

Kate Davis

Professor Rowan

English 295

14 June 2021

Sound and Silence in *Citizen*

While ruminating upon the death of Trayvon Martin, Claudia Rankine writes that the “sky is the silence of brothers . . . raining down” (90). This description of silence comes right in the middle of an explanation of the toll Martin’s tragic death had on his brothers. This scene in the book, further substantiated by the accompanying Situation video created by the author, illuminates the truth that silence is an all-encompassing, overarching pressure. Rankine selects this terminology carefully, weaving in the idea of silence as being just as large and as all-encompassing as the sky. Silence assumes a deeper meaning with its ability to fall down and spread to other spaces and individuals. The language of *raining down*, repeated various times over in this passage, carries with it a connotation of the inevitability of experiencing the weight and existence of silence. This passage helps the reader understand the vital nature of silence as a force present particularly at the most complex moments with meaning far beyond the mere absence of sound. This contemplative scene is one of many in Rankine’s *Citizen* that problematizes the idea of silence as a force to be reckoned with and, by default, foments a frank analysis of other concepts that stem from the notion of silence like sounds and words.

Critics and a variety of researchers have investigated the weight and impact words can have on an individual and historical level. In contemplating the interplay of words and silence, Anna Bax stresses that the language and silence surrounding race contains a “history” that is “invoked and reconsolidated” when words are spoken (119). The way Rankine herself structures

the words of her work is described by Heather Milne as a recycled language that functions to “excavate the past” in order to delve into the “ongoing legacies of violence, domination, and inequality” (Milne 7). In an interview, Claudia Rankine expresses that words pull “moments into their reality,” a phenomenon that can provide valuable catharsis for those experiencing racial oppression (Everyday Racism). Historically, even Barack Obama, a former President of the United States, underscores the limitations of words. In reference to the Constitution of the United States, he articulates that “words on a parchment would not be enough” to create real change in a disjointed and suffering nation (Obama). Given the rich dialog surrounding words, speakers, and silence, this paper will connect these pivotal ideas surrounding speech to the impacts on those speaking and those spoken to. It will build upon these established notions about the role of silence and delve into deeper, interrelated concepts. It will also closely examine the problems in the relationships between the speaker and the spoken to, and point to possible spaces from which we can move forward through remedial empathy.

Sound and silence are two concepts that play strongly into Rankine's lyric. Our understanding of silence progresses into one of a powerful force that can spread throughout space and time. Sounds can be an indicator of the emotional state of the speaker, and words can provide needed stability and protection from racist behaviors. Words riddled with racial animosity, also known as hate speech, impact the physiology of the hearer, which can lead to black pain. This phenomenon also complicates our understanding of custody, a state issued when a speaker addresses the hearer using hate speech. Rankine uses this backdrop to illuminate the path toward curative empathy. Empathy is a bridge that can emerge once the aforementioned boundaries between the speaker and the hearer are intentionally dissembled. This disintegration allows for a more cohesive and richer understanding of the lived experiences of the black

community. Once concepts of hearing and speaking become less distinguishable, this empathy can emerge.

Rankine understands silence not as the absence of sound, but as a separate entity of meaning that spreads throughout space and time. As Anna Bax further explains, silence is “tied to past meanings and voices,” and carries along with it a variety of connotations, contexts, and loaded meanings, just as speech would. Rather than remaining stagnant within the moment of its conception, silence arcs through time, and those who choose to remain silent are tapping into the greater totality of silence throughout time and history. In *Just Us*, Rankine describes her personal use of silence. She declares that because her “silence is active” in certain spaces, she chooses to remain silent, wanting to “make a point of that silence” (155). The idea of silence being an active force with the capacity to influence other members within a space complicates the way we see silence. It can spread and carry meaning, just as powerfully as words can. *Citizen* notes that silence can be a substantive affair, rather than a mere lack of speech, explaining that meaning can be “written in the silence,” a silence which is actively “shaping lives” and “becoming a living” thing (112). Rankine complicates our understanding of silence, giving it more weight and consequence as it is tied to past meanings and voices. That which can’t be heard “spreads across state lines”, showing that that which goes unsaid infiltrates various physical expanses as well as temporal ones (112). Silence doesn’t exist in a vacuum, but buys into past meanings, influences others, and spreads through physical and temporal spaces.

By helping the reader internalize this new definition of silence as a connective, spreading force, *Citizen* thereby complicates our understanding of physical sounds—what happens in the absence of silence—in that we begin to see them as a marker for one’s emotional state rather than a conveyance of expression between people. Sound is a fluid and malleable resource, one

that can be molded to the needs of the speaker. One use of sound is, as Anna Bax explains, to tap into the “layered meanings” that can potentially “place limits on listeners’ potential interpretations” of what has been said. Emotional expressions are composed of past experiences transposed into a later moment. This creates layered meanings that tap into past experiences and sounds, which allows for greater effectiveness in using sounds as an indicator of one’s emotional state. The narrator of *Citizen* observes that the “head’s ache evaporates into a state of numbness, a cave of sighs” (62). This emotional sensation of numbness that comes from painful, headache-inducing life experiences eventually morphs into a sigh. This sigh, a loose, unstructured sound, functions as a gauge for the emotional status of the protagonist.

A sigh is an act of self-preservation, “a worrying exhale of an ache,” but still, it “is not the iteration of a free being” (60). Sighs are sounds that contain worry, creating a sort of exit port for concern and fear. Sighs are sounds of release, but can only do so much. They’re rife with layers of meaning and provide an understanding of the strata of emotional experiences of the speaker. As they release concern, they also reflect an emotion of entrapment and claustrophobia. A sigh is a sounding of the feeling of imprisonment. In another one of her works, Rankine further comments on the function of the sound of a sigh, perceiving that “maybe hope is the same as breath”, recognizing that sighs can even be representative of the sustaining, empowering emotion of hope (*Don’t Let me be Lonely* 119). Later on in *Citizen*, the narrator explains to the protagonist that sometimes “it is interesting to think about the outburst if you would just cry out—To know what you’ll sound like is worth noting” (69). In this passage, our understanding of sound as a needed shunt for release is deepened. Readers can begin to see the layers of emotional understanding—the speaker has had an emotionally charged experience in the past, and is presently contemplating the efficacy of producing a sound in response to that complex past

interaction. The way this passage expresses an idea of longing to cry out, longing to simply make a sound that would mirror the pain on the inside, is a marker for the more complex understanding of the nature of sound that *Citizen* encourages us to undertake.

Given that sounds are an indicator of internal emotions, Rankine shows that words can be used as a sheltering and stabilizing force and have much more significance than a mere unit of speech. Judith Butler well understood this phenomenon, stating that “a turn to definitions and etymology” can be a crucial step in recovering from racist encounters (“Between Grief and Grievance” 13). *Citizen* demonstrates the power of these definitions and etymologies and shows us how they can be understood as instruments in facilitating crucial steadiness amid change and turbulence. Rankine mentions the “pronoun barely holding the person together” (71), and that the word “I” has “so much power; it’s insane” (71). This creates the understanding of a pronoun being able to prop up the bearer of the word as if the speaker successfully finds some form of needed shelter within. This concept is powerfully inverted with Jacques Derrida’s sentiment declaring that “there’s no racism without a language” (292). The way to shelter from and recover from racially charged microaggressions, is, ironically, brought about through the same means that can perpetuate racism itself—words. Rankine presents an even deeper understanding of words in this sheltering and stabilizing light while comparing them to the constant and essential force of a heartbeat. Rankine explains that “words are here as pulse, strumming,” which evokes the idea of words constantly pulsating in the life of an individual, allowing them constant and rhythmic stability (143). Words being compared to a heartbeat also capitalizes upon their essential nature; they can’t be ignored or disposed of, but are simply always there, strumming.

Given this more nuanced understanding of the nature of words, Rankine necessarily complicates our understanding of hate speech to represent, rather than simply hateful speech

toward a group of people, an act performed by the speaker that impacts the listener physically. This speech is sometimes either, as Laura Leets puts it, the “intentional infliction” of “distress,” or an offhanded remark, with consequences unclear to the speaker upon the moment of utterance (260). This distress is all too common among the black community; there is no black person “who has not felt” this “anguish” that stems from being the hearer of hate speech (124). These exchanges of hate speech are, according to Rankine, simply “headache-producing” (10). There’s an immediate and clear link between confrontations containing racist speech and the physical pain of a headache. Rankine notes in an interview that hate speech toward the black community can “lodge in them” (*Everyday Racism*), and Judith Butler further explicates that “the body bears on language all the time” (*Bodies that Matter*). Butler’s observation aptly nods to the previous textual instance penned by Rankine by explicating not only the longstanding impacts of hate speech but the responsibility of the physical body to bear the remnants of these interactions. Rankine again reiterates this point at various points throughout *Citizen*, expressing that the “physical carriage hauls more than its weight,” the body being the “threshold across which each objectionable call passes” (28). This aforementioned weight, the objectionable calls that are laden upon the listener, is hate speech which the body is obligated to bear in one way or another. Rankine also refers to Sherman James’s investigation of the physiological costs of the “stresses stemming from racism” like racist hate speech (11). The physical load of these comments can even go so far as to cause chronic health issues, as Sherman James discovered, leading to high blood pressure, hypertension, and other lifelong enfeebling conditions. James notes that “‘high effort’ coping” stemming from the experience of hearing and internalizing hate speech produces “substantial increases in heart rate and systolic blood pressure,” increases which “persist as long as individuals actively work at trying to eliminate the stressor” (James 165). In including this

reference to Sherman James's work in her text, Rankine further complicates our understanding of hate speech as having the potential to wreak havoc on the physical bodies of the hearers and create a load the body has to carry indefinitely.

This enriched understanding of hate speech can give way to a deeper understanding of black pain, which is a compounded side effect to the reception of hate speech and a manifestation of the corporeal and mental costs of being a hearer of racial hate speech. Cynthia Dobbs helps clarify this definition of black pain, viewing it as “the psychological and the physiological costs” of existing in a society that labels you as “an imminent physical threat” (168). Rankine depicts a poignant experience of this simultaneously physical and emotional anguish, describing a black individual in fear, worrying that “the night is being locked in and coded on a cellular level,” and realizing that the “physiological costs” emerging from the “stresses stemming from racism” were high (11). Black pain, in this example, is showing the conceptual reconsideration of “mind and body,” and “cause and cure” (Dobbs 168). The protagonist is meditating upon the inherent connection between emotional pain and physical anguish, the anguish caused by the oppression apparent in their life. The cause and cure of the scenario are at the forefront of the thoughts of the protagonist as well. They are attempting to realize a cure to this pain, but are unable to do so alone, being stuck in this physical and emotional gamut of pain. These physiological and psychological costs create a sort of negative feedback loop—the anxiety forming a greater physical toll, which, in turn, creates more stress. Black pain is all-encompassing, both mental and physical, and is a direct cost of being a victim of oppression.

Yet another impact of hate speech comes to light as we realize a newly complicated understanding of custody as, rather than the act of providing care and protection over another, a

condition imposed upon the hearer by the speaker of hate speech. As one lyric reflects, “whose are you . . . to surrender . . . whose are you?” (75-6). Rankine’s *Citizen* is replete with themes of this concept of custody, in a moment of rumination the narrator describes the protagonist in search of the steps it will take before they are “thrown back” into their “own body” (70). This longing for self-custody reveals the implied lack thereof. The protagonist seems to be lost in limbo, disconnected from self, clearly robbed of self-ownership, that right poached by a nameless instigator of racist hate speech (70). Later in the passage, the narrator explains a behavior to the protagonist, saying you “give yourself back until nothing’s left” (70). Our understanding of custody now progresses even further with this understanding that custody can even be, willingly or not, relinquished in the presence of intimidation through racist speech. Since racial encounters involve being, in the words of Jerry Kamionowski, “addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid,” this forced hijacking of custody is both compulsory and inevitable (371). This sheds light on how custody can also be understood as not only something imposed through speech by the speaker upon the hearer but a custody anticipated and voluntarily surrendered by the hearer, due to the inevitability of the conquest.

Understanding ownership in the light of its transferability through hate speech incited by the speaker, Rankine then nuances our understanding of empathy as a remedial force that requires the roles of speaker and hearer to break down and dissolve. As stated by Cynthia Dobbs, this active advocacy often begins by reassessing the “conceptual divisions” between “self and other”—part of the repositioning of empathizing allows speakers to realize an interconnectedness with hearers. Dobbs continues, explaining that this is the beginning of “ameliorative—if not curative” empathy. Rankine further exposes that this breaking down of boundaries between the hearer and speaker allows for an understanding of the strain of life present for the black

community, particularly the black community speakers address through speech. Once able to feel a deeper connection between self and listener, the world can achieve more effective and meaningful empathy. In an essay, Rankine further explains this particular strain of empathy, stating that “there really is one mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person, you can be killed for simply being black” (The Condition of Black Life). In *Citizen*, Rankine helps cultivate this understanding through an interaction between the protagonist and an unnamed white woman on a college campus. The white woman mentions that “because of affirmative action or minority something,” her son wasn’t accepted into the school (13). Since the woman commenting on affirmative action is unable to reassess the conceptual divisions between herself and the protagonist, this interaction demonstrates the need for this ameliorative empathy. At the heart of this interaction is an inability to conceptualize the strain of life for the black community. The white woman, being the speaker, sees herself as existing on an entirely different plane than the black woman who she is addressing, who is the hearer. In this interaction, as well as in countless other exchanges throughout the text, the stark divisions between speaker and hearer could be dissolved through a more holistic understanding of the strain of life for the black community. Rankine posits a hazy alternative, the seeds of this ameliorative empathy perhaps beginning to germinate. Being an honest examination of the lived black experience, the fact that *Citizen* doesn’t contain nearly any examples of the kind of empathy that dissolves the boundaries between the speaker and hearer is a silent but potent token of the need to cultivate this empathy. Contributing to this urgency is Rankine’s choice to switch the narrative into command form, which personally implicates the reader and magnifies the sense of exigency for the need of this empathy, the narrator, after inquiring why we are still standing up, on a separate level than they, and asks if we will join them “down here in nowhere” (73).

They continue by petitioning us not to “lean against the wallpaper,” but to “sit down and pull together” (73). This supplication for unity and blending of perspectives is a case in point for the need for remedial empathy that, through understanding the lived experience of the black community, the boundaries between the speaker and the hearer break down into nothingness. Rankine uses this scene to probe into the beginnings of what breaking down these boundaries could look like, and deepens the reader’s understanding of the concept of empathy. Rankine further navigates this concept of empathy in another book, where she praises the ability to “negotiate the world with an empathetic imagination” as the very attribute that enables frank and productive conversations that unite speaker with the listener and allow for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the black community. This is greater and more efficacious empathy, an influential effect that would unite not only hearers with speakers by dismantling the barriers between them, but also unite individuals and communities across racial lines.

Works Cited

- Bax, Anna. "'The C-Word' Meets 'the N-Word': The Slur-Once-Removed and the Discursive Construction of 'Reverse Racism.'" *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 2, Aug. 2018, pp. 114–136. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1111/jola.12185.
- Butler, Judith. "Between Grief and Grievance, a New Sense of Justice." *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, edited by Okwui Enwezor, Phaidon P, 2020, p. 13.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Peggy Kamuf. "Racism's Last Word." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, Autumn 1985, pp. 290–299. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1086/448331.
- Dobbs, Cynthia. "Diagnosis Race: Troubling Etiologies in Claudia Rankine's American Lyrics." *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 38, no. 1, spring 2020, pp. 168–188. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com.erl.lib.byu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=202018924756&site=ehost-live&scope=site.
- James, Sherman A. "John Henryism and the Health of African-Americans." *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1994, pp. 163-182. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF01379448>.
- Kamionowski, Jerzy. "'Make It News': Racist (Micro)Aggressions, the Lyrical You, and Increased Legibility in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*." *Polish Journal for American Studies: Yearbook of the Polish Association for American Studies*, vol. 11, Autumn 2017, pp. 365–376. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com.erl.lib.byu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2018280403&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Leets, Laura, and Howard Giles. "Words as weapons-when do they wound? Investigations of harmful speech." *Human Communication Research*, vol. 24, no. 2, Dec. 1997, pp. 260-301. *Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts*.

<http://erl.lib.byu.edu/login/?url=https://www-proquest-com.erl.lib.byu.edu/scholarly-journals/words-as-weapons-when-do-they-wound/docview/85647917/se-2?accountid=4488>.

Milne, Heather. "Poetry Matters: Neoliberalism, Affect, and the Posthuman in Twenty-First-Century North American Feminist Poetics." *U of Iowa P*, 2018. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.2307/j.ctvvnf7k.

Obama, Barack. "Barack Obama's Speech on Race." 18 Mar. 2008. *National Public Radio*, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>. Transcript.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2014.

Rankine, Claudia. *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2004.

Rankine, Claudia. *Just Us: An American Conversation*. Graywolf Press, 2020.

Rankine, Claudia. Interview with Eric Westervelt. *National Public Radio*, 3 Jan. 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/01/03/374574142/in-citizen-poet-strips-bare-the-realities-of-everyday-racism>. Accessed 31 May 2021.