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# “Poetic Justice”: the Corpus, from Poetry to Proof (and back again)

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## “Poetic Justice”: the Corpus, from Poetry to Proof (and back again)

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The “corpus” is an inherently unstable notion; contained in the notion is the subjectivity of the researcher, or other agent acting upon, with, or against the object that he or she (or it) has designated as such, and which he or she must defend. Defining a corpus, from the point of view of researchers, implies justifying its existence; and in some cases, writers and artists also become caught up in a similar rhetoric of justification of their own object of study, though perhaps less explicit, in order to counter potential incomprehension or accusations. We might think, for example of the avant-gardes, and the manifesto used to testify to the desire to defend against a certain fragility that works may possess due to their form, status or position in the margins of an artistic or literary space. This fragility may also stem from the subject evoked (which may be seen as taboo, provocative or highly affirmative), the angle taken, or a lack of conforming to normative expectations, as when connected to a particular social issue related to race, class or gender. This is the case of Claudia Rankine in her most recent book *Just Us* (Rankine, 2020), which provides an example of the way a rhetoric of justification can make its way into a poetic apparatus<sup>1</sup> (Hanna, 2009, p. 14-17).

While in many circles, the value of her work is not challenged, on the contrary, it is critically acclaimed, Rankine anticipates, and to some extent also writes for, or perhaps against, those who might reply that there is no need for a conversation on race today, as demonstrated, for example, by the photo featured on page 140 of *Just Us*, in which we see a white man holding a sign that reads “I am not ashamed/ afraid to be white.” At the same time that Rankine seeks to justify through the construction of what appears to be a self-sufficient corpus, pulled from various kinds of source material, *Just Us* ultimately contests the need for this corpus, or in any case the need for a delineated object that we might take as a corpus, calling instead for the inclusion of readers, and future readers, as part of the book-object and ultimately of our object of study. She calls into question traditional modes of textual analysis to instead put forth the idea that her work is situated within a living, evolving space, which does not allow us to delimit a clear corpus.

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<sup>1</sup> Term borrowed from Christophe Hanna’s *dispositifs poétiques* which highlights its “interactional heterogeneity” and its specific “operativity.”

*Just Us*, which bears the subtitle “An American Conversation” presents itself as a collection of transcriptions of conversations about race in America, which are complemented by insight from various “professionals” or “experts” (psychologists, sociologists, lawyers, historians) in an attempt to better understand, from an anthropological standpoint that becomes Rankine’s, what happens when we talk about race and why we say what we say. A review published in *The New Yorker* describes Rankine’s work as a

“collage of poetry, criticism, and first-person prose; it remixes historical documents, social-media posts, and academic studies. There’s the sense of a subject overflowing every genre summoned to contain it. There’s also a contemporary feeling, of going about one’s day—switching on the news, talking to a friend, reading an essay” (Waldman, 2020).

Rankine constructed the book around conversations, which she often initiated, and which took place in a variety of situations. Her idea was to initiate conversations and to transcribe them, before then considering who owns the implied facts, fact checking them, correcting them, and even sending the transcribed or glossed conversations back to the person with whom she had conversed to ask if they thought they were represented correctly, if what was said was meant, and if there was anything to add about their intentions, content which is then included in the book. This process in itself illustrates the difficulty of delimiting her object of study, as we, readers, observe the back-and-forth movement from an authorial impulse – Rankine’s own voice – to documents that justify it, but do not appear to be entirely satisfactory. Her point of view integrates the doubt with which she presumes she may be read, and therefore seeks ever more to validate itself by way of outside sources – more “legitimate” voices – creating what function a bit like hyperlinks, symbolized by the red dots found in the margins throughout the book. On the pages on the right-hand side, we find Rankine’s voice and excerpts of the conversations, and on the left-hand side, further documented explanations to complement them.

While we could affirm that no work is self-sufficient, Rankine takes advantage of this instability particularly well, anticipating potential attempts to invalidate her discourse, by subtly placing counter-arguments or justifications on the left-hand side in the form of “documents.” She therein effectively avoids the paradigm of “true and false” that she might have taken on in her poetic voice, and circumvents any need for readers to “believe” her.

# 1. I am not a poet. This is not my voice.

*Just Us* appears to exemplify the period of post-creativity and the conceptual trends characterized by poetic gestures in which the lyrical voice “retreats” (Aji, 2019) in a kind of dissolution of the figure, or the body, of the author, the poet or the artist, somewhat delegitimated today, in favor of the document, the written: proof. This process has been described by H  l  ne Aji as a distance taken from the burden of authorship and expression (more or less lyrical, poetic or literary) toward the document, the archive, and is found in what Marie-Jeanne Zenetti has called *factographies*, in a kind of rejection of the self-contained, expressive, auratic object (Zenetti, 2014). As Zenetti, Christophe Hanna, Franck Leibovici, Laurent Demanze and others have pointed out, we have witnessed a withdrawal of the “author” as we know him or her in favor of a pure decision-making role, where expression is replaced by intention, framing, and conceptualizing practices. As Leibovici explains with respect to Vanessa Place’s work built around a “forensic” gesture, we observe the displacement-replacement of raw material from the field to the laboratory, for it to then be taken as a moment in a larger sequence, containing potentialities yet to be exploited, and signs to be picked up on<sup>2</sup> (Leibovici, 2020, p. 135-143).

For Place, it is a matter of shedding light on violence and countering the violence involved in the rendering inaccessible of these documents hidden away in archives and perhaps to be eventually destroyed. Similarly, in Rankine’s work, the intention is explicit, and the result is directed, in accordance with the tradition of the avant-gardes, toward two audiences: those who understand and may become accomplice to the work; and those who it seeks to provoke. In this respect, the nature of the work produced, made of “unoriginal” documents calls our attention above all to the process of “mediation,” which might serve to underscore or undermine the mediation already at hand within the documents. These types of endeavors highlight the “operativity” given to “ordinary writing” (Leibovici, 2020) and allow works such as *Just Us* to constitute an efficient response to the post-truth era, in particular to the Trump era in the United States, where it is more and more difficult to distinguish true and false, where statements can be easily debunked and denied on social media, and figures who once held a certain authority can be cancelled. On page 144 of *Just Us*, we find, for example, a sign that reads “All lies matter,” an ironic twist on the slogan “All lives matter,” which is a critical response to the affirmation “Black lives matter.”

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<sup>2</sup> Vanessa Place is perhaps a more radical example of this. Her “forensic poetics,” to adopt Leibovici’s term involves publishing in book form a series of legal documents taken from sexual assault cases (in the trilogy *Tragodia: Statement of the Case; Statement of Facts; Arguments*) or constructing an electronic archive of the last words spoken by executed inmates in Texas.

In this context, the word of one, particularly of a Black woman, becomes significantly unreliable and runs the risk of being made invisible, as Rankine demonstrates in her commentary of Paul Graham’s photograph entitled “Woman with outstretched arms,” in which she writes “there is a black woman at the center of things who lives amidst the whiteness” (Rankine, 2020, p. 86-87). “We must travel through a cloudy veil to arrive at a human object. [...] The filter covers our pupils and acts as a kind of cataract even as our black circular openings open to the light” (p. 87). This point of view intersects with the issue of gender and the voice of women, when she comments, for example, on the appointment of justice Kavanaugh (Rankine, 2020, p. 262-263) and dedicates a chapter to blond hair and feminine beauty (p. 267-305).

The book reveals an impression of a voice that is doubly fragilized, given her identity as a Black woman, but it also seems that the poetic process reflected in *Just Us* testifies to an awareness of the limited scope of poetry as a genre capable of reaching broad audiences. To this effect, she even presents us with a quote from Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia,” which we can read ironically, given its placement within Rankine’s book: “Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry – Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. It could not produce a poet” (Rankine, 2020, p. 117). Rankine herself appears to want to avoid the posture, to adopt Jérôme Meizoz’s term, of the “poet,” in perhaps a feigned stance. Though she is the author of *Don’t Let me Be Lonely* (2004) and *Citizen* (2014), which both bear the subtitle “An American Lyric,” and of the book of poems *The End of the Alphabet* (2015), when asked if her new book is poetry, she replies “No. There is some poetry in it,” but it’s a volume of essays.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the book, in its posture, seems to want to turn a page from the lyrical, at least temporarily. She seems to deny or ignore a conception of poetry as the creation of a poetic apparatus, which might not be understood, or might reduce the scope of her work. In a material manifestation of this posture, there are several moments in the book when words (in black ink) are literally whited out, such as on pages 213-215 where what remains resembles a visual poem, in which we can interpret the absence of words to symbolize the incapacity to speak or to be heard.

We could hypothesize that where Rankine, through past experiences, has felt her own words are insufficient, or have been subject to doubt by others, and where Poetry does not at first do “justice,” given the changes in the society in which we live, she turns to 1) conversation, or more generally, to the Other, an approach that multiplies the voices that may be heard by readers, reflected in particular on the

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning that at the time of publication of *Just Us*, Rankine was a Professor at Yale University, which she mentions on several occasions in the book, a position that does not necessarily help validate her voice, at least in *Just Us*, but which seems to be the facet of her profile that brings the most credibility to her “anthropological work” involved in the creation of *Just Us*.

pages on the right hand side of the book; and to 2) a process of *justification* involving the inclusion of different media, including documents that contain the word of authority on the subject. But, as we will show, the work ultimately depends on readers, upon whom she calls, less through an explicit call to action than through a renewed confidence in poetry, or language in general, which emerges legitimated or having regained political potential. The posture of the non-poet is just that, a posture adopted within the framework of the book, but which occasionally lets its guard down. In fact, Rankine opens the book with a poem, and ends it with a call to faith in language, a framing technique that serves to lead us from poetry to proof, and back to poetry, as we will now demonstrate, in looking at these two moments.

## 2. What if – I am a poet?

While throughout most of *Just Us*, we observe a clear refusal of the right to a “poetic voice,” the book in fact opens with a poem in six parts entitled “what if” with each part inscribed on the left side of the book. At only one other occasion does the work integrate what resembles a poetic form: in the section entitled “sound and fury” on pages 179 and 181 (almost exactly in the middle of the book). In the second part of the six-part poem, reproduced below, we find the themes of resignation, loneliness (echoing with the title of another of Rankine’s book *Don’t let me be lonely*) and the incapacity to fully incarnate a voice:

ii.

There is a resignation in my voice when I say I feel  
myself slowing down, gauging like a machine  
the levels of my response. I remain within  
so sore I think there is no other way than release—

so I ask questions like I know how  
in the loneliness of my questioning.  
What’s still is true; there isn’t even a tremor  
when one is this historied out.

I could build a container to carry this being,  
a container to hold all, though we were never  
about completeness; we were never to be whole.

I stand in your considered thoughts also broken,  
also unknown, extending  
one sentence – here, I am here.  
As I’ve known you, as I’ll never know you.

I am here. Whatever is  
being expressed, what if,  
I am here awaiting, waiting for you.

in the what if, in the questions,  
in the conditionals,  
in the imperatives—what if (Rankine, 2020, p. 7).

It is a matter, in fact, of highlighting the difficulty of being considered “whole” as a Black woman in America today: “though we were never about completeness; we were never to be whole.” Nonetheless, the use of the first-person singular “I” is omnipresent, attempting to gain listeners, as we read in the last stanza, with the affirmative situatedness contained in the expression “I am here.”

The voice-body of the poetic “I” is presented as broken: “I stand in your considered thoughts also broken”; yet, it does not conclude on that note. Rather, the “I” presents itself as “unknown, extending, one sentence – here, I am here,” an outward reaching sentence that calls for response: “I am here. Whatever is being expressed, what if, I am here awaiting, waiting for you. In the what if, in the questions, in the conditionals, in the imperatives – what if.”

The “I” that speaks here is less the “I” of Professor Claudia Rankine, writing what she calls “essays,” and not yet the “I” in the conversations *Just Us* brings us to witness in the parts of the book that follow. It is the lyrical “I” she leaves behind after the opening poem, though only temporarily, the one she leaves us to seek out, by meeting her half-way, by taking part in the conversation, “in the conditionals,” “in the imperatives,” all the while expressing doubt, through the repetition of “what if,” as to our capacity to actualize the potential the poem contains.

In the sixth and last part of the poem, this desire for response is more explicitly expressed together with a call to faith in words:

vi.

What if what I want from you is new, newly made  
a new sentence in response to all my questions,

a swerve in our relation and the words that carry us,  
the care that carries. I am here, without the shrug,  
attempting to understand how what I want  
and what I want from you run parallel—

justice and the openings for just us (p. 11)

In this last part of the poem, the relational is already there, in the intersubjectivity of language, in “the words that carry us,” in “our relation” and in the last line, in the

association between “justice” the ultimate overarching goal or motivation for Rankine’s writing endeavor, no matter the form, and “just us.” Poetry or literature here asks us for a leap of faith in the pronoun “us,” an “us” yet to be defined, a register which is quickly abandoned by the “justification” process already described and that we delve into just after the end of the poem when Rankine opens the following section “liminal spaces 1” with a journalistic tone: “In the early days of the run-up to the 2016 election, I was just beginning to prepare a class on whiteness to teach at Yale University” (Rankine, 2020, p. 15).

### 3. We are the corpus

At the end of the book, Rankine presents us with a conversation about the book itself, held with a friend who had just finished reading the final pages of it. In this conversation, which echoes the opening poem, Rankine defends the power of literature, and of the study of it, and calls for an embodied approach to it. We read, for example,

A friend finished reading the final pages of *Just Us* and said flatly, there’s no strategy here. No? I asked. [...] How to tell her, response is my strategy. Endless responses and study and adjustments and comprises become a life. [...] The call for a strategy is a strategy, and I both respect and understand the necessity of that call [...] The murkiness as we exist alongside each other calls us forward. I don’t want to forget that I am here; at any given moment we are, each of us, next to any other capable of both the best and the worst our democracy has to offer (Rankine, 2020, p. 334).

Further on in this concluding conversation, we find a call to a kind of intimacy between individuals:

Our lives could enact a love of close readings of who we each are, the love of a newly formed, newly conceived ‘one’ made up of obscure but sensed and unnamed publics in a yet unimagined future. What I know is that an inchoate desire for a future other than the one that seems to be forming our days brings me to a seat around any table to lean forward, to hear, to respond, to await response from any other. Tell me something, one thing, the thing, tell me that thing (Rankine, 2020, p. 335).

In highlighting the need for close readings of ourselves, including of our conversations (our language, our texts) and our responses to them, *Just Us* offers up a new enlarged corpus, as well as a newfound faith in words. The mechanisms that give *Just Us* an apparent self-sufficiency, by building its own corpus – made of conversations, and the delegation to other forms or documents (proof) in addition to the author’s voice – in fact serve to allow for a return to poetry or “literature”



which emerges as re-legitimized, in a kind of messianic return that endows it with the capacity to be political again. Rankine asks her friend, as she asks us, to live with the doubt, with the risk that words will fail, but also to have faith, to remain in the uncomfortable position that is not that of an activist affirming with certainty, but that of the “what if.” It is, furthermore, interesting to note that this final chapter brings us outside the book itself. In looking at her own gesture, as we are doing in this article, which she calls “endless responses and study and adjustments” conducted in “murkiness as we exist alongside each other” (Rankine, 2020, p. 334), Rankine’s work imposes a powerful distance that gives weight to the book object and its circulation, which becomes part of the reading experience. Readers are compelled to perceive the intersubjectivity of all language, which turns the corpus, perhaps the one worth studying here, less into the work itself than into its relationality, its capacity to turn readers (or receptors) into agents of change. The book effectively takes readers through a dialectical unlearning/re-learning process that mirrors what John Roberts has called “skilling – deskilling – reskilling,” resulting in the reinsertion of art into social praxis (Roberts, 2007).



While we might be tempted to see the writing practices we observe in Rankine (as well as in Place, Kenneth Goldsmith, Veronica Gerber or Vivian Abensushan, for example) as an abandonment of literature as we know it, the conceptual and/or documentational turn can also imply a return to the poetic activity of language, reinvested with relational potential, a kind of re-politization of language or poetry, after having been legitimated by anthropological, proof-providing practices that visibly anchor language to the world through the “ordinary” document. The result is a kind of contestation of the text as a closed or delimited entity, and even of the author as an agent acting of his or her own free will, expressing, or revealing singularity. Instead, the collective – a new “us” – is brought to the forefront within the poetic voice rendered more material, in the sense of the “materialist turn” that aims to account for concrete enunciative situations and the interconnectivity of embodied actors<sup>4</sup>. We arrive at the idea explained by Florent Coste according to which “literature should be seen as more of a process, a moving part in a complex network of intentions, actions and practices that it remodels from within” (Coste, 2011, p. 73-88). Indeed, “the author and the readers play their part in this process alongside a whole orchestra of other, often unexpected actors” (Coste, 2011, p. 73-88).

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<sup>4</sup> See Karen Barad’s “agential realism.”

The process we observe in *Just Us* calls us to re-consider the corpus as delimitable, as the scope of the work goes beyond the page to include the conversations Rankine transcribes and complements, the resources she provides us with, and finally readers’ own bodies and their interactions, yet to come, with the material at hand. The corpus indeed morphs into an open-ended “*corps à corps*” in movement. This consideration of literature in society does not nonetheless lead us to abandon “close reading” as Rankine’s book works in a kind of back-and-forth movement. It is through textual analysis that we find the call for a critical gaze that also turns readers into social agents, potential agents of change and then even, in her words, to a “love of close readings of who we each are” (Rankine, 2020, p. 335). While the bulk of the book constitutes a shift from an attempt at justice through the literary to a reliance on proof, poetry in the end emerges with better chances thanks to the creation of this corpus of new source material for a variety of future uses. Readers are given the agency to become anthropologists, researchers of their own, like Rankine, but can also return to poetry, through the space opened for renewed dialogue that her poetic expression “hoped” for in the very first pages. We therefore go from poetry to proof, and back again.

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## PLAN

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- 1. I am not a poet. This is not my voice.
- 2. What if – I am a poet?
- 3. We are the corpus

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[Voir ses autres contributions](#)

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