous December 1817 letter risks becoming a disembodied ethic of skepticism, one based on uniformly available and distributed empathy. As it offers escape into a negatively creative mode of mobile non-identity, this space of being represents a universalized mode of social imagination that draws from, and hence requires analysis informed by, the philosophy of modern racial ontologies and ideas of Blackness. Against the ingenuously “universal” tradition of philosophical skepticism, drawn here from Descartes and Hume, I frame analysis through a fugitive alternate tradition of Black skepticism. Through reading that aims to provide both close thematic comparison and a critical allegory, the essay shares extended discussion of Rankine’s volumes *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen* alongside the poetry of late Keats, focusing on miseries—not simply mysteries—of knowledge. Rankine’s two “American Lyric” works explore the possibilities not only of impersonal lyric but of a sympoetics of misery. This lost situational *discomfort* of Keats’s Negative Capability proves useful to feel and think with only if it keeps reference to “a poetry of and between bodies,” in the words of Anthony Reed.

#### **Biographical Note**

Eric Lindstrom is an Associate Professor of English at The University of Vermont and Secretary of United Academics. He is author of the book *Romantic Fiat: Demystification and Enchantment in Lyric Poetry* (2011), and editor of the collection *Stanley Cavell and the Event of Romanticism* (2014). He has recently finished a second book, *Austen and Other Minds*, on Jane Austen and ordinary language philosophy. A companion essay to this one, on Percy Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* and the essays and poetics of Audre Lorde, is forthcoming in an issue on Romantic Poetry and Public Feeling with *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*.

*Romanticism on the Net #74-75 (Spring-Fall 2020)*

1. Seeking a healthy communitarian response to the present raft of uncertainties in humanities teaching, learning, and research, The University of Vermont held its first English Department student research symposium in March 2018. I helped to organize the event but could not attend due to participation in a conference panel across the country on “Poetry and Public Feeling,” where a version of these materials was first presented. I would summarize the main areas of student paper submissions to the symposium, in the course of a long and often demoralizing institutional year, as identity, precarity, and male toxic sexuality (a novelist in our department said “war, grief, predation, fading American towns”)—and *Keats*.
2. Why, this essay asks, amid the many projects giving voice to misery, the Keats? Scholars of Romanticism will not be surprised to hear that readers turn to Keats for help in uncertain times. Yet this essay takes the question of Keats’s salience in a time of differential precarity in a less recognizably humanist, more interrogative, direction. It urges that contemporary reception of Keats ought not only to draw upon the aesthetic values and pleasures of creative being-in-uncertainty, but also to foster the project (political in the broadest sense)<sup>1</sup> of sustaining creative forms of dialogue and dissensus around the discomforts of relation: genres of experience that include uncomfortable situations left unresolved despite their episodic and fitful address, as well as the structurally intolerable, the too-well known. At its base, this essay takes a version of the negatively capable Keats many Romanticists have inherited from Walter Jackson Bate, and joins the effort begun by Emily Rohrbach and Emily Sun in their special issue on “Reading Keats, Thinking Politics” (2011) to engage Keats in a contemporary critical constellation. What I add to that important ongoing project

of thinking the political along with the aesthetic in Keats is an emphasis on a strand of Black American poetics. I argue that Claudia Rankine's poetry continues (a century after Countee Cullen's homage in "To John Keats, Poet, at Spring Time") to share a form of sober "derange[ment]" with Keats as an unexpected aspect of its anti-racist documentary poetics—well after anything like an innocent summons to "keep revel" in pastoral Beauty is compromised.

## **I. IMH, A Poetics of Black Skepticism**

3. One of this essay's main goals is to bring to Romanticism a more descriptive—though not for that un-metaphorical—poetic practice that thinks about poetic work and public feeling in terms of public health.<sup>2</sup> I should say right away I do not work in the medical humanities, and do little more than begin to follow the pointing of the late Keats toward the post-Romantic and Conceptual poetics that mean to address the (arguably) anti-expressive poetics of medical knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Both as an object and as a method of critical poetics, the social location that interests me is present from the start in the textual conduct of Lauren Berlant and Claudia Rankine's friendship; as when, in the preface to their 2014 interview in *BOMB* Magazine, Berlant characterizes their interchange as mutual "consultation." A documentary poetics of public health features in Rankine's close engagement with the health issues of cancer and dementia in her 2004 book, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, and is maintained through her next widely acclaimed and taught book, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014). Each of Rankine's "American Lyric" volumes undertakes the work of documenting individual misery and structural immiseration,

starting from a diagnosis—akin to Berlant’s cruel optimism (see *Lonely*, 21)—of the damages of America’s wellness-based consumer culture. Rankine has explained how part of the original project of *Citizen* was to document the disproportionate occurrence of high blood pressure and other cardiological ailments among Black Americans, a condition she refers to as John Henryism in *Citizen* (11).<sup>4</sup> “We’re spending a lot of energy just trying to stay human” (Charlton). Rankine’s documentary focus on the medical precarity of African Americans demands to be read as an accumulative, undeflected continuity with *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*. Both books sustain an analogy between poetry and social medicine while documenting and indicting the way the medical complex (as pharmacological big business, tied to the war economy) structurally maintains toxicity and death. Indeed, the poet of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* asserts flatly in conversation that she is writing “a book on hepatotoxicity, also known as liver failure” (53). “Why do I care about the liver? I could have told her it is because the word *live* hides within it” (54). Anticipating Afropessimist theory in moments like this, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* also hints at a retrospective archive drawing from what will seem a very Keatsian mode of personhood, at least to a Romanticist: “the living who are already dead,” and yet who continually struggle to reawaken and experience honesty, social connection, and aesthetic sensitivity (25).

4. At one point in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, a man suffering from Alzheimer’s disease writes on a slate message board “**this is the most miserable in my life**” (17; original emphasis). This vulnerable message—hardly a line of poetry—demonstrates an unbearably present “this” in witness to suffering that escapes both the subject and object locations of naming, a dispossession beyond the grammar of ownership of “my life.”<sup>5</sup> The moment offers a

version of the Keatsian bleak December of embodiment, the “feel of not to feel it” that similarly witnesses life beyond identity, and an attendant poetics that has garnered a number of recent commentaries by Romanticists including Charles Rzepka, Anne-Lise François, and Stuart Curran.<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Roe in his biography of Keats reads the line as a comprehension specific to grief (199). *Lonely*’s non-feeling of misery translates Keats’s rendering of the conditioned feel of winter cold and erotic loss into the setting of a Bush II era physical suffering near-contemporary to us, thick with the narcotizing effects of social death in government and media. The man’s scrawled message gives a form of absolute negative witness, while it might also be taken uncannily to reverse a foundational Romantic move in which creative memory accedes to a harmonizing and unifying power of reflective judgment.<sup>7</sup> Rankine’s patient instead inscribes the experience of misery in the shortest possible autobiographical form, grammatically eliding the first-person subject along with the very specificity of attested feeling. With her friend’s condition comes the loss of reflective distance with regard to not only the objects of experience but also those framing the self. What remains is the terror of immanence that manifests in the very language formed, in the misery of voice, to inscribe it. Above I have gestured at the afterlives of Wordsworth’s and Keats’s poetic theories in contemporary lyric. So, in his discussion of “post” and “late” lyric, Anthony Reed, citing the poet Douglas Kearney, refers to “an addled aftermath of something that hasn’t passed” in expressive poetic form (24).

5. If Rankine is thinking of (Doctor) William Carlos Williams’s moving claim that “men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found” in poetry, her practice eschews the dual Romantic lineage that celebrates, alternately, the troublingly sovereign (Wordsworth?) and

vibrantly sensuous (Keats?) heritage of poetic expression. Even in moments of great lyric resonance, Rankine's tone is often flat and fastidiously precise. The title of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* emerges out of the presentation of a kind of self-dialogue (or Beckettian exchange) from the poet's notebook on a day she finds she cannot work: "I thought I was dead. [...] You'd let me be lonely?" (16). A distanced third-person autobiographical entry from elsewhere reports: "the poet diagnosed in herself 'a deepening personality flaw: IMH, the inability to maintain hope, which translates into no innate trust in the supreme laws that govern us'" (23). Rankine expands upon this refrain in an interview, commenting that "No innate trust in the supreme laws that govern us" marks the closest *Lonely* gets to "the technical meteredness of the lyric."<sup>8</sup> This "line," though, functions less as an instance of falling into regular metered footing than as a chant or refrain (following from "IMH" as its sponsoring hashtag) that might hold open a space to gather energies of resistance for those "[t]oo scarred by hope to hope, too experienced to experience" (23).<sup>9</sup> Displaying his more voluble style of "enthusiastic social vision," it is through a comparable formation that Fred Moten writes of the history of White European Enlightenment critical philosophy, lived in the Black body in America, as the performative inheritance of a kind of rigorous-ungovernable triple or quadruple declension: Black Kant, Black Can[']t, Black Chant (241).<sup>10</sup> By Summer of 2020—the time of this writing—Rankine's "supreme laws" will signal the regime of White supremacy for many readers, before they suggest metaphysical belief or evoke the kind of unquestioning trust in nature or government in which citizens of the parental Platonic Republic were raised. In the chorus-catch that amplifies the terse acronym IMH, "No innate trust...", Rankine can be understood to merge her own dual lineage in autotheoretical (expressive) and Conceptual (avant-garde, anti-expressive)

poetics with a philosophical tradition that takes Enlightenment European skepticism at its word (not David Hume's own more relaxed recommendation) regarding the creative urgencies and anxieties underlying practices of ordinary belief.<sup>11</sup>

6. Rankine's means of negatively inheriting not only Wordsworth and Keats but also Hume can be turned to speak to the larger challenge of critically imagining the instantiation of philosophical history in lived sensuous experience. As Heather Love has recently shown, Rankine's work in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen* overlays dimensions of structural violence and "ordinary trouble" (427). If this analysis only demonstrates yet again how systemic racism already works across scales, Love's account usefully offers a redrawn guide to critical descriptive methodology, through Rankine's specific relevance to the aim to reconcile close descriptive practices long known in microsociology with the political role sought by critique. Here, I am interested more in a long-view philosophical vantage on this inherited split between the left-activist concern with structural totality and the ascription of quietism to micro and ordinary textures of detail. It is felt as a question for the subject, before preparing plenary questions for a discipline; and it is not posed in isolated reflection, but lived: as "*live* hides within it"; "this is the most miserable"; "I thought I was dead." How is the skepticism of first philosophy experienced as a modality of human being? In *A Treatise of Human Nature* Hume concludes that the consequences of well-reasoned philosophical skepticism cannot and should not have any destabilizing effects on actual human social behaviors outside of the gentleman's study (316). Because ordinary life in common lies elsewhere than in the space and moment of crisis, Humean skepticism need not be lived.



7. There is, by contrast, a longstanding, deep, and wide cultural knowledge in Black intellectual experience that knows better. Drawing from an archive of life and memory not so readily assembled—at first—through texts, Black skeptical thinkers and Black knowledge traditions may also (and painfully) be shown to know *why* the experiences of skeptical doubt, belief, and disbelief matter in historical bodies and social spaces; why the precarities of excessive knowledge and indeterminacy alike inform lived conditions. To reference only one text, signal in that it gathers pieces of this lived history into a scrapbook of four centuries—the importance of the publication of *The Black Book* (1974), led by Middleton A. Harris in a group that included Toni Morrison, was in part to give irrefutable documentary answer to the question of Black life in the Americas, made so virulent by the history of White supremacy so as also to become philosophically rooted: How do you prove you are alive?<sup>12</sup>
  
8. Witnessed by means of the rich and disturbing documentary culture of *The Black Book*, Morrison would address this as an existential question, meeting it superabundantly through the lives and language of the characters in her novels. In contemporary Afropessimist philosophy, by contrast, the question of Blackness registers ontologically and its politics is negative. In *Ontological Terror* (2018), the axiological question Calvin L. Warren asks—“can blacks have life? What would such life *mean* within an antiblack world”—receives no affirmative ontological ground, but a counter in the public voice of “*nihilistic responsibility*” (1-2; original emphasis).<sup>13</sup> One of Rankine’s means to acknowledge and explore this truth of the heretofore private conditions of thinking, taking the life of the mind

beyond the philosophical closet, is the realization—titling her 1992 volumes of poems—that *Nothing in Nature is Private*. Likewise, a Black philosophical poetics of skeptical experience functions in telling contrast to Descartes's first philosophy of clearing and overturning (one free day: "once in a lifetime" [18]) of doubtful truths and everything built on them. The provocation of Black skepticism is not imagined as that of conferring or withholding executive mental "assent" to the false reality projected by "some unidentified deceiver...dedicated to deceiving me constantly" (Descartes, 22, 24). Displaced from persons to structures as an effect of systemic racism, the agent of malign force is identified and fraudulence is motivated. Descartes invokes his malign evil genie in the skeptically conditioned doubting procedure of Western philosophy, almost without prompt or motivation: "Some years ago I noticed how many false things I had accepted as true in my childhood. ... Thus I will assume that everything I see is false" (14, 23). In its very radicality as procedure and premise, Descartes's elective assumption of a posture of skepticism shows excessive confidence in the sovereignty of volition. Descartes does admit the body obliquely as a stakeholder in the exercise to sustain this kind of doubt, but only to register such doubt as "a tiring project" (22). Thought's all-important first powers take effect unresisted and weightlessly.

9. In Black skeptical thought and poetics, however, this sweeping premise of doubt carries both individual and cumulative history. It is weighted, embodied and environed, as in the phenomenological tradition that would restore distance, texture and care of touch to philosophical experience.<sup>14</sup> Audre Lorde writes in her poem "A Litany for Survival": "And when the sun rises we are afraid / it might not remain / when the sun sets we are afraid / it

might not rise in the morning.” The feeling recounted in these lines may be called cognitive doubt; but it is critical not to allow a kind of ingenuously “universal” narrative about skeptical thought to displace specifiable forms of living under domination. If it is to be inclusively meaningful, revisiting Cartesian skepticism requires a more careful and sociolinguistically-ordinary interrogation of what we mean by giving “assent” to the evidence of our senses, or else somehow checking or blocking sense experience from taking effect (22), along with continued questioning via a poetics that communicates in the gaps between affect and knowledge. Actually living Humean skepticism for the subject, as Lorde says, who was not meant to survive, whose own survival and participation cannot be extended through empty space, requires modes of livable creative rewriting in what Moten calls the “break.”

10. Tagged miserably as IMH, “No innate trust in the supreme laws that govern us” itself may become a kind of discomfiting yet fortifying verse refrain to give a counter-rhythm to the exhaustion of generic and other “lawful” structures. The chorus of “IMH” delineates as a performative chant the constructed space where hope may act in the demise of American optimism, though like the lyric’s “something that hasn’t passed,” we are still in its “throes.” A different kind of essay on Rankine’s “IMH: ...no innate trust” and the historical knowledges of Black life might connect more broadly to the legal history of racial injustice, to cultural archives like those assembled in *The Black Book* and Kevin Young’s *Bunk* (2017), and to the formal rejuvenation in media beyond poetry, led by Frank Wilderson’s works of autotheory, or, more popularly, in Jordan Peele’s horror film *Get Out* (2017). As the thinking of a British Romanticist, however, the present essay moves paratactically, if

not transhistorically, through its engagements with doubt's forms. Having gestured above at how widely different Rankine's (unannounced) relation to Keats is from Cullen's direct tribute, much of what I do below either pulls Keatsian poetics closer to Rankine's formal experiments with documenting misery, or shows how Keats may be encountered anew, outside the exclusive idea of his supreme devotion to beauty, when refracted in the urgent yet nuanced affective aesthetics of Rankine's work. For specific textual analysis, at times on the level of theme and content, at times as a pervasive but indirect form of aesthetic allegory, I present the false contemporary agenda of wellness in paratactic relief with Keats's figure of Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion*. Moneta is a difficult figure who has been read as muse not only of warning and admonishment but of expenditure.<sup>15</sup> She is also a racialized white figure. In a poem whose prologue likens voicelessness and the condition of the imagination without writing to a "sable charm," Moneta is beyond white: "deathwards progressing / To no death was that visage; it had pass'd / The lily and the snow."<sup>16</sup> It is Moneta who admonishes the figure in the poem of the "dreamer [who] venoms all his days," and who tests the speaker's assertion that the poet is "a humanist, physician to all men" (1.175, 190).

11. The second intervention the essay makes is an argument testing the relevance of Keatsian "Negative Capability" as a tonal disposition in responding to Rankine's *Citizen*, in particular, and to thinking about poetry and the modes of being and address of ethical imagination, in general—and not of the lyric alone. Here the movement is directed against the modeling of selfhood and art that we have inherited in large part from a twentieth-century aesthetic-humanist rendition of Keats (especially from the standard-bearing

biography of Walter Jackson Bate). While it successfully pushes back on “the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime,” and in that sense opens new possibilities of imaginative experience, Negative Capability has by now itself taken up a lot of air and space. Critical discussions of race may permit, if not force, us to see how the suspensive, dispersive outlook of Negative Capability has gotten too established as an easy ethic of skepticism, one based on uniformly available and distributed imaginative empathy. Insofar as its premise is the escape into a negative space of mobile non-identity, the ethic of being-in-uncertainties bears on, and benefits from, the existing racialized category of the non-person: the philosophical history of Black non-being. Or, to put this another way: the affirmation of being-in-uncertainties has trafficked too much upon the certainty of being; a certain White being open to the poetics of elective suspension. The very fluency of Keats’s famous term becomes an inhibiting problem, if what it makes attractive and sensible is an aesthetic skepticism and moral imagination based on the access to sympathetic experience of other subjects (Bate, 243). It turns out nothing has been easier than belief in the values—harmonizing the sensuous, imaginative, and moral—of a kind of “imaginative flexibility” (Wolfson, 186). Negative Capability enters literary history with the chancy spark of an oxymoron and the specific weight of a personal insight garnered in place and time (Rejack and Theune, 3). But it has become a ubiquitous currency, whether we think of such experience in terms of the promotion of “ambiguity” and of specifically literary ways of knowing not reliant upon “fact and reason,” as developed by twentieth-century New Criticism; or in the ongoing terms of a novelistic mindset that enters immersively into lives of characters as the extension of writer’s imaginative experience as a porously defined self.

12. Utilizing Anthony Reed's call for "a poetry that asks us to think of experience not as what happens between sovereign subjects, but as what happens between bodies" (34), I will argue we need to reintroduce practices of affective and spatial *discomfort* into Keats's project of dwelling with(in) the "Penetralium of the mystery" and "being in uncertainties."<sup>17</sup> This moment in Keats's marvelous December 1817 letter has been both celebrated and shielded from public life through our insistence that its affirmation of "half knowledge" is fundamentally a contented epistemological claim for the ego-free mobility of art, beauty, and the life of sensations. Keatsian discomfort has been neutralized as a specific praxis, through the sublation of its encountered conditions to the abstract condition of a humanist poet-physician, prescribing a universal rendition of "life's final questions."<sup>18</sup> In the reception of Keats these have often been projected as universal conditions of human mortality as such, or experiences of beauty, in and for themselves.

13. In December 2017, the *Keats Letter Project* online celebrated "the 200-year anniversary of the letter in which Keats coined one of his most famous phrases: negative capability" in a series of productions across platforms.<sup>19</sup> As a number of the media installations, entries, and commentaries in this venture show (especially when read along with the subsequent more traditional edited volume of scholarly essays), the long afterlife of Keats's improvised theory of Negative Capability has affective registers as well as aesthetic and cognitive implications. The individual claim I advance here is that a lost sociolinguistic and political *discomfort* of Keats's Negative Capability proves useful to feel and think with when the aim to secure contented peace-in-uncertainty is no longer an ideal or praxis in which we

claim an innocent share. Keats's own development in his poetry and letters from 1817 to 1819, in which he recurrently locates affective *misery* in the cognitive *mystery*, and himself transforms the theory of Negative Capability by its inhabitation, I read as a confirmation of this thesis.

## II. *Citizen* and Its Counter-lyric Devices

14. "Descriptive" or "documentary" poetics as I use these terms invoke not a poetry based on statement of fact, exhibiting naïve faith in reference, but an imaginative poetics that directly interrogates material constructive values and formal relationships while seeking to record and witness truths of individual and collective experience.<sup>20</sup> Rankine's primary subject of documentation in *Citizen* is the experience of blackness as "that which gets reconstructed as metaphor" (5). From the beginning of this project, the figural and the documentary intertwine, but in such a way as to ask questions of the realm of metaphor in the process of its historically racialized formalization. At the same time, new critical metaphors are tried out in this practice. In an interview conducted in 2014 around the time of the publication of *Citizen*, Lauren Berlant describes her conversation with Rankine as an interchange that "walks around how we think with and against the convenience of conventionally immiserated forms of life and art."<sup>21</sup> The *BOMB* interview frames and unfolds an ongoing moment in a conversation between Rankine and Berlant, carried out with rich texture in their varied and various work as poet and cultural theorist: "[m]etabolizing outrage while maintaining a sense of it" being a "common tendency" to which Berlant points (*BOMB*, 46). To "walk around" is to make a purposeful survey, perhaps, but it also signals lower-

key historical perambulations—whether as part of a post-mortem investigative team or in the role of flâneuse, the stroller of the city or sculpture park. Walking serves as a metaphor of the rhythm of conversation, and as a figure for the embodiment (not static, it includes gesture, stance, and the semi-autonomous coordination of talking and thinking while breathing) of intersubjective critical aesthetics. The accompanying aesthetic is culturally charged and socio-politically interested, but it also reflects exploratory and indeterminate modes of affective engagement. Walking around immiserated and disinvested spaces, Berlant and Rankine address the question whether this form of mobility can put us in contact with the public life of a neighborhood of and a nation. Walking around “conventionally immiserated forms of...art” positions aesthetic experience immanently within sociopolitical forms. Such “patterning on the move” attends to “infrastructure” in Berlant’s terms, rather than to the domain of institutions.<sup>22</sup>

15. Noting that “[e]xperimental work always forces us to imagine analogous genres around it,” Berlant remarks upon features of *Citizen* that at once move “with and against” conventions of lyric. *Citizen*, referring to the ubiquity of our smart phones, begins in a mood “too tired to turn on any ...devices” (5); yet as Berlant affirms in the interview, “the more devices the better—*Citizen* meditates on counter-uses of the pronoun, the metaphor, the catastrophic event, and the wedging phrase”—thus making Rankine’s allusion to poetic devices explicit (*BOMB*, 45). An example of a device deployed “around” and not identical to its convention is “the forward slash (/) we associate with the end of the line in a cited poem” (*BOMB*, 45). A recurrent marking found in the “director’s cut” (meaning pre-publication galleys or a review copy?), Berlant annotates this slash as “designat[ing] the



previous writing as a line of poetry embedded in a history captured through citation” (*BOMB*, 45). The (deleted) slash connotes ontological as well as generic revision. Does the distance of citation mark Rankine’s *American Lyric* as non-verse autotheory? Does the citation of poetic ontology displace or allow the critical making-present of poetry itself? Perhaps it disarms the assumption that imagination is non-racial or that the poetic self does not arrogate voice? The slash, of course, conventionally divides lines in citations of poetry criticism. Here it refers to “the previous writing”—directly, the previous page of writing and the entire preceding book; but iterative slash lines also obliquely carry an accumulated weight of words and acts and history. This formally dislocated “line” of poetry is then “embedded” *in* and *as* “a history captured through [the] citation” of the poem’s juxtaposed presentational form in social relation (*BOMB*, 45). Caught at a quick glance, nevertheless, the slash resembles nothing so much as a depressed italic “*I*.” Although these forward slashes indicating cited verse are gone in the published volume, we are still told—warned even—not to fail to heed their presence: “do not forget to read for the breathless cut and join of enjambment, as it figures the core intimate fact of relation” (*BOMB*, 45).

16. Another example of Rankine’s refiguring the conventions of lyric production is the backing of the material page of *Citizen*’s artbook-style text, a space opened by Rankine’s short page blocking as a revision of the prerogative of the poetic line. Berlant comments to Rankine about “the shocking whiteness of the paper you’ve printed the book on” (*BOMB*, 48).<sup>23</sup> Linked to an “aesthetics of supremacist sterility,” the experience of the book’s construction in material space and time conveys “a long, painfully white hall we’re walking down, punctured by stunning images of black intensity and alterity” (*BOMB*, 45). If, for a

Romanticist, this description already may uncannily summon the ruined stone halls of Keats's *Fall of Hyperion*, Rankine's interest in tableau and film genres is similarly productive as post-Keatsian mediatic device. *Citizen's* book design and materials themselves formalize the idea of a black punctum vivifying otherwise white supremacist space. The cover art of this issue of *BOMB*, reproduced in Rankine's 2015 collection *The Racial Imaginary* (71), features Jeff Wall's 1982 light box transparency. Entitled "MIMIC," this human-scale (78"x 90") photographic enlargement shows a walking scene on the street. In it, a white male—one arm extended out to hold, but perhaps pulling, the hand of a white woman—makes an anti-Asian racist gesture toward another man, walking slightly enough ahead to be uncomfortably aware of it. A footnote in which Rankine elaborates on her interest in Wall's art clarifies his method: the photographed scene is a kind of tableau, a composed costume reenactment. Rankine comments on her relation to Wall's work: "The photographer Jeff Wall writes about moving into moments of eroding freedoms. He describes racism as 'determined by social totality' that 'has to come out of an individual body.' In his photographs he brings his lens to existing 'unfreedoms.' I am interested in his decision to reenact, to stage moments that happen too fast for the camera to capture. On some level he can't let what he saw go: 'Did you see that?'" (*BOMB*, 46).

17. Rankine's remarks on Wall's project suggest analogies to her own interest in sports replay, a micro-genre of everyday life in which the question "Did you see that?" has a technological means of redress (though for that not always a clearer answer). Wall's tableau-like composition of the photographed microaggression suggests the need for analytical tools to render such lacerations of the everyday in scale and time: slowing down,

panning in, but also interceding using the technology of visual devices. Rankine's commentary further makes clear how her interest in Wall's work links with the idea of poetic experimentation as a training practice. To read *Citizen*, ideally, means to rehearse a set of anti-racist social and aesthetic practices—sometimes verbalized in the moment, sometimes not—of interceding acts, disempacting analysis, and counter-surveillant replay.<sup>24</sup> This training itself incorporates uncertainties inherent in the linguistic conventions and discursive peculiarities of lyric poetry. Apostrophe and the paradoxes of lyric address, as modes at once intimate with and indiscriminate toward their audience, are only the foremost of such lyric features. Though *what did you say?* is by definition an odd question to be asking of a poem, its way of putting tone front and center to meaning is apposite. The multiple grammars and temporalities of *you, here, and now* within the operational field of the lyric both de-center and enliven the stakes of making American Lyric the generic terrain for Rankine's public discussion about the racial imaginary. Are the in-the-moment anti-racist replies in *Citizen* articulated to a "present" audience that is responsible to the ethical urgency of their address? Or do even *Citizen's* readers inhabit the imprisoned scene of "overhearing," found in J.S. Mill's famous account of what scholars in Historical Poetics term "lyric reading"? *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* sets a baseline to this question by drawing its epigraph from Aimé Césaire on the danger of "assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle" (unpaginated). *Citizen* presents and explores the idea that the limitations of the imagination are no different in art than in our lives otherwise, personal, historical, and mediatized. The poem's lyrical call-out to the abandoned and drowned victims of Hurricane Katrina (*Citizen*, 86) is understood on an intimate public continuum with the pressurized sigh of historical Black bodies (*Citizen*, 59-

61), and with the iterated physical act of taking breath. “You wouldn’t call it an illness; still it is not the iteration of a free being” (*Citizen*, 60). (This echoes, unexpectedly, the situation once recognized in a line of Keats: “That unbelief has not a space to breathe” [*Fall of Hyperion*; 1.367].) Thus, in *Citizen*, a gesture one would conventionally assign to the abstract expression of lyric breath—sigh, apostrophe<sup>25</sup>—is conditioned as a public health effect and as densely socialized affect, as documented stress on the racialized body.

18. *Citizen* seeks to open specifically lyric features and potentialities of the mobile (singular or plural) second-person “you” in the position of reader, and a porous “I” that shifts between incidents, barely holding personhood together (71). In the incidents of *Citizen* such pronominal locations can feel both generic and specifically weighed, limited. In a line like “to call you out, to call out you” (145), the public charge of intervention and interpellation pivots with a voice of lyric, even erotic, intimacy, as these coexisting forces of anonymous lyric and embedded social life are brought together juxtapositionally. The strangeness and intensity of such moments nearly challenges Heather Love’s valid classification of the scenes in the book generally “not as epiphanies but as object lessons” (437).

### III. Symptoiesis and Immiserated Forms

19. In interviews Rankine has spoken about the experience of reading *Citizen* as deliberately curated to resemble a walk around a museum gallery. Picture walking around the not-yet-entirely-privatized commons, the civic museum of “conventionally immiserated forms of

life and art.” What are its holdings? How might we conceptualize these resources anew to help reanimate their Titan-like exhaustion? The “immiserated forms” of Romanticism’s universally abstracted male lyric I and of Conceptual poetry’s white-wielded “pain machine” are in one room.<sup>26</sup> The perambulation of a living commons includes Kara Walker’s installation *Domino Sugar Sphinx* (2014) and Rankine’s own return, in “The Provenance of Beauty: A South Bronx Travelogue,” through the genre of film essay to reimagine the obsolete and class-based conventions of pastoral eclogue.<sup>27</sup> Eschewing linearity at all scales, to walk *with* and against the misery of convention implies seeking out spaces where immiseration and enrichment make meaningful contact. What, for instance, are the poetics and politics of feeling around the contact zone, signal to Rankine’s work, between sentimentality and conceptual poetics? In “Who Reads Poetry?”, Virginia Jackson presents the question of the dubious “public” of post-romantic poetry as a diversion from more crucial unaddressed questions, insofar as the warning that no one reads poetry and the reassurance that poetry is celebrated outside the academy are both built on the abstraction of the homogenous absolute “lyric.” This argument informs at least one aspect—the generic and historical side—of the misery distilled in Jackson’s influential book *Dickinson’s Misery*.

20. But what *exactly* is the expressive or structural content of the “misery” in Jackson’s study, if it is not the ubiquitous history of the “lyricization” move itself? Jackson resists and indeed critically allegorizes the wish to say that Dickinson’s misery is that her queer desire is illegible and unlivable. An explicit referent only in the book’s last chapter, misery is performed but thematically and conceptually occluded as the key “weak” concept in

*Dickinson's Misery*, which thereby suffers from the very rigors of its argumentative disciplining against affect studies. This suspension of a voiced project for the affect of misery is a major source of the considerable pathos of the book. The answer that Jackson gives in her final chapter is that the condition of misery is the slippage, for the poetess, between public persona and private feeling. But I will confess—not necessarily being the subject equipped most to feel it—that I find this conclusion inadequate: too narrowly professional, too discursively constrained to a nineteenth-century scholarly audience, and too (in all senses) generic. Can so much pathos collect around genre as object? It is notable that Rankine's admission of "a deepening personality flaw: IMH, the inability to maintain hope" develops in explicit reflection on Dickinson and is quite personal in its tone of address: "Or, perhaps, Emily Dickinson, my love, hope was never a thing with feathers" (*Lonely*, 23).

21. In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen*, Rankine's poetry witnesses the conditioning of public intimacy and delivers the critical affect of *extimacy* as the register of heretofore personal and "private" feeling.<sup>28</sup> The checking, rehearsing, and slowing motions of her poetry all contribute to an exercise in the arena of public poetry. The mini action-script of "Did he just say that?" inserts a check to impede the "moments of eroding freedom" that "happen too fast" for belief, but not too fast for the body to undergo them, for historical sensitivity to register, in the transpiring traumatic present that cites prior violence (*BOMB*, 46). This interrogative microtechnique works at a far remove from big nineteenth-century anthems that arm collective feeling. (I think of Percy Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy*, or William Morris's *Chants for Socialists*, from which I am told Caroline Levine asked her

audience to recite collectively at a plenary lecture of one recent Victorian Studies gathering).<sup>29</sup> But to my ear, the repeated “Did you see that?” and “Did he just say that?” sociolinguistic genres in *Citizen* are not naïve expressions of philosophical doubt toward sense certainty and the possibilities of knowledge. They are responses to all-too patent racist bodily and verbal acts and histories, redoublings that would serve to block rather than deepen moments of laceration.<sup>30</sup> In such moments constellating the not-yet-past historical racial imaginary, doubt registers not toward the evidence of the senses, but out of embodiment of history in social iteration of the repeatedly known, yet singular, event.<sup>31</sup> This is the doubt of disbelief that has not the space to breathe, the doubt or “reality check” of a *yet again*. To treat this as either the display or prompt for an ingenuous skepticism is to rehearse its experience in terms that wrong further. Stephanie Burt compares the incident in the scene (situation, poem, event) “You and your partner go to see the film,” “a story of a black man in suburbia,” to “a horrible parody of a classic philosophical problem for introductory courses in philosophy: are the morning star and the evening star ‘the same’”: does a single knowable and livable identity hold together the “nice young man...standing outside” your house (*Citizen*, 15) to your neighbor’s description of the same young man as “a menacing black man”? (350).

22. The experience of Black Americans recounted in *Citizen*, I am underlining, is not primarily one of uncertainty, but of disbelief—and of being trapped and forced to participate in a history of disbelief. Paranoia can be the right name for the mood under which historical and psychic forces bring these options to the same head. In the recounting of friendship with which Berlant begins her interview of Rankine, the epistemological dimension of “*am*

*I crazy?*” registers as a question not of philosophical procedure, but of critical tone: “Claudia and I have built a friendship through consultation about whether our tones are crazy, wrong, off, or right; about whether or not our observations show something, and what” (*BOMB*, 45). Here craziness is a workable ground of convivial reason, rather than the premise of Cartesian isolation. When speakers in *Citizen* ask “am I crazy?” they are not unknowing. Without reducing them to the genre of “rhetorical” question, these questions are quasi-interrogative forms that do performative work in their social environment. Of the “repeated tag, ‘What did you say?’” it is not the flat-footed interrogative but “the *tone* that reroutes the damaging verbal exchange from its target into the shared space of a disowned violence” (*BOMB*, 45). The sociolinguistic genre of a reality check on racist speech first appears in Rankine’s one-word response—“What?”—lengthened then to *wtf*—to a poem by her one-time colleague Tony Hoagland, “The Change”:

I once had a colleague who wrote what some readers perceived to be a racist poem.

When I first read it I thought, “What?”

“What!”

I let the book close on the desk and stared out the window through non-existent trees.

There is a parking lot out there. And though my emotions can at times feel wrongheaded, sometimes you just have to say it—what the fuck? It took me a minute, the kind that folds out into months, to get over the actual words on the page.<sup>32</sup>

An exclamation of responsive disbelief unfolds into a long “minute” of intransitive looking wherein “months” of experience— affective, critical, stupified—transpire.<sup>33</sup>



23. The fastidious tone of *Citizen* promotes friendship in consultation and a restorative critical practice toward the analysis of public feelings, ranging from wrongheadedness to violence. But what public affects and collective projects can be assembled under this poetics—a sympoiesis or collective production—of *misery*? In our present moment of pile-on disasters, how should we be calling out and bringing to account the “immiserated forms” of the established literatures we love and critique? Perhaps the term “conventionally immiserated forms” should not be foreclosed to say in advance that forms imprison. The phrase doesn’t even convey that conventions are socially dead. As the word’s etymology suggests, we need them, if for nothing else, to come together around. Yet in the historical form of what Jackson calls the “white poetics” of lyric reading, and Kamran Javadizadeh terms “the whiteness of the lyric subject,” the miseries not alone of artistic convenience and convention, but of autobiographical poetics, intersect with interrogations of privilege and white supremacy. These interrogations of identity track with genre history. The accumulations of convenience and convention yield not just misery but structural immiseration: they produce impoverished, intolerable but enduring “forms of life and art.”<sup>34</sup>

#### IV. Negative Capability as Discomfiture

24. If Keats’s availability to contemporary affect theory may be drawn from his affirmations of sense and vulnerabilities to the poetics of “the feel of not to feel it,” the ongoing theorization of precarity as the felt experience of living in uncertainty has antecedents in Keats’s letters and poetry. Berlant’s further description of the critical poetics she holds in

common with Rankine can sound like the Keatsian capacity for being in mysteries, turned to the idiom of recalcitrant minor- or non-prestigious-affects. To pick up a previous citation on these lines: “Metabolizing outrage while maintaining a sense of it is one of our common tendencies, isn't it? Keep moving even when we're still. Find stillness when we're jolted. Learn from unwanted ideation about being with the unbearable” (*BOMB*, 46). The Keatsian project of “[m]etabolizing... while maintaining...the unbearable” shows its lineage, a practice Rankine and Berlant nominate “indwelling” (*BOMB*, 46). The urgency of the question put by *Citizen's* repeated interventions is a version of what Berlant calls the genre of impasse, “stuckness,” in the passages to which I keep returning. Yet it is not the mobility but the *discomfort* of Keats's “Negative Capability” that supplies this art of indwelling its resiliency and purchase. For a contemporary poem that shows why there needs to be irritable reaching, see Tracy K. Smith's Prologue to “History.” The poem begins with the lines: “This is a poem about the itch / That stirs a nation at night. // This is a poem about all we'll do / Not to scratch—.” Despite Keats's own statements to the contrary in December 1817, his version of negatively capable “indwelling,” too, is not realized most fully as an epistemological art practice. Rather, it is a tactical approach to the affective challenge of how to suffer and think and still go on to live and create. Negative Capability responds most fully not to the terminal “Penetralium of the mystery” (rejecting finicky theology and Coleridge, content with “half knowledge” and the obliteration of “all consideration” by beauty [LJK, 43]) but to the “burden of the Mystery” (critically embracing Wordsworth under the later admission that “[u]ntil we are sick, we understand not” [LJK, 93]). The negatively capable person of Keats's May 1818 letter explores “dark

Passages” along a range of available susceptibilities to reception and response, given the obdurate structures of “Misery and Heratbreak” (sic).

25. The reception of Keatsian “being in uncertainties” as a stance that bears primarily on ultimate “Mysteries,” not miseries, of knowledge, has had a long grasp that can be argued even to influence our response to the scenarios presented in *Citizen*. Celebrating the poetics of Negative Capability can ultimately foster an environment that supports a falsely innocent misreading of Keats and others, if we see it as an exclusively epistemological genre rather than as a tactical capacity for abiding within discomfort (“without,” as the apothecary surgeon Keats says, “any irritable reaching after fact and reason,” thus drawing upon a nineteenth-century physiological term). For example, I do not hear much epistemological uncertainty about what happened in the tennis club parking lot, in the final “incident” of *Citizen*. Stakes are not highest around the question of what in fact happens here (does the woman in the other car move spaces out of a racist discomfort or fear?), but instead gather around the speaker’s choice of whether to “follow[] her to worry my question” (*Citizen*, 159). On the conduct of skepticism, cue should be taken from Rankine’s documentation of a social and affective “math” that tallies the reality checks in response to a continual environment of racial gaslighting. This affective, embodied, and historical experience of self-questioning is not related to doubt in the primarily cognitive sense: “The anxiety is fueled by the fact that racism, in its very dailyness, in its very variety of expression, isn’t fixed. It’s there, and then it’s not, and then it’s there again. One is always doing the math. Was it there? Was it not? What just happened? Did I hear what I thought I heard? Should I let it go? Is she making too much of it? Racism often does its ugly work

by not manifesting itself clearly and indisputably, and by undermining one's own ability to feel certain of exactly what forces are in play."<sup>35</sup> The doubt is part of this structurally certain interplay. The justified paranoia and "craziness" of *did that just happen? is this really happening?* plays a role in a verificational procedure. But it does so in a structure of vertiginous redoubling, as corroboration of the racist moment "now" that reiterates, within a past that has not passed.

26. Blocking and checking in *Citizen* have a different primary motive, a different humanist orientation, than the ingenuous ground-clearing philosophical moves of skeptical first philosophy: is what I am sensing fraudulent? how do I really know for sure? By contrast, "[t]o follow the question" in *Citizen*'s last incident requires a movement toward consultation and a careful disposition for tone. This path seeks not origins but further interactions by forming a potential relation of sequel. The key move to which "follow[ing] the question" commits would engage possible futures and make a turn possible from citation-as-trauma to a conversational practice-as-sequel. That is the question Rankine has now continued in *Just Us* (2020), significantly subtitled *An American Conversation* by genre; but she poses it in final scene of *Citizen*, told as an uncomfortable bedtime story:

Tell me a story, he says, wrapping his arms around me.

Yesterday, I begin, I was waiting in the car for time to pass. A woman pulled in and started to park her car facing mine. Our eyes met and what passed passed as quickly as the look away. She backed up and parked on the other side of the lot. I could have followed her to worry my question but I had to go, I was expected on court, I grabbed my racket. (*Citizen*, 159)

With Rankine's atypically first-person speaker here headed off to her lesson, the suspended future of this moment is not, as I see it, about returning to establish certainty about what has taken place. Did the woman back her car away and park elsewhere because of a reaction of racial bias? Occupying the peculiarly privileged and mobile subject position of the reader, we are not actually given any information about the speaker or about the other woman directly. Does that mean that preconceptions and bias are a script, whatever reading we produce? These questions have value, but their "universal" skeptical protocol seems beside the point in *Citizen*. Invoking them excuses withdrawal—the very movement the woman takes in her car.

27. In their reduction to problems of certainty, these classic Cartesian questions fail to address vital issues, here or elsewhere, in *Citizen*. The live question instead is about whether there is an inhabitable and conversable future between these people in the society that produced and sustains them: here, whether the speaker chooses to follow-up to make dialogue with the woman who has pulled away (and perhaps make a "scene"). Is the scene part of what Stanley Cavell would call a conversation of justice, a further response? Or is it the tactical choice to let it go? Drawing from the physical movements, sociolinguistic negotiations, and self-talk of tennis, the tennis star Serena Williams gives a crucial patterning to *Citizen* in the language of exhortation and scene-making—"Come on!"—and the enticement (declining through "Let's go!") to "Let it go" (25-36; 151). In Rankine's diagnosis, to be a citizen as a Black American means to be expected to "move on" and "let it go" in response to the iterations of injustice. Yet language from the same family gives the choice in response to white fear as "You let her have it" (131). The book ends on what might be too-

neat a moralistic pun: the tennis date (and the book) is not a competitive “match” but a training “lesson.” (Not to forget the book’s final image of J.M.W. Turner’s painting “The Slave Ship,” placed after this scene without commentary.)

28. The incidents recounted and replayed in *Citizen* comprise a training on the question of whether to intercede or let moments go by. They also compel further thought on how such instants of historical condensation play back questions of knowledge for further scrutiny of their affective challenges and tactics. Such an inheritance and renewal of the main interpretive line on Keatsian Negative Capability would take being in discomfort, rather than weak ego boundaries as such, for its orientation. This shift has the additional effect of directing a needed critical scrutiny toward an idea that often follows on from “being in uncertainties” in Keats: the “camelion Poet” (LJK, 157); the artist *coming home a different person every day and continually filling in for other bodies*.<sup>36</sup> We have grown comfortable celebrating this rather ghoulish art of poetry as an aesthetic and even ethical ideal. But dissatisfaction with this model for his vocation is part of what sent Keats himself down his version of the “long, painfully white hall” in his last poetry. The action and moral drama of *The Fall of Hyperion* develop from a very situated awareness of the speaker’s limits.

29. This lost situational *discomfort* of Keats’s Negative Capability proves useful to feel and think with only if it keeps reference to “a poetry of and between bodies,” in the words of Anthony Reed. The imagination cannot be free of race, as Rankine and Beth Loffreda contend, “because our imaginations are creatures as limited as we ourselves are.”<sup>37</sup> Taken alike in embodied and imaginative terms, in the poems and in the letters, late Keats explores

this creative criticality of limitation. Keats tarries with the misery (“Now if we live, and go on thinking” [LJK, 95]) as well as mystery of knowledge. The May 3, 1818 letter to Reynolds on Wordsworth’s “burden of the Mystery” responds in terms of a “breathing” knowledge as much as that of executive thought, to consider the nerves’ conviction that the “World is full of Misery and Heratbreak, Pain, Sickness, and oppression.” As Keats walks around his own famous simile-scape comparing “human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments,” the intoxicating “light” and “atmosphere” darken (a darkening Keats mentions no less than four times) in the “Chamber of Maiden-Thought” (LJK, 95). Contrasting the two letters and analyzing their difficult continuity, we extend from the ability to reconcile multiple, perhaps incompatible ways of knowing, to the painfully evolving imaginative education “explorative of those dark Passages.”<sup>38</sup>

- 30.** In the May 3, 1818 letter and in *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats uses “breathing” as a spatial and stationing term for the arduous plot of romance-epic, and for survival in human life. Rankine’s unusual poetic interest in the liver provides a surprising and bracing twenty-first century revision of the organ of Negative Capability, presenting its limited, embodied mode of processing life into affective experience and imaginative art. The maneuver that rightly causes discomfort to Negative Capability itself can be teased out at a micro-level from a moment of the *BOMB* dialogue. Berlant posits as a complement: “Indwelling is a great way to describe preserving the resonance of the event in the sensorium affected by it” (*BOMB*, 46). But Rankine holds to a more troubled line that cannot rest on the concept she has just articulated. The living, the liver, is irritated: “The difficult thing about this ‘immanence’ or ‘indwelling’ is that it holds and prolongs the violence of supremacist

spectacle in a body and shuts it down in other participatory ways.” Rankine then goes on (in reply to a prompt to comment on the connection of this idea to the “train piece” in *Citizen*): “The question for me was: What do I gain by dwelling in the struggling public spaces that wish to obliterate the black male body? The train piece attempts to stage the impossibility of actually putting your body in the place of devastation if it doesn’t belong to you” (*BOMB*, 47). The “train piece” refers to the poem-incident in which the decision “You let her have it” functions as a form of neutral restatement that relocates the force of racism on its white origin:

On the train the woman standing makes you understand there are no seats available.  
And, in fact, there is one. Is the woman getting off at the next stop? No, she would  
rather stand all the way to Union Station.

The space next to the man is the pause in a conversation you are suddenly rushing to  
fill. You step quickly over the woman’s fear, a fear she shares. You let her have it.  
(*Citizen*, 131)

“You let her have it”: this recessive practice also opens a space of resistance and solidarity—one taken up affirmatively by the speaker at the end of the episode (*Citizen*, 133). It properly situates internalized violence.

- 31.** The “you” in this episode allows white fear to remain in its proper body, by choosing in an ordinary sympathetic and political act where to move her own body: “You put your body there in proximity to, adjacent to, alongside, within” (*Citizen*, 131). The poetry of the later Keats is focused to an unsettling degree on placement of the body, and on what it means to shut down or live on. The Keats fragment poem known as “This Living Hand,” which ends



“I hold it towards you,” is typically read as a paradigm of the lyric gesture of apostrophe, but was written on a manuscript page of Keats’s 800-line “Faery Tale” *The Jealousies*, and may have been intended for one of Keats’s two unfinished blank verse plays. Leaving these other genres for the lyric, it turns to and fills in for other bodies, in a gesture and with a tone that is not sympathetic, but mischievously chilling.<sup>39</sup> Rankine and Loffreda indicate exactly where critical discussion regarding the racial imaginary must go, into the affective and sociolinguistic spaces heretofore reserved for anonymous (white) lyric reading: “To not simply assume that the most private, interior, emotional spaces of existence—the spaces that are supposed to be the proper material of the lyric and the fictive—are most available for lyric and fictive rendering because they are somehow beyond race.”<sup>40</sup> The editors of *The Racial Imaginary* argue there has been injury also to white writers in the denial of race in imagination. The terms of this injury are, again, importantly Keatsian though not as we have been reading him: “That’s the injury, that their whiteness has veiled them from their own power to wound, has cut down their sympathy to a smaller size, has persuaded them that their imagination is uninflected, uninfiltrated. It has made them unknowing.”<sup>41</sup> The white pretense of a universal imagination bears with it the cost of unsituating knowledge, the loss or veil upon knowledge and of attached modes of being and care.

**V. “those to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery”**

32. IMH could imply corporate acronyms (IMF?), or it could suggest a rapper’s or DJ’s handle. (BLM emerged a decade after *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* was published in 2004.) Rebecca

Solnit has written on the United States drug trade as Mexico's GNP, Gross National Pain. As a marker for the project of low-adjustment utopia, the tag awkwardly resonates with Northrop Frye's and Anahid Nersessian's "Rcsm" (which means to abbreviate Romanticism but inadvertently truncates racism: one can't not see that).<sup>42</sup> That adjustment here means the challenge to live well without wellness, in response to "the throes of our American optimism" (*Lonely*, 21).

33. This final section turns to work to be done in using Rankine's counter-lyric descriptive method as a prompt for re-reading *The Fall of Hyperion*. In *The Fall*'s resetting of epic within romance, Milton within Dante, and omniscience within limitation, one apprehends something of Rankine's continued formal interrogation of lyric and documentary, expressive and conceptual, poetic modes. Rankine works in a zone where documentary poetics (of racism, but also of medicine and public health) conjoin with and depart from autobiographical and conceptual poetics. One way to understand Rankine's poetic project is as a "pointing to the fact" of something whose worst reality can never be naively referential: to systemic racism, not simply its individual, intentional, or conscious operations. The problem of generic designation emerges not just by way of the subtitle, *An American Lyric*, but goes all the way down to the conceptual pragmatics of what to call a unit of the text one wants to cite. What does it mean that we can't even comfortably decide to call the text on a page a "poem" or an incident or an event? *Citizen*, too, recasts this issue of generic indetermination on the level of perception (Keats: "We are in a Mist"), when on its first page the "you" speaker "fall[s]" into the necessary rhetorical gloss of sleep, dream, and blackness as "that which gets reconstructed as metaphor" (5).

34. Rankine's *Citizen* and Keats's *Fall* share an estranged-perspective documenting the social role of the poet who is embedded in limited selfhood. For Rankine, both lyric and America are collective mass projections of that self, expressions of the culture that created the "I." Suffering—even depressive suffering—forms the basis not exactly of "truncated optimism" but of consultation over what lacerates in prolonged acts of attention.<sup>43</sup> "Until we are sick, we understand not," Keats writes in the letter of May 1818, in the last year of his brother Tom's life (LJK, 93). As the nurse, not the dying man, in Spring 1818 Keats does not understand; he is limited. He feels his way by arduous steps and breathings in this "darkening" letter. Thinking with Wordsworth about humanity post-Romanticism, he contrasts the "Mist" we are in, not just to the light of the Chamber of Infant Thought, but to history as a consolidation or consensus of progress found in early modern "resting places" in Milton's time (the image is that of reaching a plateau of democratic and moral achievement: the end of the Inquisition and codpieces). *The Fall of Hyperion*'s visual, even filmic perspective is frequently noted in recent criticism. *The Fall* also is structured as a walk around the immiserated forms of the titans' ruin—joining the embodied spatial idiom of perambulatory analysis. Keats's speaker makes it to the first step of the altar of Moneta an instant before his immobilization (Canto 1, lines 128-133).

35. "There are moments of straightforward escape in Keats," Paul de Man says in his 1966 introduction to a selection of Keats's poetry, but "[t]he power which forces a man to see himself as he really is, is also called 'philosophy' in the later Keats."<sup>44</sup> As an instructor of philosophic mind, "power which forces" is more like sickness than medicine. Medicine offers an image of care and intimacy not in shoring up meaning but in providing a spatial

distance that clarifies in the act of touch. “Experience in general would start there: it would begin by feeling itself touching a limit, feeling touched by a limit, and its own limit” [...]; “ ‘touched and spaced out’—apartness in contact” (Derrida, 111, 129).

36. Keats perseveres in the idea of the poet as a figure of healing, in moving from the fragment *Hyperion* (1818-19) to the unfinished *Fall of Hyperion* (1819), as Timothy Ziegenhagen observes. However, Keats rejects Apollo as the figure of that project in favor of a mortal poet-speaker “who lives in the same disease ecology as those he would heal.”<sup>45</sup> In *The Fall of Hyperion* the apothecary-poet is immanently positioned, embedded in and with suffering. And if poetry is to be “a potentially healing agent” there (281), unlike the immortal Apollo in *Hyperion*, “the speaker in ‘The Fall’ is susceptible to the ills of the world” (290). Apollo, the god of poetry and healing (as well as music, prophecy, sun and light), exists above and outside of disease. (In Homer’s *Iliad* when Apollo brings both plague and arrows to Troy, “his coming was like the night” [1. 47]). But in *The Fall* the apothecary-speaker is a healer of wounds himself susceptible to disease, experiencing the same pathogenic condition and environs in order to give help (Ziegenhagen, 296). As in Rankine’s repeated subtitle for her 2004 and 2014 volumes, this positional choice regarding the speaker entails rejecting third-person “epic” forms for first-and second-personal ones—those of a speaker immersed in “unhealthy conditions.” It is weak mortality in *The Fall* that helps the speaker bear and report the burden:

“None can usurp this height” returned that shade,

“But those to whom the miseries of the world

Are misery, and will not let them rest.

All else who find a haven in the world,

Where they may thoughtless sleep away their days,

If by a chance into this fane they come,

Rot on the pavement where thou rotted'st half." (Canto I, lines 147-53)

Rather than professionalism, susceptibility is the qualification that authorizes and saves the poet in this passage. The best poets, according to Ziegenhagen, are *not* poets in the sense that the poetic profession, aligned with the role of gentleman physician, was understood in polite culture of Keats's time (302).

37. The post-epic task of *The Fall* is to live and write out of numbed sensations of life as structured by immiserated forms. The first step meaningfully taken leads to critical reflection on the poet as "a humanist, physician to all men":

"If it please,

Majestic shadow, tell me: sure not all

Those melodies sung into the world's ear

Are useless: sure a poet is a sage;

A humanist, physician to all men.

That I am none I feel, as vultures feel

They are no birds when eagles are abroad.

When am I then? Thou spakest of my tribe:

What tribe?"—The tall shade veil'd in drooping white

Then spake, so much more earnest, that the breath

Mov'd the thin linen folds that drooping hung

About a golden censor from the hand  
Pendent.—“Art thou not of the dreamer tribe?  
The poet and the dreamer are distinct,  
Diverse, sheer opposite antipodes.  
The one pours out a balm upon the world,  
The other vexes it.” (Canto I, lines 186-202)

The Keats concordance is rife with the occasions of miserable, miseries, and misery—with over thirty uses (twenty-one just of “misery” alone).<sup>46</sup> There are the expected apostrophic and exclamatory uses (“O misery of hell! relentless, tame”; *Endymion*, Book 3). But there are also aesthetically unforgettable phrasings in *Lamia* and *The Fall of Hyperion*:

“So rainbow-sided, touch’d with miseries” (*Lamia*, Book I, line 54)

“With an electral, changing misery” (*The Fall of Hyperion*, Canto I, line 246)

These startling, gorgeous constructions perform internal transformations of the sensuous Cockney language that “Z” attacked as political and class threats in his 1818 *Blackwood’s* review: the review that ends by telling Keats to stop being a poet and go back to his medicines. Keats takes his “smokable” gender-based sentimentality, as figure for the exposure to misery, and revises its idiom to a vibrant and mercurial embodiment. But he does not change the sense of limits and “infiltration.” These moments complexly instance Keats’s thinking with and against immiserated form. As Moneta delivers with an arresting tautology, only “those to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery” indeed ever come to the poem at all—to the space where they need poetry and seek metaphor. The immanent turnings and changes in these arrestingly brilliant examples construct logics of the mutation of misery. They are witnessings and affordances of a punctum vivifying supremacist space.

38. Keats's fragmentary *Fall* ends in an interrogative mood that seems to foreknow the doubts of contemporary poetic practice regarding whether documentary and conceptual poetics gain anything from the idea that a poet's brain had dreamed them up. This skepticism over the poet's intrinsic value based on any standing other than personhood, imparts something cool but vital to the style, method, and ethics of affective and political friendship. The working premise of creation as consultation, or of the poem as a construal in social space, furnish ideas of a poetics that "walks around" generic conventions and ambitions—both permeable and located enough so as to afford confrontation of boundaries. Rankine has said in an interview: "The friends I have, and the people whom I admire, are people who have an understanding of the conditions under which we live, and have a humanist sense of the world. If that's lacking in my understanding of a person's negotiation of the world, I can't be close with that person."<sup>47</sup> Rankine inherits Keats when she projects no future of poetry at all. The poem is continued in acts of friendship and the critical practices of discomfiture. Keats's May 3, 1818 letter to Reynolds ends with "the wine of love—and the Bread of Friendship" (LJK, 96). The idea of Negative Capability continues to apply to poets and poetics, of course, but it emerges from "not a dispute but a disquisition" with Dilke and pays homage to the differences of conversation. "All the major metaphors and critical insights for which Keats is famous"—Negative Capability, the camelion poet, human life as a Mansion of Many Apartments—in fact, emerge in debates" (Wolfson, 189).<sup>48</sup>

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## NOTES

1. The essays collected in "Reading Keats, Thinking Politics," edited by Emily Rohrbach and Emily Sun, present an allied approach my thinking about a transhistorical, anachronistic, contemporary, and (un)timely Keats.
2. Recent scholarship on Keats and Negative Capability has extended into the interdisciplinary fields of social work and narrative medicine.
3. As I understand it, the field of narrative medicine seeks largely to integrate a set of traditional practices of humanistic literary knowing (first-person account, empathetic relations) as a partner into the communications of professional medicine. Here I challenge from within the expressive voice and generic conventions of that "literary" knowledge. Reed is an acute critic of the often unhelpful, self-serving distinction drawn by "faddish avant-gardism" against the expressive lyric (34).
4. Rankine states that she initially learned about the term "John Henryism" from the poet Elizabeth Alexander; see Sharma.

5. See Khalip for a reading of anonymity and Negative Capability.
6. Keats wrote the poem in which this line appears, “In drear nighted December,” earlier in the same month as his letter on Negative Capability. See Rzekpa, “The Feel of Not to Feel It”; François, “ ‘The Feel of Not to Feel It’, or the Pleasures of Enduring Form”; Curran, “ ‘The Feel of Not to Feel It: The Life of Non-sensation in Keats.” Curran explicitly uses the phrase “double consciousness”—so foundational to Black Studies after its use by Du Bois—in reference to the bearing of Keats’s medical training on his perception and life as a poet.
7. Similarly, Reed’s account of the poetics of mourning in recent Black experimental poetry still works off the model of a “distilling and refining” of feeling, from Wordsworth’s most famous sentences in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (25, 27).
8. For remarks on the IMH refrain, see Rankine’s interview with Major Jackson.
9. For an account of how the “white poetics” of lyric reading “organizes lyric rhythm” in a racialized history of verse, See Virginia Jackson, “The Cadence of Consent”; I cite at 103.
10. Moten’s 2007 talk “Black Kant (Pronounced Chant)” shares materials that later inform the opening and closing essays of *Stolen Life* (2018).
11. Javadizadeh offers illuminating discussion of Rankine’s own understanding of her career as positioned between confessional and experimental traditions.
12. Moten raises this version of the question of skeptical first philosophy to Black life, and declines participating in its vicious entanglement; see the question-and-answer period following “Black Kant (Pronounced Chant).”
- <sup>13</sup> Since I (all-too-briskly) work through Descartes and Hume in this essay, it is worth indicating other reference points among the White European philosophers focal to genealogies of race. In urging that “Black thinking, then, must return to the question of Being,” Warren develops the thought of Heidegger as the primary resource and set of coordinates for a new Critical Philosophical Black Studies (7). Moten inherits and revises Kantian anthropology and critical philosophy. In a cluster of three powerful essays published since 2015, Rei Terada examines the various and interconnected subjective, conceptual, and historical roles played by race in Kant and Hegel.
14. Warren’s “meditative strategy” of “Black Care” is an example of this phenomenological writing (37).
15. In *Keats’s Life of Allegory*, Levinson develops Ruthven’s study of “Queen Money” in her chapter on *Lamia* but argues that “Ruthven does not do very much in a critical vein with his mythographic findings, but then there’s not a great deal to do in the context of ‘Hyperion’ and ‘The Fall’.” By its formal signature, ‘Hyperion’ is a ‘good’ poem: following Bakhtin’s formula for epic firstness, a good *old* poem” (257).
16. *The Fall of Hyperion*; Canto 1, lines 10; 160-162. Given hereafter in text, citations of Keats’s poetry are taken from Stillinger’s edition.

17. Gittings, ed., *Letters of John Keats*, 43; hereafter JKL. In *How to Make a Soul*, Wilson interweaves autobiographical writing on depression with commentary on Keats, attending at one point to E.M. Forster's idea that "muddle" is a philosophical term, one related to "the potential fruitfulness of confusion" (32-33).
18. Sperry, 377; review of Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence*.
19. <https://keatslettersproject.com/negativecapability/>
20. See Love, 435, for a reclamation of the political usefulness of description.
21. "Claudia Rankine by Lauren Berlant," 45; hereafter cited in text as *BOMB*. *Immiseration* is cited as a "thesis" rather than a condition from the 1940s onward, in translation of the German *Verelendung* in Marx. In Marx, immiseration characterizes the capitalist structural disparity between accelerated accumulation of wealth and workers' impoverishment.
22. Berlant, "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times," 398, 403.
23. In describing *Citizen* as a "meticulously designed book" (348), Stephanie Burt notes among other features its "glossy, photography-friendly paper" presented in the manner of a "museum catalog" (349).
24. In a chapter from *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers a guide for the analytical "disempaction of the scene" that might anticipate and recall Rankine's project of reconfiguring thought and action "around" racism (68).
25. See Culler.
26. See Wagner.
27. <http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/>  
For a description of "The Provenance of Beauty," see <http://thefoundrytheatre.org/2009/09/18/the-provenance-of-beauty/>  
For video of one segment, <https://vimeo.com/20888656>  
The voiceover proposes at one point a Keatsian poetics of being in uncertainties: "I want to make being here all that matters."
28. Rankine suggests "extimate" to Berlant, calling it "your word" (*BOMB*, 50).
29. Thus drawing from Levine's argument in *Forms* that poetic meter draws on and promotes social rhythms (73-81).
30. Compare the incident in Coates (93-99).
31. On *Citizen* as a lyric event in Culler's sense, see Farred.
32. See Rankine's "Open Letter: A Dialogue on Race and Poetry."
33. See Terada; compare *The Fall of Hyperion*, 1.392
34. Seb Franklin writes: "So: the form/formless distinction examined here is not universal and ontological, but historical and epistemological. It is a distinction made and sustained by the complex, ever-shifting knot of capture, exploitation, and immiseration otherwise known as capitalism" (2).

35. Rankine and Loffreda, *The Racial Imaginary*, 18-19.
36. Keats writes the poet “is continually in for—and filling some other Body”; Gittings adds that by “in for” Keats possibly meant “informing” (LJK, 157n).
37. Rankine and Loffreda, *The Racial Imaginary*, 16.
38. The epigraph of *Citizen* cites a quotation over black leader from the opening voiceover of Chris Marker’s travelogue, *Sans Soleil* (1983): “If they do not see happiness in the picture, at least they will see the black.”
39. *John Keats: Complete Poems*, 384.
40. Rankine and Loffreda, *The Racial Imaginary*, 18.
41. Rankine and Loffreda, *The Racial Imaginary*, 20.
42. See Nersessian, *Utopia, Limited*, Chapters 1, 6.
43. I take “truncated optimism” from Nersessian (29).
44. De Man, reprinted in *Keats’s Poetry and Prose* (541, 545).
45. Ziegenhagen, 281; further citations in text.
46. Baldwin, *A Concordance to the Poems of John Keats*. Here two examples must suffice for misery in Romantic poetries: in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson infamously declines to engage Phillis Wheatley’s poems by stating: “Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry” (Query XIV); in the line “O miserable Chieftain!” from William Wordsworth’s sonnet “To Toussaint L’Ouverture,” published in *The Morning Post* in February 1803, two months before Toussaint’s death in a French prison. See Youngquist (8-10).
47. See Sharma.
- <sup>48</sup> This essay has been enriched by conversations with Tristram Wolff over the relation of *Citizen* to a discursive field that includes sociolinguistics, lyric theory, and Keats.