

Lewis's "Sable Venus" and Rankine's *Citizen*:
African American Poetry as Black Feminist Theory?

DRAFT, NOT FOR QUOTATION

Claudine Raynaud, University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3
EMMA, ITEM/CNRS
claudine.raynaud@univ-montp3.fr

Probing the works of African American poetesses Claudia Rankine *Citizen. An American Lyric* (2015) and Robin Coste Lewis, *The Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems* (2015),¹ this paper asks what kind of black feminist theoretical propositions may be said to emerge from these productions. Can these two interventions be placed in relation to contemporary essays that present themselves overtly as theoretical? Saidiya Harman's *Lose your Mother. A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2008) and Christiana Sharpe's *In the Wake. On Blackness and Being* (2017) indeed put forth the tenets and modulations of what has been termed Afro-pessimism from a black feminist perspective (Sexton).

Rankine's text is a series of prose narratives, interspersed with images and artwork, that describe racist encounters. Yet its "literariness" (notably the use of the "you" for the addressee) runs counter to the "diction" of the scholarly pieces (Genette). Lewis's collection focuses first on the historical figure of the Sable Venus to, more generally, "attend to the complexities of the archive(s) of Blackness, slavery, girl- and womanhood, and U.S. history" (Thomas).² African American poetry has been defined as "the difficult miracle" (Jordan) while the genre has historically been "a site to transform struggle into song" (Young). Can we eke out theoretical propositions from these creations to map a Black feminist theory? How do they, by their very nature as poetry, exceed and qualify theory? Finally, Alexis Pauline Gumbs's *Spill. Scenes of Black Female Fugitivity* (2016) might help us further question the strict demarcating lines between artistic creation and intellectual production as the poet finds in Hortense Spillers's essays material for her own intervention.

I. "Poetry is not a Luxury"³

Rankine's *Citizen* (2014) relates in poetic prose "microaggressions" theorized by psychiatrist Chester Pierce in the 1970s, the reactions, notably the stress, of people exposed to racism, or "John Henryism" (C 11). Rankine explains: "I wanted to create the field of the encounter, what happens when one body comes up against another and race enters into the

¹ The editions used are Claudia Rankine *Citizen. An American Lyric*. Graywolf, 2015 and Robin Coste Lewis, *The Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems*. Alfred Knopf, 2015. Hereafter abbreviated as C and S followed by the page number.

² Building up on Heloise Thomas's analysis of the archive and memorial work at the core of Coste Lewis's collection, I here turn to the actual form of Coste Lewis's text: i.e., "found poetry" as political intervention. Thomas summarizes her intervention as follows: "*Voyage of the Sable Venus* helps perform memorial work in line with Sharpe's concept of wake work, that is, memorial work that does not seek to resolve or pacify a traumatic past that keeps spilling over into the present but that tries instead to imagine something else—a new way of contending with the violence of the archive(s), a new mode of subject formation for Black women, a new way of making art in the wake." (Thomas 6)

³ Title of a 1977 essay by Audre Lorde.

moment of intimacy between two people.” (NPR 2015) Here is an example of one such encounters: “At the front door the bell is a small round disk that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there, yells at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?” (C 18) She also ponders celebrated athlete Serena Williams’s angry outbursts and their racial context at specific moments in her career. She concludes that Williams’s anger was “commodified” as “performance of blackness and not the emotional state of particular individuals in particular situations.” (C 23). She asks: “What does a victorious or defeated black woman’s body in a historically white space look like?” (C 25).

This reflection brings to the speaker’s mind Zora Neale Hurston’s statement in “How Does it Feel to be Colored Me?” (1928): “I feel most colored when I am thrown up against a sharp white background.”⁴ Rankine in turn links it to Glenn Ligon’s etchings reproduced at the center of the booklet pages 52-53. The hybridity of the text—prose fragments, situation videos created with her husband John Lucas, photographs, and reproductions of paintings such as Turner’s *The Slave Ship*—highlights the correspondence between the visual and the said, as well as her use of breaks and silences. Rankine also addresses Zinedine Zidane’s headbutt in answer to Materazzi’s slur during the 2006 World Cup (C 120-129).⁵ The “encounters” that led to the death of countless black men and women (Trayvon Martin, James Craig Anderson, Jena Six) culminate in the list of the names of the young men and women killed by police at the origin of the movement Black Lives Matter. The poet turns her text into a eulogy to the dead and murdered whose endless list fades away into the whiteness of the page: “In memory of... (C 134). The opposite page reads: “Because white men can’t police their imagination, black men are dying” (C 135).

Coste Lewis’s “The Voyage of the Sable Venus” is “a narrative poem comprised solely of the titles, catalog entries, or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a black female figure is present, dating from 38,000 BCE to the present” (S 35). It purports to cover nothing less than “the history of human thought.” (C 35) The title comes from Thomas Stothard’s etching, *Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies* by William Grainger (1801), itself based on a poem by Isaac Teale. Historian Saidiya Harman had brought this work of art into the conversation in her 2008 essay “Venus in Two Acts.” Coste Lewis detailed comparative descriptions of Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* and “The Voyage of the Sable Venus” ekes out the historical and racial tensions in both works (C 142-143). They also foreground the question of beauty and its criteria in a modern world whose emergence rested on the institution of slavery.

An epilogue in the form of a narrative poem, that explains the process of collecting and the questions raised along the process, follow the different catalogs ranging from Antiquity to the present. The speaker “boards” the “Voyage” and uses the metaphor of the ship: the slave ship(s), but also the boat(s) when hurricane Sandy hit New York in 2012. She likens her collecting of fragments to hoarding onboard a ship all the broken pieces of black female representation throughout the history of Western art: “By the end the ship was full of

⁴ This passage is commented on as follows by Mariel Rodney: “Color acts in excess of the embodied Black subject and, in turn, enacts the instability of racial categorization. Scenes like this illustrate Hurston’s negotiation of value and resilience across the essay.” (Rodney)

⁵ Rankine is misled in her analysis of the incident as solely a racist one. It has surfaced that Materazzi insulted Zidane’s sister, not his mother, in what was above all a sexual innuendo.

fragments A catalog of dismembered and dead burnt, broken, chopped—half-length black female bodies.” (S 150) The epilogue is explicitly autobiographical, with references to her son and her everyday life, *and* poetic in form. Retracing the genesis of the project, it also defines its theoretical underpinnings: History, the archive, the definition of beauty: “The greatest ideological territory of all: *Beauty*.” (S 147) The poem is a reflection on language as opposed to the visual, to the image: none of the sculptures or paintings are reproduced. This collection of fragments from the past also reflects the speaker’s “identity”: she is a postcolonial postmodern subject, the sum of these pieces: “A pastoral poet trapped in a post-colonial body” (S 154) habited by a “postmodern self-righteousness” (S 155).

Whereas Rankine relies on everyday conversations, glances, judgments, questions, Coste Lewis’s text is an experiment in “found poetry”: the deliberate dislocation of actual captions from museums from around the West. All these captions relate to representations of the black female body in a “*poésie trouvée*” that becomes a comment on Marcel Duchamp’s iconoclastic gesture of selecting “*objets trouvés*” or ready-mades.⁶ She asks: “If we considered an art title the true portrait, the hidden image, what could we see?” (S 146). If the “framing,” i.e., placing these captions and legends in a collection of poetry, does not necessarily metaphorize the content, it recasts and troubles the set language of museum presentation (that of artists, curators, and art historians). It presents it as discourse: Western art history is placed on the page as a racist ideology that does not hide its name. Attention is also brought to the historical context: the historical specificity of the wording, such as the words “Negress”, “Moorish,” and the continuous violence of marginalization and exclusion, even when a list of Black virgins breaks the overall momentum (S 67-70). Its effect is at times one of oversaturation through repetition while polysemy reactivates the original meaning and performs a reflexive gesture that liberates another meaning (“small relief”). It is at other moments one of dispersal and estrangement as the words are isolated, as if thrown like dice on the page:

Angles
a room like heads
upper most the two
partly
small relief
(*disk*)-shaped
adorning
worn
women
Occasion
glories poppies

⁶ Duchamp’s “objet trouvé” pointed the role of the museum in transforming an everyday object like the bottle drainer into a work of art, without the intervention of the artist. It was an antidote to the visual or “*art rétinien*.”

cornflowers (S 61)⁷

The logic of the list, at the same time limited and endless, points to the reproduction and self-justification of the same, the ineluctability of ideology's persistence. "What recitations, repetitions, recollections? What suites, what alliterations, rants, odes, meter, anaphora—which fixed and unfixed forms?" (S 146) The visual effects of the breaks, of the repetitions., the introduction of periods where there should be none create a poetic effect where there could have been a simple gesture of naming the art object, the convention of the "title". Enjambment and capital letters introduce breaks, pauses in a tortured syntax, a rhythm that brings the isolated words to the reader's consciousness in isolation, forcing him to ponder what a title "holds" as opposed to the image.⁸ She concludes that "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" was an epic written in one line" (S 145) and ventures "Perhaps silence is the greatest epic of all" (S 145).

Coste Lewis has deliberately chosen to include objects such as "spoons, buckles, pans, knives, table legs" (S 35) shaped as black women's bodies. Such decision brings to the fore the question of the object/subject, the "thingification" of the slave (Césaire 1955 42), the creation of Black memorabilia and collectibles. The following poem is a description of a clock in the shape of a black woman:

XV.

When the Woman's Left Ear
Ring is Pulled

Her Eyes Recede
and a Mechanism Rises

Into Place
Showing the Hour

In the Right Eye
And Minutes

In the left
The Right Earring

Was Originally
Designed

To Release
A Musical

Movement

⁷ See also last entry Catalog 8 p.110: Still life with flowers including a Negro servant.

⁸ The hold (of the slave ship) is a chapter of Sharpe's *In the Wake*. Harney and Moten also devote pages to the hold.

With the Pipe

Organ
in the Base (S 80)

These everyday decorative objects are placed next to the high art of figurative painting. More generally, the bringing together of “Sable” and “Venus” as an impossible combination both liberates the equation of beauty and darkness while necessarily referring to slavery which in turn becomes a metaphor for History itself: “History is a runaway slave—running, running—trying to find some place to be safe” (S 154).

II. Black feminist thought: Afropessimism

Both collections echo Saidiya Harman and Christina Sharpe’s scholarly work. These academics—a XIXth century historian and a cultural critic—have theorized the link between slavery and modern consciousness, the articulation of black subjectivity and the human, in the wake of Gilroy’s pioneering *Black Atlantic* (1993). They have thus in a way answered a demand for more theory from Black feminist scholars: “Incessant demands that Black feminist work prove its rigor on one hand and its timeliness and relevance on the other place enormous demands on Black feminist scholars to say something new, even if we haven’t sufficiently said everything there is to be said about the “old.” (Cooper 7) Hartman’s central notion is that of the “afterlife of slavery”: “Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is . . . because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery.” (Hartman 2007 6). Her question is that of the (im)possibility of freedom considering the genocide of the Middle Passage: “How does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?” (Hartman 2007 3).

For her part, Christina Sharpe defines what she terms a “post-slavery subjectivity.” She explains that “to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (Sharpe 13–14). To perform “wake work” is to labor within the space of paradoxes surrounding black citizenship, identity, and civil rights. Sharpe plays on the polysemy of the word “wake” (from to wake up, to cause to stir or come to life, but also occurring after). She also teases out the meaning of wake as the vigil held the night before a funeral. She is “imagin[ing] new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property. In short, I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” [Sharpe 2016 32]. Rankine’s *Citizen*, because of its emphasis on discreet moments, probes the link between the self (the “self self”) and what she calls the “historical self.” How is one “human” before being caught up in language and history? Is this humanity denied the black subject? Is subjecthood denied the black man or woman? The racialized subject has internalized ways of reacting emotionally that respond to set situations: this is what Rankine, and Sharpe make plain.

Although not concerned with language in the same way *Citizen* and “The Voyage of Sable Venus” foreground its role as barrier, and yet as only solution. The speaker asks: “What the image is called, within the signs, within the words?” (S 145). What if the caption conditioned the gaze, and even defined what was to be seen?: “Is language really a textual code, or a visual one?” (S 146). The speaker in Coste Lewis reverses the proposition by finding more in the title than in the image: “Inside the title of any work of art, armies stand. Horses, canons, five-mastered ships anchored in the harbor, the general watching Death from on board. How had I missed it?” (S 145) For Rankine, it is conversational English, such as the following exchange: “I didn’t know you were Black!/I didn’t mean to say that, he then says./ Aloud, you say./ What? he asks./You did not mean to say that aloud”(C 44).

Coste Lewis confronts the racist ideology embedded in art history and through manipulation underlines how language (as the Other in Lacanian terms) resists the inscription of the self, of black subjectivity. Both point at the limit (the silences) while stretching their respective experiments to their very ends. The vulnerability that each highlights echoes Audre Lorde’s statement about the necessity of breaking the silence and overcome fear: “For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.” (1984 44). Rather than waiting in silence, Rankine and Coste Lewis sound the silences, question the silent archive, confront us with the density of the ideologically unsaid. They perform it.

What *Citizen* points is the intimacy of the encounters, the closeness of the bodies, as they are regulated by social interactions in public places. Rankine interrogates feelings such as anger, rage, fatigue, and questions the techniques developed to counter stereotypical reactions. Her poetry concentrates on the body as breath, sigh, cough, on black pain, on the energy deployed to stop oneself from responding, on strategies of avoidance. Her attention to the “breathing” body, called up by the chokeholds of police murders, but also by non-verbal answers to situations, mobilizes affects, emotions, bodily reactions: “To live through the day sometimes you moan like deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets. Perhaps each sigh is drawn into existence to pull in, pull under, who knows; truth be told you could no more control those sighs than that that brings the sigh about.” (C 59).

In *The Undercommons*, Harney and Moten coin the concept of hapticality, based on the closeness of the bodies in the hold: “To feel others is unmediated, immediately social, amongst us, our thing.” (Harney and Moten 98) They expand the contradiction of ultimate complete touch (cf. Spillers’s notion of “flesh” (1987), while the slaves and their descendants were simultaneously denied feelings, and hence humanity: “Thrown together touching each other we were denied all sentiment, denied all the things that were supposed to produce sentiment, family, nation, language, religion, place, home. Though forced to touch and be touched, to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history and home, we feel (for) each other.” (Harney and Moten 98). The shift towards affects and touch is a modulation on Lorde’s opposition between thinking (the white father, European consciousness) and feeling as she voiced it in “Poetry is not a Luxury”: “The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: ‘I feel, therefore I can be free’” (1984 38). She called on black women to turn not to ideas, but to experience which she construed

as a situation to be lived, a place of knowledge. She then urged them to move from these feelings to language, and then to action: "The transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (Lorde 1984 42).

Both poetesses trouble the notion of lyricism—*Citizen* is subtitled *An American Lyric*—and its attendant form in prose: autobiography. In *Citizen*, the "I" addresses a "You" that can be a double of the speaker: "Who do you think you are saying I to me?" / You nothing/You nobody/You" (C 142). "Don't say I if it means so little,/ holds the little forming no one" (C 143). The "I" is in crisis, alienated in language. It is a you, the "immanent you": "you floating above your certain ache" (C 139). Language as the Other effects the scission of the subject, rewritten as a contemporary version of double consciousness, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois). The speaker is absent from language whereas the you of the addressee ("Hey you," C 140), calls him/her up. Rankine lists all the pronouns to further stress the subject's difficulty of inhabiting the "personal" pronouns. "I they he she we you were too concluded yesterday to know whatever was done could also be done, was also done, was never done – /the worst injury is feeling you don't belong so much to you--" (C146) Coste Lewis likewise states that: "Voyage is a kind of autobiography, an autobiography without an "I" (S 151). Both poetesses bring forward the erasure of the "I" from language and hence the impossibility of autobiography for the Black subject. Another modality of "life writing" should, however, be possible in the wake, to take up Sharpe's works. It is what *Citizen* gestures towards. Coste Lewis expresses it quite simply in the epilogue: I write because all I want is you—here with me..." (S 158). This radical calling into question of the lyric "I" coincides with its political efficiency, its truly subversive character: "Politics is an activity that the American lyric discloses" (Alvergue 224)

III. Spill/Spillers: Black Feminist Fugitivity

In 1987, literary critic Barbara Christian stigmatized "The Race for Theory" and stressed that "... people of color have always theorized--but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic [...] our theorizing [...] is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking." (Christian 52). As historian and critic Hortense Spillers explained her attendance in her 2016 lecture "Shades of Intimacy: What the Eighteenth Century Teaches Us," she favors "history from below," if not theory from below: "attending to the methodologies appropriate for discussing silences and gaps in the archive, or as she termed that silent archive, 'the world's special collections'" (Pickens 15). She also focuses on touch.

In these negotiations between high theory and the Black archive of (un)recorded experience, theory as it can emerge from below, poetess Alexis Gumbs troubles the stakes even further. Her *Spill*, titled after Spillers, claims a self-conscious filiation or imbrication between theory and poetry, a call and response.⁹ Gumbs dedicates her text:

⁹ The blurb on the back cover indeed claims that the text "allows readers to imagine new possibilities for poetry as a portal for understanding and deepening feminist theory." (Gumbs). This essay runs counter to Claude Grimal's assessment in her review of *Citizen* that Rankine's text, unlike McKay, Hughes, Baldwin's, is solely narrowly "literary" and trapped in a White/Black dead-end (Grimal).

to Black women

who make and break narrative

///

after and with

Black White and In Color

by Hortense Spillers

The black female poet explains that, for her, Spillers's essays went beyond the normal goal of critical theory: "There were phrases in [Spillers's] work that did far more than make her point. They made worlds. They invited affect. They brought to mind nameless women in unknown places who were laughing and looking sideways at each other and a world that couldn't understand them." (Gumbs xi). She plays on the etymology hidden and yet present in Spillers's proper name:

spill (v) 1. cause or allow (liquid) to flow over
the edge of its container, especially unintentionally.

"You'll spill that coffee if you're not careful."

Synonyms: *knock over, tip over, upset, overturn* (Gumbs xviii)

In the section "How She Knew," footnotes explain the relationship between her poetic text and a phrase culled from one of Spillers's article in the collection *Black White and in Color*. For example, the first note at the end of the text "And it is still it is still it still/It is still just as bad as it looks" (Gumbs 3) refers to the terms "unalterable badness" from "A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love," page 95. The poet claims that the theoretical text contains elements that met up with her own desires: "It is either that I was craving these scenes and these voices or they were craving me and we met up at the hot spot called *Black, White, and in Color*." (Gumbs xvii)

On a different mode since, as a historian, she confronts the archive and its lacunae, Hartman's "creative fabulations" are a solution to bring in and give life to those erased from history: "I have chosen to engage a set of dilemmas about representation, violence, and social death, not by using the form of a metahistorical discourse, but by *performing the limits of writing history* through the act of narration." (Hartman 2008 1, italics mine).¹⁰ She, however, cannot find solace in the thought that this is the past: "If the story ended there, I could feel a small measure of comfort. I could hold on to this instant of possibility. I could find a salutary lesson in the girl's suffering and pretend a story was enough to save her from oblivion. I could sigh with relief and say, 'It all happened so long ago.' Then I could wade into the Atlantic and not think of the *dead book*." (Hartman 2007 153; italics in the original). *Wayward Lives*,

¹⁰ Hartman questions the limits of narrative: "How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it? Is it possible to construct a story from 'the locus of impossible speech' or resurrect lives from the ruins." (Hartman 2008)

Beautiful Experiments is the scholar's latest endeavor. She writes from the archive the history of black women's freedom in the 1920s. Her work enters in correspondence with Coste Lewis's: both are a reflection on the archive and the writing of history. The "beautiful" in Hartman's title also points to a desire to interrogate aesthetic criteria, to redefine beauty on black women's own terms.

Poetry is power, Coste Lewis explains: "Poems have power, lives of their own: In the United States, the first poem we know of by a black person, "Bars Fight," was composed in the mid-1700s by a former slave named Lucy Terry Prince. No one wrote it down—it was memorized and transmitted orally—until 1855, when it was finally published." (Coste Lewis, Oprah.com). The work that poetry does is highly political: it is one of denouncing, bringing to the fore, reckoning, reclaiming, and at the same time of consciousness raising. It posits creativity as resistance to appropriation, even in the midst of ruins, erasure, and eradication. As one critic asserts: "As invention, moreover, [Rankine's poetry] performs a corresponding impossibility of affect to be appropriated into the neocolonial maintenance of deliberative order—impossibility, I should note, in the sense of resistance, as the body's resistance to commodification, subjection, and alienation." (Arvergue 222)

Conclusion: Not a match, a lesson

Rankine's last entry points towards the difficulty of closure: "I can hear the even breathing that creates passages to dream. And yes, I want to interrupt to tell him her us you me I don't know how to end what does not have an ending." (C 159) The "you" is in this instance the partner who takes the speaker in his arms: "Tell me a story, he says, wrapping his arms around me." (C 159) The collection closes on the metaphor of the tennis game, as the speaker explains that she went to the court for a lesson, not a game. While the word "match" means a contest, but also an equal, a partner, the subtle didacticism of the whole collection is enclosed in the word "lesson." The casualness of the remark (the banal, the ordinary) reverberates through the whole text that can retrospectively be read as an exercise in decoding "racism" in the understatements, the a priori, the inferences. What one assumes about the other while not being in her place. This is precisely what Rankine notes as she reports Judith Butler's answer about the reason why language hurts: "Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this" (C 49).

Coste Lewis's ending tries to tie love and art through a comparison:

Like art, I am only attempting.

Like art, I don't know how let love near.

Like art, your mouth leaning into mine is too much.

Be still. I want to say.

Just be still.

Look.

But that isn't the entire truth.

It would be most revealing to say: *I am afraid.*

But what I am most frightened to say is:

Please. Sit here.

Read to me. (S 159)

The reflexive gesture of the invitation to read to the loved one trumps the visual ("Look"). It is the most intimate feelings of vulnerability ("afraid," "frightened") that the speaker utters for she (he?) knows the power of language. Like Rankine's speaker in her lover's embrace, Coste Lewis's ending speaks the difficulty of nearness, of opening oneself up to the other, its tentative character, its innate fragility, but also the hope that it bears. Both poets thus thread together what Audre Lorde voiced about poetry and fear:

We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been-before. (1984 37)

And like Toni Morrison's slave girl in *A Mercy*, they question the addressee: "Can you read?" (2008 3)

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