FORMAL AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN DIASPORIC FEMINIST TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

While scholars who investigate the works of African diasporic authors Edwidge Danticat, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Claudia Rankine acknowledge the importance between form and audience in their works, critics have either yet to fully recognize how and/or for what purpose each author implements specific techniques. Paying close attention to what I propose are formal affective strategies in Danticat's *Everything Inside*, Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric,* allows us to see how each author infuses experimental forms that are strategically bound to how their future readers will react to their texts with the hope that these reactions will prove more socially and politically moving than just moving—as in readers simply turning the page. Black diasporic women authors, including Danticat, Adichie, and Rankine, destabilize traditional literary paradigms and invent new formal affective strategies in their works. Upon closer consideration, these strategies not only help expose the continuous exclusivity of the American Dream and contemporary problems associated with the enduring patriarchal hegemony, but by engaging the audience with commonly felt affects, reconfigure future possibilities for intersectional solidarity through the very conflicts and difficulties their writings explore and formally embody.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Aside from being published in the past decade or so, at first it may seem that there is little that connects the following contemporary works by African diasporic women writers: Edwidge Danticat's *Everything Inside*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*. After all, Danticat is Haitian-American, Adichie is Nigerian-American, and while Rankine was born in Jamaica, she identifies as African-American. On top of the authors' varying nationalities and degrees to which their works reflect their multicultural backgrounds, *Everything Inside* and *The Thing Around Your Neck* are collections of short stories while *Citizen: An American Lyric* is a multigeneric book of poetry that intertwines linguistic text with visuals and makes strategic use of white space. However, the experimental form each author employs in their work moves beyond merely being nonlinear or fragmented or simply different/surprising and culminates in what I call formal affective strategies or experimental choices that each of these authors makes in order to reconsider our own feelings and attachments under a patriarchal, white supremacist, neoliberal, neocolonial, falsely post-racial American hegemon.

Recent developments in contemporary African diasporic literary scholarship acknowledge this fluidity and mobility of Black artistic practices, moving beyond borders and attempting to map the emerging and overlapping trends best representative of Black authorships amidst neoliberal failures and false notions of a "post-racial" moment. In comparison to scholars like Stephanie Li and Yolita Goyal who try to create new categories for thinking about African diasporic literature about the U.S. and its more contextual connections to the African American literary canon, there are scholars who more closely focus their attentions on form and aesthetics. In that regard, an important contribution to both the fields of African American and African diasporic literary studies, Anthony Reed's *Freedom Time* moves away from what Reed deems "racialized reading," or in a sense reading and/or valuing Black texts for content that is solely supposed to reflect the Black experience. Reed urges that this kind of reading not only prevents scholars from seeing the inventive techniques found in Black texts but "minimizes potentially radical forms of black politics" (7). Instead, Reed suggests that contemporary "black experimental writing" does respond to the present moment but simultaneously responds to that present moment through a reconfiguration of formal techniques (8-9) and in doing so, presents new future possibilities. In a similar fashion to Reed's *Freedom Time,* with a focus on form and aesthetic, Samantha Pinto's *Difficult Diasporas* compares multiple Black women writers and multiple genres in order to theorize the relationship between form, time, location, race, and gender. Both Reed and Pinto recognize Erica Hunt's call to "invent a new language" (Pinto 3) "which pushes at the ruling order's ideological coverage and disciplines of knowledge" (Reed 1) in the techniques of Black authors they each respectively analyze. Pinto's *Difficult Diasporas*, in both its highly

complex comparative approach and its content, shows how the innovative techniques undertaken by the African diasporic women writers she examines across time and geographic space prove to reflect the difficulty of conceptualizing the Black Atlantic as well as the difficult position of women in the African diaspora; Pinto contends that these difficulties are embodied by the "nonnarrative" or the "decentered, undone, and thwarted" in the texts she compares (5), much like the innovative techniques signaling disruption that Reed highlights are employed by contemporary Black women writers in *Freedom Time.*

While my own critical approach is similar to Pinto's in that it partially investigates the relationships between form, race, class, and gender in three seemingly unrelated African diasporic feminist texts, it is also indebted to Reed's concept of "black experimental writing" and scholars like Li and Goyal who question how diasporic texts add to the conversation surrounding the contemporary moment in the U.S. Articulating the contemporary moment that the texts I analyze respond to and discussing the yet unrealized solidarities that their formal affective strategies call for, I believe, is impossible without briefly turning to intersectional feminism as a point of reference. Intersectional feminists agree that solidarity building should rely on the acknowledging of difference, not shying away from it. Patricia Collins points out, "Coalitions are built via recognition of one's own group position and seeing how the social location of groups has been constructed in conjunction with one another. Empathy, not sympathy, becomes the basis of coalition" (247). It is also in this manner that Black feminist and poet Audre Lorde portrays feeling and difference, as a vital point for understanding each other and being together. Similar to Hunt's call for innovative writing and Reed and Pinto's view of

poetics as more encompassing than what poetry typically means to us and their call for "our own interpretive strategies" to "shift not away from form and structure but toward it" (Pinto 9) in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" Lorde expresses that the meaning of poetry is not only a deviation from the rational thought the Western world valorizes but is a mode of survival for women within that world. She beautifully writes, "Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives … They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and conceptualization of any meaningful action" (37). Thus, Lorde views poetry as a radical necessity for the outpouring of feelings that are not only first consciously unrealized but as an outpouring of feelings that spurs the creation of new knowledge that can then create the kind of empathetic solidarity that Collins and others maintain is crucial.

Lorde's location of feelings and poetry as the impetus for the creation of new knowledge and new imaginings finds its home in the works of feminist affect theorists like Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant who are quite central to my project in that they use affect theory to pinpoint what emotional attachments make the world go round under a neoliberal white supremacist patriarchal regime. Affect as a concept is particularly difficult to pin down as different disciplines use the theory with their own specific purposes in mind. To simplify the matter, in my own understanding of how affect works, it is similar to Lorde's assertion about the relationship between feelings and poetry in that poetry allows for the yet unknown to emerge in the produced poetic language itself but that this unknown is at once personal, social, and largely on the periphery of our consciousness to begin with. Affect refers to the forces that shape how we feel about the

world without actively thinking about the feeling; instead that feeling or orientation is circulated between us and makes us react or perhaps makes us not react at all. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* Ahmed figures that the Western world's valuing rationality over feeling and then connecting feeling and emotionality with feminism and racial others, "not only works to exclude others from the realm of thought and rationality, but also works to conceal the embodied aspects of thought and reason … the 'truths' of this world are dependent on emotions, on how they move subjects, and stick them together" (170). These 'truths' and how poetry (including other creative/artistic endeavors) can perhaps create and reconfigure these truths into more livable futures as a result is what I see Lorde promote but also what we can find in Reed and Pinto's critical approaches to contemporary African diasporic literature as well as in what I mean by formal affective strategies.

Notably, critics claim that Danticat's fiction typically encourages women to subvert patriarchal standards, portrays the American Dream rather positively, and makes formal choices to reach across many audiences. In regard to genre, and especially the short story cycle as seen in *The Dew Breaker,* critics recognize its formal nonlinearity and at the same time circularity that allows for a multiplicity of voices but most describe it as the kind of difficulty Pinto sees in African diasporic women writers except that the difficulty is instead placed solely on the relationships between Haitian diasporic women in the narratives. Ellen J. Goldberg sees Danticat's form as an attempt to access multiple audiences for the purpose of bridging difference and ultimately political action beyond merely reading the book; she asserts, "With its fragmented form and many narratives, *The Dew Breaker* invites differently positioned readerships to foreground different

narratives, to urgently seek different connections with the text and with one another, and to treat differently the text's dissociations" (150). For Goldberg, *The Dew Breaker* in its own formal difficulty and fragmentation implicates the audience to question and reinvent their own thinking about the world. With a similar attention to audience, Birgit Spengler argues, "What renders *The Dew Breaker* especially effective in countering a form of violence that is constituted through neglect is the interplay between various aesthetic strategies, which Danticat uses to involve the reader with the novel's social agenda" (191). Thus, for scholars like Goldberg and Spengler, Danticat's short story cycle is an opportunity for Danticat to reach different audiences with differing rhetorical effects.

Similarly, scholarship on Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* emphasizes the role of immigrant duality in the collection and how it is reflective of a very particular "postcolonial" experience in the U.S. and abroad, while specifically regarding the short story "The Thing Around Your Neck," critics focus on symbolism as well as the function of using second-person point of view in the story to evoke empathy for the Nigerian woman immigrant experience in the U.S. Scholars including Anita Harris Satkunananthan and Leena Hannele Eilitta speculate about the symbolism behind "the thing around your neck" and tend to connect it back to colonialism and commodification—two factors that Nami Shin also stresses are important in the collection. In regard to Adichie's pronoun choice, Shin explains, "The reader not only feels as though she is being addressed, but also experiences the emotional force of a relationship at the moment she identifies with the 'you'" (98). Moreover, according to Shin the collection clearly expects to be read by a Western audience as well, and since "it is only much later in the story that we learn the protagonist's name … one of the effects

of the unspecified second-person pronoun is that its ambiguity blurs the strict boundaries between the story's protagonist, Akunna, and the reader" (104). In short, Adichie's experimentation with this form for Shin allows for the reader to engage with the experiences of the narrator in the story as closely as possible in order to empathize with the Nigerian woman immigrant experience beyond the pages of the story.

Likewise with the existing criticism about Danticat's short story cycle and fragmentation as well as Adichie's use of second-person point of view, critics identify both fragmentation and pronoun choice in Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* as crucial to the effect these stylistic choices have on the audience as amplifying either traumatic experience or identification with the speaker as an opening for social change. In addition to fragmentation and pronoun choice, scholars also point to Rankine's experimental use of white space and visuals to convey the precariousness of Black life in a colorblind U.S. largely unattuned to the historical moments that led to the present disregard for police brutality and white supremacist violence. For Michael Richardson, Rankine's strategic use of white space alongside the content of the lyric embody the moments where linguistic text fails to fully articulate meaning (in Richardson's analysis the feeling of trauma), which is in some ways similar to Reed's assertion that experimental black writing "[holds open] a place for the unthought, for what is unassimilable to the prevailing regime of power" (5) and that it "it inscribes itself in the margins of the possible, invoking a now at once out of reach and immanent in the present, producing and destabilizing its own contexts for meaning" (22). In Richardson's view, Rankine's experimental form opens up a way to express the past's relation to the present, but for Reed, the importance of experimental form is on the now and the future that it

embodies. Moreover, similarly to the way that Shin views second-person point of view in Adichie, Bella Adams maintains that the second-person point of view destabilizes the interracial relationships which simultaneously place "us" in the position of the speaker and the racist alike (58); she also notes that the repetitive nature of situational racism in *Citizen: An American Lyric* provokes in the audience the feeling of its persistence (56). Adams concludes by asserting that the lyric promotes color consciousness, ultimately questioning the readers' own view of their citizenship and the extent to which they respond to racial injustice (69). In comparison to Richardson, Adams's critical reading of *Citizen: An American Lyric* is therefore more in line with what Reed theorizes about experimental writing.

While scholarship that individually looks at each respective author acknowledges the importance between form and audience, and in some cases, argues that these three authors' experimental choices directly attempt to provoke social change, critics have either yet to fully recognize how and/or for what purpose Danticat, Adichie, and Rankine each implement specific techniques. More specifically, the scholarship on Danticat typically tends to view her fiction as portraying the American Dream positively while I view *Everything Inside* as a significant deviation from her past works in that it exposes the idea of the American Dream as not only unattainable but, in fact, detrimental to our being no matter how close or far away we are from achieving it. Moreover, critics tend to read both Danticat and Adichie as specific to their original homelands rather than engaging with a larger conversation about neoliberalism and intersectional oppression in the U.S., while in the chapters that follow, I show how both these authors provide important commentary about life in the U.S. that is not only significant for Haitian and

Nigerian diasporas but for envisioning a world in which feminists build solidarity across difference. Criticism on Rankine, on the other hand, does point out that Rankine's second-person point of view is important to heightening empathy, but it also does not fully explore how that empathy is accomplished with a closer examination of all of the various modes of communication Rankine employs in order to further solidarity across difference. Most importantly, critics have yet to register an important shift in contemporary African feminist diasporic literature about the U.S. which not only involves experimental form but how that experimental form either engages with our own popular affective attachments and/or evokes empathy and in turn serves to build intersectional solidarity and reject neoliberal values, no matter how alluring. Black feminist diasporic authors, including Danticat, Adichie, and Rankine, destabilize traditional literary paradigms and invent new formal affective strategies in their works. Upon closer consideration, these strategies not only help expose the continuous exclusivity of the American Dream and contemporary problems associated with the enduring patriarchal hegemony, but by engaging the audience with commonly felt affects, reconfigure future possibilities for intersectional solidarity through the very conflicts and difficulties their writings explore and formally embody.

The second chapter proposes that temporal fragmentation, symbolic characterization, and thematic circularity in the two short stories "Dosas" and "Without Inspection"—the opening and closing short stories in *Everything Inside*—are formal affective strategies that act upon Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" and in doing so implode the idea of the American Dream. Danticat's two stories set up a Darwinian like hierarchy in which regardless of the choices made by the characters, their lives are

nonetheless controlled by a neoliberal structure. For Danticat's characters, trying to achieve or live the American Dream—what I view as synonymous with cruel optimism—extinguishes their humanity in "Dosas" and results in literal death in "Without Inspection." I discuss how the story expresses a hopelessness with upending the structure of neoliberalism and/or American patriarchal hegemony and with mitigating the influence of materialism in relation to both American citizens and illegal immigrants. However, I simultaneously interpret the short stories through an intersectional feminist lens that allows me to show how Danticat's women characters, whether through their conflicts in "Dosas" or social agency in "Without Inspection," become an important indication that the possibility of re-structuring our world for the better rests in solidarity between women as well as an awareness of when the American Dream becomes cruel.

The third chapter discusses Adichie's titular short story in *The Thing Around Your Neck* and argues that the story is a cumulative point in the collection for the author's promoting solidarity across difference. Adichie's second-person point of view acts as a formal affective strategy that disrupts readers' expectations for traditional narrative style and that closes the distance between the narrative and the audience, locking readers into more closely experiencing America for the first time as a young Nigerian woman immigrant. In addition to the second-person point of view which heightens empathetic identification, I discuss how the two men characters in the story embody popular stereotypes that women reading the story are likely to affectively identify with. I also draw upon Ahmed's concept of "happy objects" to discuss how the American Dream is equated with money and is also circulated as a happy object in this story, paying special attention to how Adichie portrays money as an object of happiness that is imposed upon

the protagonist not by the "you" but the protagonist's family members. Moreover, I contend that since solidarity between women does exist in stories preceding "The Thing Around Your Neck," but only in settings outside of the United States, the lack of solidarity in the discussed story proves to be a purposeful and jarring contrast which suggests Adichie's formal affective strategy in using second-person point of view also serves as a reflective purpose for the audience; to what extent, as a woman, am I a complicit agent in promoting the American patriarchal structure and to what extent can I relate to other women across difference?

Considering Berlant's definition of "compassion," I discuss Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* in the final chapter, arguing that the work's incorporation of various modes of communication along with second-person point of view and narrative fragmentation function as formal affective strategies that elicit empathy for the poetic speaker experiencing racism. I point out how the incorporation of visuals like white space, photography, artwork is also responsible for heightening the empathy Rankine fosters through her poetry. As the poems and microaggressive situations build up to more injurious forms of white supremacist violence and police brutality in the second half of the book, I discuss this choice as one that aims to connect the traumatic microaggressions with physical injury, altogether acting like a memory folder which validates and expresses feelings of Black anger and outrage toward colorblindness and systemic racism amidst what has been hailed as a post-racial America. Lastly, this chapter also investigates the emotional response that the audience is intended to feel for the racist, concluding that Rankine exposes the moments in which racism occurs as not only detrimental to Black Americans, but to the white Americans who are causing it. In short,

Rankine's formal affective strategies promote solidarity across difference as they help break down the moments that lead to racism, ultimately showing that it serves no one.

Paying close attention to the formal affective strategies Danticat, Adichie, and Rankine each employ in their respective works allows us to see how each author, no matter how different from each other they may be in terms of their original homelands, infuses experimental forms that are strategically bound to how their future readers will react to their texts with the hope that these reactions will prove more socially and politically moving than just moving—as in readers simply turning the page. bell hooks points to the problem with simply saying one is a feminist and argues that, "Focusing on feminism as political commitment, we resist the emphasis on individual identity and lifestyle … The ethics of Western society informed by imperialism and capitalism are personal rather than social. They teach us that individual good is more important than the collective good, and consequently that individual change is of greater importance than collective change" (30). With the use of their formal affective strategies, the writers I discuss subvert these "ethics of Western society" and align with what Lorde tells us about poetry in that it "gives name to the nameless so it can be thought" (37). Contemporary African diasporic feminist writers are not only at the forefront of emotionally attuning us all to the detriments of living under a patriarchal, white supremacist, neoliberal, neocolonial, falsely post-racial American hegemon, they are finding new and highly innovative ways to express the needs for solidarities not yet realized that move beyond saying one is a feminist and actually realizing how a lack of collective good is actually no good for anyone no matter how, rationally speaking, well off their lives may seem.

CHAPTER II

WHICH COUNTRY IS A "SHITHOLE" AFTER ALL?

Danticat's most recent collection *Everything Inside* features characters with various ties to the Haitian diaspora and glues together seemingly unrelated stories about love, death, loss, friendship, roots, and family both set in the U.S. and abroad. At first glance, that much may be true, that Danticat explores these themes, but lurking beneath in many of these stories is a political commentary about America that has not emerged to the degree in Danticat's fiction as it does in *Everything Inside.* Between stories that highlight generational trauma and stories that portray the personal aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Danticat skillfully speculates on the prevalent affective attachments to the American Dream.

As she recalls the atrocities which marked Haitian history under the regime of François ("Papa Doc") Duvalier[1] in her book *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work,* the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat claims that the understated responsibility morally obliging the immigrant writer is to "create dangerously" for

[1] François Duvalier's dictatorship in Haiti lasted from 1957-1971. Then, his son Jean-Claude Duvalier ("Baby Doc") continued his father's bloody legacy 1971-1986. The US, fearful of communism coming to Haiti and aware of economic opportunity this island nation presented for American investors, supported both dictators as they mercilessly murdered any opponents who stood in their way (Alexander).

readers that may or may not be risking their lives to read a particular text; in other words, for Danticat immigrant writers should strive to create meaningful, intelligent, and thought provoking narratives that inspire, inform, and guide its various audiences to new understandings that are actually worth dying for (10). Following her own paradigm, Danticat creates dangerously through novels and fictional stories that often address difficult subjects and attempt to reconcile Haiti's historical and generational traumas. However, unlike her past fictional works that do not harshly assess American exceptionalism or America's ongoing neocolonial impacts[2] on Haiti or other Caribbean island nations, Danticat's most recent 2019 short story collection *Everything Inside* seems to critique exactly the type of white supremacist mentality that Donald Trump advanced and will most likely continue to propagandize even after his removal from office, arguably making this particular short story collection her most dangerous yet.

Although it appears to be the case that the short stories in *Everything Inside* together offer a response to the recent outburst of American xenophobia and alt-right nationalist illusions of grandeur, critics have yet to explore this possibility, most likely because the collection is so new that few research articles on it have yet appeared. Surveying criticism on Danticat's older works shows an important turn for the author's style and approach to the idea of the American Dream we see in *Everything Inside.* When analyzing *Breath, Eyes, Memory,* which repurposes Haitian myths to explore the impact of sexual and collective traumas in three generations of Haitian women, critics largely

[2] Whereas postcolonial theory focuses on the long-lasting impacts of colonialism on once colonized nations, in Kwame Nkrumah's *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Nkrumah defines neocolonialism as "the idea that control and power over the states and economies of the ex-colonies has been retained by the former colonizing power," (168) since many previously colonized nations were separated "into a number of small non-viable States which are incapable of independent development and must rely upon the former imperial power for defense and even internal security" (Nkrumah qtd. in Rao 168).

focus on Danticat's unconventional commentary on immigrant identity formation as well as her critique of women's commodification in Haitian diaspora. Critics assert that Danticat portrays worlds in which women are allowed to move forward and reconcile their traumatic pasts through their solidarity with other women. Likewise, criticism about *The Dew Breaker*—the 2004 short story cycle that dramatizes the long-lasting impression of Duvalier and his brutal regime in Haiti—concerns how Danticat's narrative techniques serve to help reconcile Haiti's national trauma and implicate the role of the US in its making. Critics recognize that since each story in *The Dew Breaker* builds upon and complicates the next through multiple perspectives and multiple points of view, critics have recognized that Danticat provides alternative ways of coping with the horrors and violence of Duvalier's regime, which likely still haunt many Haitian families today.

Importantly to my discussion of the formal and contextual deviation *Everything Inside* makes in response to the contemporary moment, critics agree that Danticat's older fiction serves many feminist and sociopolitical goals, including that of promoting the American Dream as a reality for many immigrants; this trust in the American Dream as reconciliatory proves less apparent in Danticat's most recent collection. In regard to *Breath, Eyes, Memory,* Newtona Johnson perceives the main character's immigration to the US, subsequent sexual trauma, and finally the attempts to overcome this trauma as a highly significant progression in the novel. Donette A. Francis points out about Martine, the main character's mother who commits suicide, "If the United States symbolizes the place for the fulfillment of immigrant dreams, in writing about the pained black Haitian woman's body that can get no relief—even through migration, Danticat compels us to understand that sexual trauma travels as well" (86). Johnson reframes this Francis's point

as she articulates that Danticat's commentary on immigration severs itself from past theorists who claim that territorial and geographic displacement leads to the fragmentation of the self and a loss of identity (150). Johnson explains:

> For Danticat, the affirmative aspects of territorial displacement, for women at least, lies in the opportunity it provides for psychological transformation necessary for liberation. Danticat grafts the idea of emancipatory psychological transformation to form a vision of (Haitian) women's liberation from the crushing weight of patriarchal hegemony. (151)

Unlike Francis, Johnson views Sophie's (the protagonist) ability to begin to overcome generational trauma and her own troubled past as a sign that Danticat furthers the idea that immigration can be a positive and psychologically relieving phenomenon. Overall, whereas critics disagree on some aspects of the novel, most view it in a similar fashion to Michelle Hunt who contends that Danticat's novel strives to project that "women should fight [patriarchal] standards that are set forth for them" and that "women should be allotted the same freedom as males: the freedom of individuality" (147-48).

Furthermore, critical consensus about *The Dew Breaker* is that the work functions in a similar way to *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as the work attempts to deliver an alternative way of thinking about collective trauma. For instance, relying on Marianne Hirsch's idea of post-memory—a concept used to describe the passing of historical traumas from parents to children even if new generations have not experienced the same trauma their parents had—Maria Rice Bellamy explores how finding out about her father's violent past in Haiti moves the character Ka to a "life-long quest to understand and represent her father's tortured past," and also notes that the ending of *The Dew Breaker* uncovers "a

model of righteous resistance to oppression that re-imagines Haiti's history of victimization" (178). Moreover, as she attempts to place Danticat in the tradition of postcolonial trauma theory[3], Silvia Martinez Falquina views the short story cycle form as Danticat's vehicle for representing trauma and simultaneously trying to reconcile the many traumas Haitian people have historically suffered[4] through narrative fragmentation and non-linearity (174-175). Martinez Falquina reviews how Danticat uses the short story cycle form to then deal with this trauma without erasing Haitian history and without appeasing the guilt of Western audiences, "for the traumatic condition goes on and there is a danger in celebratory readings of these narratives of neo-colonial appropriation and silencing" (177). Drawing upon a *Callaloo* 2007 interview in which Danticat says, "I think 'average' Americans, who are . . . 'average' in quotation marks . . . have proven that when they are informed and motivated, they change things" (Danticat qtd. in Goldner 150), Ellen J. Goldner argues that Danticat's short story cycle form in *The Dew Breaker* allows Danticat to address multiple audiences in an attempt to "dismantle colonial relations" and invite readers, including Western readers, "to imagine all reading as decentered and all readerships as open to the influence of others" (150-151). Thus, critics view Danticat as a writer who undeniably incorporates a political and social agenda into her work, in this case *The Dew Breaker.*

[3] In the field of postcolonial trauma studies, the idea of trauma has been controversial as some critics assert that trauma is "unspeakable" while others argue that the writing of trauma allows for healing and recovery. Moreover, writing trauma in postcolonial texts has proven particularly difficult because it runs the risk of appropriation, misrepresentation, and the imposition of Western ideals on non-Western nations (Martinez Falquina 175).

[4] Martinez Falquina discusses Haiti's nationally felt trauma, which she asserts is perhaps one of the most deeply felt in comparison to other countries considering Haiti's relatively short history and high prevalence of traumatic occurrences including "invasion and occupation, military dictatorships, political coups, trade embargoes and also natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes" (175).

In her past works, as critics have noted, Danticat tends to portray the possibility of the American Dream in a rather positive light and also tends to infuse the political with the literary in order to inspire change, yet as I will argue, while Danticat's latest collection *Everything Inside* is driven largely by the political, it is also breaking with Danticat's American Dream portrayals and instead focuses on the impossibility of its true obtainment. As she layers the familiar themes of collective trauma, the role of memory in immigrant identity making, and women's commodification into stories about Haitian diaspora in *Everything Inside*, Danticat also develops the themes of biopolitical[5] as well as neoliberal and neocolonialist bodily commodification and its destructive impacts, thereby exposing the US as a monstrous perpetrator of a white supremacist and patriarchal hegemony both in the US and abroad. This monstrous perpetrator, Danticat seems to suggest in her stories, is largely tied to our attachments to the American Dream and could be more effectively fought with women's solidarity as her women protagonists either find solace in each other or otherwise propel American hegemony through their lack of empathy for each other. Much like her other works, the two stories discussed in this chapter including "Dosas" and "Without Inspection" in *Everything Inside,* rely on symbolic characterization, temporal experimentation, and thematic circularity and bolster Danticat's acute commentary on our current material attachments to the American Dream that are not only impossible to obtain but dehumanizing in the process. The collection

[5] Coined by Michel Foucalt at one of his lectures in 1976, biopolitics describes the uses of new technology to control the population by the state. "A set of processes such as the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population … the mortality rate, longevity … together with a whole series of related economic and political problems … become biopolitics' first objects of knowledge and the targets it seeks to control" (243). As defined by Antonio Gramsci, the term "cultural hegemony" refers to the mainstreaming of ideology by the intellectual elite that imposes this ideology on the economically subordinate classes. Unlike the idea of "dominant ideology" which supposes a static involvement of the groups being dominated, this concept suggests a more active involvement for the "hegemonized groups" (424).

progresses, I argue, from the most covert ways that American exceptionalism functions in "Dosas" to the most apparent and scathing criticism of American Dream[6] delusions in "Without Inspection." I would like to stress that although *Everything Inside* includes many facets that act as scornful retorts to Trumpism, I do not want to imply that Danticat (or her body of fiction) actually mocks the entirety of the American Dream; instead, I merely want to show that despite Danticat's fairly positive depiction of what America can offer immigrants in her previous works, the rise of Trumpism appears to have pushed the author to a new sense of urgency in trying to dispel white supremacist ideas and in trying to inspire solidarity that as a country, the US is currently sorely in need of.

What Is the American Dream?

The concepts of the American Dream and American exceptionalism are not mutually exclusive but interlocked. According to Stanley Buder, many nations believe in and claim their exceptionalism, but for many of them, "these claims usually assume the exclusive and superior qualities of a people." Unlike these other nations, Buder asserts that American exceptionalism relies on strong economic values—that for many, Buder points out, are tied to a God-given right—as well as "limited government, individual liberty, personal responsibility, the rule of law, and a free market economy." In addition to the belief that America is economically superior to other nations, Buder informs that this exceptionalism is born out of the idea that "it [America] is not exclusive, to one people or resting on inherent racial traits, but based on core values as noted above and practices that can and should be exported to others" (34). Nonetheless, Buder notes that

[6] The American Dream is "the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their own version of success in a society where upward mobility is possible for everyone. The American Dream is achieved through sacrifice, risk-taking, and hard work, rather than by chance" (Barone).

the second reason for what makes America exceptional is undermined by the widespread belief that American exceptionalism is not exclusive and that the American Dream as a national ethos is reserved for the privileged rather than everyone as its own definition suggests.

Indeed, the American Dream is exclusive, and the propagandized idea of American exceptionalism is nothing more than an exertion of superiority on the national and global scale, enticing more and more people to crave the pursuit of what America has to "offer." For instance, Yehwroe Sinyan and Isabel Lorenzo observe, "As Black immigrants chase their dreams, they face tremendous economic challenges. Recent [21st century] Black immigrants entered an American economy that offered less economic opportunity than it had for the European immigrant of the early 20th century" (18). The racial inequity which still marks the experience of many Black immigrants and Black people in the US furthers the claim that the American Dream is a falsehood, yet statistical data of this inequity is overshadowed by hope. Moreover, Jiangli Su views the American Dream through Roland Barthes's definition of "myth": "To examine myth, Barthes means to understand its ideological function in perpetuating economic and political aims of the society. American dream as a myth is 'a system of communication', an ideological tool which helps to motivate generations of Americans to pursue, to climb up the social ladders, and to break new frontiers" (838). For Su and others then, rather than a reality, the American Dream is simply a manipulative sociological tactic aimed to keep the working class working and merely dreaming of better. In Lauren Berlant's groundbreaking work *Cruel Optimism,* she defines "cruel optimism" as "a relation of attachments to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered

either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic" (24). She also states, "Fantasy is an opening and a defense. The vague expectations of normative optimism produce small self-interruptions as the heterotopias of sovereignty amid structural inequality, political depression, and other intimate disappointments" (49). Despite all that is wrong with the system and what should be alarming to American citizens, the circulating notion and enduring possibility of the American Dream keeps citizens content enough, perhaps, to avoid complaint. In Berlant's sense then, for what is fantasy to her and what is myth to Barthes, the American Dream respectively could function as an affect that "sticks" or an ideology that is spread as a dominant assumption. In either case, for these theorists and in Danticat's *Everything Inside*, the American Dream as it stands could be simply viewed as "cruel optimism."

Danticat's Politics and Views

Despite the absence of scholarship on Danticat's most recent work *Everything Inside,* there is a significant array of interviews, magazine reviews, and articles that help unpack the collection, including Danticat's responses to Trump's chaotic presidency that continues to polarize, distort truth, and encourage a white-only world. Of the many alarming and cringe-worthy moments that marked Trump's racist and xenophobic agenda, his "alleged" 2018 remarks about the Temporary Protection Status for immigrants perhaps top the list of his white supremacist and not-so-sugar-coated delusions about the world as it is. In this regard, Trump "allegedly" claimed, "Why do we want all these people from Africa here? They're shithole countries … We should have more people from Norway … Why do we need more Haitians? Take them out" ("Completely Racist"). Sadly, these remarks were publicized on the eight-year

anniversary of the earthquakes that devastated Haiti and tragically took 300,000 lives (Dreyfuss). On this day dedicated to national mourning, and in response to his words, Danticat bravely pointed out how such hateful rhetoric encourages the targeting of Haitian and other Black immigrants in America and abroad, basically putting them on the radar for white supremacist crazies. In her interview, she expresses that Haiti and Africa are incomparable because one is obviously a nation and the other is a continent. In that regard, Danticat advises, "Someone should tell him [Trump]" ("Completely Racist"). Not nearly as explicit about Trump or white supremacy as in her interviews, Danticat nonetheless weaves in a similarly biting commentary in *Everything Inside.*

Furthermore, in a 2019 *NPR* interview with Steve Inskeep, Danticat provides this illuminating commentary which helps us understand her project in *Everything Inside* with more insight about her changing and most current views on America:

> America has a very complicated history with Haiti in terms of occupations and interventions. So that has always been part of my formulation of how I see America. You know, before we came to America, in many ways, it came to us—you know, from 1915 to 1934[7]. So I've always had a very nuanced view of America. But the America we see these days—and it's not all Americans, it's not all of America—but the most visible representation of America through the presidency we have, and how people like me are viewed. It's certainly helping me

[7] Prior to 1914, Germany had many economic interests in Haiti. With the onset of the First World War, the US became increasingly weary of the German influence so close to its border. As a result, the US occupied Haiti between 1915-1934 and "controlled customs … collected taxes, and ran many governmental institutions, all of which benefited the US." However, American fiscal influence over Haiti lasted until 1947, leaving Haiti impoverished and dependent on the US for years to come (Alexander).

to reshape, and sort of worry about the future that my children, who are U.S. born, what future they will face as black children of Haitian immigrants in this country.

Although this explanation is not directly tied to anything specific in *Everything Inside,* in the crucial commentary that Danticat provides through her series of seemingly unrelated stories with interconnected themes, she suggests that America is certainly not as exceptional as some would like to believe and is arguably even as much of a "shithole" as Trump proposed in his racist indictment of other countries.

"Dosas": Materialism and the American Immigrant's Moral Dilemma

Through shifting the narrative structure between the past and present and using characterization as symbolism, in the first short story "Dosas," Danticat exposes the simultaneously luring and morally and/or emotionally destructive power of the American Dream. The narrative structure in "Dosas," because it moves between the past and the present, allows the story to explore the impact of the American Dream and what happens when the law-abiding and morally sound protagonist's attachment to her source of optimism, her "happy object," is money and the American Dream. The story suggests that it was the protagonist's belief in the American Dream as well as the working toward it that ultimately led to her divorce; in the present, however, her attachment toward the American Dream is not broken and continues to be the source of the protagonist's purpose in life, implying an affective cycle that cannot be broken. Likewise, the symbolic characterization in "Dosas" adds to Danticat's criticism of the American Dream as a destructive cycle. The three women characters featured in "Dosas," including the protagonist, allow themselves different approaches to the pursuit of the American dollar and thus the American Dream, but importantly, each woman character also becomes an

actor in Danticat's Darwinian-like narrative structure which represents society navigating neoliberalism and Trumpism alike. Between the protagonist (Elsie) who wields the least power in achieving the American Dream, the antagonist (Olivia) who rejects moral considerations to achieve the American Dream, and the protagonist's employer (Mona) who (maybe) achieves the American Dream at the cost of her humanity, each character occupies a different power stratum in this hierarchical structure. As we will see in my discussion of the final story in *Everything Inside,* working toward his American Dream results in literal death for the protagonist of "Without Inspection," and for the characters in "Dosas," this juxtaposition alone implies that they are all already experiencing a living death as they are all complicit in upholding the illusion that the American Dream is achievable without human or personal cost. In short, what the content and formal affective techniques in "Dosas" set up as the first story in *Everything Inside* is the idea that no matter the degree to which one gets closer to or farther from their American Dream, there is an inevitable emotional loss involved in terms of what is supposed to be central to our existence as people: being together.

Set in contemporary Miami, "Dosas" features the struggle of a divorced Haitian immigrant woman Elsie who works as a nurse aid. The story begins while Elsie is at work with a phone call from her ex-husband Blaise informing her that Elsie's old friend and his current partner Olivia has been kidnapped in Haiti and that the kidnappers are asking for ransom money. Blaise asks Elsie for help with the ransom money and Elsie ends up giving Blaise the majority of her savings or $5,000 towards the ransom. Sandwiched in this plot is Elsie's attempt to balance the emotional upheaval the kidnapping has caused in her life and her own job caring for an elderly Haitian immigrant

Gaspard under his visiting daughter's supervision. While Blaise tells Elsie that he paid off the ransom, but that Olivia was still killed by her kidnappers, Elsie later finds out that she has been duped by the couple and that Blaise and Olivia are both back in Haiti with the money they stole from both her and others. Despite the problems at work that this draining situation has caused, Elsie is ultimately able to keep her job caring for Gaspard.

Gaspard's function in the story serves as a symbolic reminder for the audience that despite one's accomplishments in life, despite what one could consider to be "the good life," at the end of one's journey, the achievement of the American Dream is bound to end in isolation. Through the social positioning achieved by Gaspard, this isolation is also bound to repeat itself through his daughter Mona, and it appears that because Mona's ambition in life has been similar to her father's—making money—on his death bed, it is his health aide Elsie who assumes the true role of being there for him, not his daughter. Unlike Elsie who cares for Gaspard, Mona is not around nearly as much. In order for Mona to "live" her American Dream, Elsie has to "live" hers as she provides Gaspard with care that in Haitian culture typically befalls family members. Gaspard tells Elsie, "I don't want you to think Nana's deserting me, like a whole lot of children forget their parents here" (8). Shortly after, it appears that despite Mona's presence, Mona's communication with her father or even keeping him company is nothing more than a material presence: "Mona usually walked to Gaspard's room as soon as she woke up. In order to avoid tiring him, they didn't speak much, but for the better part of the morning, she would either be reading a book or texting on her phone" (8). Considering that her father is near death, it is strange and unfeeling that instead of perhaps just talking out loud to him without Gaspard having to reply, which perhaps would tire him, Mona

chooses to simply be in the room with him as she engages with a completely different world. Moreover, despite Gaspard knowing people from work, he does not want to see them: "Aside from his daughter, he hated having visitors. He minced no words in telling the people who called him, especially the clients and other accountants he'd worked with for years … that he wanted none of them to see him the way he was" (8). At the end of the day, at one's time of death, Danticat suggests here, is the need to surround oneself with family, not with people we worked with; under the neoliberal structure, however, in order to obtain the American Dream, work proves to be the most important factor for many of us. This is perhaps something Danticat points out most of us do not think about when considering our own attachments to the American Dream: one day we will be on our death beds and who will we want around us and how would we want them to treat us? That Gaspard refuses to speak to his work acquaintances and prefers to see his daughter instead also evokes the idea that Gaspard refuses to accept his daughter's kidney because whether or not he literally lives or dies, he perhaps finally confronts the idea that "living" his American Dream is already metaphorical death being that he is spending his days in bed close in proximity to his daughter but far away in thought, far away from emotional bond and connection.

Beyond Gaspard serving as the story's ultimate template for the American Dream gone wrong, in the Darwinian hierarchy Danticat construes to critique society's attachment to the American Dream, the narrator places emphasis on the impetus for Mona's grandiose aspirations coupled with her present situation in order to reflect our commonly felt need to belong to a patriarchal culture focused on image and money. Mona's dedication to exceeding what the patriarchy expects of her is apparent when the

narrator reveals, “Mona was unmarried and had no children and had been a beauty queen at some point, judging from the pictures around the house in which she was wearing sequined gowns and bikinis with sashes across her chest. In one of those pictures, she was Miss Haiti-America, whatever that was” (7). For what Danticat allows readers to find out about Mona beyond her poor treatment of Gaspard, this description alone solidifies the character as breaking with her Haitian upbringing that fosters the idea of family and indulging in what is often broadcasted as American, as what is material. Mona’s idealization of this materialism and overt focus on image clearly began earlier in life as in Mona’s old room the “walls were covered with posters of no-longer-popular, or long-dead, singers and actors” (7). In her past works, Danticat often illuminates the impact of childhood on adulthood, and these singers and actors connect Mona’s childhood dreams and aspirations to who she is today in the story: plastic, selfish, and unable to fully empathize with neither Elsie nor Gaspard. At the same time, the aforementioned quote, if thought about more closely in relation to the perpetual affective and destructive cycle of the American Dream, highlights the ways in which this commonly felt need we have to belong survives through the past and the present for what we idealize and hold valuable: fame, money, power to belong on some kid’s wall in the future to inspire them to idealize and hold valuable the very things that drove us to get on that kid’s wall even if the kid ends up somewhere less famous and less powerful than what we inspired them to be.

Moreover, the details relaying Mona’s career in advertising bolster Danticat’s suggestion that the destructive affective cycle of the American Dream under a neoliberal system is inherently bound to repeat itself inasmuch as it has already repeated itself through the generational inheritance from father (Gaspard) to daughter (Mona). Danticat

paints Mona's present identity as a character both highly consumed with image and her career in cosmetics: "Elsie knew little about her except that she was living in New York, where she worked for a beauty company, designing labels for soaps, skin creams, and lotions that filled every shelf of every cabinet of each of the three bathrooms in her father's house" (7). Mona is not only in the cosmetics industry, but she also designs the labels for these products, which directly connects her with the output of information in terms of what is marketable to appeal to the American consumer. Considering the effects of skin care products, Mona's description also implicates her as a pawn in advancing the American patriarchal hegemony that imposes impossible image standards both in America and abroad. In short, regardless of if Mona became the kind of person she aspired to be—a beauty queen or a popular then popular celebrity featured on the poster walls of some kid's room—she is still turning the wheels in feeding society the impossible. Mona literally markets ideal femininity; the sheer number of products Mona has used to stuff her father's place suggests her dedication to the American patriarchy and economy—one of the many ideas about the American Dream Danticat critiques: to live in America basically reduces people to working their lives away and keep dreaming of better.

With showing Mona's childhood aspirations then outcomes of these dreams to reflect what contemporary society and culture expected and expect of Mona, her actions in the present show that despite the power she wields over her employee Elsie and despite her work accomplishments, Mona's ability to empathize with others is lacking. Danticat's criticism of American neoliberal values and culture as shown through Mona's heightened socioeconomic status at the cost of human connectivity works beyond the treatment of

her father and begins as soon as Mona returns with Champagne to find Elsie on an important phone call. This is the readers' first hint that although she is the daughter of a Haitian immigrant, she is above Elsie in Danticat's Darwinian portrayal, takes advantage of this fact, and lacks the kind of community Elsie would expect out of fellow Haitian immigrants, evidenced as Mona coldly demands, "Elsie, I need you to hang up" (4). Clearly, Mona could care less whether or not the phone call was important. In fact, Mona's response to Elsie echoes the kind of treatment most would expect from corporate America. The fact that Elsie does not feel comfortable enough to stand up for herself as to why she needs to be on the phone during this critical time is also telling of Elsie's perception of Mona as someone who is not a fellow Haitian immigrant but as someone who has been consumed by American neoliberalism that assumes every minute and every second of a worker's time on the job count as precious money. Even if there are redeemable moments in the way Mona approaches her father's sickness, especially her concern with her father's fall, this empathetic side of Mona is short-lived as she does not and cannot fill in for Elsie going through a crisis—this is capitalism's inhumanity at its best. Thus, Danticat's portrayal of Mona's treatment of Gaspard and Elsie alongside the descriptions of what propelled and propels Mona's existence implies an almost mechanization of being with others in this character.

Even if the other two women characters in "Dosas," including Olivia and the protagonist Elsie, begin their journeys in the same social position in the past—a social position unlike that of Mona's who was born in the U.S. to opportunities that likely opened up to her because of her father—Elsie and Olivia end up exemplifying two starkly contrasting approaches to the attainment of the American Dream that comes at a cost later

on. Danticat's juxtaposition of the two women suggests that there is a choice in how to navigate the attachment to our fantasies of the good life. However, despite the choices available to the two characters and despite their pursuit of the American Dream in differing ways, both Olivia and Elsie end up losing intimate parts of themselves in return depending on the degree to which they know how to manipulate the patriarchal order as well as the degree to which they are aware that they actively occupy a Darwinian like system in which only the fittest survive to see the American Dream (even if it is not as sweet as planned). In the past, Olivia was once Elsie's co-worker, friend, and fellow nurse assistant. Like Elsie, an immigrant devoted to her participation in the American economy and relentlessly saving money, Olivia proves to be just as materialistic; yet much like Mona, Olivia lacks the moral compass to pursue the American Dream in the way that Elsie readily accepts her position in the hierarchal neoliberal ordering of power:

> Olivia was sort of nice looking. But what Elsie had first noticed about her was her ambition. Olivia was two years younger than Elsie and a lot more outgoing. She liked to touch people either on the arm, back, or shoulder while talking to them, whether they were patients, doctors, nurses, or other's nurses aides. No one seemed to mind. Her touch quickly became not just anticipated but yearned for. Olivia was one of the most popular certified nurse's assistants … Because of her near-perfect mastery of textbook English, she was often assigned the richest and easiest patients. (6).

Although Danticat explicitly attributes Olivia's success as a nurse assistant to her "near-perfect mastery of textbook English," it is clear from the preceding description of Olivia that it is perhaps far more than her English fluency that makes her a more desirable

choice for patients. In fact, Danticat reveals that it is Olivia's ambition that Elsie first noticed, yet it is not her English-speaking skills that are then immediately brought to the reader's attention but Olivia's playful touch and openness that "quickly became not just anticipated but yearned for." Olivia navigates the pursuit of her American Dream by abiding by the unwritten rules of our contemporary American patriarchy—rules that ask women to project more than just their skills in the workplace. It is Olivia's feminine charm, first and foremost, coupled with her perfect English that seems to solidify Elsie's view of her ambition and that also solidifies her place as one of the best nurse assistants. Therefore, while Olivia and Elsie share a very similar background, Olivia depends on the same ideas that Mona does in achieving her American Dream; there is an overreliance in both Mona and Olivia to use traditional femininity to their advantage in pursuing their ambitions.

If Elsie's approach to the American Dream reads as permissive to the neoliberal forces which surround her and navigate her life, Olivia's conscious care for her appearance and actions to help her jump to the top of the hierarchy is important to Danticat's commentary because it suggests a difficulty in navigating human relations sincerely and without sacrificing something in return for the American Dream. Whereas initially Olivia's ability to climb to the top of the ladder is only hinted being a part of her ambitious nature, Danticat further uncovers Olivia's underlying agenda to successfully manipulate the patriarchy (as well as the Darwinian hierarchy Danticat creates) via her femininity when the narrator describes one of Elsie's first memories hanging out with Olivia at her husband's band gig. The narrator vividly captures the physical contrast between Elsie and Olivia: "That night, Elsie wore a plain white blouse with a modest

knee-length black skirt, as though she were going to an office. Olivia wore a green-sequined cocktail dress that she'd bought in a thrift shop." Of her outfit, resembling that of Mona's in the Miss Haiti-America picture, Olivia said, "It was the most soiree thing they had." Immediately, the narrator informs that "Dede's [the club] was not a soiree-type place but a community watering hole with exposed-brick walls and old black leather booths" (9). Thus, Danticat drops subtle hints that Olivia aims to live out her materialistic American Dream sooner rather than later as she treats a "community watering hole" like the type of place one may imagine celebrities frequenting, all in order to land the one man who she can marry and who will help her live the good life. Elsie, on the other hand, conforms to the environment around her and "plays by the book." Moreover, on the night that Elsie, Olivia, and Elsie's husband Blaise get drunk and end up in a threesome, Olivia expresses that she would like to "find a man who was willing to move back to Haiti with her." Elsie then asks her, "Do you have to love him or can it be anyone?" Olivia responds: "Anyone with money … Oh, I can live without love … But I can't live without money. I can't live without my country. This country makes you do bad things" (20). Here, Danticat exposes Olivia's motivations and the mentality which leads her to betray Elsie and begin a relationship with Elsie's husband. Olivia readily admits that her purpose is indeed money, but importantly, Olivia immediately reveals that she cannot live without her country and that America *makes* "you do bad things." I place an emphasis on "makes" here because Olivia's interpretation of America directly places America at the center of her "survival of the fittest" mentality. Unless Olivia is ready to do the bad things she has in mind, she will not get any closer to the American Dream, but Olivia views it as a necessity; her affective attachment to the American Dream propels her

actions in the story and considering Gaspard's observation about the Haitian emphasis on community, her flip in morality moves her farther away from Haiti not toward it.

Although Elsie lives her life without conscious adjustments to what America can and cannot do for her, this contrasting approach to Olivia and Mona's proves just as destructive for her; through this Danticat shows that no matter the degree to which we can strive for our American Dreams, placing the American Dream as the center of our lives proves problematic no matter what. While Olivia unapologetically steals Elsie's husband, and although the couple then cons Elsie to give up all of her hard-earned savings in an elaborate fake kidnapping/ransom scheme that allows Blaise and Olivia to go back to Haiti with a lot of money stolen from the various people that they have known, it appears that what truly breaks Elsie and Blaise's marriage is their growing distant precisely because of their dedication to making money regardless if making money meant losing each other in the process. On the night that Blaise leaves Elsie for Olivia, the narrator recounts the Valentine's Day card Elsie gave to her husband just a year ago: "Inside Elsie had simply written 'Je t'aime.' She had left the card on Blaise's pillow the morning of Valentine's Day while he was still asleep. She had a double shift that day, and he had a solo gig at a private party. They would not see each other until the next morning, when he didn't mention the card at all" (18). That the couple works different shifts throughout the day to the extent that they barely see each other in order to fulfill their American Dreams is highly significant to the meaning of "Dosas" and offers an alternative scenario to the way that Olivia pursues money, which steps on the bounds of what Elsie would be willing to do for it. Elsie is not Olivia; she is not willing to use her womanhood as a supplement to her ambition; she is not willing to treat people as pawns

in order to get what she wants. This is precisely what Mona does not have to do to get closer to the American Dream: treat people as pawns to get to money. Treating people as pawns for Mona is simply a side-effect rather than the means for achievement. Being that she is the daughter of a Haitian immigrant who made it highlights the importance of the environment in this story. Olivia simply does not have the resources and the backing of an established father to get what she wants. Importantly, despite the challenges Elsie faced and the hard truths she had to learn, it does not appear that these events will re-shape Elsie's life in any other way than by making Elsie less trusting of others. After all that has happened, all that Elsie wants to do is get back to work. The destructive cycle of the American Dream seems too impossible to shatter.

The back-and-forth temporal narrative structure allows for more contrast between Olivia and Elsie and helps stress that the idea of choice is possible in the pursuit of the American Dream but ultimately futile if a win-win scenario is the outcome one wants to get. In fact, because of the similarity of the women's position in their past, Olivia and Elsie could be re-imagined as functioning as the same character except that the two make different choices to get what they want. Danticat does not allow Olivia to appear in the present, only in the past. If we consider for a moment that it is Elsie's divorce and not the outrageous kidnapping scheme that is at the center of the plot, then Danticat could be seen as portraying Olivia through the lens of memory for which Elsie's reflection upon the failure of her marriage could be the most obvious motivator. Elsie cannot break the moral and ethical boundaries she has set for herself in order to get richer. Instead, Olivia takes the easy way out for getting the promised riches of the American Dream, which for both women, is to have enough money to go back to their homeland and live

comfortably. The contrast between the two women then creates the idea that had Elsie "done bad things," she would have kept her husband. Moreover, through this mirroring made possible by the temporal fracturing of the narrative, Danticat offers a criticism of the American Dream, since whether or not one pursues it legitimately, it proves to be a lose-lose situation. Either one can choose to work mercilessly to obtain it like Elsie or one can choose to take on a "survival of the fittest" mentality—like Mona and Olivia—and take advantage of others inasmuch as the U.S. has abided by this Darwinist concept to thrive on the backs of people and countries the American hegemony regards as worthy of dehumanizing and exploiting.

"Without Inspection": Coming Full Circle

The final short story "Without Inspection" builds upon the elements contained in the stories leading up to it, as Danticat's symbolism and formal choices more fully bring to mind that the American Dream often reduces the "other" and specifically immigrants to something less than human, deeming these "non-members" of society as easily trashed and replaceable in a country that on the one hand condemns illegal immigration and on the other materially benefits from it. As *Everything Inside* progresses from portraying the American Dream as a kind of living death in "Dosas" to exposing the covert ways American neoliberalism and neocolonialism function as more than just economic dependence but ideology which seduces postcolonial countries into political corruption ("Seven Stories") and broadcasts American exceptionalism ("Hot-Air Ballons" and "The Port-au-Prince Marriage Special"), "Without Inspection" combines these critiques as the protagonist of the story makes a risky trauma-filled trip to the US under the illusion of what America will offer, only to be ground up in a cement mixer as he anonymously

contributes to the foundational building of American infrastructure at his construction job; in other words, "Without Inspection" gels the collection and Danticat's commentary about the impossibility of the American Dream together. The story "Without Inspection" is perhaps the most linear and cohesive of them all, which indicates that only in impending death can we find life and realize what is truly important—a slower battle that Gaspard in "Dosas" must decide for himself as he has to make a choice between accepting his daughter's kidney and death; that Gaspard has to even think about such an obvious choice for many implies that the dreams he has realized in America came at a major cost.

Considering the Darwinian hierarchy Danticat sets up in "Dosas" based on the characters' approaches to the American Dream as well as the impossibility to elide the detrimental effects associated with this common affective attachment, the Darwinian sense of being under the control of neoliberal America continues in the last story "Without Inspection" except that the last story seems to flip Gaspard's template of the American Dream gone wrong and make it more visible, altogether begging the unanswerable: for what do illegal immigrants risk their lives? To one day become a citizen and end up like Gaspard who on the surface achieves financial success in America as a Haitian immigrant but lonely and deep inside questioning whether or not he wants the kidney of his image-driven, unempathetic daughter Mona? Or perhaps to end up like Elsie, in a less dangerous work environment in comparison to the protagonist of "Without Inspection," but one that nonetheless envelops both Elsie and Olivia in "their ordinary cage of sickness and death"? (10) "Without Inspection" serves not only as a call for better treatment of illegal immigrants, especially since the protagonist's motivations are less

about money but mobility, but coupled with a story like "Dosas" as a warning for those who come or plan to come to America.

Moreover, in the light of Trump and his supporters' recent strong antipathy for illegal, and even legal, immigrants—as Trump indicated arriving from non-white and "shithole countries"—Danticat not only illuminates the true realities and hardships many immigrants face but advances the idea that for as much hatred as the Trump presidency inspired toward immigration, it is the American immigrant who is responsible for the material successes of the US—the American immigrant who has been duped by the belief in the propagandized American exceptionalism and subsequent American Dream that is born of that exceptionalism; the American immigrant who toils and risks their life time and time again, working jobs that most who attack them would simply say "no" to; the American immigrant who does not deserve to be trashed and replaced; the American immigrant who is human. Whatever Trump meant by "shithole countries," the final story in *Everything Inside* answers the question that the other stories in the collection provoke: is a morally bankrupt nation that leads to the dehumanization of others a "shithole"? As Danticat infuses a heartbreaking recollection of the protagonist's memories, hopes, and dreams as he is falling to his death, the answer seems to be a definitive "yes."

Whereas memory and narrative fragmentation in Danticat's fiction often act as a means by which the author represents traumatic experience, "Without Inspection" is notably fluid in its narration; Danticat starts the story with Arnold falling to his death then recants Arnold's life while noting the most important events—a kind of biographical memorial tribute to undocumented immigrants who die as anonymous non-citizens. Considering the short story "Dosas" which travels back and forth between the past and

the present, what the stylistic choice to expand time on Danticat's behalf suggests is that for many implicated in the American capitalist machine, to live and work is to already suffer a living death, while dying is to finally experience freedom from the kind of duality of choice between feeling and the material that an attachment to the American Dream forces upon its victims with no real resolution to this duality readily available. The contrast created by expanding the moments leading up to his death to show what motivated Arnold's American Dream and what he held important and by depicting the gruesome death in the symbolic cement barrel, marks Arnold's death as especially unjust and tragic. Notably, Arnold's assumed place in the Darwinian hierarchy and his approach to the American Dream raises the idea that Arnold is perhaps more worthy of a chance to live than any of the characters encountered in "Dosas."

"Without Inspection" chronicles the last dying thoughts of an illegal Haitian immigrant Arnold has as he is falling to his death to be ground up in a cement mixer at his construction job. As he is falling, Arnold recounts his most important moments and the people closest to him. Among these memories, Arnold recounts how he got to the U.S. He was part of a group of people sailing on a boat, many of whom died before they reached the beach. Arnold recalls that his girlfriend Darline was there to save him and that this experience began their loving relationship. Darline has a son Paris and Paris quickly became like Arnold's own son. His last wish is for Darline to keep saving men like him and Paris's father who died before he reached the beach.

The entirety of Arnold's death highlights an important difference between what Arnold wants out of his American Dream and what Arnold must do to obtain it, which further shows Danticat's dissatisfaction with American neoliberalism and the way that

many believe illegal immigrants, though not necessarily dreaming of taking the money of other American citizens, just want to survive and be with their families. While Arnold exemplifies the sort of life Elsie experiences in "Dosas" in the US, where her marriage falls into shambles as she works tirelessly to achieve the American Dream and Arnold is forced to skip out on fully being present with his family to work then literally die working, Arnold is still nonetheless focused on the life he has with his family rather than amalgamating money like Elsie. Arnold's death is explicitly noted as a kind of freedom from the choices that an attachment to the American Dream asks for between the feeling and the material:

> One reason not to own too many things was their crammed two-bedroom apartment, but the other, at least for him, had to do with never wanting to feel bound. To be attached to people was fine—to Paris and to Darline, who were as much a part of him as his blood was—but he never wanted to be tied to things, to clothes and shoes gathering dust in packed closets, to a fancy car that required hefty payments every month. No, it was simpler to be free. As free as this fall, which he had neither intended nor chosen… (201-202)

Indeed, as much as Arnold never wanted to feel bound by material or even physical spaces, his citizenship status as an illegal immigrant and pursuit of the American Dream, which for him is not money but the freedom to simply live, means a "stuckness" that makes him both bound to material things as well as physical space—a country he cannot leave, and if he does, he cannot freely return to. That Arnold dies in a cement barrel, which literally provides foundation and binds, symbolizes the tragic, yet ironic cycle of abuse caused by a belief in the American Dream. A cement barrel, used as a tool to fulfill

capitalist enterprises and as the building block for many of our privileges, kills Arnold, inasmuch as Arnold works with others to use the cement to build a forty-eight story hotel. Thus, the cement—what is material and what is America—is to be used by the few and built by the many like Arnold in our Darwinian neoliberal world where the fittest, as Danticat seems to suggest, are unfortunately not feeling people like Arnold. Danticat's narration humanizes the anonymous immigrant and by doing so, Danticat works to both dispel the fears associated with xenophobia and also raise fears about who it is Americans should truly fear, which according to the entirety of *Everything Inside,* it is ourselves since to an extent, we all occupy a space in a Darwinian like world Danticat creates in the collection, one where characters perhaps have choices, as limited as they may be and especially for someone like Arnold, but ultimately insufficient to give them true agency from the neoliberal structure pushing our lives forward.

Throughout "Without Inspection," Danticat provides a fulfilling complement to "Dosas" by focusing on the innocence and simplicity of Arnold's American Dream in comparison to the money-making motivations of the characters in "Dosas" who all have legal status in the U.S. unlike Arnold. When Arnold falls to his death, he does not share in the fantasies of the material which propel the three women characters in "Dosas," but focuses on a single concept of the airplane as source of mobility and freedom he hopes his son Paris can experience; the name Paris is not coincidental as Paris's real father dies on the way to America and his dream was to travel to Paris one day. Beyond the irony behind Arnold building paper airplanes with his son and becoming an expert at making paper airplanes as a boy, once Arnold falls into the cement mixer, "He saw an airplane cut across the clear blue sky. And that was when he realized he was dying, and that his

dying offered him a kind of freedom he'd never had before. Whatever he thought about he could see in front of him … He had wished for something with wings to pluck him out of the cement mixer, and there it was up in the sky now, in the shape of an airplane" (211). The irony of the idea that the illegal immigrant is a source of fear is that for many illegal immigrants, the simple source of happiness is the ability to move, to do something as simple as get on a plane rather than make it to America via boat in a highly dangerous maneuver. Moreover, we find that, "He and Darline had been putting money away to take Paris on an airplane. It was either a trip or a ring, and they were already essentially married, Darline had told him. Paris was their ring. They loved each other and they loved him. He was their son" (211). The prevalent misconception of the illegal immigrant is that they are here to take the jobs of Americans, but what we get here is a man who has the single American Dream of his son to be able to experience the mobility and freedom he could not. The focus on familial experience as opposed to the pursuit of the material (ring) here provides a contrast to "Dosas" and the broken optimism of pursuing the material, since what matters in the end is not what we own but the memories we share and the people that we love. The idealization of the American Dream and its pursuit thus creates a blockade for feeling for many that are born or arrive in the US with a single goal in mind: the good life and/or money. It is unknown whether or not this blockade would have reached Arnold had he been a legal U.S. citizen, but the story does imply that his job expectations have been taking more and more away from his time with close ones. This destructive American Dream cycle is problematic on many accounts, but through "Without Inspection," Danticat shows that it can be worse for some than for others. Nonetheless, it appears that because Arnold was able to achieve a sense of freedom (even

if in death), since his American Dream motives were focused on loved ones, in comparison to the characters in "Dosas," Arnold's life seems to have been far more emotionally fulfilling.

As mentioned previously, "Without Inspection" reads like a tribute to illegal immigrants whose names we will never learn, but the impetus for Danticat's choice to expand the few last seconds of the protagonist's life becomes especially apparent towards the end of the story as the narrator informs the death from the perspective of the media and the outside world that dehumanizes Arnold, much like illegal immigrants are "othered" by people like Trump. The irony in this story resounds in the construction company's statement which not only uses Arnold's fake assumed named Ernesto Fernandez but in the company's assertion to call the situation an "unfortunate accident" which truly was caused by the failure of the company to properly inspect the working conditions. Between the fact that Arnold came to the U.S. without inspection and illegally and that he died because a company failed to inspect properly suggests that perhaps instead of focusing so much attention on illegal immigration in this country, more attention should be paid to the companies and corporations which dehumanize and objectify workers. Importantly, the narrator relates that there were people on site who took videos and photos of the occurrence, describing the "quickly assembled collage of these recordings" to make Arnold look "not like a person but like a large object plummeting. He was moving too fast to be identifiable as a human being when the footage wasn't in slow motion" (218). Thus, here we see that Danticat, by expanding these moments, wanted to give Arnold, and others who have died anonymously like Arnold, dignity, respect, and some memory that could never be fully brought back.

Danticat's humanizing of Arnold and his motives in life against the backdrop of his death imply that while people tend to dehumanize and objectify others like illegal immigrants in this case (as we see in "Dosas" with the characters' pursuit of their material American Dreams), as U.S. we should be more concerned with whether or not we have dehumanized our own selves with our pursuit of the dollar.

Women and Solidarity

In an interview with Rachel Epstein for *Marie Claire*, Danticat reveals that her inspiration for the title of *Everything Inside* as well as a sign on Elsie's door in "Dosas" came from seeing the warning sign on a window in Miami's Little Haiti which read "Nothing inside is worth dying for." Epstein notes that later on, Danticat interpreted the sign as "if you come in here, you will die." Danticat obviously reverses the meaning of this sign by naming her collection *Everything Inside,* suggesting that everything inside is worth dying for. What is important to remember is Danticat's emphasis on the superiority of feeling over the physical and material world. Thus, the message that emerges from Danticat's short stories is that not only is the American Dream an illusion, what should perhaps replace the American Dream is the pursuit of a life in which love over hate and unity over competition thrive. Women appear to be at the center of this hope to stop ourselves from the mechanization of feelings that an attachment to the American Dream brings about. While merely being in the U.S. places us at the forefront of limited choices and Darwinian control sparked by neoliberalism, the conflict between the women in "Dosas" along with Darline's activism imply Danticat's hope that women in America defy what is expected of them. Indeed, Danticat's *Everything Inside* shows us that America is just as much of a "shithole" country as any others but it also shows that what

could make it less of a "shithole" and perhaps no longer a "shithole" for the future is women banding together.

This includes Darline who changed the course of Arnold's American Dream since initially Arnold wanted to come to the U.S. to make something of himself to prove his owner and only mother figure wrong about him being worthless. Tying the poor treatment Arnold received from the woman he worked for as a child to the cruel ambition that brought Arnold to America's shores then reversing this focus in his life to the familial at the forefront of his American Dream because of Darline shows an important commentary Danticat makes about women and for women not to fall into a patriarchal trap that continues to cycle toxicity. Darline's love for Arnold and her son have changed Arnold's needs since all that he ended up truly wanting falling to his death was a life with them. Importantly, the final moments of the story, like "Dosas," more explicitly inspire the reader to not only "create dangerously," as Danticat suggests in *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, but to love and remember dangerously as well. Despite Arnold's connection to Darline, he has one more wish:

> There are loves that outlive lovers. Some version of these words had been his prayer as he fell. Darline would now have two of those. He would also have two: Darline and Paris. He would keep trying to look for them. He would continue to hum along with Darline's song, and keep whispering in Paris's ear. He would also try to guide Darline back to the beach, to look for others like him. (219).

Considering that "Without Inspection" also functions as a memorial and tribute to the anonymous immigrants who died on the way to the US or in the US, to keep this memory alive while providing this last unspoken wish, perhaps attempts to inspire the reader and

especially woman reader to think beyond the context of Arnold's death in the immediacy of the story and to reconsider how they themselves are being guided not only by the American Dream but by the losses they are aware of but the losses they do not help to address and should be addressing, essentially to reverse the destruction brought upon by neoliberal values and the patriarchy.

Moreover, the women characters in "Dosas" and especially Olivia and Mona, because they each attempt to achieve the American Dream by abiding by the unwritten rules of the patriarchy in this Darwinian matrix Danticat creates and still are not able to achieve these dreams without sacrificing important human attributes like empathy to the neoliberal order allows Danticat to project the idea that it is about time that women were made aware of how their lack of solidarity allows this ugly affective cycle to continue. Mona attempts to level with Elsie, but she nonetheless treats her like an object and "just a worker" rather than a part of her immigrant community being that her father Gaspard is a Haitian immigrant. Mona, because of her image-driven life and pursuit of the American Dream, disregards Elsie as a human being even before she finds out about the kidnapping. More importantly here, Olivia's belief that it is a man she needs and not herself to live a good life and then disregard for Elsie as a friend shows how trying to survive in a still patriarchal world doing the very same moves men have been pulling is detrimental to our common sense of morality and of being together. Danticat suggests that fighting the patriarchy fire with fire, as in materialism with materialism, is beside the point of helping women thrive.

CHAPTER III

FROM "YOU" TO #METOO

Adichie's short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* chronicles and juxtaposes the numerous experiences of Nigerian nationals in their home country as well as Nigerian immigrants in America. In the titular short story, Adichie's narrator provides important commentary about relationships between Black and white characters as the woman narrator navigates her new immigrant experience. From the moments that the narrator leaves her home country to the crucial months following arrival in America, the narrator traces the new racial divides and cultural disparities she must now frequently deal with.

Critical response to Adichie's collection commonly acknowledges the work to be reflective of Nigerian women's experience; and specifically in response to the short story "The Thing Around Your Neck," critics typically recognize the profound impact of second-person point of view on the audience. Anita Harris Satkunananthan discusses in detail what exactly is the "thing around your neck," pointing to specific instances where the narrator uses the phrase to express her self-perceived feelings of powerlessness and then power once that symbolic "thing around your neck" loosens; Satkunananthan

connects these feelings of powerlessness to commodification and silencing that so many "postcolonial women"—women from countries that were once colonized—continue to experience in both their home countries and abroad (60-61). Likewise, Leena Hannele Eilitta views the narrator's experience as one that mirrors the struggle with cultural duality as an immigrant. Furthermore, Eilitta asserts that "the thing around your neck" functions as a symbol of silencing and powerlessness as it conjures up the ideas of bondage and slavery (84). Of all critics Nami Shin provides the most commentary on Adichie's experimental form and second-person point of view. According to Shin, Adichie's "you" closes the distance between the narrator and reader, and in turn, evokes empathy in the audience for the Nigerian woman immigrant experience that is seeped deeply in the same cultural struggles Satkunananthan and Eilitta analyze.

However, scholars have yet to discuss the new American sociocultural environment that Adichie's characters find themselves struggling to navigate in *The Thing Around Your Neck,* and as a result of their focus on just the idea of immigrant identity, scholars have yet to fully explore Adichie's most important priorities with her audience: feminist power and societal change. For instance, Satkunananthan delves into the issues of memory, trauma, and women's silencing in the collection. Though significant in her contribution to criticism on Adichie and other postcolonial women writers, Satkunananthan's argument does not situate Adichie's work as one that does belongs amongst the most essential contemporary takes on race and gender in America, yet since so much of Adichie's short story centers on the issues of race and gender in America, the work begs for such a reading. Similarly, Eilitta's criticism discusses the psychological impacts of the many roadblocks the "you" faces in "The Thing Around

Your Neck, but does not address the deeper implications of "your" liberal white boyfriend. This emphasis on the psychological even extends to Shin's analysis of how second-person point of view functions in the short story which once again subjects Adichie's work to the boundary of just the immigrant experience. In reality, Adichie's experimental form does much more than elicit empathy for postcolonial women immigrants: it also provides invaluable commentary and exposes racial issues in America for what they are.

In other words, critics have yet to discuss how *The Thing Around Your Neck* functions alongside contemporary American literature and also have yet to discuss the collection in terms of critical race theory and affect theory. Instead, most criticism treats Adichie's stories as an alienated kind of a gender experience and an experience that is completely separate from the experiences of women and especially Black women in America. Though these critical readings are valuable and they do accurately portray Adichie's focus as one that means to "give collective voice to the experience of young Nigerian women as a new group of immigrants residing in the United States" (Shin 101), these readings still do not help situate Adichie's voice as one that resides among both Black and American women writers who respectively address racism and women's objectification in their works. Although Shin remarks that *The Thing Around Your Neck* "anticipates an American reader as part of its audience" (109) and Satkunananthan points out that the narrator's boyfriend masks his objectification "behind a deep interest in West African culture" (61), both critics elide the fact that this objectification often also encompasses Black women in America, and not on the basis of their nationality like the narrator but their race.

Moreover, because critics forego the important contrast between the sexism of the Nigerian immigrant uncle and also her white liberal boyfriend created by the progression of the story in relation to the heightened empathy created by Adichie's second-person point of view, Adichie's critique of American patriarchal hegemony has not been fully discussed. The white liberal boyfriend represents the American patriarchy, while the Nigerian immigrant uncle represents the influence of that American patriarchy upon all men regardless of their racial or cultural backgrounds. Surely, Adichie does give "a collective voice" to Nigerian women immigrants, but she is also striving to inspire "a collective voice" for U.S. women altogether considering that . If we consider that the story begins with readers experiencing a potential sexual assault by a person who is supposed to be a safety net—something that many of us have experienced—and then progresses to the narrator's objectification by her white liberal boyfriend, what then emerges is an important attribution of this misogyny to the American patriarchal hegemony which works silently much like the narrator's boyfriend. Importantly, the uncle uses the obtainment of the shared "happy object," the American Dream, to sway the narrator into giving in to his sexual advances, basically telling "you" that unless "you" sleep with him, "you" will not get far in America. Realizing the objectification of the white liberal boyfriend then—a symbol of the white male patriarchy ruling America despite the many notions of women achieving true equality—the narrator abandons her attachment to the "happy object" altogether. All of this happens against a backdrop of missing solidarity between women; from the "you" not telling the uncle's wife about what happened to the racial ignorance of the white girls the "you" experiences, solidarity seems to be the missing key for overcoming the narrator's issues with the patriarchy and

being able to remain in America. Solidarity between women is often the reason for growth in Adichie's other stories, and because we do not get that in "The Thing Around Your Neck," it appears that the second-person point of view, because of the empathy it provokes, attempts to achieve that solidarity.

Whether all women reading Adichie's story have personally confronted a similar traumatic situation, it is at the very least safe to say that most women have confronted a misogynist who relentlessly stood in their path, given the patriarchal structures that still permeate most cultures around the world. Thus, Adichie's short story, in that it strives to connect women's shared experiences to that of the narrator through second-person point of view, proves to be more than a call for empathy for the postcolonial woman immigrant. Rather, "The Thing Around Your Neck"—which, as critics point out, builds upon other narratives that feature similar conflicts—is a call for women to understand each other and unite in spite of their various backgrounds in the U.S. so that the American Dream is no longer an impossibility with sacrifice to the patriarchy.

Adichie's Feminist Agenda

Though Adichie never explicitly mentions a feminist agenda in her short story collection, it is next to impossible to ignore just how passionate Adichie is about gender equality and solidarity between women when reading her work considering that Adichie has become a well-known and popular feminist in this past decade. It is important to note that the prominence Adichie achieved as an author skyrocketed partly due to Beyonce sampling portions of Adichie's 2013 TEDx talk "We Should All Be Feminists" in her hit song "Flawless." More specifically, Adichie's powerful words and voice compose the entirety of Beyonce's second verse in which Adichie questions the reasons why girls are

taught certain ways of being, especially to have ambition "but not too much" and why girls are taught "to aspire to marriage and we don't teach boys the same." Such questions Adichie asks in the verse, now famous from Beyoncé's performance of it, permeate much of her fiction even if Adichie never explicitly makes her narrators ask them.

Moreover, in a 2017 interview with Susannah Butter for *Evening Standard,* Adichie disclosed her own struggles with confidence as a feminist. Butter relays that in her conversation with Adichie about the recent globally empowering feminist #MeToo movement, the author admitted to being a victim of an unwanted sexual advance:

> When she was 17, she met a powerful man in the media back in Nigeria to ask for support launching her poetry book. They had a pleasant conversation. But before she knew what was happening, he slipped his hand under her shirt, squeezing her breast. Taken aback, she froze. Then she pushed his hand away, but gently, so as not to offend. (Butter)

We see such an offense play out in "The Thing Around Your Neck," a short story that existed eight years before the #MeToo movement really took off in 2017. Notably, the experimental form that Adichie implements in this short story appears to aim for energizing a very similar kind of movement in which women could share their stories without hesitation or fear, standing in solidarity against the patriarchy which oppresses them.

As Stephanie R. Larson recalls the inception of the movement, she reminds us that the Me Too movement was originally created by the activist Tarana Burke in 2006 as a supplement to Just Be Inc., her organization devoted "to supporting the health and wellness of young women of color and raising public awareness about the quiet

pervasiveness of sexual abuse" (432). However, it was not until Alyssa Milano's provocative tweet in 2017—"Suggested by a friend: 'If all women the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me Too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem'"—that numbers of women and supporters took to the social media platform to be heard too; "quite literally thousands of people responded almost immediately in solidarity, many of whom offered testimonies of personal experiences with sexual harassment and assault" (432). Larson further argues that the #MeToo movement marked a rhetorical shift for women's solidarity and one she attributes to Aristotle's ancient rhetorical strategy *megethos,* or rhetorical power through magnitude. With the sheer multitude of short, concise, and to the point #MeToo tweets, these tweets became more powerful in number as they began to constitute a list "in an effort to replace problematic assumptions of victimhood or apathetic opinions of rape culture with visceral feelings of pain and outrage, feelings that aim to provoke viewers into action" (434). Thus, for Larson, the affective success of the #MeToo movement was largely due to its accessibility and the magnitude of voices that participated, together creating an unparalleled energy of solidarity not only in sexual harassment and assault victims but people who could no longer turn a blind eye to the phenomenal global evidence of male abuse of women.

Adichie's short story "The Thing Around Your Neck" mirrors the kind of feminist solidarity we see fold out amidst the #MeToo Movement with the use of second-person point of view. For instance, Larson highlights the use of second-person point of view in Gabrielle Union's tweet: "You know us. We are your family members. Your friends. Your co-workers. Your neighbors. And yes, even your heroes. We are everywhere.

#MeToo" (D'Efilippo and Kocincova qtd. in Larson 437). Another tweet she points to explicitly calls out people who may believe sexual violence is a non-issue: "If #MeToo is 'making you uncomfortable,' you're the one it's meant to reach. Silencing sexual assault victims doesn't make it any less real" (D'Efilippo and Kocincova qtd. in Larson 438). Larson realizes that the pronoun "you" becomes effective at disrupting the comfort that so many people surround themselves with by not considering the impact of sexual assault and violence in their everyday lives; the #MeToo movement strived to rupture that very comfort surrounding the normalization of sexual abuse by asking "indifferent or stubborn audiences … to dwell in their own discomfort as opposed to foreclosing it, a discomfort unparalleled to actual victims but one useful for persuading doubtful audiences of the realities of rape culture" (Larson 438). Likewise, from the perspective of time, Adichie's narrator, the "you" in her short story, reads much like a precursor to the solidarity that the *megethos* of the #MeToo movement accomplished since the "you" moves between positioning the audience in spaces of comfort then discomfort; unlike the "you" use in the tweets Larson mentions that aimed to move unsympathetic audiences, Adichie's use of the pronoun "you" appears to motivate women audiences to the point in which—we as women—are comfortable enough to say "me too."

The Uncle Predator We All Know

"The Thing Around Your Neck" follows the experience of Akunna, a Nigerian woman immigrant newly arrived in the U.S. She first stays with her uncle, the visa sponsor, and his wife and kids, but once the uncle makes an unwanted sexual advance towards her, she leaves the next day without saying goodbye to anyone. Following this occurrence, the protagonist tries to make ends meet by working as a waitress. There she

meets her new white boyfriend who at first seems to be a breath of fresh air from all that she has endured, yet as the story continues, the boyfriend is clearly privileged, objectifies Akunna, and cannot understand the conflict between them. Once her father dies, the protagonist goes back home with the implication that she will only come back to America to keep her visa active.

Adichie's two male characters in "The Thing Around Your Neck" may be read as exemplifying what in Adichie's eyes is wrong with the American patriarchy and the way it still continues to haunt women through its reliance on women's objectification in the name of achieving success/American Dream amidst neoliberal competition. Considering the second-person point of view in this short story, exposing the audience to the sexual predator of an uncle is an important choice since it not only provides an affective link between any women reading the story but also points to how the patriarchy and even white supremacy, as historically and contemporarily propagated by white men, gives any men, regardless of their race or cultural background a clear advantage over women in the U.S. Through the uncle, Adichie also unwinds an important aspect of what leads to these moments of sexual subjection for women: comfort. The reason why using the uncle's sexual advance is a highly relatable moment on top of the second-person point of view is because sexual assault most often happens because of someone we know rather than a stranger. Although the short story "The Thing Around Your Neck" could have been narrated without the initial incorporation of "your" sexual predator of an uncle and simply started with the narrator first meeting her dishonestly liberal white boyfriend, Adichie nonetheless strategically positions this backstory of predation to provide an affective link between the narrator and any of her women readers who have themselves

experienced such predation, regardless of their varied cultural backgrounds or skin colors.

The uncle navigates the pursuit of his American Dream with a clear understanding of racism, yet he would rather accept this system as a fact rather than anything problematic since it enables him a degree of control over his wife and then the "you." He tells the "you" that he accepted a job that pays more money than the average salary plus other benefits in spite of the company using his photos in every brochure because "they were desperately trying to look diverse" (116). That the uncle so nonchalantly approaches this information in the story suggests he is willing to do a lot for the dollar. On top of it, his sacrifice for the dollar includes not only alienating himself by living in an all-white town for this job, it means alienating his wife who has to "drive an hour to find a hair salon that did black hair" (116). This alienation extends to the narrator since the uncle positions "you" in a community college amongst white women whose microaggressive questions do little to make the "you" feel a sense of belonging. The uncle uses this alienation against the "you." Upon picking the narrator up from the airport, he tells "you": "The trick was to understand America, to know that America was give-and-take. You gave up a lot but you gained a lot, too" (116). This could be seen as the uncle grooming the narrator for his plan to make his sexual advance; surely the idea of the American Dream suggests a form of sacrifice, but the uncle specifically relies on this common misconception that what women really need to do to "take" and be competitive in America is to "give" their bodies to men. Importantly, as "your" sponsor, the uncle already "gives" something to the narrator which is a sense of comfort in his home since it is discomfort that the "you" experiences anywhere outside the home, and it is this very

comfort that Adichie suggests throughout this story that men rely upon to take advantage of women.

As much as the #MeToo Movement largely relied on breaking the comfort zone of those reading through social media, the narration of the uncle's sexual misconduct quickly moves from a highly comforting scene to utmost discomfort. The second-person point of view heightens empathy in the audience but the uncle persona also causes for heightened relatability between the "you" and the audience since he largely represents the safety man. The revelation of his sexual predation is preceded with a rather comforting scene: "You laughed with your uncle and you felt at home in his house; his wife called you *nwanne,* sister, and his two school-age children called you Aunty" (116). Immediately following this seemingly happy experience in America and despite being away from the safety of the narrator's true home at this moment, in the very same paragraph, Adichie's narrator crushes "your" blissfully domestic setting: "They spoke Igbo and ate *garri* for lunch and it was like home. Until your uncle came into the cramped basement where you slept with the old boxes and cartons and pulled you forcefully to him, squeezing your buttocks, moaning" (116). This direct juxtaposition between familial comfort and what appears to be the uncle's sense of right to the narrator's body invokes the alarming immediacy with which women experience unwanted sexual advances and sexual violence. In short, "you" just did and do not see it coming; many women reading Adichie's short story are then highly likely to say, "me too."

Beyond this relatability that women could experience reading the uncle as the safety man, the uncle also relies on the idea of success and competition in order to lure

the "you," which yet again shows Adichie's attempt at exposing the inner workings of the American patriarchy today. While some readers may see the uncle as an isolated incident, it is my hunch that the majority of women reading this story have come across a safety man like the uncle who promised them success. Adichie underlines the uncle's assumed privilege as the narrator relates,

> After you pushed him away, he sat on your bed—it was his house, after all—and smiled and said you were no longer a child at twenty-two. If you let him, he would do many things for you. Smart women did it all the time. How did you think those women back in Lagos with well-paying jobs made it? Even women in New York City? 117

Not only does the uncle attempt to make the narrator believe that the only way to success as a woman in Lagos is to debase herself, the uncle also attempts to make the narrator believe that women—all women—at the pinnacles of success in New York City take the path to this position through sexual subjection. This is probably the moment in the story where the identification with the narrator's struggle becomes highly palpable for the audience of women since the alarming immediacy of sexual violence for women culminates in the uncle's question of how "you" thinks the women in New York City make it. The uncle's specific mention of a cosmopolitan American city full of women originally born in both America and anywhere else in the world collapses the distance between the experiences of the narrator and the very women the uncle incites the narrator to think about; whether women reading this short story are themselves being gaslighted at the moment or have been in the past, Adichie deliberately chooses to help the women audiences readily identify with the narrator's struggle with the patriarchy.

The White Liberal Boyfriend We Shouldn't Ignore

Adichie creates an important link between the uncle and the narrator's white liberal boyfriend since both men attempt to exert and/or exert control over the narrator through a sense of comfort. More importantly, however, Adichie's first introducing the invested readership to the uncle then progressing that affective investment with the "you" to the white liberal boyfriend proves to be the most significant move on Adichie's part in pointing the audience to the intertwining of patriarchal oppression with white supremacy. Whether women reading the story experience and/or have experienced the kind of patriarchal oppression we see with the uncle or are personally affected by the kind of racialized objectification we see with the white liberal boyfriend, the point becomes then that no matter how we look at things as women in America, the source of our struggles against the patriarchy is white men. Thus, the story if we look at its political implications, inverts cause (white liberal boyfriend) and effect (predatory uncle).

Although the white boyfriend initially seems like a catch to the narrator, making her feel comfortable in a world that does quite the opposite, by the end of the short story, Adichie implicitly connects the uncle's sexual predation to the boyfriend's covert white privilege and ethnic fetishization. That American history and both current and past political rhetoric together promote the idea that racism is merely a relic of the centuries long gone becomes reflected in the white boyfriend's inability to understand the existence of his "polite racism" and fake white liberalism. Thus, Adichie purposefully reverses the patriarchal structure in America that in the short story begins with the most obvious misogyny as perpetrated by the Black Nigerian uncle and ends in the least obvious misogyny as enacted by the illusion of the white boyfriend's good intentions. Adichie's

reversal is meant to be effective in unraveling the underlying causes of the patriarchy in America since by the time the white boyfriend appears, the narrator has already—and hopefully—affectively captured the identification of all women with the "you."

As previously mentioned Adichie locates comfort as the source for how women become dependent on men and potentially vulnerable to their unwanted advances, so coming from a place of discomfort in America, the narrator ironically finds comfort in the arms of an ostensible liberal who comes to symbolize the covert nature of American patriarchy that wrongfully claims America is post-racial. Such claims do not make the microaggressions disappear inasmuch as the white boyfriend, claiming to be liberal, cannot help but objectify the narrator. Before Adichie's narrator first recounts how she met her boyfriend, Adichie provides ample padding and explanation for how the narrator ends up with someone like him precisely due to the discomfort and the avalanche of unpleasant events originally set off by the uncle's sexual advance. The narrator recalls, "Many people at the restaurant asked when you had come from Jamaica, because they thought that every black person with a foreign accent was Jamaican. Or some who guessed that you were African told you they loved elephants and wanted to go on a safari" (119). Regarding this very passage, Shin notes, "Rather than operating as a form of dialogue that aims to deepen their understanding of Akunna, the questions she receives more confirm peoples' ignorance as well as their preconceived notions regarding life in Africa and immigrants" (108). The ignorance which Shin identifies proves deeper with roots in white supremacy and the same racial profiling that Black Americans experience. Adichie's stress on the discomfort and alienation the narrator feels ultimately underlies the narrator's pull toward the fake white liberal.

Immediately after the aforementioned microaggressions that assume the narrator is Jamaican, Adichie contrasts these uncomfortable experiences with the comfort the white boyfriend brings the narrator and as we will see later, this comfort is short lived—just like the idea of diversity on a brochure is for the uncle who sees through the façade. The boyfriend's initial approach to the narrator's foreignness proves refreshing in its accuracy in comparison to her recently past encounters:

> So when he asked you, in the dimness of the restaurant after you recited the daily specials, what African country you were from, you said Nigeria and expected him to say that he had donated money to fight AIDS in Botswana. But he asked if you were Yoruba or Igbo, because you didn't have a Fulani face. You were surprised—you thought he must be a professor of anthropology at the state university. (119)

This observation was surely refreshing for the narrator, yet nonetheless questionable in regard to his intentions. If the man wanted to hit on the narrator, then why not do it without the initial curiosity about the narrator's cultural and ethnic background? The narrator continues:

> He told you that he had been to Ghana and Uganda and Tanzania, loved the poetry of Okot p'Bitek and the novels of Amos Tutuola and had read a lot about sub-Saharan African countries, their histories, their complexities. You wanted to feel disdain, to show it as you brought his order, because white people who liked Africa too much and those who liked Africa too little were the same—condescending. But he didn't shake his head in the superior way that Professor Cobbledick back in the Maine community college did during a class discussion on

> decolonization in Africa. He didn't have that expression of Professor Cobbledick's, the expression of a person who thought himself better than the people he knew about. (120)

At this point, the narrator feels herself drawn to this man because thus far in America, she has not been able to find anyone who could relate to her as a Nigerian immigrant, aside of course, from the uncle and his family. On the basis of this man's interest and understanding of the narrator's background, the narrator agrees to go out with him. With their developing relationship, the narrator finally allows herself to let her guard down:

> You knew you had become comfortable when you told him that you watched *Jeopardy* on the restaurant TV and that you rooted for the following in this order: women of color, black men, and white women, before, finally, white men—which meant you never rooted for white men. He laughed and told he was used to not being rooted for, his mother taught women's studies. (120)

Adichie, through the way the narrator roots for contestants, conjures up the idea of the patriarchy and its solid foundation in white supremacy. The narrator roots for both Black and white women, but not for white men, and in many ways, Adichie invites white women to root for Black women before they root for white men too, and especially because the white liberal boyfriend turns out to be nothing more than a man too ignorant to realize his own role as a white patriarch—a role he plays exceptionally well to cover up with genuine interest.

On the contrary, the genuine interest the boyfriend initially shows the narrator, slowly but surely, becomes exposed as a fetish for exotic women. The boyfriend mirrors the kind of fake white liberal we see James Baldwin describe in "The White Problem"—

self-congratulating and unattuned to their racism, ignorance, and past abuses. As the relationship between the narrator and her boyfriend progresses in Adichie's short story, Adichie exposes the boyfriend as a fake white liberal when the couple goes to a restaurant that apparently the boyfriend has frequented in the past:

> Once at Chang's, he told the waiter he had recently visited Shanghai, that he spoke some Mandarin. The waiter warmed up and told him what soup was best and then asked him, "You have a girlfriend in Shanghai now?" And he smiled and said nothing. You lost your appetite, the region deep in your chest felt clogged … Later you told him why you were upset, that even though you went to Chang's so often together, even though you had kissed just before the menus came, the Chinese man had assumed you could not possibly be his girlfriend, and he had smiled and said nothing. Before he apologized, he gazed at you blankly and you knew that he did not understand. 124-25

The narrator's boyfriend here is completely ignorant of his own faults much like the U.S. has tried to forgo the conversation about its racism; after all, he is dating the narrator, but the question here is also why? Based on the waiter's question at the restaurant, we get the sense that the narrator is certainly not the first or the last woman from a different country that he will date; the boyfriend smiles because he wants the conversation to end then and there—he wants to avoid further confrontation about his past. In many ways, the boyfriend also feeds his own ego.

Furthermore, the boyfriend's white privilege signals the ways in which all patriarchy comes back to money, power, and white supremacy; the connections Adichie sets up between the uncle and the boyfriend further the resulting sense of solidarity

Adichie aims for her women readers to feel. Following the instance at the restaurant, the boyfriend showers the narrator with various gifts that serve her no immediate purpose: “a fist-size glass ball that you shook to watch a tiny, shapely doll in pink spin around”; “a shiny rock whose surface took on the color of whatever touched it”; “an expensive scarf hand-painted in Mexico” (124). All these gifts serve the narrator no practical use, and it quickly becomes clear that not only is the boyfriend attempting to buy the narrator’s love, but that the boyfriend has zero inkling to the narrator’s financial struggles as an immigrant. In short, the boyfriend exercises his privilege to draw the narrator into his nest of dependability, yet he fails to realize what could potentially and truly make her dependent on him. Moreover, the boyfriend’s fascination with foreign objects parallels his fetish with exotic women; for the boyfriend, these women are nothing more than cool objects to add to his vast arsenal of foreign stuff. According to Satkunananthan, “Akunna situates herself against what she perceives as her boyfriend’s privileged American background. She stands in solidarity not just with her fellow Nigerian women, but also with other postcolonial nations whose experiences are collectively commodified by people such as her boyfriend” (61). I argue, however, that the narrator stands in solidarity with all women, because this fake liberalism and the objectification of women offers further proof that white supremacy, though spun in secret channels of American history and society, lies at the core of the same patriarchy feminists of all backgrounds must face to fully understand its ramifications and danger.

Strings Attached: America as Happy Object

According to Sara Ahmed, a “happy object” is something that people associate happiness with and position themselves as close in proximity to these presumed “happy

objects" so that naturally happiness will become the end result (33-34). However, as much as these "happy objects" are shared and circulated between people, they are nonetheless simply accepted as being happy and in the case that this object does not promise happiness to a person, this person will become "out of line with an affective community" (37). Thus, it becomes less likely for someone to abandon seeing an object as happy if that risks alienation from the people around them. In Adichie's "The Thing Around Your Neck," the narrator's attachment to the American Dream first functions as a "happy object" that is first pushed upon the narrator by her family and friends at home then ultimately rejected by the narrator after realizing the cost that this "happy object" truly carries being that it is closely intertwined appeasing the patriarchy. Importantly for the discussion of feminist solidarity, Adichie's short story demands a reconsideration of the object which is supposed to give us all happiness—whether it is money or the American Dream—based on the common sacrifice women share with the covert patriarchy that proliferates from white man privilege to other means of control by men. The ending of the story suggests that a rejection of the happy object, in this case the American Dream, is possible but it is still not ideal.

Viewing America as a "happy object," based on "your" unpleasant experiences in the U.S., "you" do not want to admit to those back home that this "happy object" is not exactly a source of happiness, but not communicating this to family continues this destructive affective cycle of the American Dream we see play out in Danticat's *Everything Inside.* We find out that the narrator's family and friends all view America as a "happy object" as in the beginning of the story, they all encourage the narrator to take advantage of this opportunity and present this "happy object" as an easy way to gain

stability, material things like a house and car, and overall, happiness. The uncle likewise propels this ongoing attachment by presenting America as "good" despite the setbacks and racism he experiences. Though the "you" felt like there was nothing "happy" to relay to her family back at home, eventually the narrator makes several observations about life in America that are worthy of being discussed in letters—letters "you" never sends because "you" cannot afford the gifts she promised her relatives before leaving for America. This in turn does nothing more than help promote the idea of American exceptionalism, as if everything was going just fine.

Once the narrator finds out that her father died back in Nigeria, she finally makes the decision to go back to her home country, breaking the cycle of America as the "happy object" once "you" fully realize that the white liberal boyfriend and what he represents is what is truly wrong with the U.S. The boyfriend is seemingly sympathetic towards the end, yet Adichie emphasizes that his sympathy is selfish and a manipulative tactic to keep the narrator, an object of his affection:

> He held you while you cried, smoothed your hair, and offered to buy your ticket, to go with you to see your family. You said no, you needed to go alone. He asked if you would come back and you reminded him that you had a green card and you would lose it if you did not come back in one year. He said you knew what he meant, would you come back, come back? You turned away and said nothing, and when he drove you to the airport, you hugged him tight for a long, long moment, and then you let go. 127

By the end of Adichie's short story, the narrator fully grasps her boyfriend's treatment as one that is thoroughly immersed in his objectification of her. Though Shin views the

couple's break-up as a result of the narrator's inability to share her feelings with him and views "the thing around your neck" as the narrator's symbolic isolation, the problem with Shin's reading reduces the full scope of the symbolism, since it foregoes specifying the boyfriend as an oppressor and colors him in as someone who simply cannot understand the narrator's background (112). Likewise, though still falling short of its true implications, Satkunananthan argues that the underlying cause of this "thing around your neck" is due to "the haunting loss of identity found in-between different cultural constructs" (58); and although unlike Shin, Satkunananthan realizes that "Akunna finally fights back against her boyfriend's objectification which was masked behind a deep interest in West African culture," Satkunananthan nonetheless does not explicitly connect this objectification to "the thing around your neck" (61). Unlike Shin's analysis, the "thing around your neck," that only Eilitta astutely views as racial and patriarchal oppression, ultimately disappears for the narrator as Adichie allows the "you" final control over at the airport. It is no longer the "thing around your neck" that chokes the narrator before bed, but it is the "you" who "hugged him tight for a long, long moment, and then you let go" (127). It is the narrator here who hugs the boyfriend—"tight" like the "thing around your neck"—and then lets go. The narrator, for one last time, herself hugs the symbol of covert white supremacy and patriarchy—the boyfriend—then willingly and independently lets go of him, and potentially of American patriarchy's hold on her.

The letting go of the white liberal boyfriend is a reversal and a rejection of "your" community's "happy object," hinting at the possibility of a larger, more organized rejection despite the potential feelings of alienation and considering the affective link

between the "you" and the audience. Following the uncle's sexual advance "at night, something would wrap itself around your neck, something that very nearly choked you before you fell asleep" (119) and following the situation at the restaurant "the thing that wrapped itself around your neck, that nearly choked you before you fell asleep, started to loosen, to let go" (125). Shin regards "the thing around your neck" loosening here as a sure sign that the narrator is overcoming her feelings of isolation as an immigrant (111). However, the progression and evolution of how "the thing around your neck" functions in Adichie's story in fact mirrors new knowledge and independence that the narrator gains about and from the patriarchal structure in America. The silent patriarchy that the narrator discovers in America proves to reflect strangulation—"the thing around your neck"—since it is the most overlooked and least easily spotted form of domestic violence:

> Acts of strangulation are highly harmful in their own right, especially when recurrent, as they often are. They can cause cumulative brain damage, throat injuries, and damage to the vocal cords, among other injuries. This is so even when the violence leaves no external bruises, scratches or abrasions—as is the case in about half of strangulation cases. And less than half of these visible marks, in turn, are deep or dark or appear quickly enough to show up in police photographs. (Manne)

Indeed, the experiences of the narrator with both her uncle and then her white boyfriend leave the "you" with mental bruises and traumatic memories, but no physical damages. "The thing around your neck" only loosens when "you" realize just exactly what sort of secretive patriarchal power plays "you" have uncovered in America, bulldozing the circulating notions of the perfect American Dream "your" friends and family paint at

home in Nigeria. With Adichie's incorporation of the second-person point of view, which brings readers as close as possible to the experiences of the narrator, Adichie seems to hope that readers pick up on the knowledge that the American patriarchy truly is rooted in white supremacy. She also seems to hope that the sense of common purpose that this evolution and realization could bring about amongst all women in America is fully realized.

The Women We Wish We Could Talk To

While the narrator is able to realize the detrimental aspect of an attachment to the American Dream as a happy object and refuse to pursue it any longer if that means bowing down to the patriarchy, Adichie's short story, when considering the other stories in the collection, suggests another unrealized potential outcome for the narrator, especially since the second-person point of view allows her readers to interrogate the actions of the protagonist more closely. It is highly significant that "The Thing Around Your Neck" is not the first short story in the collection but is preceded by six other short stories that do not implement second-person point of view. As much as the #MeToo movement disrupted the normal day to day operations of social media platforms, Adichie's second-person point of view in "The Thing Around Your Neck" disrupts what readers likely expect to find in the story, since they would already have taken for granted a back and forth between first-person and third-person point of view as the standard narrative perspectives in the collection. Feminist solidarity has already featured in the stories preceding "The Thing Around Your Neck," but not with the twist of second-person narration. For instance, in the story "Imitation," it is Nkem's friend Ijemaka who informs Nkem that her husband is cheating on her which in turn propels Nkem to

reconsider and reconstruct the power dynamic in her marriage. Such solidarity is thus one that Adichie already acquaints her audience with, but one that is missing from "The Thing Around Your Neck." With ideas of solidarity—ideally—already circulating in the minds of her readers, Adichie removes such solidarity from "The Thing Around Your Neck" to allow "you" to ponder what "you" would and should do when faced with a decision that ultimately comes down to expressing to your woman friend "me too…you too?" In regards to the question of the American Dream and the American patriarchal hegemonic grasp over the way that the American Dream is achieved, Adichie's removal of solidarity between women in "The Thing Around Your Neck" suggests that this solidarity is not only needed but necessary for a full achievement of freedom for all women in the U.S. That the narrator abandons the "happy object" is important as showing that such a rejection is possible, but this is still not the ideal outcome for the "you" or for "you" reading the story.

The alienation and lack of community the "you" experiences is largely due to "your" sponsor, but the lack of any common bond or understanding across difference between the white girls at schools and the "you" add to "your" feelings of non-belonging. The girls at school asked: "Where you learned to speak English and if you had real houses back in Africa and if you'd seen a car before you came to America" (116). Furthermore, "They gawped at your hair. Does it stand up or fall down when you take out the braids? They wanted to know. All of it stands up? How? Why? Do you use a comb?" (116). As soon as the narrator may feel like she is part of the group or even making friends—boom—here comes another stupid random question, and she is back to being alone. Thus, Adichie's employment of second-person point of view in this short story not

only invites the reader, as Shin suggests, "to experience what it must have felt like to be exposed to and receive these kinds of responses and questions," but invites women, and especially white women, to finally comprehend the scope of their ignorance. Instead of aiding the narrator's transition from Nigeria to America, these girls' ignorance and curiosity about her foreignness overtakes any feelings resembling empathy they may have felt. Instead of welcoming the narrator, the girls push her farther away from feeling at home.

Interestingly, the narrator foregoes communicating this traumatic incident to the woman who called "you" *nwanne* or sister, pointing to how the power of the larger American patriarchal structure prevents women from banding together with the use of second-person here because the narrator's non-action evokes important reflective questions. The "you" reflects upon the incident with uncle the following morning when she silently and permanently leaves the uncle's house, and the uncle drives past the narrator without making a stop: "You wondered what he would tell his wife, why you had left. And you remembered what he said, that America was give-and-take" (117). Could it be that the narrator chooses to forgo relaying the critical information to the uncle's wife, the woman who called "you" *nwanne,* because you feel certain that she is also a victim of the uncle's power—his "give-and-take"? In that case, what would it matter if "you" privately informed the uncle's wife, when she is most likely a victim of his manipulation too. What safety could you offer her when the only safety "you" have been able to experience in America is undergirded by the very same safety as hers, the uncle's house and financial support? Though the narrator does not provide further detail about her silence, Adichie's second-person point of view aims to propel "you"—the audience—to

consider what “you” would have done in the narrator’s shoes. Moreover, the absence of a proper channel or community of women to turn to highlights the need for women’s solidarity across cultural and racial bounds. How different could things have been for “you” if “you” had just went with the uncle’s concept of America being “give-and-take”? How different could things have been for “you” if “you” were able to engage the uncle’s wife about her husband’s sexual advance? How different could things have been if it were known across cultures that women could talk to each other about the manipulation and oppression they face as a result of a patriarchal world? Adichie invokes these loaded questions by only providing the audience with the narrator’s limited reflection upon the husband’s wife; it is a topic that the “you” mentions in one sentence and one that the audience is likely to ponder given Adichie’s emphasis on the close relationship these two women once had and the second-person point of view certainly aids that these questions are indeed asked. For women reading this short story, to have another woman call “you” sister, then not tell her something so critical about her husband should feel like a betrayal; yet, this is the conversation Adichie apparently wants all women to be able to have about the very “give-and-take” the uncle entices the narrator with. If the narrator just felt comfortable enough to address these issues with the uncle’s wife and the uncle’s wife was also comfortable enough to discuss them and take action, then the two women could bond in solidarity against the oppressive uncle and create their own healthy sense of what “give-and-take” should mean in a relationship. The two women could help each other and create their own home, but as Adichie underlines through the narrator’s silence, some women are simply just not yet ready to engage in unapologetic solidarity and Adichie’s

short story invites the audience to believe that all women should get ready to say #MeToo.

Conclusion

As the story progresses, and the "you" wins the shared common experiences of women readers, Adichie moves to the narrator's experiences as a Black woman immigrant in America—experiences that not all women readers could say they have been through. Yet the empathy and the affective bond Adichie creates through the situation with the "uncle" builds upon itself and likely remains embedded in the readers' minds and this in turn may propel their imaginations for a potential future understanding between women.

CHAPTER IV

FEELING MODES

Claudia Rankine's experimental work *Citizen: An American Lyric* deeply situates its audience in the psyche of her Black female narrator experiencing various acts of microaggressions: subtle, covert, perhaps unintentional acts of racism. As she employs second person point of view throughout her work, Rankine strategically attempts to force the readers—regardless of their races or genders—to locate themselves within the situations presented, piece by piece and page by page. From time to time, the speaker returns to first-person narration to amplify the racist's stupidity and ignorance: "What did he just 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? The moment stinks" (9). Immersing us in the psychology of microaggressions in an unwoven sequence, *Citizen* successfully embodies racism's incessant, never stopping, and always looming nature. Rankine's experimental mix of stylistic and poetic choices embody that context as well. Going back and forth between verse and prose, hypothetical situations and fact, abstract art and photography, the author reveals the prevalence of microaggressions; Rankine not only stresses their powerful existence but stresses their almost omnipresence. In one of her

essays “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning,” which was published before *Citizen*, Rankine proposes:

> Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking in the day, no turning onto the street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black. (146)

That even white sympathetic liberals will never fully understand the perpetual feeling tied to the imminent danger of racism in the Black community seems to be the impetus for the her project in *Citizen* as ostensibly innocent slips at the beginning of the lyric progress into white supremacist violence and police brutality (145-146). Whether the white microaggressor in *Citizen* pleads ignorance or obliviousness to their actions or flaunts their sympathy and compassion for the black experience with no other goal than to further their ethos as a white liberal, the poetic progression in Rankine’s lyric—from the micro to the macro—implicates the “white imagination” in perpetuating white supremacy and in upholding systemic racism.

Existing criticism on Rankine’s *Citizen* often pertains to Rankine’s stylistic form and how it embodies collective injury in the lives of Black Americans as a result of an oppressive past and constrictive present. Trauma theorist Michael Richardson specifies that the work heavily relies on “aporia” to convey and reimagine the traumas of Blackness in America, defining aporia as “the unrepresentable, unknowable event that

enters into literary language through its fracturing, its falling short of meaning making" (1). He then adds that the resonances of negative space in relation to the written language conjure traumatic effect in works that "embrace the absence of text" (2). In short, Richardson keenly analyzes the idea of trauma in both the verbal and nonverbal strategies Rankine incorporates. With a similar focus on injury in *Citizen*, Joel Schlosser explicates that current metaphors for contextualizing citizenship—and more specifically the "standing" metaphor which suggests that any American citizen can equally engage in the pursuit of the American Dream—fail to consider the injuries in which Black citizens living outside of the white dominant society have suffered and continue to suffer. For Schlosser, "standing" then denotes all automatically legal American citizens are born to the same circumstantial social position and are given the same set of opportunities. In his analysis of *Citizen,* Schlosser then contrasts "standing" with the metaphor of "injury" and argues that Rankine's lyric sheds light on the presence of social "injury" which prevents many African Americans from "standing." Although Richardson's "trauma" and Schlosser's "injury" seem to be interrelated, Schlosser's criticism more fully anticipates Rankine's effect on the audience; Schlosser astutely observes that "injury" as a counterimage to "standing" in *Citizen*, "[elicits] an alternative poetics of citizenship and thus a different imaginary to democratic practice" (2). Furthermore, in regards to *Citizen,* Bella Adams maintains that the second-person point of view destabilizes the interracial relationships which simultaneously place "us" in the position of the speaker and the racist alike (58); she also notes that the repetitive nature of situational racism in *Citizen* provokes in the audience the feeling of its persistence (56). Adams concludes by asserting

that the lyric promotes color consciousness, ultimately questioning the readers' own view of their citizenship and the extent to which they respond to racial injustice (69).

Whereas most critics address *Citizen's* style and the poetic conventions Rankine utilizes to alert the audience of the contemporary Black struggles amidst a colorblind culture, none have yet to consider the impact of the lyric's second person point of view and multimodality together. Richardson highlights Rankine's form as a precursor to conveying trauma, but he does not consider the interrelated effect of the lyric's various modes. Moreover, though Schlosser argues against the "standing" citizenship metaphor as he counteracts it with the metaphor of "injury" in *Citizen*, he only highlights Rankine's diagnosis of contemporary racism and does not establish the purpose behind Rankine's experimental form. Likewise, Adams provides vital analyses of the work's second person point of view, but still not in combination with Rankine's other experimental strategies like negative space or art. Overall, critics have yet to focus on the ways in which affective states, including cognitive empathy and pity, in *Citizen* are built upon its experimental form: the intertwinement of second person point of view with multimodal lyric.

Rankine activates the imagination and empathy by strategically combining second-person point of view with a cohesive interplay of prose and poetry, visual art, and expressive negative space. Her stylistic choice for the multimodality in *Citizen* first immerses the audience in the omnipresent nature of microaggressions, then progresses to situating the established "you" in the omnipresent dangers of racial police bias against Black Americans. With this progression, the success of evoking empathy in the latter part of *Citizen* is intensified by the already established pathos, leading to an understanding of the sociopolitical atmosphere concerning colorblind racism which historically acted and

acts as a silencing agent for the continual injury in African American communities. Moreover, *Citizen's* point of view and multimodality allow the audience to veer into the psyches of racists with somewhat unexpected affective results; instead of evoking complete anger or pure disgust, Rankine instead suggests that racism as a system is also detrimental to racists. Ultimately, the lyric propels the imagination to a deeply empathetic experience, which arguably, would not be as powerful without the experimental form Rankine employs.

Affect

Although it may perhaps seem obvious to the average reader that Rankine's experimental form and second-person view are not merely authorial whims of imaginative creation at work but serious choices to affect the audience, what may seem far less obvious are the affective spaces that Rankine propels her readers into. It may be easy to characterize Rankine's project as one that induces empathy for the speaker and in turn for Black women and Black Americans, but empathy proves to be far more slippery today than in the past. Historically, the essence of empathy resided in the philosophies of some of Western culture's best-known and most-respected intellectuals. Adam Smith and David Hume did not necessarily use the word "empathy," but they nonetheless equated "sympathy" with "empathy" and advocated that putting oneself in another's shoes is somewhat of a building block for having a good moral compass (Bloom 39, 68-69). Twentieth-century psychologist E.B. Titchener translated aesthetician Theodor Lipps's "Einfuhlung," "which meant the process of 'feeling one's way into' an art or another person," as "empathy" to provide a new terminological tool to describe this affective

phenomenon. As Suzanne Keane points out in "Narrative Empathy," Titchener's explanation of empathy relied on the reading experience to capture its meaning:

> We have a natural tendency to feel ourselves into what we perceive or imagine. As we read about the forest, we may, as it were, become the explorer; we feel ourselves the gloom, the silence, the humidity, the oppression, the sense of lurking danger; everything is strange but it is to us that strange experience has come. (Titchener 198 qtd. in Keane 1286).

In short, the circulating notion and definition of empathy can be reduced to what Keane describes as "I feel what you feel. I feel your pain" (1285). Keane also differentiates "sympathy" from this experience, since "sympathy" takes "empathy" a step further: "I feel a supportive emotion about your feelings. I feel pity for your pain" (1286). Thus, empathy can lead to sympathy, but these terms are nonetheless not interchangeable.

More recently, in *Against Empathy,* psychologist Paul Bloom attacks the very essences of sympathy and empathy that philosophers like Smith and Hume hailed as segues to good moral decisions. Refuting this standard view, Bloom points out, that empathy, although it most certainly can be a force of good, can also find its way into destructive and even toxic decision-making. For Bloom, because empathy occurs in the here and now, it propels the empathic experiencer to forgo rationalization and could propel that same empathic experiencer to dismiss the notion of the greater good. Not only does Bloom refer to Tania Singer's laboratory research which shows that there is a clear cognitive difference between the activation of empathy and compassion in the brain (43), Bloom demonstrates this—perhaps surprising—paradox with numerous examples of empathy gone wrong.

For instance, Bloom expounds his argument against empathy by providing the psychological study in which people were more compelled to help the person they knew were in dire need of a transplant ahead of the people who were also in dire need and at the forefront of the same list. This example illuminates the way that human empathy propels people to skewed moral judgements. Moreover, Bloom points out:

> Intellectually, a white American might believe that a black person matters just as much as a white person, but he or she will typically find it a lot easier to empathize with the plight of the latter than the former. In this regard, empathy distorts our moral judgements in pretty much the same way that prejudice does. (Bloom 31).

To further advance his case against empathy, Bloom reminds us that some of the best-known humanitarians arrived at their moral choices not by empathy, but by sheer rationalization. Drawing upon the work of psychologist Peter Singer, Bloom takes into consideration the case of Zell Kravinsky who donated the majority of his multi-million dollar assets to charity and did not stop there (26). Citing scientific studies that show the risk of dying as a result of making a kidney donation to be 1 in 4,000, Singer or Kravinsky says that not making the donation would have meant he valued life at 4,000 times that of a stranger, a valuation he finds totally unjustified. (Singer qtd. in Bloom 26). Thus, for Bloom and for Singer, individuals that favor "cold logic and reasoning" over empathy tend to make more morally sound choices—a process that Bloom terms rational compassion and strongly advocates for.

As Lauren Berlant theorizes, even compassion, like empathy, proves to be a tricky affective state. In the introduction to *Compassion: The Culture and Poetics of an*

Emotion, Berlant outlines the current state of compassion in the sociopolitical arena. She argues that "the national dispute about compassion … has been organized by the gap between its democratic promise and its historic class hierarchies" (1). Berlant describes "compassionate conservatism" as promoting the idea that "society's poorest members can achieve the good life through work, family, and community participation," therefore "rephrasing the embodied indignities of structural inequality as opportunities for individuals to reach out to each other" (4). Berlant offers an insightful view of compassion to the reading of Rankine's *Citizen* asserting that "compassion is a term denoting privilege: the suffer is *over there*" (4). Rather than prompting compassion in the audience, Rankine's second person point of view positions the audience directly in the "you," shortening the distance between the reader and the sufferer. Berlant's characterization of compassionate conservatism helps crystallize the notion that the affective states Rankine positions different audiences to experience are far more complex than mere empathy or compassion; such terms prove reductive in getting to the bottom of how *Citizen* functions rhetorically and how the form, including multimodality and second-person point of view, propels the audience to new reflective and affective insights.

Multimodality

In order to fully grasp how Rankine aims to impact the readers affectively, a closer overview of multimodality is necessary. As a concept used by rhetoric and composition scholars, multimodality refers to the author's utilization of more than one semiotic mode in order to express meaning. Although literary scholars do not typically draw upon the theories of multimodality to analyze poetry or literature, reading *Citizen*

through this lens is vital to a fuller understanding of how Rankine's different modes of communication come together to produce meaning and establish her affective purpose. In *Non-discursive Rhetoric: Image and Affect in Multimodal Composition,* a proposition of a language theory that encompasses non-discursive symbols, Joddy Murray repudiates the traditional idea that feelings, emotions, and affect dwell in a space far removed from reason and rationality. In fact, Murray points out that, historically, rhetors were often well aware that image impacts emotion but were unfortunately limited to the understanding that rhetoric encompasses only one medium. Drawing upon advances in neuroscience as well as postmodern theories of language, Murray argues that since image and emotion are intertwined in a reciprocal relationship, and that since emotions are constantly present, reason is inherently affective.

Moreover, in "Images, Words, and Narrative Epistemology," Kristie S. Fleckenstein exposes the historical emphasis on linguistic text as a form of oppression. From Plato's distrust of "imagistic knowledge" to the Scientific Revolution which overly accentuated "rationalism and empiricism," Fleckenstein outlines how "the discrediting of imagistic thinking" became solidified in our culture (916). However, Fleckenstein's arguments prove that such distrust of imagery stifles us from fully embracing the potential to create meaning. She stipulates:

> While it may provide the detachment necessary for us to deal with psychological trauma, the distancing of language from the context of individual experience also allows us to justify and accept morally ambiguous actions (war, capital punishment, and so on). Such dereferentialization severs word from emotion, implicitly emphasizing the specious dualism between reason and emotion,

> meaning and feeling, dominant in our Western culture. Dereferentialization offers us tools to legitimate or rationalize almost anything. 920

In other words, Fleckenstein argues that linguistic texts have historically propelled the audience to logical reasoning and rationalization over emotional understanding. On the other hand, Fleckenstein points out that "imagery, because it provides an alternate way of organizing thought, reality and self, compensates for the coercive force and structural limitations of language" (920). Considering Fleckenstein's stance on imagery, it is important to note that Rankine seems to be disrupting the oppressive limitations of language through the poetic forms she chooses to channel in *Citizen*.

Far from a contemporary phenomenon, poets preceding our era—even the iconic Romantic poet William Blake—have often coupled verbal and visual stimuli (Gibbons 1). Likewise, Rankine stylistically deviates from the norm to bolster the empathy evoked by her speaker's second person point of view. Despite the temporal fragmentation of the situations she presents, Rankine strategically moves from the everyday and perhaps familiar interracial interactions to the more injurious violence that the commemorated Black Americans in the latter portion of the work have suffered. Creating such flow, in the very least, successfully produces an invitation to listen, if not fully feel for the necessity of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Empathy, Multimodality, and *Citizen*

Rankine's situations depicting microaggressions exemplify the avant-garde process through which the poet fosters cognitive empathy. In one of her poems, Rankine combines the influential second person point of view prose with a powerful image (see *Fig. 1)* depicting what she wants the audience to feel by placing themselves in the "you."

The speaker is going to see a new therapist that she has only spoken to over the phone. Their appointment is at the therapist's house and as the speaker rings the doorbell, the therapist yells, "Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?" (Rankine 18). The speaker follows with, "It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment." The second person pronoun directly places the audience in the psyche of the speaker. This, in turn, promotes the reader's ability to read the text as if experiencing the situation for themselves.

Fig. 1 Kate Clark's *Little Girl* (Rankine 19)

On the contrary to immersing the audience in psyche of the "you" alone, Rankine also provokes the audience to consider the psychology of the person creating the microaggression. The therapist then questions the validity of "our" statement, pausing to catch herself in the act of being unintentionally racist. Reading *Citizen* through the lens of the critical race theory, Adams suggests that "the second person breaks down subject/object separations" and that "*Citizen* denies 'you' the reader distance from the

stories and the lives therein, and in so doing positions the reader as racist and recipient of racism simultaneously" (58). Although the trauma counselor apologizes a few times over for an unspoken violation, it is perhaps her admission of guilt that should disturb "us" the most. Would a spoken acknowledgement of the microaggression make things worse or better for the speaker? Would a believable, elaborate story of how the counselor is very forgetful and not seeing many patients lately, make things worse or better for the speaker? Would it have been better or worse for the therapist to say that she forgot to take her anxiety medication on top of forgetting she had any appointments? Does she forget, or is it the color of the speaker's skin that is making her yell in fear for her life? These open-ended questions are the hallmark of the loaded white spaces Rankine leaves for her readers, allowing them to ponder the questions that come to mind. Richardson argues that this negative space in Rankine's work "demands that the paper's whiteness not be allowed to become mere unremarked background, the natural normal upon which language rests" because so many "blocks of poetry in *Citizen* halt abruptly, black text populating only part of the page." Furthermore, he explains that it "produces a present-tense of experience that can only reside beyond the words themselves" (8). As the speaker remains taciturn and composed, refusing to comment upon what just transpired, the negative space is a place for the audience to filter what the "you" is holding in. This situation is tendentious as the second person pronoun, the speaker's silence, and the negative space come together to elicit a complex sense of cognitive empathy for the speaker and the therapist alike.

In accordance with Adams's suggestion of the "you" as situating the audience in the mind of the racist and the recipient of racism, the reading is two-fold as the shock of

the occurrence leaves the "you" with inquiries regarding the therapist's state of mind. The speaker does not make it completely clear who the "wounded German shepherd or Doberman pinscher gaining the power of speech" is referring to. Although it is most likely referring to the "you," it also fits the reaction of the therapist as she "protects" her home, loyal like a guard dog and protecting the too often colorblind white dominant society. Ultimately realizing her unconscious process, the therapist apologizes with "I am so sorry, so, so sorry," underlining her own shock in discovering herself as racist. She is not only apologizing to the speaker, but herself as well—how could she? The prose in this specific microaggression is accompanied by negative space to filter the occurrence, ending in a single image of a deer with human features that further incites the audience to feel the speaker's reduction to something other and less than human **(see *Fig. 1).***

Rankine's use of second person directly confines us within the speaker's psyche, the art amplifying the image that the readers have already conjured up in their imaginations. The art propels empathy in the audience as it ensures that the confusion, the hurt, and the debasement is truly felt by "you." Simultaneously, the choice of art is strategic, spurring the imagination to the "deer in the headlights" expression, which here, also encompasses the speaker and the therapist. The therapist, hesitating between realization and her admission of guilt, reduces herself to something other and less than human as well. She finds herself in the act and does not try to cover up her tracks to save her repute as a trauma counselor. Here, the racist seems to be sincere when she apologizes in shock, indicating that she is also feeling confused like the depicted deer and hurt by her own ignorance as she just imposed trauma on another human being. Rankine's cognitive empathy relies on the cohesion of formats she employs. In this

poem, the cognitive empathy Rankine evokes is rather complicated. First and foremost, the empathy elicited is for the patient, the recipient of racism. However, there is also an underlying attunement to the racist that Rankine promotes by placing the audience in the "you" rather than the "I." As Rankine's speaker locates the audience in the "you," the art following the microaggression creates deep ambivalence as it is applicable to the reading of the speaker and the racist in this ironic occurrence.

Similarly, in another poem depicting microaggression, Rankine effectively compels the audience to empathy for the speaker and simultaneously attunes it to the ignorance of the racist. The speaker is at the bar waiting for a friend and a man designedly shows the "you" a picture of his black wife. The man's words following this happening congeal the disconcerting microaggression. Upon seeing the picture of the man's wife, the speaker remarks, "You say, the bridge that she is, she is beautiful." To this response, the man replies, "She is … beautiful and black, like you" (78). Although the man's eagerness to show off the picture of his Black wife is not unintentional, his inability to grasp that he is throwing the speaker "against a sharp white background" is (53). If the man produced a photo of his wife, then of course, the speaker already knows that his wife is Black. Rankine maximizes the power of verbal irony as their short encounter produces the underlying microaggression in which what the man is really saying is that despite being Black women, the speaker, and his wife, are both beautiful. Rankine designs this irony to propel the audience into a sense of uneasiness as what the man intends to be a compliment stemming from his pride for being married to a black woman, turns to "our" objectification. It is his pride for being married to a woman that is Black and beautiful at the same time that Rankine highlights here as inadvertently racist

and marked with ignorance. Rankine's "you" evokes empathy for the speaker as the man's unconscious racism results in the speaker's silence.

The instance between the speaker and the man at the bar is acutely pertinent for women since living in a society which constantly objectifies their gender, comparing them to an impossible ideal, makes every woman, regardless of race or nationality, targets of objectification to some degree. Rankine's strategic minimalization of the exchange between the speaker and the man at the bar accentuates that very common comparison to a Dane Caroline Wozniacki "smiling blonde goddess" image (Rankine 36). With the feminine perception of beauty universally skewed by societal stereotypes, Rankine is appealing to an emotion most women know all too well because most of them do not fit the "smiling blonde goddess" stereotype. Therefore, having experienced the dilemma of being measured to something other than themselves, it propels them to relate to the speaker whose beauty is being racially objectified. *Citizen*, fragmented and unwoven, projects a cohesive sense of what it means to be Black, a woman, and attuned to the omnipresence of microaggressions in modern America. The fragments, situational microaggressions, art, photograph, and all other form mediums that Rankine inserts into her work unite and empower for the same common purpose; empathy, understanding, and reflection.

Critics of African American experimental literature typically acknowledge the long-lasting effects of history on the contemporary era of colorblind racism, which Rankine actively pursues to uncover through her multimodality in *Citizen.* According to Anthony Reed in *Freedom Time,* the "regime of multiple governmentalities … has proven adept at organizing power along ethno-patriarchal lines within an officially 'color

blind' framework while redefining the past to authorize the negation of civil gains and the reorganization of public institutions to achieve analogous effects." Reed also asserts that, "official narratives of success, in turn, make the repetition of that success unlikely, even anomalous, while making larger transformations more difficult, if not impossible to articulate" (2). Rankine's lyric calls for such a larger transformation by attuning the audience to the façade these "official narratives of success" have inspired. Phillip Brian Harper's argument about black-white interaction at the turn of the twentieth century points out that, "we should by no means forget that legal and political developments are themselves facts that condition the moral and psychic existences of those who live in their shadow, even without governing their every interaction" (364). Harper continues to say that the enactment of Jim Crow specifically highlights the ways in which legal and political developments lurk into the psyche of citizens living underneath that body politic. Interestingly, Rankine's *Citizen* contemporarily exposes the psyches of those citizens living underneath what Reed calls "a colorblind framework." In her experimentation with form, Rankine endeavors to subdue the aforesaid "official narratives of success" as she conceives novel thinking conduits that facilitate the reader's imagination to a production of empathy.

Indeed, if Rankine chose to write the lyric in the first-person point of view, it is likely that compassion would be elicited in the audience instead. Whereas the noun "Compassion" is defined as "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it," the related noun "Empathy" is defined as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having

the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner," as well as "the imaginative projection of a subjective state into an object so that the object appears to be infused with it." Rankine's approach in retaining the second person point of view throughout the lyric fuses the audience with the "you" and therefore, forces the audience to feelings of empathy, rather than compassion. The latter definition of empathy as "imaginative projection" promotes the idea that *Citizen's* multimodal style intensifies the effectiveness of generating empathy because Rankine's various stylistic forms activate different senses and expand the dynamism of the reader's imagination.

On multimodality, Alison Gibbons provides insight which aids in understanding *Citizen's* format and the ways in which Rankine's style is more enriching for eliciting empathy in the audience. Gibbons explains, "The different modes of expression are located on the page not in an autonomous or separate fashion, but in such a way that, while these modes have distinct means of communicating their narrative voice, they constantly interact in the production of textual meaning" (108). Gibbons further explicates on the importance of cognitive poetics in the study of multimodal texts, arguing that because cognitive poetics is a discipline in which creativity and reception are both crucial parts of meaning making, multimodal texts complicate such analyses of literature. In her own analysis of *VAS: An Opera in Flatland,* Gibbons concludes that multimodal works provide readers with extra cognitive demands in comparison with the conventional novel because "multiple forms work in synchronicity to communicate narrative meaning" and because such synchronicity allows for the audience to heighten its cognitive perception (120). Therefore, cognitive poetics can similarly elucidate an intriguing edge to the reading of empathy in Rankine's *Citizen.* Based on this literary

theory and the meaning of "Empathy," *Citizen's* multimodality urges the audience to access sources of imagination otherwise untapped. Gibbons's research in cognitive poetics helps prove that Rankine's amalgamation of semiotic modes in *Citizen* is profoundly responsible for triggering empathy.

If the second person point of view "destabilizes subject/object pronouns" and positions the reader in the racist and recipient of racism alike (Adams 58), then it is possible that instead of inducing compassion for the recipient of racism, Rankine's speaker induces it for the colorblind racist instead. "Pity," is like "Compassion," but refers to "a sympathetic or kindly sorrow evoked by the suffering, distress, or misfortune of another, often leading one to give relief or aid or to show mercy." Unlike "Compassion," the noun "Pity" embraces mercy, signifying a kind of forgiveness. At the very least, some degree of pity underlies the reading of the therapist and the man at the bar. Based on the empathy produced by being situated in the "you," the pity branches from the very ignorance in the behaviors of these two characters. Despite the microaggression they are instigating, Rankine communicates the characters as oblivious actors in the culture of colorblind racism. In effect, Rankine's speaker propels the audience to feelings of pity and mercy for their lack of awareness since both characters seem to mean other people well and their intention is not to hurt the speaker. The irony in the therapist specializing in trauma counseling and causing trauma to another person is enough to induce pity, perhaps even compassion, in the "you" because the therapist's apology suggests her unawareness and disappointment in herself as someone who is supposed to help others with their mental health. Due to the unrealized ignorance and the irony portrayed in *Citizen,* Rankine's speaker seems to suggest that not only is racism a

highly uncomfortable experience for the one experiencing it, it is also a morally destitute space of being for the racist as well.

Whereas the microaggression may possibly lead the therapist to a novel discovery of her own colorblind racism and the idea of color consciousness, hopes for such a revelation are bleak for the man at the bar. In his skewed perception, he is not a racist: he has a beautiful Black wife. The portrayal of the man's ignorance deepens with the notion of him "nursing something" before showing the speaker the photograph (78). Rather than a spontaneous action, the man first ponders about the way to inform the "you" that he has a Black wife. In the sense of Berlant's theories on compassion, the man explicitly "denotes privilege," (4) assuming all Black women must feel underappreciated in terms of their physical appearance in comparison to white women—why else even bring this conversation up? As Berlant explains, "You, the compassionate one, have a resource that would alleviate someone else's suffering" (4). In this case, the resources available to the man are the notion that white men do marry Black women and the compliment which follows shortly after. On the contrary to his compassionate intent, the man unintentionally creates a demeaning comparison—or the microaggression. Furthermore, the man's behavior in purposefully showing the photograph also "denotes privilege." There is no other reason for it aside from the man propelling his own ego as a non-racist, forcing to show off his compassion. This short, yet complex, situation may lead the audience to assume that the man marries a beautiful Black woman out of racial compassion to feed his ego. In turn, such a portrayal of the man's ignorance and unaware process evokes pity in the reader. If not compassion, the audience is at the least meant to feel pity for the man, questioning how one could be so out of touch with their own intent. In addition to

the empathy that the speaker elicits, Rankine's "you" and the irony of the situation propels the audience to feelings of pity for the man.

Rankine's ironic pieces on microaggressions portray the extremity of ignorance with which the colorblind racists operate. In one instance, the speaker describes a conversation with a woman that holds multiple degrees. Automatically, the audience can safely assume this person is "educated" enough, aware enough not to cause a microaggression, but ironically, the "educated" woman tells "you," that she "didn't know black women could get cancer" (45). Rankine's speaker continues: "instinctively, you take two steps back though all urgency leaves the possibility of any kind of relationship as you realize nowhere is where you will get from here." In instances like this one, Rankine establishes the audience in the "you," evoking empathy for the speaker's resignation in not trying to enlighten the racist with multiple degrees. What possible avenue could the speaker, the "you" take to make a supposedly "educated" white woman reconsider her colorblind remark? Would she listen? Would she care to listen? Pity is once more evoked for the racist. Although the woman holds multiple degrees, she is so out of touch, that "you" don't even bother to correct her. Why even try? There seems to be nothing "you" feel one could say to improve her ignorant condition, and so the woman with multiple degrees will continue her unenlightened existence.

On this specific situation, Adams speculates that "the fact that interracial relationships are going nowhere makes racism a problem for everyone" (58). Indeed, the speaker's second person point of view, interwoven with situational irony, encapsulates this idea as it forces readers to position themselves in the psyches of the racist and the recipient of racism. The speaker propels feelings of empathy and either compassion or

pity for each respectively. Arguably, it is often the situational irony in Rankine's pieces that allows for feelings of compassion and pity to emerge in the audience. The man at the bar is married to a beautiful Black woman and the therapist specializes in trauma counseling. The woman who did not know Black women could get cancer holds multiple degrees and should certainly know that Black women can get cancer too. Most of the time, Rankine's speaker feels no resolve and provides no resolution to the conflict that has just transpired. Instead, the speaker bottles up the microaggressions one after another. If someone holds multiple degrees and has yet to figure out that all human beings can get cancer, then what could the speaker say to make one color conscious, to see their own ignorance? This lack of resolution along with each piece standing as its own short narrative enhances the feelings of empathy for the speaker because evidently colorblind racists are omnipresent and lurking at every corner of life. They all operate with the same sort of ignorance and they are everywhere: at the bar, at the store, in the parking lot, at work, on a plane. Instead of providing an anger filled resolution, the speaker's silence creates pity for the unenlightened racist. His/her ignorance stems from simple mindedness, stupidity, lack of awareness and so the speaker feels it is futile to correct the racist. The speaker's relationship with the racist is "going nowhere" and there is not much that can be done to prove them wrong.

When the speaker does attempt to address the microaggression, a brick wall of ignorance is hit. In an instance preceding the situation with the woman who holds multiple degrees, the speaker describes speaking to a manager over the phone and letting him know that "you will come by his office to sign the form" (44). Once the speaker arrives in the manager's office and announces "yourself," the manager exclaims, "I didn't

know you were black!" Immediately, he follows with, "I didn't mean to say that." Here, the "you" responds to the microaggression by implying that the manager typically hides his racial bias. All that the speaker retorts with is "aloud," resulting in the manager being caught off guard as he asks, "What?" The speaker then repeats, "You didn't mean to say that aloud." The piece ends by informing the readers that the transaction goes smoothly thereafter. Despite the speaker's effort to address what has just come out of the manager's mouth, the manager does not apologize to the speaker or make any further remarks. Perhaps this will help the manager think twice, but nonetheless, the manager's racial bias will likely continue. This idea seems to account for the speaker's repetitive silence followed by negative space as "you" realize that "nowhere is where you will get from here" (Rankine 45).

Each of these separate microaggressions is followed by loaded negative space in *Citizen*, grounding the audience in the prevalence of racism the speaker faces. Each separate microaggression positions readers in a new location with new characters and with a new form of racism. The negative space causes for a thorough fragmentation of Rankine's situations, which permits readers time to immerse themselves in the "you," provoking their imaginations to reflect upon each one of the pieces. Although Rankine's speaker could easily change from situation to situation, the pronoun "you" remains the same in each and it is the pronoun "you" that the audience remains situated in. If the pronoun amplifies the empathy readers feel for the speaker in each microaggression, then the fragmented pieces collaborate to kindle an entrenched emotional response in the audience.

However, the negative space functions as more than a mere divider between the microaggressions in *Citizen*. It also serves as an embodiment of Rankine's references to Zora Neale Hurston's essay *How It Feels to be Colored Me,* and more specifically the quote, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" (Rankine 25). This quote appears more than once in Rankine's work and singlehandedly evinces the speaker's discomfort caused by the prevalence of microaggressions. The negative space is the sharp white background in question and the speaker's words bear its blindness beyond the physicality of the page. According to Schlosser, "blocks of poetry in *Citizen* … halt abruptly, black text populating only part of the page, as if demanding that the paper's whiteness not be allowed to become mere unremarked background, the natural normal upon which language rests." Moreover, Schlosser conjectures that the negative space bolsters the speaker's silences since "what this [microaggression] does to a body looms in the force of the unsaid, in what need not be said, yet is affectively present – an absence that produces a present-tense of experience that can only reside beyond the words themselves" (8). In addition to Schlosser's argument that the negative space epitomizes "the force of the unsaid" and traumatic affect, Rankine's negative space highlights what must be the passive aggressive in the speaker's silences.

Rankine contemplates Black anger using Serena Williams as an example of being "thrown against a sharp white background" in an essay which sets precedent for the silences following each microaggression. Interestingly, the "you" explicitly imparts feelings of empathy for Williams, and in turn, those feelings of empathy are also elicited for the speaker. The speaker initially explains, "For years you attribute to Serena Williams the kind of resilience appropriate only for those who exist in celluloid. Neither

her father nor her mother nor her sister nor Jehovah her God nor NIKE camp could shield her ultimately from people who felt her black body didn't belong on their court, in their world" (Rankine 26). At the US Open in 2004, Williams lost due to five bad calls by Mariana Alves, "the distinguished tennis chair umpire." Despite the injustice many felt occurred based on Alves's racial prejudice against Williams, the tennis star contains her composure. When a similar incident happens five years later, Williams finally outbursts in rage against the umpire. The media, as well as the Grand Slam Committee, penalize Williams for it. However, as Rankine's speaker asserts, "the body has a memory … all the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through" (30). Therefore, the negative space and the speaker's silences denote a passive aggressiveness that could only boil for so long. Williams, much like everyone else, has a breaking point. Each microaggression separated by negative space serves as an individual present memory in the "you," a filing cabinet of occurrences marked with prejudice, racism, and an overwhelming silence necessary for the world not to label "you" as an "angry black woman" like it did Williams.

Instead of anger, though more than rightfully felt, Rankine's speaker time and time again initiates the audience to feel pity for the racist by creating situations which rely on irony. In theory, if a human being is embarrassing themselves, it is a normal reaction for a bystander to look away as they themselves are feeling the embarrassment just by watching it happen. Following the same logic, the ironic extremity of the racist characters in *Citizen* is embarrassing and allows the "you" a sort of victory over the microaggression in the form of pity.

As the lyric continues into the more politically driven areas, police brutality, and the Black Lives Matter movement, the "you" cannot escape adding more memories to the filing cabinet, except that in the latter portion of Rankine's work, those occurrences commemorate people who are no longer with us. Moving through the scripts from situation videos readers can easily access online, Rankine continues adding human losses to the abstract collection of empathy inducing memories in the "you." If the poet's strategies are affective, then the vast array of microaggressions builds up anger in the speaker by retaining the 2004 Serena Williams composure. With each microaggression and situation video acting as a separate memory of racial bias in the speaker's psyche, Rankine forces her audience to reconsider the moments which lead to racism. In many ways, those moments resemble the microaggressions, except that the "unintentional" racist is the police officer, or the self-proclaimed vigilante. One of the most important quotes from *Citizen*, and one that Rankine explicitly reminds us of in an interview with PBS, encompasses the role of perception in racially inspired violence:

"because white men

can't police their imaginations

black men are dying" (135).

As proven by Rankine's experimental multimodal lyric, human imagination is bendable, expansive, alterable and the mind acts as a filing cabinet of memories that builds and builds until it can no longer resist outpouring the piling layers of the emotional intake, the traumatic affect of being dehumanized by the dominant society. Rankine's repetition of abuse via various semiotic modes activates the reader's imagination to

processing all the occurrences as one's own memories and therefore heightening the intensity of the empathy produced.

Rankine's experimental work *Citizen* revolutionizes the world of poetics as it implements multimodality and second person point of view to heighten the imagination of the audience and evoke feelings of empathy for the "you." With the Williams essay on Black anger setting precedent for the lyric, Rankine implicitly expresses the need for the speaker's composed silence and the loaded negative space following one microaggression to the next. Interestingly, the situational irony and second person point of view contained in the depicted occurrences also evokes pity for the unintentional racist. More importantly, with the progression to police violence, the lyric raises the social question of how to promote color consciousness, and Rankine appears to suggest in *Citizen* that our imagination and our capacity for empathy is the key. As the work switches back and forth between different forms, *Citizen* mimics memory, effectively intertwining the audience with the psyche of the speaker. Although there is yet much to considered concerning *Citizen's* complex use of multimodality, Rankine's experimental work nonetheless contemplates the moments that lead to racism, while providing a coherent sense of what it feels like to be Black in color blind America.

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