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Negotiating Meta-Black Identity as Postcolonial Hybridity in Claudia Rankine's "Coherence in Consequence"

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Abstract

This study adopts a postcolonial framework to examine how Claudia Rankine addresses the complexity of Black identity and cultural diversity in her poetry, with a focus on her acclaimed collection *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Through the lens of postcolonial concepts such as hybridity, the Third Space, and cultural negotiation, the research investigates how Rankine challenges rigid definitions of Blackness. Her portrayal of identity is neither fixed nor singular; rather, it emerges as fluid and multi-dimensional, shaped by intersections of race, gender, migration, and belonging.

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By utilizing hybrid poetic forms, fragmented narratives, and vivid imagery, Rankine exposes the realities of systemic racism, everyday microaggressions, and the lasting effects of colonial histories. Her poetry not only critiques these structures of power but also offers space for rethinking Black identity as something evolving, relational, and resistant to simplification.

This study adds something new by focusing on Claudia Rankine's poem "Coherence in Consequence", a piece that has received little critical attention. By examining this specific poem, the research gives space to a lesser-known part of her work and shows how it contributes to important discussions about identity, race, and belonging in postcolonial literature.

Keywords: Black identity, Claudia Rankine, Coherence in Consequence, Cultural diversity, Hybridity

التفاوض على الهوية السوداء كهجينة ما بعد استعمارية في كتاب "التماسك في النتيجة"

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المستخلص

تتبنى هذه الدراسة إطارا نظريا لما بعد الاستعمار من أجل تحليل كيفية تناول كلوديا رانكين لتعقيد الهوية السوداء والتنوع الثقافي في شعرها، مع التركيز على مجموعتها المعروفة المواطن: غنائية أمريكية. ومن خلال مفاهيم ما بعد الاستعمار مثل التهجين، والفضاء الثالث، والتفاوض الثقافي، تبحث الدراسة في الكيفية التي تتحدى بها رانكين التعريفات الجامدة للسواد فهي لا تقدم الهوية بوصفها ثابتة أو أحادية بل تصورها كهوية سائلة ومتعددة الأبعاد، تتشكل عند تقاطعات العرق والنوع الاجتماعي والهجرة والانتماء.

من خلال استخدام أشكال شعرية هجينة، وسرديات مجزأة، وصور شعرية حادة، تكشف رانكين عن واقع العنصرية البنيوية، والاعتداءات الدقيقة اليومية، وآثار الاستعمار المستمرة. ولا تقتصر قصائدها على نقد هذه البنى السلطوية، بل تفتح المجال كذلك لإعادة التفكير في الهوية السوداء بوصفها شيئاً متحولاً وعلاقائياً، ومقاوماً للاختزال

وتقدم هذه الدراسة إسهاماً جديداً من خلال تركيزها على قصيدة كلوديا رانكين "التماسك في النتيجة"، وهي قصيدة لم تحظ إلا باهتمام نقدي محدود ومن خلال تحليل هذا النص تحديداً، تفسح الدراسة المجال أمام جزء غير مستكشف من إنتاج رانكين، وتوضح كيف يساهم في نقاشات محورية تتعلق بالهوية والعرق والانتماء في الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية السوداء، كلوديا رانكين، التماسك في النتيجة، التعددية الثقافية، التهجين

Introduction

This paper examines the poetry of Claudia Rankine, a prominent figure in contemporary American literature whose work powerfully engages with themes of race, identity, immigration, and the emotional impact of displacement. As a Jamaican-born poet raised in the United States, Rankine's multicultural background significantly informs her writing, allowing her to navigate complex intersections between personal experience and systemic inequality (Adams, 2017). This study specifically focuses on her poem "Coherence in Consequence" from her collection *Plot*, analyzing how it reflects the fragmented identities and traumas experienced by immigrants and refugees, particularly Black individuals.

Claudia Rankine's poetry is renowned for its hybrid form-blending prose, lyric poetry, and visual media-to capture the psychological and societal effects of racism and exclusion. In "Coherence in Consequence", she employs symbolism, particularly the imagery of "black," as well as a fragmented poetic structure to explore how racialized and diasporic subjects experience invisibility, mourning, and alienation (Abramson, 2020). These formal strategies mirror the emotional dissonance and fractured sense of self often experienced by displaced individuals (Bona, 2023).

Despite Rankine's significant contribution to contemporary literature, there remains a research gap in scholarly engagement with how her poem "Coherence in Consequence" specifically addresses the refugee and immigrant experience within the framework of postcolonial theory and diasporic identity. Most existing literature focuses primarily on her book *Citizen: An American Lyric* without fully exploring the postcolonial resonances in *Plot* (Adams, 2017). Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by critically analyzing "Coherence in Consequence" through a postcolonial lens, highlighting how Rankine constructs a space for marginalized voices and interrogates the structural forces that shape belonging, race, and identity in exile.

Theoretical Framework

The term "postcolonial" can be read both as a marker of chronology -post colonization, and as a perspective that considers the enduring impact of colonialism on society and culture. Postcolonial studies examine the material remnants of colonization and its deep material penetration between colonizer and colonized, in many cases leading to the crisis of identity for the latter. Homi K. Bhabha, in his influential publication "The Location of Culture," argues that colonialism not only established domination, but also create a complex cultural encounter that challenged the line between colonizer and colonized identity (Bhabha, 1994). This interaction has resulted in cultural hybridity, in which different cultural mix, into new and fluid identities that are not necessarily defined through colonial dualisms of colonizer/colonized (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2013; Loomba, 2015; Young, 1995).

Bhabha theorizes hybridity in terms of the "Third Space," a metaphorical, cultural space of negotiation and transformation of identity and meaning. In the Third Space, new cultures develop which undermine the fixed categories of identity and question the dominance of hierarchy (Bhabha, 1994). This space for re-coding cultural diversity less as a sign of separation but cultural hybridity and coming into contact. Cultural authority becomes ambiguous, as Bhabha argues, because it is constructed by contesting identities: to access it, one has to partake of a values tradition that is, in this situation, contradicted and undermined, no longer fully in control (Rutherford, 1990; Hall, 1996; Bhabha, 1994).

Bhabha (1994) coined the term “hybridity” to describe how colonized subjects negotiate between native and colonizer identities and how new identities forms represent resistance against and incorporation of colonial culture. This notion of hybridity argues that postcolonial identities are never fixed but are instead constantly in flux, shaped by both historical trauma and ongoing cultural negotiation. Colonial histories, therefore, are not just about the past; they continue to inform the lived experiences of individuals and communities, influencing modern racial and cultural identities and shaping power dynamics in contemporary societies (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994).

Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, challenges the notion of fixed racial and national identities by introducing the concept of the Black Atlantic. He argues that Black identity is not confined to a single nation or culture but is shaped by transnational movements, particularly through the history of slavery and migration. This perspective aligns with Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity, as the Black Atlantic represents a fluid space where African, European, and American cultures merge, creating new, dynamic identities that resist essentialist notions of race and belonging. (Gilroy, 1993).

In *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, George Yancy (2008) critically examines the enduring impact of systemic oppression on Black individuals, focusing particularly on how it operates through the intersections of race, class, and gender. He introduces the concept of the "metaphysics of whiteness" to explain how white norms, values, and identities are embedded within societal structures, rendering Black bodies marginalized and devalued. This dominance is not only expressed through overt racism but also manifests subtly in everyday interactions, cultural assumptions, and institutional policies. According to Yancy, this system produces existential challenges-such as alienation, invisibility, and ontological exclusion-while simultaneously sustaining sociopolitical inequalities in education, employment, and the legal system.

As Yancy (2008) states: "The white gaze renders the Black body as a site of danger, hypervisibility, and invisibility. It sustains a metaphysics of whiteness that continues to normalize and universalize white bodies as the normative standard while situating Black bodies as ontological absences" (p. 3).

Yancy's analysis resonates with Homi Bhabha's critique of "cultural difference," a concept that refers to how dominant groups define other cultures as inferior or subordinate. Bhabha argues that this process of "othering" creates binary oppositions such as civilized/uncivilized or superior/inferior that sustain the power of the dominant culture (Bhabha, 1994). These binaries ensure that the marginalized remain confined to a position of inferiority, reinforcing systemic oppression (Loomba, 2015; Fanon, 2008).

Fred Moten, in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, examines how performance, music, and literature play a central role in shaping Black identity. He contends that Black expressive culture—particularly jazz, poetry, and visual art—produces spaces of resistance and reinvention that challenge dominant cultural narratives (Moten, 2003, pp. 96-97). His analysis reinforces the notion that cultural hybridity is not merely a theoretical abstraction but a lived and embodied reality, especially as it emerges through artistic expression. Moten's work offers a valuable framework for understanding the innovative poetics of contemporary writers such as Claudia Rankine, whose use of hybrid forms and fragmented narratives reflects the complexities of racial and cultural identity.

When the study specializes in denomination "black people" within same framework, the researcher should underscore the concept of "Meta black".

The term "meta-" comes from the Greek "μέτα", which means "beyond" or "transcending." In the context of meta-blackness, it suggests a form of self-awareness or reflection on black identity itself, examining not only blackness but also how blackness has been historically and culturally framed (Drabinski, 2017).

"Meta-black" refers to the self-reflexive, often critical examination of black identity, focusing on how blackness is represented, constructed, and understood in various societal contexts. It is not simply about the portrayal of black identity but about critiquing how blackness is shaped by historical, political, and cultural forces. This concept invites a more complex understanding of blackness as it moves beyond traditional or simplistic depictions (Reed, 2014).

Meta-Black identity refers to a nuanced, layered understanding of Blackness, one that transcends essentialist views and engages with the complexities of intersectionality, multiplicity, and lived

experiences. It critiques stereotypes and explores how Black identity is negotiated within oppressive social structures and historical contexts (Samaradiwakera -Wijesundara, 2022).

Meta-blackness resonates strongly with postcolonial theory due to their shared focus on challenging fixed, dominant cultural narratives. Both frameworks critique the complex construction of identity under the influence of colonialism and imperialism.

Poetry has been a crucial form of expression of postcolonial experiences; Providing poets a unique opportunity to explore themes of resistance and empowerment, as well as the nuances of cultural identity, by putting a personal face to type. Poets, using rich imagery and innovative language, work to disrupt prevailing narratives and that deal with displacement, hybrid identity and the reclamation of voice. In this multidimensional relationship postcolonial studies poetry is apparent in a number of writings that demonstrate the poetic's power resistance to colonial legacies (Uddin et al., 2024).

Claudia Rankine's poetry confirms these theoretical constructs and grapples with identity issues of race and gender in the postcolonial context. Her works embody the struggle of cultural belonging and dis-belonging, reflecting the hybridity and Third Space dynamics as articulated by Bhabha (1994). Moreover, Rankine's use of lyric hybridity deepens this engagement by negotiating racial trauma and identity fragmentation (Chan, 2018). The cultural influences, and systemic racism that Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* intercepted, this thesis considers how Rankine's deployment of the hybridity of language, form, and image allows her to articulate meta-Black identity, a mode of being that can only occur in the space opened up by the dynamics of cultural divergency and difference (Rankine, 2014).

In conclusion, meta black identity encapsulates the multifaceted experiences and backgrounds within the black community, shaped by personal and cultural factors. This complexity is essential for fostering understanding and equality in contemporary discussions about race and identity.

Methodology

This thesis draws on postcolonial theory to examine how Claudia Rankine engages with the complexities of racial identity in contemporary society. Central to the analysis are Homi Bhabha's concepts of Third Space and hybridity, which provide a theoretical lens through which to understand how identities are negotiated in the spaces between dominant and marginalized cultures. The Third Space, as Bhabha (1994) explains, is not a fixed position but a site of cultural negotiation, where meanings and identities are reconfigured. Similarly, hybridity challenges rigid binaries and highlights how identities are shaped through ambivalence, contradiction, and cultural interaction.

In addition to postcolonial concepts, the thesis also incorporates the idea of meta-Black identity, which offers a framework for understanding how Blackness is constructed not as a singular or fixed identity, but as a layered and reflective experience. Scholars such as Yancy (2008) and Moten (2003) emphasize that meta-Black identity involves both a critical awareness of how Blackness is shaped by systemic forces and an imaginative reworking of what it means to be Black in different historical and cultural contexts.

The study adopts a qualitative methodology, relying on both primary and secondary sources. Primary materials include Rankine's poetry-especially *Citizen: An American Lyric*-as well as her public interviews and recorded performances. Secondary sources include scholarly monographs, journal articles, and critical reviews. The research uses textual and thematic analysis to examine how Rankine's use of fragmented form, evocative imagery, and intertextual references contributes to the construction of liminal subject positions-identities that exist in-between fixed categories of race and culture.

By situating Rankine's work within this theoretical and analytical framework, the thesis seeks to explore how her poetry resists dominant racial narratives and opens up spaces for more fluid, hybrid, and dynamic expressions of Black identity.

Discussion

Imagine them in black,

the morning heat losing within this day that floats.

And always there is the being, and the not-seeing on their way to...

(Rankine, 2001, p45).

The phrase "imagine them in black" conjures an image of mourning, sorrow or becoming unseen. Blackness could mean loss, death, and invisibility for an immigrant or refugee, who is often invisible and marginal in public discourse (Rankine, 2001). While, the reference to "morning heat losing within this day that floats" implies a disorienting experience of time, as immigrants and refugees may experience being unmoored or decoupled from the linearity of time. This in-betweenness is very much like Homi Bhabha's (1994) "third space", where individuals are in the middle of cultures, nations and identities, never fully part of or represented in either.

"And always there is the being, and the not-seeing on their way to-". In this line

the act of "being" implies existence and resilience, while "not-seeing" conveys invisibility or a lack of recognition. Refugees and immigrants often navigate such dualities-they are present physically yet frequently overlooked or misunderstood socially and politically. This tension underscores the emotional and psychological toll of displacement, aligning with Rankine's broader commentary on systemic erasure of marginalized identities (Rankine, 2001). The "not-seeing" also critiques systemic failures to address the humanity of refugees, reducing them to political or numerical categories rather than recognizing their lived experiences. Rankine's work, much like that of Warsan Shire, emphasizes empathy and challenges readers to confront these erasures, calling for a reimagining of belonging and visibility.

The unfinished "on their way to-" introduces uncertainty, paralleling the precariousness of refugee journeys, both literal and metaphorical (Garcia Canclini, 2011). Throughout this phrase Rankine invites readers to consider the open-ended and often precarious journeys of these individuals, while critiquing the lack of visibility and support they receive.

The days they approach and their sharpest aches will wrap experience until knowledge is translucent, the frost on which they find themselves slipping. [...] for never was it independent from who they are. who will be (Rankine, 2001, p. 45).

This line that reflects the fluidity and resilience of identity, "The days they approach and their sharpest aches will wrap experience until knowledge is translucent." suggests that the passage of time and the pain endured transform personal experience into a deeper understanding, albeit one that remains "translucent" rather than fully clear. Such language emphasizes the fragmented and evolving nature of identity, especially for those navigating displacement.

Anderson (2023) argues that Rankine's work portrays identity as shaped by both historical trauma and contemporary social struggles. This is particularly evident in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, where Rankine presents fragmented narratives and microaggressions that reveal the enduring impact of racial injustice on personal identity.

The imagery of "slipping" and "loose mindless grip of their forms" evokes the instability and precariousness of immigration. These lines capture the experience of being caught between two worlds—neither fully belonging to one's homeland nor feeling secure in a new host country. The "frost" metaphorically suggests both the cold reception faced by immigrants and the challenges of adapting to an unfamiliar environment (Smith, 2021).

Moreover, the line "the frost on which they find themselves slipping" underscores the hostile environments refugees must endure. This includes not only the physical dangers of their journeys but also the unwelcoming attitudes of host nations. As Anderson (2023) notes, Rankine frequently uses environmental metaphors to underscore systemic barriers faced by marginalized communities.

The final stanza from Rankine's "Coherence in Consequence" powerfully engages with themes of identity, immigration, belonging, and the refugee experience. Through its poetic structure, the stanza questions rigid perceptions of "otherness" and instead appeals to a sense of shared humanity that transcends societal divides.

The phrase "knowing the other as the same" serves as a direct critique of the dehumanization often experienced by immigrants and refugees. By emphasizing shared human qualities, Rankine confronts dominant narratives that depict refugees as alien or threatening. This perspective supports an ethical responsibility to recognize the refugee not merely as "other," but as part of a global human community (Ruiter, 2024).

Finally, the idea of "knowing the other as the same" envisions a world in which borders-both physical and ideological-no longer determine one's worth or humanity. This call for inclusivity challenges exclusionary practices that strip immigrants and refugees of a sense of home or belonging. As Said (1978) argues, the text invites readers to imagine a collective identity that embraces, rather than alienates, those who have been displaced.

Rankine foregrounds the idea that identity is often constructed through difference-"the other" being defined in contrast to "the same." Here, Rankine suggests that if humanity could recognize shared experiences and emotions, symbolized by "the same pulsing compassion," such recognition would dismantle orthodox beliefs about identity rooted in exclusion and hierarchies. The "orthodox heart," symbolizing rigid societal norms and entrenched biases, would metaphorically "break," suggesting that compassion and empathy have the power to dissolve barriers. This resonates with Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which posits that identities are fluid and constructed through cultural negotiation (Bhabha, 1994).

Hybridity in "Coherence in consequence"

Claudia Rankine's poem evokes a profound exploration of hybridity, a concept that encompasses the blending of identities, experiences, and emotions. The line "And always there is the being, and the not-seeing on their way to-" reflects hybridity by showing the tension between visibility and invisibility. "Being" suggests presence and identity, while "not-seeing" implies erasure or neglect. The speaker captures a hybrid state where people exist but are not fully recognized. According to Bhabha (1994), identity is formed in the "in-between" space, where contradiction and ambiguity shape how one is seen and known. This line reveals how racialized individuals experience life both as subjects and as invisible presences in society.

In the line "Were we ever to arrive at knowing the other as the same pulsing compassion would break the most orthodox heart" reflects hybridity by breaking down the binary between self and other. When Rankine writes "knowing the other as the same," she imagines a space where people no longer see each other as completely different. Instead, they recognize shared human feelings. This idea breaks the "orthodox heart," which stands for traditional ways of thinking that keep identities separate and fixed. According to Bhabha (1994), hybridity creates a third space, where

different identities can meet and form new, shared meanings. In this space, true understanding and "pulsing compassion" can grow because people no longer see each other as completely separate. They recognize shared humanity within difference (Sharma, 2016).

Third space in "Coherence in consequence"

Claudia Rankin's evocative poem explores the intricate dynamics of human connection and the complexities that arise within construct the concept of third space, as articulated by Homi Bhabha, refers to a hybrid space where cultural identities can intersect and interact, creating new meanings (Bhabha, 1994). Claudia Rankine's poem "Coherence in Consequence," this idea manifests through the exploration between visibility and erasure, self and other, memory and present. Through fragmented imagery and fluid identities of race, identity, and societal expectations, allowing for a nuanced dialogue between personal experience and collective memory. Rankine constructs a liminal zone where characters "meet" beneath the surface, resisting fixed definitions (Bhabha,1994). This third space allows for new modes of being and belonging, shaped not by exclusion or binary logic, but by shared pain, empathy, and transformation.

The line "And always there is the being, and the not-seeing on their way to " reflects the Third Space as a place of ongoing contradiction and transition. "The being" represents the presence or existence of the subject, while "the not-seeing" suggests social erasure or exclusion. The phrase "on their way to" implies movement toward something undefined, emphasizing that identity is never complete or settled. According to Bhabha (1994), the Third Space is not a fixed cultural position but a shifting in-between zone where identity is constantly negotiated. In this space, individuals are not fully seen nor fully invisible.

Meta- black identity in Claudia Rankine's work

Meta-Black identity refers to a nuanced, layered understanding of Blackness, one that transcends essentialist views and engages with the complexities of intersectionality, multiplicity, and lived experiences (Samaradiwakera -Wijesundara, 2022).

Claudia Rankine's 2014 book of poetry, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, invokes the visual, the gaze, and the distorting lens of stereotype, Rankine focuses on the phenomenological, embodied trauma that existing in these breaks exacts. *Citizen*, in a sense, Rankine exposes the embodied tolls of living as black in America. Rankine also uses techniques that can be term meta- black, engaging with popular, mediated representations and stereotypes of blackness, but she does so in order to remind her reader of the material consequences to which these simulations of blackness contribute. *Citizen* in many ways enacts a darker vision of what living as black in America means in terms of physical and psychological effects, the transmedial, meta-black aesthetic of her work models (Hayman, 2017).

In the "Coherence in Consequence", the notion of meta-Black identity within the lines "And always there is the being, and the not-seeing on their way to-" reflects the concept of meta-Black. The phrase "being, and the not-seeing" captures the paradoxical existence of Black individuals in society: they are hyper-visible due to racial profiling yet invisible in terms of full recognition of their humanity. This duality resonates with the concept of meta-Black identity, which challenges fixed notions of Blackness, emphasizing its fluidity and multiplicity (Bhabha, 1994).

"Were we ever to arrive at knowing the other as the same pulsing compassion would break the most orthodox heart." Rankine imagines a world where people no longer see Black individuals as different or separate, but as fully human-equal in emotion, value, and life. She uses the word "same" to suggest that underneath skin color or identity labels, all share the same human heart.

The phrase "pulsing compassion" means deep, living empathy. If people truly felt this kind of connection, it would break the "orthodox heart"-a symbol of old, rigid, and often racist beliefs. This reflects meta-Black identity because it challenges how Blackness is traditionally viewed, as "other." Rankine calls for a new way of seeing, one that goes beyond labels and recognizes shared humanity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Claudia Rankine's poem "Coherence in Consequence" intricately explores the complexities of meta-Black identity, offering a profound meditation on how Black individuals navigate a world that both hyper-visibility and simultaneously erases them. Through fragmented

form, unfinished lines, and layered imagery, Rankine captures the internal conflict between being seen and being understood, a hallmark of the meta-Black experience. Her poetic language dissects the intersectionality of race, identity, and belonging, positioning the speaker in a liminal space shaped by social exclusion and historical trauma.

This poem not only reflects Rankine's broader project of challenging dominant racial narratives but also actively constructs a third space a hybrid zone where new meanings of Black identity can emerge. By resisting fixed definitions and instead foregrounding multiplicity and ambiguity, Rankine invites readers into a participatory reflection on the formation of selfhood under systemic constraint. Thus, the poem moves beyond artistic expression to function as a critical site of resistance, contributing meaningfully to postcolonial and contemporary racial discourse.

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