Research Article

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The Personal Is Theoretical and the Past Is Present: Blurring the Lines in Contemporary Anti-Racist Writing

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Abstract: This article studies the anti-racist writings by contemporary scholars Cornel West, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., George Yancy, and Claudia Rankine. It uncovers how they include personal narratives in their works in order to theorise the workings of white hegemony in the twenty-first century. In doing so, I argue, they productively blur the lines between the personal and the theoretical as well as between the past and the present. Consequently, they problematise the notion of abstract theorising, the myth of continuous racial progress as well as conceptions of postracialism.

Keywords: anti-racist criticism and embodiment theory, theoretical inquiry and life writing, conceptions of time and progress

African American culture is rich in autobiographical accounts which range from early Abolitionist slave narratives and Civil Rights activism to contemporary discussions of black life in the U.S. Black Studies scholars have long analysed the ties between life writing, black politics, and black culture. The twenty-first century continues this tradition of life writing but also shows an increasing diversity in contexts, subjects, and styles so that, Eric D. Lamore remarks, "the methodologies utilized in reading African American life narrative in the twenty-first century take a variety of productive forms" (9). Joycelyn K. Moody nonetheless acknowledges significant continuities in black life writing: "New directions in black life writing ... remember, represent, and detail the myriad means by which African Americans narrate struggles and endurance in an antiblack universe" (193). All these differences notwithstanding, authors who turn to the autobiographical[1] predominantly contextualise the personal as inherently tied to the social. While Lamore and Moody both acknowledge the plenitude of forms of life writing and critical approaches to it, they appear to overlook one of its central characteristics: life writing, I argue, is directly linked to *theorising* in anti-racist inquiry. Theorising is fundamentally important to anti-racist narratives, be they literary or scholarly.

There are numerous examples of *anti-racist narratives* that either include autobiographical elements or use the personal as the starting point of theorisations and narrations. In such texts, theory and life writing are inextricably connected, intersect, and shape one another in their challenges to white supremacy. One famous example of anti-racist autobiographical theorising is Frantz Fanon's in-depth recollection of his personal initiation into the racist world of colonialism in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon's analysis of imperialism is based on the personal racist encounter with a child who identifies Fanon from a white hegemonic subject perspective as the deviant other, thereby, Fanon infers, reducing him to a racist fantasy allegedly identifiable by his black body. Even prior to Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois pondered his personal

1 Borrowing from Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, I quite simply and very generally take *autobiographical* to "designate [any form of] self-referential writing" (4). I do not use it with specific genre boundaries in mind. Other terms that I equivalently turn to throughout this essay are *personal* or *individual experiences* and *elements of life writing*.

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initiation into white racism as a child in *The Souls of Black Folk*, recalling in detail the moment when he first discovered that he was "a problem" (8). In a manner quite similar to Fanon and Du Bois, contemporary black scholars of race as well as anti-racist writers draw on personal experiences to both frame and embed their writings on blackness, race, and racism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

An analysis of selected writings by scholars Cornel West, George Yancy, Eddie S. Glaude Jr., and Claudia Rankine will illustrate how these authors integrate their anti-racist goals with elements of life writing so that their lived experience becomes central to their works. Borrowing loosely from J.L. Austin's study of performative utterances, I maintain that by describing the racist reality and racial status quo, their works (partially) change the social and racial reality they explore and thus contribute to the social change they call for. By analogy with *perlocutionary acts*, the writers' approaches seek to affect their audience and encourage them to think, feel, and act differently (Austin 101). Consequently, they *perform* anti-racism. It is embodiment theory that especially allows the writers to bridge personal experiences and theorising in order to highlight their socio-historical positioning as the source of any theory.

Moreover, I argue in a second but related step that the turn to the personal has profound consequences for the conceptualisation of time. In sharing personal racialised experiences in anti-racist inquiries, these scholars and writers productively blur the lines between the past and present, recognising the past as a perpetual influence. However, in both narrating and theorising their individual and collective pasts, they simultaneously seek to shape the future, always knowing that progress is neither straightforward nor guaranteed, and seldom triumphal. This notion has a long history in African American thought. Gregory Laski details how, already during Reconstruction, Du Bois rejected the idea of a "purposeful break between past and present" and instead discussed slavery as a "past-present" (3). Contemporary anti-racist writers maintain this tradition. Consequently, I claim, the writers' understanding of the future is strongly marked by hesitancy, doubt, and a fragile hope. Success often already lies in the possibility of change. By showing the continuities between past and present, the authors resist the celebratory discourses of postracialism and challenge the idea of continuous, even if slow, racial progress—an idea pervasively present in American public and private politics.

Similarly to Robert Gooding-Williams who describes autobiography as "a narrative form of historical inquiry" (166), I regard the selected autobiographical passages as performing *theoretical* inquiry. Analyzing these texts requires a particular methodological approach to differentiate the various levels of performance. Borrowing sociologist Niklas Luhmann's concept of *second-order observation*, i.e. "observations of observations" (55), my analysis is two steps removed from the original situation: on the first level of observation, the four scholars' pieces rely on (their own) direct/experiential observations being analysed. The second-order observations, that is, the observations made in this essay, will be made on a meta-level observing these scholars' observations. This second-order observation enables me to show the ways in which black scholars challenge the common understanding of apersonal or abstract theories as allegedly more 'objective' and instead regard the personal as relevant to theorising and thus also to a collective given anti-racism's social thrust. I will first briefly contextualise contemporary black life writing before outlining embodiment theory since it influences the texts under consideration. I will then offer close readings of selected passages from West, Glaude, Yancy, and Rankine's works to show how life writing and the theoretical merge. In the final part, I will discuss the consequences the turn to the personal has for understanding progress and time.

The Embodied Subject of Contemporary Black Autobiographical Theory

In postmodern and postcolonial theory, as David Huddart has pointed out, authors advance "standpoint theory" by including autobiographical moments to advance the de-centralisation of Western unified subjectivity as one of the postcolonial theory's main goals (13). Standpoint theory recognises that human identity is situated in and contingent on socio-historical facts so that knowledge is always contextualised. Studying a particular form of life writing, Sidonie Smith observes that "autobiographical manifestos" reject

the Western concept of a universal, coherent, and independent subject and speak from an experienced-based position instead. Manifestos, Smith explains, have "the purpose of announcing past actions and explaining the reasons or motives for actions announced as forthcoming" ("Autobiographical Manifestos" 435). They establish a connection between past and future events as converging in the present. Regarding autobiographical manifestos as going against hegemonic scripts of autobiographical writing, Smith claims that autobiographical telling is not necessarily a "self-expressive act" but rather a performative one in which the self is not so much expressed as it is constructed in the very process of narration ("Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance" 108).

The authors and their anti-racism studied in this essay also strongly reject the idea of a pre-existent and independent self and advance standpoint theory.[2] However, the writers do not assume the radically (de)constructionist stance offered by Smith, nor do they embrace posthumanist conceptions of the subject, which—though they have become popular in recent years—are often committed to dangerous colourblind racism in their attempt to conceptualise subjectivity beyond the human. Instead, they speak from a subject position that is heavily shaped by experiences and socio-historical circumstances, a position that emphasises the importance of lived experience. Since they are situated in the black middle-class and educational elite, what these writers narrate are, for the most part, not necessarily events of blatant racism but racialised/racist everyday encounters, commonly referred to as *microaggressions*. At the same time, though, the writers' middle-class positioning underlines how class (or gender for that matter) does not shield them from becoming the targets of antiblack racism. In line with this assumption, Moody observes that African American autobiographical writing continues to be guided by the black body as a central theme: "Eschewing a purported postrace era, black autobiographical protests against antiblackness and racialized discrimination remain germane and continue to center on the black body—alive and deceased" (192).

While Moody raises a valid point, it is necessary, however, to be more specific with regard to the concept of the black body. West, Glaude, Yancy, and Rankine focus on the black body and use it as a starting point for their examination of white supremacy, but they interrogate the processes of *embodiment* that account for narrow and harmful perceptions of and experiences with the black body. They do not believe subjectivity to be constructed in the process of writing, but neither do they simply rely on a monolithic understanding of the body. Rather, they understand subjectivity to be contingent and expressed in the *lived body*[3] which makes them part of a larger group of intellectuals who, over the past two decades, have more or less directly turned to a phenomenology of race to account for the pervasiveness of racism despite all efforts to end it.

Critical Race theorists argue that racism manifests itself structurally on both macro- and micro-levels, on both societal and individual levels. Since it works on these two levels, racism is not only inscribed into institutions but also shapes human embodiment; human behaviour, values, and perceptions are often pre-reflectively under white hegemony's influence. Linda Martín Alcoff defines antiblack racism as a habitually trained way of seeing the world—a knowledge "deeply sedimented into white psyches" (216). At the same time, it has profound negative and lasting disruptive effects on black psyches. It is precisely because racism habitually inscribes itself into *lived bodies* where it becomes real that it is a worldview and system that is extremely difficult to undo. If this is the case, then anti-racist work must address both structural and personal racism because the two continuously feedback one another. The merging of theory and life writing in anti-racist texts mimics this connection and allows the writers to explore the ways in which racism plays out in the private. Moreover, it enables them to demonstrate how individual performative acts of racialised perception and interaction, through reiteration, always shape the structural level while being reinforced by

2 While this trend has severe consequences for theorising the various genres of life writing (cf. Smith and Watson 1-19), I am first and foremost concerned with the consequences it has for anti-racist criticism that dissects the racial status quo and proposes ways for a different racial practice.

3 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* for a detailed discussion of the concept. A prominent scholar of the phenomenological and existentialist tradition in black thought is Lewis R. Gordon. In *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* or more recently in his study of Frantz Fanon's philosophical legacy in *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*, Gordon explores race as an experiential dimension of human life that bears resemblance with the works under consideration in this article.

it in turn.

In their texts, West, Yancy, Glaude, and Rankine recount everyday racialised encounters and racist microaggressions that have similarly harmful and lasting effects as overt instances of racism. Drawing on phenomenologist methodology and embodiment theory, they take seriously the past's influence on the present, thus obscuring neat distinctions between past, present, and future. They all examine how past experiences of phenomenal blackness inscribe themselves into actual bodies, thus comprehensively shaping identities in the present. This is precisely what makes these texts such a fruitful resource for an investigation of *flat time* in black performances. As socio-historically contingent acts, black performances are "vulnerable to perpetual looping of past experiences of anti-black violence and trauma" (Hodges Persley and Kelly). In narrating personal events, the authors emphasise the importance of the lived body, not only to questions of race but also to subjectivity in general. Likewise, in including the lived body, their texts attest to the past's perpetual relevance and thus perform what their theorising (embodiment/phenomenology) implies. Within anti-racist writing, the levels of personal, collective, and theoretical are inextricably connected and support one another. Against the backdrop of this theoretical framework, I now turn to the texts for close readings to show how exactly embodiment theory plays out in theoretical texts, making it possible for the writers to problematize American progress myths in their written performances in support of the struggle for a (racially) just future.

Unfolding Contextualized Knowledge in the Works of Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude

Autobiographical writing has decisive benefits for theoretical considerations, especially when it comes to the struggle against structural inequalities and systemic injustices as it is the case in Cornel West's and Eddie S. Glaude Jr.'s works. Though at times seemingly mere anecdotes, personal stories serve decidedly strategic purposes in anti-racist works because they narrate and consequently uncover the intricate connections between individual experiences and systemic injustices. Emphasizing the important role that personal experiences must take in theoretical writings, Nancy K. Miller remarks:

> In the face of visible extremes of racism and misogyny, or the equally violent silences of theoretical discourses from which all traces of embodiment have been carefully abstracted, the autobiographical project might seem a frivolous response. How can I propose a reflection about an ethics in criticism (an ethics requires a community) from these individualistic grounds? But the risk of a limited personalism, I think, is a risk worth running—at least the movement of a few more degrees in self-consciousness—in order to maintain an edge of surprise in the predictable margins of organized resistance. (xiv)

Echoing Miller, Cornel West leads with a personal memory in his seminal 1993 book *Race Matters*. The preface places the brutal beating of Rodney King by L.A. police alongside West's personal experiences of stop-and-frisk. West remembers:

> Years ago, while driving from New York to teach at Williams College, I was stopped on fake charges of trafficking cocaine. When I told the police officer I was a professor of religion, he replied, "Yeh, and I'm the Flying Nun. Let's go nigger!" I was stopped three times in my first ten days in Princeton for driving too slowly on a residential street with a speed limit of twenty-five miles per hour. (xxv)

West's consecutive analysis of issues of race in late twentieth century America is thus closely tied to personal experiences of being a black man in a white hegemonic nation that constructs blackness as whiteness' deviant and dangerous other as he continues: "Needless to say, these incidents are dwarfed by those like Rodney King's beating" (xxv). Nonetheless, their proximity in *Race Matters* suggests that they are supported by similar mechanisms.

West identifies "nihilism," i.e. "a profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America" (20) as a dangerous threat to black life in the U.S. It

is interesting to consider West's ruminations about black life, and especially black working-class life, in connection with his personal narrative of being stopped by the police, a practice that is both approved of and encouraged by stop-and-frisk laws. When considered against the backdrop of West's own experiences, nihilism is particularly dangerous because it does not halt at class boundaries but can rather extend to everyone who exists in a black body in a white-hegemonic world. And this hostile world is fundamental to the problem of nihilism. West maintains: "While black people have never been simply victims, wallowing in self-pity and begging for white giveaways, they have been—and are— victimized. Therefore, to call on black people to be agents makes sense only if we also examine the dynamics of this victimization against which their agency will, in part, be exercised" (21-22). Thus, when West frames his philosophical and political work with a recollection of personal racist encounters, his text does what he calls on anti-racist work to do: it analyses the conditions of black life and dissects the context in which black life is lived.

In a similar vein to West, Eddie S. Glaude Jr. opens his 2016 *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* with autobiographical pieces as well as with personal stories by those who suffered most from the 2008 economic crisis and structural antiblack racism. One chapter into the book, readers are introduced to Christine Frazer and Patricia Hill who lost their Atlanta and Chicago homes respectively due to foreclosures during the housing crisis. Glaude details the ways in which the crash of the economic system had severe consequences for the black working class, their social status, as well as their psychological well-being. It is individual stories like Frazer's and Hill's that Glaude ties to the larger problem of what he refers to as the "Great Black Depression" (26).

In his close study of American democracy, Glaude comes to the conclusion that the state of democracy in America is feeble. Responsible for this is *white fear*, Glaude claims, because it seeks the maintenance of the unjust status quo. In order to conceptualise white fear and demonstrate its pervasive grasp, he shares a personal memory with the reader:

> I was walking to my car one evening after a long day in the office when I saw the spouse of a colleague and raised my hand to say hello. But a peremptory glance let me know she was not interested. She seemed afraid. The fact that we've had dinner together and shared jokes, or that her partner writes about race, didn't seem to matter. I was black, and it was dusk. ... It's Princeton. It's a patrolled campus parking lot. The black guy is wearing an expensive suit. Doesn't matter. The object of fear, in this instance, has only one identifiable quality: skin color. (74-75)

While Glaude emphasises that he is a professor of religion at Princeton University, at the end of the day, he nonetheless remains 'just' a black man that is both the trigger and the target of white fear. Harvey Young offers an interpretative framework for this phenomenon. He holds that across time, embodied black experiences are strikingly similar though never the exact same because "conceptions of blackness are projected across individual bodies" (11). In certain situations, the (hyper)visibility of blackness as the socio-historical construct of *the Black Body* temporarily overrides the importance of other identity categories. Both West and Glaude are the targets of a white gaze that whites have always already been trained in; whites have learned to fear the black body, and the black *male* body especially. The police officer in West's case sees a potential criminal; the colleague's wife in Glaude's case sees a potential threat in his mere physical presence. While their projects both push for a fairer future by making instances of systemic and personal racism visible, any future is closely tied to the past, as West and Glaude draw from their personal histories to make sense of the present moment.

In order to account for the complexities and to get to the core of the intricacies of race relations in the U.S., it is particularly productive to focus on recent theories of embodiment. In their works, both West and Glaude theorise embodiment, even though they do not explicate it as such. Glaude, for instance, notes that "the belief that white people are valued more than others" is prevalent in America. This "value gap," he argues, is sustained by "racial habits, [namely] the things we do, without thinking" (6). In discussing racial habits as pre-reflective processes, Glaude provides a taste for what is outlined in greater detail in Yancy's works, i.e. to think of racism not so much as an attitudinal problem but an embodied, identity-shaping way to live in and move through the world. Rankine's literature narratively and poetically puts embodiment theory to work by discussing (in)famously public and painfully private confrontations with

white supremacy. From what I have detailed up to this point, it becomes clear how both West and Glaude deem it necessary to write from a specific standpoint instead of an abstract and removed subject position. This is a perspective they share with George Yancy and Claudia Rankine. What is even more explicit in the works of the latter two, however, are the ways in which experiences inscribe themselves into and thus shape humans. It is important to note that the individual lived body is not only shaped by its surroundings but, in turn, also affects the ways in which collective identities find expression, are experienced and reiterated.

Theorising Embodiment in George Yancy's Philosophy of Race

George Yancy has written extensively about the nature of African American philosophy as an existentialist discipline that works from the basis of black lived experience. He notes:

> I conceptualize African-American philosophy as a counter-voice to whiteness as a site of hegemonic metanarrative nation-building, a site of terror and the desire for totality. In other words, African-American philosophy introduces fissures, differences, and heterogeneity vis-à-vis the white normative same." ("Through the Crucible of Pain and Suffering" 1145)

Not surprisingly then, autobiographical elements play an important role in Yancy's works. His 2008 book *Black Bodies, White Gazes* opens with a list of mundane encounters that seem ordinary and accidental but are nonetheless racially charged. He writes, for instance: "When followed by white sales security personnel as I walk through department stores, … I feel that in their eyes I am this indistinguishable, amorphous, black seething mass, a token of danger, a threat, a criminal, a burden, a rapacious animal incapable of delayed gratification" (*Black Bodies* 2). He consequently concludes: "The Black body has been confiscated" by a white racist fantasy (1). This confiscation, Yancy asserts, takes place not only in extraordinary events but also/primarily in everyday situations.

Most of Yancy's scholarly work discusses the ways in which whiteness and blackness reinforce one another and uncovers how whiteness relies on blackness for its existence. Describing the default view of blackness through a white lens, Yancy professes: "From the perspective of whiteness, I am, contrary to the existentialist credo, an essence ("Blackness") that precedes my existence" (1). The detailed recollection of an encounter he has had with a white woman in an elevator is at the heart of his work. The elevator, a mundane but also confined space, is regularly the site of one of the historically most racially charged everyday encounters, namely that between a black man and a white woman. He offers an insightful and detailed interpretation of such an encounter. Drawing from personal experiences in the space of the elevator, Yancy interprets both the woman's bodily reaction to his presence as well as the effect this reaction has on his self-image:

> It is a peculiar experience to have one's body confiscated without physically being placed in chains. Well-dressed, I enter an elevator where a white woman waits to reach her floor. She 'sees' my Black body, though not the same one I have seen reflected back to me from the mirror on any number of occasions. Buying into the myth that one's dress says something about the person, one might think that the markers of my dress (suit and tie) should ease her tension. What is it that makes the markers of my dress inoperative? She sees a Black male body 'supersaturated with meaning as they [Black bodies] have been relentlessly subjected to [negative] characterizations by newspapers, newscasters, popular film, television programming public officials, policy pundits and other agents of representation.' Her body language signifies, 'Look, *the* Black!' On this score, though short of a performative locution, her body language functions as an insult. (4; original emphasis)

In this encounter, the woman's body responds to the sight of Yancy. However, she does not react to his actual presence; rather, his presence triggers a response to an imagined presence that she (pre-reflectively) takes to pose a threat to her safety. He goes on to offer a detailed reading of the woman's bodily reaction:

> I walk into the elevator and she feels apprehension. Her body shifts nervously and her heart beats more quickly as she clutches her purse more closely to her. She feels anxiety in the pit of her stomach. Her perception of time in the elevator may feel like an eternity. The space within the elevator is surrounded from all sides with my Black presence. … Her palms

> become clammy. She feels herself on the precipice of taking flight, the desperation to flee. There is panic, there is difficulty swallowing, and there is a slight trembling of her white torso, dry mouth, nausea. (5)

It is important to note that Yancy acknowledges that it is possible that he is misreading the situation and that there are reasons for the woman's reaction other than his mere presence. However, he cautions not to reject or dismiss his experiences and interpretations. He writes: "Rarely do I face the anonymous white woman within the elevator in isolation from an informed history of the mythical purity of white female bodies and the myth of the Black male rapist" (8). In a way, his socio-historic positioning provides him with epistemic privileges. It is, moreover, important to keep in mind how Yancy's description functions as a first-order observation of the elevator encounter and is not to demean the woman but rather to show the consequences of her white female identity for Yancy as a black man.

Accordingly, Yancy also stresses that the woman's behaviour does not pertain to this particular woman or is merely located on the individual level. Instead, he asserts that her behaviour is backed and supported by a long history of conceptualising black bodies as dangerous, deviant, and dreadful and perceiving them accordingly. Quite clearly, Yancy's personal twenty-first-century encounter in the elevator is steeped in a tradition of moments past—a history of institutionalised and individual antiblack racism—that culminate in this very moment:

> The white woman's gaze is reiterated within the context of power relations that not only help to sustain the larger social racist imaginary but also sanction her performance of the gaze in the first place, guaranteeing its performance with impunity and ensuring material effects on the gazed-upon body. (23)

These moments, of course, shape the ways in which the woman will conceive of herself from then on because she is unable to see how her reaction was unjustified, harmful, and cruel. All she will unconsciously take away from the situation is how she reacted to an alleged threat. This reaction will become part of her lived body. Moreover, such encounters are particularly harmful because they do not only shape the way the woman will think of herself; they do not remain inconsequential for Yancy's self-image either. He admits:

> Despite what I think about myself how I am for-myself, her perspective, her third-person account, seeps into my consciousness. I catch a glimpse of myself through her eyes and just for that moment, I experience some form of double consciousness, although what I see does not shatter my identity or unglue my sense of moral decency. (5)

Even though he knows her perception of him to be wrong, he cannot prevent it from having an effect on him. While the moment does not override Yancy's sense of self entirely, it is unquestionably harmful.

Throughout the narration, Yancy moves from discussing this specific encounter to dissecting the theoretical concepts and structures underlying the encounter and back. This movement mimics textually how, in the real world, the personal encounter and the larger systemic structures are always inextricably entwined. Both elements are essential components of racism and addressing the two is a necessary part of anti-racist practices. In light of this, Yancy's first-order observation forms the performative beginning of racism's deconstruction and a possible point of entry to anti-racist activism for second-order observers. Instead of furthering the illusion of a postracial era, Yancy emphasises how racism is deeply rooted in white people's bodies and how they partake in and benefit from white supremacist practices often without being aware of it. Anything but a layer easily cast off, it is part and parcel of their very identity. The woman's white self comes with a 'trained' way of seeing the black male as a potential threat while simultaneously constructing herself as innocent, good, and human. Pre-reflectively, her body shows signs of fear, anxiety, and stress. On an individual level, it plays out white hegemony as an organising principle of U.S. life more generally. Racism, Yancy's work suggests, cannot be simply rationalised and explained away. On the contrary, racism's undoing requires a steady, thorough, and painful process of uncovering whiteness, accepting it for what it has long been, and relearning it for new racial scripts. Becoming aware of the processes of racialised perception, behaviour, and judgment is a first and mandatory step and one that Yancy's work contributes to.

Narrating Embodiment in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Bringing Claudia Rankine's literary works into conversation with West, Glaude, and Yancy might strike as odd at first sight; after all, *Citizen* is, on the surface level, not a philosophically inspired theory but a book-length collection of prose poems, essays, and pieces of visual art. At the same time, however, it is impossible to separate the aesthetic value from the profound discussion of subjectivity as embodied that permeates Rankine's work. *Citizen* is a case of anti-racist life writing that theorises both racism and anti-racism. In combining different life stories that focus on experiences of and with race (Rankine's own with those of friends, family, and public personas such as Serena Williams), *Citizen* follows a trend in life writing. Smith and Watson remark that it has become difficult to neatly differentiate between autobiographical and biographical texts as "contemporary practices increasingly blend them into a hybrid" (8).

It is part of Rankine's overall academic project to explore the racial imaginary in the U.S. in order to make the (seemingly invisible) workings of race visible. In *Citizen*, she does this through collecting short scenes that narrate racist microaggressions and macroaggressions aimed at the destruction and disruption of black subjectivity. In these scenes, Rankine theorises the racial imaginary and also narratively and aesthetically unfolds it and its impacts on black and white life in America. The situations range from police killings to racism at sporting events, racist comments at work and hurtful actions by friends. With this range of situations drawn from a multitude of personal histories, *Citizen* represents antiblack racism as not simply a personal/individual fact but an institutional/systemic one, maintaining that the two are reciprocal. From this perspective, questions of social justice also unfold in the private.

Since the short episodes that make up *Citizen* are drawn from different personal histories, the collage-style renders the individual histories collective at the same time. *Citizen* expands the meaning of the autobiographical to include the biographical; though not explicitly her own, other people's experiences with racism might have just as well been hers if we recall Young's assertion that black embodied experiences are comparable across time. The self is clearly marked as a collective one, and Paul John Eakin remarks that life writing includes not simply "the autobiography of the self but the biography and the autobiography of the other" (58). In comparison with the other texts, *Citizen* must, in particular, be seen as negotiating the blurred lines between the individual and the theoretical by heavily invoking the collective. The subtitle already hints at a similar direction: instead of representing the inner thoughts of an individual, as most lyrics do, this *American* lyric inextricably ties the personal to a larger national American identity and history (cf. Adams 55). *Citizen* is not so much Rankine's life narrative, as it is the mirror image of a collective American life narrative in the twenty-first century, an image steeped in a history of the racial imaginary. The self is a collective self in *Citizen*.

By extending the autobiographical to include others' individual histories, Rankine bridges the private and the social, and her "transpersonal poetics," to borrow from Kathy-Ann Tan, "conflat[e] autobiographical modes of self-inquiry and critical self-representation with larger socio-political contexts" (21). In *Citizen*, this blending finds powerful expression in the narrative choice of a second-person you-speaker that makes it possible to recognize how the individual is entailed in and supports the larger system of racialization in the U.S. The you-narration emphasises that the experiences are not Rankine's alone, but instead imply others—both targets and perpetrators—alike. Rankine explains that "the first person would have deactivated the scene" (qtd. in Sharma) by making it sound like a memoir, like experiences that only pertain to her. The second-person you, however, makes it difficult for readers to withdraw from the scenes because it implies all readers. Along these lines, Siobhan Phillips observes that the book's "evenhandedness manifests an uncertainty preceding any claim to individualism" (97). The narrative choice then, highlights how the racial imaginary, a white hegemonic worldview, permeates society in such a way that it does not leave anybody unaffected. Pondering the personal allows Rankine to dissect the racial imaginary in order to stress the collective dimension of every individual encounter.

In line with the other texts, it is not simply the physical body that is of interest to Rankine but rather the lived body and the ways in which the racial imaginary plays itself out on and inscribes itself into

identities. *Citizen*'s nameless speaker repeatedly returns to a notion of the past as fundamentally relevant for the present because past experiences have literally inscribed themselves into the characters' bodies and inform their every move. Subjectivity is embodied for the speaker; she shares moments from the past as they accumulate in her lived body and maintains: "Yes, and the body has memory. The physical carriage holds more than its weight. The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness" (Rankine, *Citizen* 28). Countless examples help Rankine make this point: the therapist who cannot fathom to have made an appointment with you (18), the colleague who complains that he has to hire a black writer even though "there are so many great writers out there" (10), or the friend who accidentally calls you by her black housekeeper's name (7). It is moments like these that render the speaker "too tired to even turn on any of your devices" so that you "linger in a past stacked among your pillows" (5).

These are all real-life examples, collected to support Rankine's theory of racialisation and illustrate that everyday encounters are backed by a history of constructing and looking at black bodies in not only racialised but often racist ways. And instead of being conscious reactions, many encounters are dominated by pre-reflective, embodied responses. Every moment, then, is supported by a larger and ongoing history of racialising black bodies as problematic; every moment comes with historical baggage that is inscribed into people's lived bodies. Consequently, given the repeated dehumanisation of people of colour on a daily basis, the speaker wonders: "What else to liken yourself to but an animal, the ruminant kind" (60). Race, Beth Loffreda and Rankine argue, is one of the world's central organising principles that functions "as a structure of feeling, as something that structures feelings, that lays down tracks of affection and repulsion, rage and hurt, desire and ache" (18). Quite clearly, Rankine recognises race's embodied dimension. It is neither a biological fact nor a mere social construct; race has affective potentials and is a lived reality that shapes the ways in which people experience the world, go about their everyday business, and perceive both themselves and others around them. This point of view bears a striking resemblance with the philosophical insights of Yancy.

Aside from the many consecutive short scenes, Rankine achieves an impression of immediacy and urgency with a series of questions and phrases that she repeats throughout the book: "What did he say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth?" (*Citizen* 9). As the moments add up, so do the questions that arise from each. Similarly, here: "Each time it begins in the same way it doesn't begin the same way, each time it begins it's the same" (107). The repetitions perform on the textual level the repetition that racism relies on in the real world in major and minor racist acts. It is precisely because humans rely on embodied scripts that the past continues to play such a central role in the present. By relying on embodiment theory, Rankine accentuates how the past continues to be reiterated in the present, highlighting the backwards-orientation of black future, and it is through narrating the personal, that Rankine can convincingly argue her point.

Spiralling (Back) Into the Future?

At the height of the modern Civil Rights Movement, Ralph Ellison cautioned in a 1964 essay: "American history is caught again in the excruciating process of executing a spiral—that is, returning at a later point in time to an earlier point in historical space" (567). It is this spiral that the anti-racist writers acknowledge and theorise in their works today when drawing on personal historical space and its impact on the present for both themselves and Americans more generally. They show the necessity of theorising from a socio-historical positioning instead of an abstract and free one by including (auto)biographical elements in their theoretical ruminations about race and the racial imaginary. I have argued that this blending shows how the anti-racist writers are painfully aware of the past's importance to the present. In this, they follow and/or anticipate a trend in recent African American criticism that studies the ties and breaks between the Antebellum era, Jim Crow America, and the twenty-first century (cf. for instance Aida Levy-Hussen, Gregory Laski, Joseph Winters, and Alexander Zamalin). This awareness makes all of them reject naïve and celebratory narratives of racial progress as they see ubiquitous continuities between then and now. As Rankine puts it: "The world is wrong. You can't put the past behind you. It's buried in you; it's turned your

flesh into its own cupboard. Not everything remembered is useful but it comes from the world to be stored in you" (*Citizen* 63). Even though the writers do not conceptualise the past as an unchanging same, they do assert that patterns from the past are strikingly pervasive in the present.

However, while the past might have the present in "chokehold" (Rankine, *Citizen* 156), causing West, Glaude, Yancy, and Rankine to reject outright optimism, they are not pessimists either; after all, their texts aim at reconfiguring a future with greater (racial) justice. In line with this, Margo Natalie Crawford has recently observed a *turn to melancholy* in twenty-first century Black Studies that gives expression to the measured hopefulness at the heart of anti-racist theory. The turn to melancholy is not nihilistic though; rather, advocating "melancholic hope," Joseph Winters requests that we "think hope and melancholy together" (243). Melancholic hope serves as a mode of resistance that is able to account for both the "signs of the past in the present" (Crawford 804) as the four writers do, as well as for the present itself, all the while remaining oriented towards a future. Such tension between past and future is an integral part of embodiment theory as well, for embodiment theory does not assume (racial) habits to be forever fixed but accounts for their resistance to change. Precisely because they know, i.e. experience regularly in body and mind, racism's persistence, West, Glaude, Yancy, and Rankine reveal a particular relationship to time, progress, and hope. They embrace what I term a *fragile hope* for a better future because they believe in the possibility of change, certainly not in the inevitability of change. A changed practice, they maintain, can only begin to take place on the basis of an honest engagement with the status quo.

In distinct and yet similar ways, the authors suggest ways of breaking the spiral of continuous racialization. West challenges the nihilistic threat in America by proposing a radical love ethic, thus "increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one's community." While an analysis of racism is "indispensable," for West, it is only the first step towards changing the world for the better (29). Glaude demands a "democracy in black," calling on readers to "imagine a democratic way of life without the burden of the value gap" (236), one that uproot[s] racial habits" (6). In a similar manner, Yancy describes his criticism of the elevator incident as "a moral critique that [the white woman] gets her shit together," which is "suggestive of [his] hope of a radically different world" (*Black Bodies* 6). Yancy puts embodiment theory to productive use, seeking to challenge readers and their self-images, to make them uncomfortable, and to affect them so that they critically and actively approach their own racialised ways of being. When done right, this is a way of creating options for a future with greater justice, even if there is no guarantee. Yancy requests that "while both Black and white bodies are constituted by various discursive practices, such practices can and must be challenged and troubled" (26). This is only possible though when acknowledging the wrongs of the past and present that are continually being committed. Melancholy and hope clearly go hand in hand for all three writers.

This connection is similarly central to Rankine's worldview. In an interview Rankine declares in anything but a triumphant gesture: "I believe in the possibility of another way of being. Let's make other kinds of mistakes, let's be flawed differently" (qtd. in Sharma). In this belief, Rankine stays tragically attuned to the past, both her personal and collective history of people of colour. Shaping the future in and through anti-racist writing is difficult and only possible when fully aware of the past's role in the present. After all, to quote from the book's final page: "I don't know how to end what doesn't have an ending" (*Citizen* 159). Nonetheless, she gestures towards moments of transcendence and a love ethic throughout *Citizen*. While these moments do not override painful experiences, they pose as their flipside, making it possible to move on in spite of the past's impact. For instance, when a stranger knocks over a woman's son without taking account of his presence, "a group of men began to stand behind me like a fleet of bodyguards, she says, like newly found uncles and brothers" (17). Moments such as this one make it possible to go on without necessarily moving on as positive, healing experiences shape the lived body just as much as disruptive ones. Such an orientation towards the future remains receptive to the past and its limitations but is not overwhelmed or paralysed by it either. Instead, the possibility of change renders a fragile hope a viable outlook.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this article, Cornel West, Eddie S. Glaude, George Yancy, and Claudia Rankine close the gap between abstract theory and real-life experiences by including personal stories in their anti-racist narratives. It has been my argument that such standpoint theory is no inadvertence or turn toward the trivial but indeed an integral part of their attempts to help undo the racial spiral. For all of them, understanding the ties of the past to the present and thus also the future is a prerequisite to performing race differently in that very future. It is because of the persistence of white hegemonic structures in institutional as well as embodied forms, narratively expressed in the personal pieces, that black futures are always also back futures. A long way from a postracial society, the authors assert that—if at all—such a society is only feasible with a forward glance that is always also a backward glance.

This backward glance can be observed not only in theoretical anti-racist writings but it has also been particularly prevalent in African American fiction and most visibly so in the historical turn to slavery since the 1980s. There is currently an intense debate going on about the usefulness of this turn to the past and especially to slavery. Stephen Best is critical of the historical turn in contemporary narratives of slavery[4] and questions "the idea that the slave past provides a ready prism through which to apprehend and understand the black political present" (473). Far from insisting on direct translations of the horrors of slavery into the present and thus "incit[ing] melancholy," as Best claims about Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (472), Robert J. Patterson points out that for such texts "slavery is only a part of a larger system of antiblack racism that governs the modern period" (212). This system has not yet ceased to exist. Accordingly, such narratives do not deny progress, neither do they resort to pessimism and passivity; they do, however, challenge the wishful but naïve illusion that racism has been outdone or that modern forms stand disconnected from the history of antiblack attitudes in the United States. Narratives of slavery, in fact, underline how past traumata continue to shape the present, at times in minute ways. In this gesturing to the historical past of slavery (or other eras of African American history for that matter), it is not simply large-scale history that is deemed important. Rather, against the backdrop of embodiment theory, it is also a person's individual histories of past experiences that are taken seriously and given the representational space they require due to their prominent position in people's lives. Thus, an undoing of the historical cycle might begin to take shape then precisely because of this gesturing to the past's influence—in fictional as well as theoretical anti-racist works.

It is important to imagine ways in which this tradition of doing anti-racism can be brought to bear on other discourses and social justice initiatives. No social justice initiative can be devoid of the narratives of those who struggle most under a lack of justice, and the notion of abstract theorising removed from social realities is an illusion at best. In openly blurring personal and theoretical elements and thus insisting on a continuation between past and present, West, Glaude, Yancy, and Rankine think critically through and about their socio-historical locations and how these affect their identities, both as scholars and private persons. They reveal a form of self-reflexivity and honest self-questioning that Critical Whiteness Studies requests of those scholars who identify as white (or write from other troublingly normative positions). Moreover, it might be particularly fruitful to consider intersections of race with gender, sexual identity, and class beyond the scope of what I have been able to do here in order to extend the insights offered by these writers to discourses outside of Black Studies. What if we think both the present moment and the future through the past, not in order to be bound or inhibited by it, but to understand how it continually affects human doing and ultimately existence—at times even counter our best intentions? Acknowledging white hegemony's prevalent grip, Rankine wonders hesitantly and yet prophetically in a 2017 speech: "The real question of the moment is not, how powerful are we, but how powerless? How irredeemable are we? Is it possible to create a path towards what has never existed but fuelled our beliefs?"

4 Arlene Keizer introduced this term "contemporary narratives of slavery" in her 2004 book *Black Subjects* (2) and it has since been adopted by a number of scholars—most recently by Aida Levy-Hussen—to address a variety of recent texts that deal with slavery but do not fit the narrow definition of neo-slave narratives offered by Ashraf Rushdy.

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