Feminist Hybridity: Word and Image in Citizen and Becoming, Unbecoming

A thesis presented

By

Kyle Wholey

to

The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

In the field of

English

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
May 2019
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Abstract of Thesis

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Abstract

In her essay “Feminist Aesthetics: Transformative Practice, Neoliberalism, and the Violence of Formalism,” Ewa Plonowska Ziarek suggests that feminist aesthetics primarily invest in two concepts: melacholia and radical politics or revolt. She describes feminist art as something that is “both enabled and limited, first by what might have been but was irrevocably erased from history [melancholia]…. and, second, by what has not yet been accomplished by even the most radical political and aesthetic practices, namely, the world without domination” (106). Understood in this context, feminist aesthetics represent a tension between what has been historically unachievable and what may be possible in the process of transcending this history. My thesis will examine this tension through two texts. I will be applying Ziarek’s definition of feminist aesthetics to Claudia Rankine’s Citizen and Una’s Becoming, Unbecoming. In using these two texts I explore both authors’ use of feminist aesthetics and their application to race and trauma.

Rankine’s work illustrates how people of color are in the constant process of becoming citizens, without ever fully achieving citizenship (without ever being treated the same as a white citizen). As a hybrid text, Citizen explores the tensions between melancholia (the ongoing racism of white America) and a radical political future for those who are still victims of racial violence. Una’s Becoming, Unbecoming also explores themes of violence, specifically in terms of violence against women. Independently investigating multiple murders and violent crimes against women in Yorkshire County, Una (as the protagonist of this graphic novel) exposes the misogyny in both the police force and the Yorkshire killer, through the interplay of images and texts. In her graphic novel Una uses storybook-style illustrations, newspaper clippings, and portraits to depict the personal and political complications of her narrative. As a hybrid text, Becoming, Unbecoming also
uses feminist aesthetics through the expression of melancholia (historical violence against women) and a radical political desire for a better future (an end to this historical violence).

Both Rankine and Una combine image and text as part of their feminist aesthetic. This combination further indicates the constant tension between historical incidences of racial and gender oppression and a future without these oppressions. As hybrid texts, both Citizen and Becoming, Unbecoming achieve different feminist goals through similar aesthetics. This dynamic reflects a particularly compelling use of feminist aesthetics in 21st century literature. Rankine and Una are both working within a familiar form, lyric poetry and the graphic novel, while also deviating from the norms expected of these forms. They are delving into a personal history in an effort to liberate it from itself.
Acknowledgements

Professor Hillary Chute has been an incredible advisor and advocate for my progress as a feminist scholar. Her expertise in visual culture, and feminist visual art in particular, made this thesis possible and I’m grateful for my exposure to Becoming, Unbecoming in her class: Feminism and Visual Culture.

Professor Carla Kaplan taught me the groundwork for most of the feminist theory applied here, and reintroduced me to the incredible work of Claudia Rankine in her class Theorizing Gender and Sexuality. Her feedback is always encouraging and challenging, and I am so lucky to have her support throughout the year.

Amanda Rust was my guide for navigating through our library database. Feminist aesthetics is such a broad term, but she was able to help me find the type of research that would ignite the theoretical framework of the first half of my thesis.

My coworkers, academic colleagues, family, and close friends helped me find the mental space to complete this thesis while handling the rigorous work and school life balance. I cannot begin to name all of you because that would be a thesis in itself.

Finally, my niece Ryleigh will always bring joy to my academic and social life. I hope she may find my work someday and be as proud of me as I am of her.
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I. What Are Feminist Aesthetics? Why Hybrid?

In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989), Rita Felski suggests that the political meaning of women’s writing: “can be addressed only by relating the diverse forms of women’s writing to the cultural and ideological processes shaping the effects and potential limits of literary production at historically specific contexts” (48). According to Felski, feminist aesthetics cannot simply be categorized because the meanings shift based on the specific context in which they are written. In other words, feminist aesthetics should be understood based on when they are created and who/what they are addressing. Feminist aesthetics may be seen as a response to, or an inevitable result of, the status quo.

A contemporary of Felski, Susan Suleiman explores the historical trajectory of feminist literature (particularly avant-garde and transgressive works) in her book *Subversive Intent*. She describes her investment in the reader, or the reader experiences, in conjunction with the literature: “to read…is to interpret as best one can at a given moment the historical, cultural, and existential situations that have led to the present…it is inevitably motivated [situated] and it is oriented toward a future” (Introduction XVI). Considering Felski’s deconstruction of feminist aesthetics and Suleiman’s understanding of the reader, contemporary feminist literature may be understood as a remapping of historical oppression within a contemporary cultural moment that is looking ahead at an ever-unknowable future.

Following Felski’s and Suleiman’s work on feminist aesthetics and feminist literature, Ewa Plonowska Ziarek focuses on the transformative power of feminist aesthetics. In *Feminist Aesthetics: Transformative Practice, Neoliberalism, and the Violence of Formalism* (2015), Zia-

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1 Ziarek writes specifically on modernity, particularly Virginia Woolf, and the experimentation with form. Women writers, according to Ziarek, adopted an avant-garde aesthetic to challenge the dominance of male writers and to subvert this power by reclaiming the avant-garde style as their own.
rek suggests that neoliberal\(^2\) feminist aesthetics primarily invest in two concepts: melancholia and radical or transformative politics:

“The contradiction between transformative action and melancholic impasse raises a fundamental question for feminist aesthetics…namely, how the haunting history of destruction and the ongoing exclusion of women from politics and literary production can be transformed into inaugural possibilities of writing and action” (5).

There is something particularly compelling about contemporary poetry and graphic narratives that explore these feminist issues through the transformative potential of writing and action. Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) and Una’s graphic narrative *Becoming, Unbecoming* (2016) respond to past and present feminist paradigms, further illustrating the tensions between what has been historically erased and what is politically possible through radical intervention. In order to represent this tension, both authors’ works are deliberately experimental and read as hybrid texts, combining words and images to represent the tension between historical erasure and political possibility.

The term “hybridity” gained particular attention following Homi Bhabha’s 1994 book *The Location of Culture*. Describing hybridity as an identity formation that disrupts the binary between object and subject (binaries such as blackness and whiteness and colonized and colonizer), Bhabha suggests that the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5). This “interstitial passage” engages with these differences (binaries) in order to create something new, something that does not recreate a hierarchy. Bhabha describes his theory as a

\(^2\) According to the OED’s definition, “These ideas include, beside free trade: privatization, deregulation, competitiveness, social-spending cutbacks and deficit reduction. The ensemble may be called neoconservatism, neoliberalism, the free market, [etc.].”
“place of hybridity…where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes…the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics” (37). Hybridity, then, creates newness out of the familiar and oppositional, challenging perceived notions of what form is and what it can do. Such is the case of word and image in contemporary texts, in these feminist texts in particular, where word is commonly considered separate from image.

Hybridity causes word and image to function as one language, a new thing which disrupts the previously understood word and image binary. If hybridity is understood as a construction of a political object, in Bhabha’s sense of the term, then feminist aesthetics hybridize word and image in order to reconstruct the political oppression of women. Hybridity may be consider a necessity within feminist aesthetics because the recognition of women’s oppression—particularly the ways women encounter sexual violence and objectification—motivates a political upheaval of misogynistic paradigms. The newness that hybridity creates is a new political form, one that puts woman at the forefront. To create this new paradigm, women writers experiment with word and image to create a new language that expresses the historical oppression of women in an effort to transcend that history. They are creating a language that is alien but necessary for a future feminist collective.

As a Jamaican-American writer, Rankine uses lyric poetry and images to show the various ways black people are either seen as highly visible or highly invisible in (white) American

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3 Words and images have commonly been understood as having a separate function; i.e. words are used to express the ideas behind the images and images are used to provide a visual for a written description. Studies on multimedia forms, comics and the graphic novel for example, have challenged this assumption. In his essay “Word and Image,” W.J.T Mitchell, who is referenced on the next page, describes the dynamic relationship between word and image. He describes this as both a “word vs. image” relationship which “denotes the tension, difference, and opposition between these terms” and a “word as image” relationship which “designates their tendency to unite, dissolve, or change places” (53). He suggests that this relationship “must be thought of simultaneously as a vs/as in order to grasp the peculiar character of their relationship” (53).
society. Rankine’s prose change in pace and voice throughout her work (vacillating from a “you” centered narrative to an “I” centered narrative) to explore the various and insidious ways that American society silences and polices black women’s bodies (and black bodies in general). Upon its release, Citizen received critical acclaim, winning the 2014 National Book Critics Circle award in the poetry category. In his review of Citizen in the New Yorker, columnist Dan Chiasson describes how Rankine’s work “suggests that a contemporary ‘American lyric’ is a weave of artfully juxtaposed intensities, a quarrel within form about form” (Chiasson). As a critically acclaimed text, Citizen experiments with form to navigate through multiple forms of contemporary white American racism.

Una’s work, on the other hand, explores issues of sexual violence and trauma through prose and personal illustrations. As a British illustrator, Una writes and illustrates extensively on trauma and gendered violence. She adopts the pseudonym Una to describe herself as every woman—“Meaning one, one life, one of many” as she writes on her website (https://unacomics.com/) —renaming herself to embrace a feminist collective. Becoming, Unbecoming follows Una through her teen years as she endures rape and sexual violence while following the murderous sex crimes committed by the Yorkshire Ripper in 1970’s England. Published a year before the Me Too movement became a mainstream phenomenon, Becoming, Unbecoming was well-received for its scathing social commentary. Kirkus Review describes it as a “graphic manifesto for female empowerment and a punch to the gut of predatory males” (August 25 2016). Like Rankine’s work, Una’s graphic narrative is an equally experimental text—though both texts play with form in very different ways. By combining word and image, Rankine’s and Una’s work are hybrid texts. Both Citizen and Becoming, Unbecoming explore issues of spectatorship as a form of male-visual logic production. They experiment with form (poetry and the graphic novel) to
bring awareness to the oppression of black women’s bodies and sexual violence against women.

In her 2014 book, *American Hybrid Poetics: Gender, Mass Culture, and Form*, Amy Moorman Robbins provides a definition of hybrid aesthetics which directly connects with Ziarek’s definition of feminist aesthetics:

“…hybrid aesthetics have been the driving force in the work of a historically and culturally diverse group of women poets who are part of a robust tradition in contesting the dominant cultural order—as well as implicitly masculinist avant-garde dogma—in ever-new, innovative, and formally subversive ways.” (2).

Much like Ziarek’s definition of feminist aesthetics, Robbins’ understanding of hybrid aesthetics engages in this tension between historical oppression and a radical future, by subverting the former to create the latter. Hybrid aesthetics subvert the “implicitly masculinist avant-garde dogma” (a historically male-dominated literary form) in order to create an “ever-new” and “innovative” (radical) form (2). Feminist aesthetics are hybrid aesthetics because the dominant culture is male-centered, and the undoing of the patriarchal order requires a feminist resistance and experimentation with form. In other words, women writers often experiment with form because they do not want to reiterate the same masculine forms of art that have been part of their oppression. Hybridity rejects the dominance of masculine art forms by manipulating these forms to create something new.

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4 Rankine’s work brings attention to the white surveillance of both black men and women. As will later be discussed, Rankine is particularly invested in the surveillance of black women’s bodies using Serena Williams as a metaphor for a black feminist collective.

5 Una’s central focus is on sexual trauma and sexual assault, while also calling to mind issues of gendered violence more generally—such as domestic violence.

6 Consider, as an example, Cindy Sherman’s photography. Sherman uses photography to create herself within her own artwork. While most male-dominated forms of photography rely on the woman’s passivity as an object of the
In his essay “Word and Image,” W. J. T. Mitchell writes: “word and image is a kind of shorthand name for a basic division in the human experience of representations, presentations, and symbols…the relation between the seeable and the sayable” (47). He compares word and image to “black marks on a white background, with specific shapes, sizes, and locations” or as “sounds against a background of relative silence” (47). The seeable and the sayable, though two distinct human functions, interact with each other in particularly effective ways. In combining word and image, Rankine and Una attempt to make the seeable sayable by connecting the word and image in order to make them function as a codependent unit. That is, words within a page (prose in Rankine’s example, and prose or word bubbles in Una’s) are connected to images shown within that same page and are read as a codependent and collectively functioning text; one cannot be understood without the other.

Mitchell concludes that, much like race and gender, the relationship between word and image: “designates multiple regions of social and semiotic difference that we can live neither with nor without, but must continually reinvent and renegotiate” (63). Based on Mitchell’s own assessment of word and image, Rankine’s and Una’s work seems particularly hybrid because it is reinventing and renegotiating (or subverting, as Moorman would say) what is seeable and sayable. Both works address the ways that women are silenced and positioned as passive objects deprived of agency, demonstrating the need for hybridity as a feminist urgency. Hybridity helps these women authors navigate through a world of violent and racist misogyny by experimenting with what is sayable and seeable; challenging the reader’s preconceived notion of what written and visual language is and what feminism can do to challenge these notions. In Citizen, images camera’s lens, Sherman subverts this paradigm by making herself both subject and object of her own art. Her work, too, may be consider hybrid because she is using an old form, photography which was often consider a male art form, to create a new form—photography which both parodies and incorporates the subject/object binary (Sulieman goes into further detail on Sherman’s work in Subversive Intent in Chapter 6 “Postmodernism”).
(artworks, photography, and screenshots) and prose function as a new form, a hybrid form that is understood simultaneously through a visual and verbal register. This hybridization allows Rankine to explore racial oppression with a particular emphasis on the surveillance of black women’s bodies.

II. Hybridity as an Oppositional Gaze

Described as a "book-length poem," a collection of "lyric essays," and "like viewing an experimental film or live performance," (Lee, New York Times), Citizen is an experimental work of literature challenging past and present racism through hybridity and an ever shifting voice that fluctuates between a collective and individualistic perspective. Mary-Jean Chan suggests that Rankine’s use of the lyric form attest to the “lyric’s legacy of hybridization” (139). She goes on to observe that: “the lyric’s ‘newness’ must come with an awareness of the lyric’s historical evolution in response to philosophical, sociopolitical, and cultural transformations” (138). Like feminists aesthetics, lyric poetry is often defined and understood based on the politics and culture in which it is produced.\(^7\) Lyric poetry is not a singular or permanent concept, but something that changes and adapts over time. Adhering to the American conventions of lyric poetry, Rankine portrays a collective and individualized voice while experimenting with form. While the “you” of each poem is often not gendered (or not overtly coded as female), the second person tense allows Rankine to explore issues of racialized gender oppression by inviting the reader into the black experience (the experience of oppression) regardless of what their gender may be. By be-

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\(^7\) Marion Thain, who Chan references in her article, describes this more explicitly in his 2013 book The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations.
coming the “you” of the poem, the reader begins to see part of a black women’s experience of racism in America while also being removed from actually living with those experiences.\(^8\)

Rankine’s specific use of feminist aesthetics resonates with bell hook’s concept of the oppositional gaze; a lens for looking back at the white male spectator who has so often rendered the black female body invisible. bell hook’s book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, exposes “spaces of agency [that] exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see.” (hooks 181). The urgency to both “interrogate the gaze” and to “look back” is an experience that is categorically a black experience—that is, an experience shared by those who are particularly scrutinized by a white male gaze. If feminist aesthetics is understood as a culturally specific phenomenon responding to past and present paradigms\(^9\), then the oppositional gaze is a crucial part of these aesthetics responding to race and gender. In order to make the white spectator understand their own position as an oppressor class, they must first look at and into themselves. The oppositional gaze creates this awareness, since the object of desire (the oppressed black female) looks back at the spectator in order to subvert their power over her. Looking is an act of confrontation and resistance and Rankine’s work is highly invested in confronting and resisting the power of the white male gaze. Hybridity performs the oppositional gaze in *Citizen* because it causes the spectator (the reader in this circumstance) to question their own position as a complicit onlooker at racial and gender violence and oppression.

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\(^8\) On the other hand, black female readers may have a more active and direct response to the content, having experienced this oppression themselves. They may understand and relate to the “you” in the poems more than a white (male, in particular) reader would.

\(^9\) Specifically, in this case, the absence of black women in feminist discourse and the ongoing efforts by black feminist theorists and writers to be part of this discourse while acknowledging their historical removal from this dialogue. Consider, as an example, Kimberly Crenshaw’s essay on intersectionality (“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”) which helped give rise to the contemporary inception of intersectional feminism.
During a particularly poignant moment in *Citizen*, the narrator describes an event in which a real estate agent states how comfortable she feels with the narrator’s friend, rendering the narrator invisible. As the only black person in this situation, the narrator (referred to as “you” in this part of *Citizen*) acknowledges that: “Neither you nor your friend bothers to ask who is making her feel uncomfortable” (Rankine 51). Glenn Ligon’s 1992 print “Untitled: Four Etchings” is incorporated into this passage to emphasize this racial tension. In his charcoal etching, Ligon translates Zora Neale Hurston’s quotes “I do not always feel colored” and "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” onto a sharp white canvas (52-53). The words in Ligon’s work smudge and become more illegible towards the bottom of the print. Deliberately blurring both of Hurston’s phrases, Ligon’s work makes the black and white stand-out as a stark contrast to each other. Ligon hybridizes word and image by making Hurston’s quote illegible. He is taking Hurston’s quote out of its metaphorical context and putting into a literal context. Blackness in this artwork becomes highly visible through the intrusive background of the white canvas.

Ligon’s work serves as a parallel to Rankine’s prose emphasizing how black bodies are scrutinized by the white spectator. His artwork may stand on its own—it’s been featured in museum across the country since its release in 1992—but it bears a particular context when read with Rankine’s prose. Within the narrative lyric, it cannot be separate from Rankine’s own words. Hybridity, both Rankine’s words and Ligon’s recapitulation of Hurston’s words form a new type of language; one that is making the sayable seeable, to paraphrase Mitchell. The artwork provides an explicit visual that causes the reader to become aware of the violence that is implicit in this encounter in Rankine’s prose. The reader sees the ways that black women are erased from everyday conversations while interpreting the artwork as a visual aid highlighting
the violence of this everyday erasure. The sayable—Rankine’s written description of common encounters of microaggressions—becomes seeable through Ligon’s violent imagery.

Figure 1 Glenn Ligon, Untitled: Four Etchings, 1992

Using a work that directly quotes Zora Neale Hurston,10 Rankine shows how black women are removed from the type of recognition and respect that is afforded to white Americans. The narrator, the reader who becomes the narrator through the evocation of a second-person pronoun, is hyperaware of their blackness, even while the white real-estate agent is completely ignorant of

10 Considered a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston wrote extensively on social issues facing African American women in particular. This quote is taken from her essay “How it Feels to be Colored Me,” which focuses on her move from Eatonville, Florida (a predominately black neighborhood) to Jacksonville, Florida (a predominately white neighborhood).
it. “You” are rendered illegible when juxtaposed to a white background, just as Hurston’s words are eventually rendered illegible in Ligon’s work. Separated, these words and image render a completely different meaning. The reader may understand the narrator’s encounter with the real estate agent, but it is the visual aid of Ligon’s work, that makes both the prose and the image create a hyperawareness of the racial dynamics that have occurred over time and continue into the present. When read together they illustrate the tragic connections between past and present racism.

Throughout *Citizen*, Rankine shows the various ways black people are either seen as highly visible or highly invisible in (white) American society. The dualism of both the hyper-visibility and invisibility of black bodies is specifically illustrated on the memoriam, or dedication, page on 134. While Rankine cites black artists throughout her work, this particular page is an image and a text that Rankine has created herself. Starting with the words “In Memory of…” Rankine lists black victims of white violence (police brutality) throughout the past decade (134). The list starts out with a strong black and white contrast—black words are cast against a white background—while fading to grey and then invisibly white towards the bottom of the page. The memory eventually fades into a blank space. As both a word and an image, this page illustrates the history of violence against black people while creating a blank space which suggests that the violence will continue (there will be more murders following whichever recent version of Citizen is in print).

As Shermaine Jones observes, each rendition of *Citizen* adjusts this page to include additions to the victims of white violence—though the list still fades to white at the bottom of the page. Jones suggests that: “The fading of the repeated phrase "In Memory Of" recreates the expulsion of a sigh moving from clearly legible to illegible, black to gray to white, audible to inau-
dible” (*The Nation*). It moves from the sayable to the seeable, or rather both the sayable and the seeable eventually become inaudible and illegible. That is why the narrator follows this text with a simple but highly provocative haiku: “because white men can’t police their imagination black people are dying” (135). Here, Rankine responds to the previous image by making the violence overtly seeable and sayable. She is addressing historical oppression in hopes of creating a radical future, one in which black people are free from white violence and systemic racism. Once again, hybridity is performing the oppositional gaze. Words and images look back at the reader, while the reader is looking back at it. In experimenting with form, Rankine challenges the reader to assess their own role in systemic racism.

Figure 2 *Citizen: An American Lyric* pages 134-135
Una’s graphic narrative has a similar investment in spectatorship\textsuperscript{11}, showing the reader the victims of sexual assault and how they have been historically silenced from the 1970s into the present day. As a coming of age story, Becoming, Unbecoming does not depict acts of sexual violence in graphic details, but rather uses the graphic narrative art form to challenge the reader’s perspective, and perhaps unacknowledged complicity, as a spectator witnessing this sexual violence as it is being retold. Combining her direct and honest prose with an illustration style that varies from stark and simplistic to darkly complex, Una delves into the eerie subject of trauma and sexual violence while being very self-aware throughout her creative process. She is deliberately writing about trauma without trying to traumatize or trigger the reader, showing a compassionate understanding that the reader may also be recovering from trauma. At the same time, she is compelled by a political motivation to address global and local issues of sexual assault. She is navigating through difficult spaces, but manages to reach eloquence and honesty through the hybrid form.

Throughout the graphic narrative, Una describes the violence she endures rather than showing it. Perhaps this is her way of subverting the male gaze. She refuses to endorse these violent sex acts by reproducing detailed images of these crimes. Representations of sexual violence take many forms in this work, many relying on words in the absence of images depicting the violent sex act. In this way, the graphic narrative is a hybrid of word and image, speaking for one in the absence of the other. Similar to its functions in Citizen, word and image are inseparable and cannot be wholly understood out of context. This hybridization allows for a particular look at sexual violence, one that looks at the past, present, and future. An absence of visual representa-

\textsuperscript{11} Specifically addressing the ‘male gaze’ that Laura Mulvey writes about in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” As Mulvey writes, “the power to subject another person to the will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned onto the woman as the object of both” (23).
tion here does not conceal the violent misogyny, but refocuses issues of systemic misogyny through its attention to the male and female (oppositional) gaze.

Building off of W. J. T. Mitchell’s work on images and space, visual culture scholar Hillary Chute writes, “while we may read comics’ spatializing of narrative as part of a hybrid project, we may read this hybridity as a challenge to the structure of binary classification that opposes a set of terms privileging one” (10). In graphic narratives, Chute’s preferred term for the more common term ‘graphic novel,’¹² neither word nor image is privileged; the binary is undone through the hybridization of word and image. Becoming, Unbecoming is particularly experimental because the word/image binary is so frequently blurred and reinvented. As Chute describes of this novel, “throughout, and especially in the book’s conclusion, Una uses the grammar of comics as a self-conscious element in her storytelling, figuring presence and absence, and the space in between” (“Feminist Graphic Art” 13). This grammar of comics is the hybridization of word and image, an experimentation with the ever shifting presence and absence of word and image. Words say what images cannot and vice versa, creating a hybrid language for Una’s narrative on sexual violence.

Early on in the narrative, Una tells a story about a woman who reported information on the Yorkshire Ripper and a policeman’s complete disregard for her story “on the grounds that she was not a prostitute and couldn’t have been mistaken for one” (31). Since the early victims of the Yorkshire Ripper were primarily prostitutes, the police cannot fathom the possibility of a suburban middle-class woman being a potential victim of this horrid crime. Throughout this full page layout, the background space is fairly dark and blank depicting only a tree and a police of-

¹² For further details read Chute’s introduction in Graphic Women. Chute prefers the term narrative because graphic novels are so often autobiographical. Particularly for women writers, graphic novels are often memoirs and/or personal retellings of trauma. Hence, graphic narratives evoke a particular form of a feminist aesthetic calling to mind the 2nd way feminist mantra that the ‘personal is political.’
ficer talking to what appears to be a mother and her daughter (an older woman and a younger girl). In a word bubble, the office condescendingly asks “we are having fun and games today, aren’t we?” (30-31). Across the top of the page a newspaper headline reads “Girl, 14, brutally beaten in lane by a ‘dark stranger’” (30-31). The headline directly confronts the policeman, who is patronizing the young girl in the illustration. The information is right above their heads, yet the police officer shows a greater interest in talking condescendingly to the young girl, discussing “fun and games” as if this is all the young girl cares about. The tree in the stark background may be symbolic of the ‘dark stranger’ someone who is close enough to be seen, but only by those who care to see him. The officer is getting several warning signs that danger is afoot, but is merely tossing them aside by invalidating and ignoring many women’s claims and concerns.

Here, the combination of prose, illustrations, and the word bubble act as a hybrid text, collectively forming an oppositional gaze against the patriarchal eye of the police force. Images speak for the prose just as much as the word bubble speaks out against the male gaze and the social forces which invalidate women’s experiences of sexual assault. The seeable is sayable through this interaction.
The invalidation of women’s lived experiences of sexual violence is a recurring theme throughout the narrative, tracing sex crimes from the 1970s into the sexual allegations against Bill Cosby and other male celebrities. This hybrid language renders the victims visible without making them hypervisible\(^\text{13}\). Una’s graphic narrative embodies a contemporary feminist aesthetic because it allows victims to speak for themselves, to grapple with their personal history with patriarchal violence and erasure on their own terms and through their own perceptions. Along with the Me Too movement, *Becoming, Unbecoming* addresses contemporary issues of sexual violence and harassment by looking back at the recent past (from the 1970’s beyond) to show how

\(^{13}\) Like the term hybridity, hypervisibility is a term that can have multiple meanings all depending on how it is used in context. Here, hypervisibility is referring to how group identities—both black and white women for example—are revealed to the public as a display, an object of public scrutiny. In becoming hypervisible, they are seen without achieving the same form of agency that the spectator has. Theresa Runstedtler provides a good example of this application of the term in her book *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line*, “hypervisibility of black American athletes has not translated into increased political power [but rather] this hypervisibility has become a frequent point of critique for white conservatives” (260).
women have continually been silenced and ignored for speaking out against their attackers. Through speaking out and representing these women (women who have been sexually, verbally, or physically abused), Una uses feminist aesthetics to illustrate the potential for women to be protected against sexual violence. In order to speak out against this violence, Una, like Rankine, is invested in the male and female (oppositional) gaze.

Una’s attention to individual and collective gazes portrays both a critique of the male gaze and an oppositional gaze focused on female representation as survivors and activists, rather than as victims. Individual and collective male gazes are shown through both the men who have assaulted her and through the gazes of the police force, who have ignored multiple women’s accounts of rape and assault. She also depicts the female gaze frequently in her narrative, showing herself looking at the reader and showing a collective of women looking back at the reader towards the end of the narrative. Understood in the context of Ziarek’s definition of feminist aesthetics, the male and female gaze may represent past and future respectively. The male gaze, in Una’s graphic novel, indicates historical oppression, a police state which renders certain female bodies in more need of protection over others (sentencing the undesirable/“improper” female body to death through deliberate ignorance and indifference). While Una’s work is highly invested in providing an oppositional gaze, her work is not centered on systemic racism, but rather on systemic sexism and universal violence against women. Applying hook’s theory of oppositional gaze to this graphic narrative can provide insight on how this narrative works against misogyny and sexual violence, but Una’s narrative is told from a white perspective and does not entirely attend to the racial arguments inherent in hooks’ theory.

Addressing the white male gaze and its reliance on black female victimhood, hooks defines the oppositional gaze as a “process of mirrored recognition…[enabling] black women to
define their reality, apart from the reality imposed upon them by structures of domination” (103). Understood through hooks’ oppositional gaze, looking back at the white male gaze may not merely be a form of defiance for black women in America, but perhaps it is the only form of defiance—an act which risks violence, even while addressing the violence it seeks to avoid. Summarizing her concept of the oppositional gaze, hooks writes: “looking and looking back, black woman involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future.” Citizen hybridizes words and images to create a counter-memory, a specific process of the oppositional gaze. Looking back is an act of resistance that: “invent(s) the future” by reclaiming the present. It is a counter-memory because it is a reaction from memories of patriarchal oppression. Una’s work, of course, performs a similar hybridization, but Rankine’s work is entrenched in an oppositional gaze because of its blatant deconstruction of white American racism and sexism from the past and into the present. Hybridity forms an oppositional gaze which attempts to identify the present and the past in order to invent the future.

In Citizen, readers become spectators looking back at themselves, while the objects of their view simultaneously look back at them. Rankine draws heavily upon issues of spectatorship through an image called Public Lynching that forces the reader to look back at the white lynching mob, confronting a not-so-distant history of America’s violent racist history (91). Considered the “most iconic photograph of lynching in America,” the original Public Lynching image depicts the lynching of two young African American men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, in 1930 (npr.org). The image was so widely circulated that it inspired the song “Strange Fruit” (made famous by Billie Holiday). In the original photo, the hanging bodies of the young men were the focal point of the image, but in Rankine’s reproduction of the image, the bodies are totally re-
moved. An image which has historically represented white violence is reinterpreted in order to interrogate the spectators of this violent image.

The *New York Times* book review of *Citizen* suggests that Rankine’s deliberate removal of the bodies highlight “the excited faces of the white mob,” redirecting the gaze to the “white spectator” in order to “ponder their fascination and their actions” (Lee, *New York Times*). This may be somewhat of a variation of hooks’ oppositional gaze. Since the dead bodies of the lynching victims cannot achieve an oppositional gaze, they are not looking at the camera and their eyes are closed, Rankine instead brings great attention to the gaze of the white spectators. Several of the spectators are looking directly into camera and directly at the viewer by default. Rankine is hybridizing the image through this removal, giving the *Public Lynching* image a new meaning from its original. The image is no longer about the spectacle of the lynching, but rather it is about the spectacle of the violence of spectatorship. The viewer is deprived of the sadistic pleasure of reading a violent image, while simultaneously reading the white faces of the spectators who created this brutal image.
Susan Sontag’s book *Regarding the Pain of Others* may provide additional reasoning for Rankine’s rewriting in the lynching image because her chapter “On Photography” specifically critiques photographs of American lynchings and the violence reenacted in viewing such images. While Sontag acknowledges that such photos force the viewer to think about the violent evils of racism, she further suggests that: “intrinsic to the perpetration of this evil is the shamelessness of photographing it” (91). The viewer participates in this shameless act by looking; the gaze is a validation of the shameless act which produced the image. By removing the bodies from the image, Rankine makes the viewer hyperaware of the violence which spectatorship reproduces. While the bodies are removed from the image, the black space is still highly visible while juxta-
posed to a violent, sharp, white background. The removal of the lynched victims narrows the focus of the photograph onto the white onlookers. The reader is looking at the past through their own whiteness. Despite the reader’s own race, they become the white spectator looking alongside the other white spectators. They become this sharp white background that renders blackness hypervisible.

The passage preceding this image further illustrates issues of spectatorship:

My brother is completed by sky. The sky is his silence. Eventually, he says, it is raining. It is raining down. It was raining. It stopped raining. It is raining down. He won’t hang up. He’s there, he’s there but he’s hung up though he is there. Good-bye, I say. I break the good-bye. I say goodbye before anyone can hang up, don’t hang up.

Wait with me. Wait with me though the waiting might be the call of goodbye (90). Here the narrative has once again shifted perspective (from “you” to “I”)—illustrating how hybridity (in Citizen) is not only just a mix of word and image, but also a hybrid blend of genres and perspectives. The narrator’s brother is “completed by sky,” as if he has become the sky (perhaps becoming part of heaven, “the skies,” by being a martyr for racial violence). He becomes the sky and achieves language through weather. He says it’s raining and it rains. As a body suspended from a tree, he moves like raindrops dripping off a leaf. The narrator is either in denial regarding the state of this brother, or is interpreting him as a spiritual and physical body. He both “won’t hang up” and is “hung up though he is there” (90).

Rankine deliberately plays on the double-meaning of hanging up, juxtaposing a telephone conversation to a public lynching. The narrator’s plea “don’t hang up” could be a plea for the brother (a brother in a collective and individual context) not to leave the conversation or not to

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14 Or through their own position as someone who is a spectator, someone who sees this everyday violence and neglects to confront it.
be victim of this violent hate crime (90). The frequent fluctuation from “it stopped raining” to “it is raining” as well as the constant back and forth between “he won’t hang up” and “he’s hung up” further emphasizes a tension between past and present racial violence and the hopes for a better future (90). Deprived of the ability to create that better future, the narrator is left waiting: “though the waiting might be the call of good-byes” (90). The cyclical pattern of this passage signifies this cyclical pattern of racial violence. History repeats itself, and some people know that far better than others. The photograph and the passage emphasize the ways that the seeable violence of white American racism becomes sayable. The lynched bodies removed from the photograph are translated onto the prose through the synecdochic use of the term “brother.” Rankine is saying goodbye to both the lynched victims and the more recent victims of white violence by creating her own language of grief. She is not fetishizing their murders through displaying the original photograph, nor is she forgetting about this violence in her prose. The oppositional gaze here is happening through both what is read and what is seen.

III. Feminist Representations: Showing Violence and Rage

As mentioned previously, Becoming, Unbecoming also challenges spectatorship by removing the graphic depictions of sexual assault from the narrative as a way of creating a language of trauma that deprives the abuser of agency over the narrative. Una’s personal and collective accounts of sexual violence are often described through words rather than images\(^\text{15}\). Like the removal of the lynched bodies in Rankine’s work, Una omits these graphic images in order to interrogate the reader’s own role as a spectator in this narrative of sexual violence. Newspaper

\(^{15}\) Or through images that use symbolism to represent sexual violence. Such as the empty word bubble that Una carries throughout the narrative; a symbol for the ways that victims of sexual violence are often silenced or encouraged to stay silent.
clippings and personal prose account for retellings, both personal and collective, of sexual assault.

In many ways, this graphic novel’s illustrations are reminiscent of children’s stories; calling to mind the Madeline series or something out of a Maurice Sendak book. Elizabeth Marshall and Leigh Gilmore’s article “Girlhood in the Gutter: Feminist Graphic Knowledge and the Visualization of Sexual Precarity” offers insight into the childhood story format of comics that explore issues of rape and sexual violence. Focusing on Roberto Innocenti and Aaron Frisch’s contemporary picture book The Girl in Red and cartoonist Phoebe Gloeckner’s A Child’s Life and Other Stories, Marshall and Gilmore suggest that: “both have either alerted or eluded calls for censorship and each remediates fairy tales, as well as the material artifacts of childhood—the picture book and comic” (96). These interpretations also can be observed throughout Becoming, Unbecoming. While Gloeckner’s work is explicitly sexual and graphic, Una’s work focuses more on the recovery aspects of trauma, rather than the reiteration of this trauma. Una, perhaps best understood as the protagonist and creator of the work, is eluding censorship by writing about rape and sexual violence without providing graphic illustrations to complement these written descriptions.

Eluding visual representations causes the reader to learn to interpret rape and sexual violence without being a spectator. Readers are provided with Una’s written personal accounts of her own sexual trauma, as well as the media’s written account of other women’s sexual trauma, to expose a universal problem of sexual violence without sensationalizing or fetishizing the victims’ trauma. Removing graphic depictions of the violent sex acts is an attempt to deprive and

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16 A graphic narrative on Gloeckner’s personal accounts of childhood rape and trauma.
17 Gloeckner uses detailed illustrations to narrate her childhood memories, when she was raped by her mother’s boyfriend.
prevent any (sexual) pleasure that can be derived from looking. Since sexual abusers derive pleasure through first looking, and then forcibly touching or penetrating directly after, Una is thwarting off the potential of the male gaze to continue to abuse and violate.

To compensate for this “elude[d] censorship” (Marshal and Gilmore 96), Una relies on picture book style illustrations and fairy tale allusions while handling a very disturbing, though universally experienced, subject matter. Similar to The Girl in Red, Una’s work seems to allude to Little Red Riding Hood at various points throughout the novel. A black and white color scheme is prevalent throughout, but several times Una is seen in a noticeable red dress cast against this black and white background. While describing her post-traumatic stress, Una recreates a dream sequence where she is chased by a wolf, who transforms into a man with a knife.
This may easily be associated with the wolf and the hunter in Little Red Riding Hood, though in this example the hunter is as much of a threat to Una (Little Red) as the wolf. This sequence occurs within several pages of the novel, and is depicted with very few (if any) words. Towards the end of this sequence, Una illustrates herself caught between bleeding white and black lines. She appears to be hiding from the wolf (turned man) in a field, writing, “I had to run and crawl through tight spaces” (100-101). Una cleverly combines this surreal illustration with written description and metaphor. These tight spaces are both the places she needs to hide within in her dream and the spaces she needs to explore personally through this experimentation with form. Space expands and tightens to emphasize the metaphor that Una is using while describing her post-traumatic stress from sexual assault. Rape is described as a chase, and the violation of space indicates the violation of her body and the invasion of her innocence. Words function as metaphors which merge with images to create new ways of addressing sexual assault and trauma.

Here, the reader actively participates in the expression of childhood/adolescent trauma through Una’s imagination; a part of her mind which is constantly trying to process the trauma on a personal and collective level. The dream sequence can be read as a metaphor for running away from recurring memories of sexual trauma, or, additionally, a reminder of how women (young and old) are always under the threat of sexual predation and are constantly trying to run away from it.

While Becoming, Unbecoming primarily explores issues of sexual violence through non-violent aesthetics (word and images as metaphors), there is a particular part of the narrative where Una explores her own trauma through rage and violence. Towards the end of the narrative, Una refers to a collective of 200 women in India who killed their rapist in a Nagpur District Courthouse. Una shows this violence through an illustration of a bloody floor. While she writes
that: “this is not a thing that anyone should resort to” (133), she goes onto discuss her own fantasies of killing her rapist. The red blood cast against a black and white background transforms into a red dress that Una purchases and wears in a surreal sequence describing her desire to recreate Italian Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi’s painting *Judith Beheading Holofernes.*

While writing about Gentileschi’s experiences with rape which inspired the painting, Una dons on the bright red dress worn by Judith’s maid. Once she has put on the dress, and has officially become the maid, she is shown in a black and white sketch, helping Judith thrust her sword into Holofernes’ neck to behead him. Below this image, Una writes about the court’s disregard for Gentileschi’s accusations against her rapist because it was assumed that: “Artemisia was a bit of a slut” (135). While this is the most violent image of the narrative, there is one distinction between the visual registers here and the absence of visuals when she is describing her own experiences with sexual violence. This act of violence and rage is a fantasy, while her experiences are far from that. Una graphically depicts this description to channel her rage at the ongoing invalidation of women’s lived experiences with sexual violence. Emphasizing the long history of disbelief in survivors, from Gentileschi and beyond, Una indulges in this violent fantasy to channel her rage and to expose it to the reader, the spectator of this ongoing violence. Rage is as much a part of this text as trauma is. Hybridity allows Una to express her rage without reinforcing the violence that has caused her trauma. The violence of the image is a release from the psychological burdens that stem from male sexual violence. As Una says herself “it was just a fantasy, I’m not that kind of girl” (134). She shows a brief moment of her violent fantasy to show how trauma impacts the victim of sexual assault. The fantasy becomes a process of both healing from sexual violence while also confronting that violence through an equally violent image.

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18 Circa 1614-1620.
Using hybridity as means to illustrate what has been historically erased and what may be politically possible, Rankine creates an intensely complex exploration of black female rage. In order to explore the complexity of black female rage, Rankine analyzes the ways that Serena Williams is scrutinized by white spectators. Rankine’s first reference to Hurston’s quote is provoked by watching Williams play at the 2009 Women’s US Open semifinals and noticing how her behavior “suggests that all the injustice she has played through the years…flashes before her and she decides to respond to all of it through a string of invectives” (25). Williams is inevitably stigmatized as a woman who is black and angry, rather than as a person who is exposed to racial injustices throughout her career and has finally reacted to it.
In section II of *Citizen*, Rankine focuses on YouTuber Jayson Musson showing how black rage may be, at times, a commodity for black men and a detriment for black women. Referring to Musson’s satiric tutorials, Rankine focuses on his advice for black artist to “cultivate ‘an angry nigger exterior’” as a form of “commodified anger” (23). As an artifice of rage, this commodified anger is “tied solely to the performance of blackness and not to the emotional state of particular individuals in particular situations” (23). Rankine uses a screen shot from Musson’s video, again combining words and images to interpret microaggressions and systemic racism. According to Rankine’s interpretation of Musson’s tutorial, and the image screenshots she chooses to use in this passage, black people must maneuver their use of rage before a white audience. Being historically stereotyped as angry and aggressive, black men perform their own blackness in order to achieve economic success.

Black women, on the other hand, may not use rage in the same way. Displaying her rage, Serena Williams is seen as someone who is “abandoning all rules of civility” (30). While rage is an emotion that is self-policed by both black women and black men, Rankine shows how it is specifically repressed by black women. Williams serves as another form of a hybrid image. She represents both the racial history that inspires rage and the political desires to express that rage without further punishment and oppression.

While white spectators view Serena Williams as a stereotypically angry black woman, Rankine undoes that stereotype by reverting the gaze back onto the spectators. She exposes the repressed rage that black Americans experience on a daily basis, using Williams as a metonym for the black community and the struggle to freely express rage before a white audience. While discussing Musson, Rankine discusses a type of anger that he does not focus on in his work. She describes this as “the anger built up through experience and the quotidian struggles against de-
humanization every brown or black person lives simply because of their skin color” (24). Ranke further suggests that this type of anger “in time can prevent, rather than sponsor, the production of anything except loneliness” (24).

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 7 Hennesy Youngman, screenshot from Youtube video ART THOUGHTZ: How to Be a Sucessful Black Artist, 2010**

The image of Musson, also known as Hennesey Youngman, depicts the YouTuber with the caption “be angry” written below him. Stylistically, these passages are far more essayistic than other passages (such as the prose proceeding the lynching image). It reads like a mini essay on Serena Williams, suggesting that her presence on the tennis court serves as a symbolic deconstruction of whiteness. Section II focuses primarily on Musson and Williams and is written in a more conventional style than the remaining half of *Citizen*. It consists of paragraph descriptions
which read in a chronological order, starting from Rankine’s description of Musson and leading into an analysis of Williams and how she is stereotyped as an angry black woman. Rankine asks the reader “what does a victorious or defeated black woman’s body in a historically white space look like?” (25). Perhaps Rankine is less concerned about experimenting with form in this section because her question demands a specific type of reading. By keeping this section essayistic, she is able to provide a detailed summary of black rage to show the reader how stereotypes of black rage are specifically used against black women. This question also asks the reader to consider rage as it is embodied in black men and women. Since black rage is something that is so commonly exaggerated and misinterpreted by a white audience, Rankine uses this descriptive, essayistic form in order to render the seeable sayable, exposing black rage as something authentic rather than as a sporadic and psychotic reaction. In doing so, Rankine makes the reader aware of their own position as a witness to this rage.

Elaborating on her definition of anger, Rankine suggests that: “witnessing the expression of this more ordinary form and daily anger might make the witness believe that a person is ‘insane’” (24). Undoing the stereotype of the angry black person, Rankine reports black anger as it is rarely reported in American society. The juxtaposition of this essay on anger to the picture of Musson, who is parodying white interpretations of black anger, asks the reader to confront their own understandings of black rage. Rankine chooses a photo which parodies anger rather than depicting it, in order to further deconstruct white America’s chokehold on black expressions of rage. Similar to her use of the lynching photo, Rankine is removing spectacle from the reader’s encounter with black rage. Instead of using a photo of black rage, she uses a photo on black rage, shifting the gaze from the white spectator to the black spectator.

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19 In comparison to other sections which often read as poetic stanzas rather than descriptive paragraphs.
In this section, Rankine also includes a photo of Nick Cave, a black performance artist who creates body suits that obscure the race of the person within the suit, suggesting that race is a social and cultural performance. She ends this section with a picture of Danish tennis player Caroline Wozniacki, Serena’s competitor, recreating a racist caricature of black women’s bodies (the Venus Hottentot), commenting on Wozniacki’s “smiling blond goodness” (36) at the expense of Serena’s scrutinized black body. Creating a hybrid of images—Musson, Cave, and Wozniacki—with words (a case study of Serena Williams), Rankine again interrogates the role of the spectator, the reader in this case. The oppositional gaze reflects back onto the reader’s eyes, causing them to question their own positions as spectators before the performance of black anger. Hybridity here combines the seeable and the sayable through a more conventional narrative, providing an essay on anger with the picture on anger, making the previously unsayable explicitly sayable. Word and image combine to render black anger visible, that is, visible and free from white scrutiny.
Rankine’s interpretation of expressions and repressions of black anger align with many of feminist scholar Sara Ahmed’s interpretations of rage. Ahmed describes rage as a snap: “a moment with a history…the accumulated effect of what you have come up against” (199). While it seems like a sudden and hostile reaction, Ahmed describes the snap as part of a “history of resistance, of not being willing to put up with something” (199). Rage is seen as a snap, not by the person who is enraged, but rather by the person who is witness to that rage. The witness does not necessarily see the history which has accumulated that rage, but only the snapping, or breaking, point of the enraged. In describing the history of these various moments of snapping, Ahmed suggests that: “a feminist politics might insist on renaming actions as reactions; we need to show how her snap is not the starting point” (189). Rankine has explicitly done this throughout her work, using Serena Williams as particular symbol of the starting point of the snap and the reac-
tion (the actual snap) which quickly ensues from it. Una does a similar thing in her recreation of Gentileschi’s painting, showing all of the social influences that lead to the snap; the snap in this case being the imagined decapitation of the male rapist (Holofernes as a symbol of male violence in general). Showing this rage, Rankine and Una use hybridity as a feminist aesthetic in order to express female rage—using words and images together as a new language to express rage and trauma.

IV. Subverting History: Hybridity as Political Resistance

Hybridity—understood as both a genre breaking (from essay to poetry) and the interaction of word and image—exposes what has been historically repressed and what may be politically possible in the future. For Rankine, the future seems bleak, given the ongoing issues of racial violence and systemic racism which have been part of the American culture for centuries. While these issues remain prevalent, Rankine’s work exposes the wounds in hopes of healing them. Her frequent references to Serena Williams and various tennis matches stress the ongoing process of fixing the current state of American racism.

Shortly after first introducing Williams in her work, Rankine writes: “the body has memory….all the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through, even as we are eternally stupid or everlastingly optimistic, so ready to be inside, among, a part of the games” (28). Rankine uses the metaphor of a game throughout Citizen to illustrate how racism becomes a game, one in which the rules are already bent towards the white competitor. The American black experience relies on learning the rules of the game, even while the rules change to further the betterment of the white competitor.

The last words of Citizen attempt to undo this metaphor of sport in order to envision a future that is freed from these racist rules. Rankine writes: “It wasn’t a match, I say. It was a les-
son” (159). These final sentences are then followed by two paintings of slave ships. Images get the “last word”—though, once again, the word and image are functioning together. By declaring the struggles a lesson and not a match, Rankine is using her continued rage to subvert historical racism. She rejects the game altogether because it is an inevitably losing game for black Americans. Since she has rendered this ongoing history of racial violence and systemic racism highly visible, she attempts to engage in a political future that is freed from this history. This future is still in the making, providing the narrator with a “lesson” that will make the match more tolerable.

Una channels her rage and recovery from trauma through a specific form of an oppositional gaze, one that literally involves the eyes of the victim. Reflecting on the deaths of the 13 females victims of the Yorkshire Ripper, Una asks “I wonder what they would be doing now?” (171). The remaining pages of the narrative imagine these women as they would be today, doing daily activities such as cleaning, drinking coffee, and spending time with their family. Una shows a future for these women that subverts the melancholic and the tragic expectations from women-centered texts. The women are looking at and beyond the reader, perhaps looking at a future that transforms or challenges the current state of sexual assault and violence against women.

Here, the gaze is saying what words cannot. The 13 pages include no words, but only drawings of these women, one per page. By ending the narrative this way, Una imagines a space for these women where they are no longer victims—ignored by the police and erased from history—but are a collective of women living their everyday lives without the scrutiny of the spectator. In hybridizing word and image, Una transforms both her personal history and the collective
history of violence against women into a future that may look beyond this and see an end to this violence even while being presently exposed to it through the image.

Early on in her work, Rankine writes about a discussion with a white colleague who draws distinctions between the historical self and the “self-self”: “sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American positioning” (14). *Citizen* should be understood as an American repositioning, a subversion of the American zeitgeist which positions black bodies as “historical” and white bodies as autonomous and self-declaring. Una repositions the past by emphasizing a feminist collective that speaks out against historical and ongoing sexual violence on a global scale: “it’s time to be heard if you can make yourself heard above the roar of the crowd” (130). Hybridity, as a feminist aesthetic, confronts this history (sexual violence and systemic racism) in an attempt to undo this history. Both texts demonstrate how reading allows for political forms of rereading and restructuring, ways of challenging the status quo. Their feminist aesthetics allow readers to see things as they are, while looking ahead at a future that may not seem so bleak.
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