Prescriptive Reading and the Resistances of Theory (Or, Beyond Paradox)

Chapter Six of On Paradox: The Claims of Theory

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How, then, to move beyond paradox? To rein in its conceptual dominance, containing its explanatory reach? What would it mean to adopt an intellectual approach that sees paradox as something to work through, build upon, and (even provisionally) relinquish? In other words, how to overcome the resistances of theory?

Prescription is this final chapter’s response to those questions. But how to undertake prescription without falling victim to everything theory proleptically cautions against? One could certainly sum up theory as a set of defense mechanisms warding off prescription and the prescriptive. Just as that adjective typically encodes some charge of didacticism, instrumentalism, coercion, authoritarianism, or related such epithet, some of the central things theorists have waged warfare upon are prescriptive thought, norms, arguments, and goals—whether by critiquing, undermining, or otherwise divulging the contradictions seen to haunt the authority a prescription implicitly marshals.¹ This cultivated aversion to prescription (and everything that word telegraphs) has been elemental to both the contrarianism and the antinomianism of the logic of paradox. Yet for exactly such reasons can a prescriptive theory help us disaggregate that logic, demonstrating why different species of paradox necessitate radically different answers.
In this chapter, I’ll therefore make a case for how a prescriptive theory can help us abandon a number of theory’s engrained resistances—resistances this book has attributed to the epistemology of paradox. While I’ll defend prescription as independently valuable, it will also require us to rethink the status of things like evaluation and criteria within theory. As an applied practice, I’ll likewise describe prescription as directed at aims like building, cultivation, fashioning, and integration—aims simultaneously geared to recover a certain phenomenal integrity of experience. Tailored to the challenges at hand, this prescriptive orientation is further situationalist and hence reliant on an ecumenical set of tools and tactics that, as such, promise to expand our existing, familiar repertoire as theorists. I’ll develop these and many other facets of prescription throughout this chapter.

These horizons of the prescriptive clearly return us to debates about the province of theory—debates arguably as old as philosophy itself. This chapter’s appeal will thus likely recall now-classic efforts to chasten the traditions of theory for extinguishing the normative, reasoned, and analytic—reproofs launched mainly from outside of theory’s bunkers. But at once, what follows shares many sympathies with recent theoretical self-appraisals increasingly gathered under the banner of the postcritical, echoing concerns among others about the negativity and defeatism informing many popular metrics. Yet while echoing those and other complaints, I’ll also explain prescription as an effort to assess and thereby correct key deficiencies within many of those emergent alternatives. It therefore registers the sense that theory still confronts an impasse—albeit a productive, necessary one.

This chapter is simultaneously invested in how prescription might renovate our hermeneutic habits—or the conventions governing how we read literary-theoretical texts and sociopolitical contexts alike. I’ll therefore recruit a literary work as an arena for putting
prescription to the test. I am not the first to find in Claudia Rankine’s influential 2014 *Citizen: An American Lyric* a postcritical agenda, or to approach it as a type of plebiscite on the state of the profession. But I’ll also take *Citizen* as a meditation on the limits of the optics of paradox. *Citizen* has been a lightning rod precisely because it ferrets out deep contradictions subtending the contemporary guises of racism in America, given its documentary-like rendition of the lethal effects of structural oppression. However, it simultaneously confronts the perils of intellectual captivity to chronic paradox, depicting the paralysis it can induce. In the process of therefore jettisoning such a sensibility, *Citizen* weighs what I’ll identify as a series of prescriptive and evaluative rejoinders to paradox, which its formal and stylistic properties themselves adjudicate. Rather than to remain hostage to fatalism or negativity, its affective arc thus culminates with glimpses of recovery, wellbeing, self-reclamation, and experiential integrity. That trajectory, I’ll argue, itself models a prescriptive practice, offering a blueprint in how prescriptive reading can translate into a program for engaged living and action.

**Locating Prescription**

In calling for a prescriptive theory, this chapter summons enduring disputes over categories like norms, universals, and reason within leftist and critical thought—as well as over the inner (if disavowed) normativities of theory as an intellectual formation. Indeed, some recent exposés have targeted exactly what we might term theory’s cryptonormativity. It is certainly telling that schools of thought organized around anarchic anti-normativities and non-conformisms would militantly enforce their own legalities, and we might find it further ironic that paradox has been one sign under which that ethos has been consolidated. Yet what exactly do such efforts to “out” theory achieve, especially when reliant on the very arsenals of critique
and unmasking (or crying paradox) they interrogate? While perhaps shattering a certain façade of radicalism, many also lament how these repressed normativities have rendered theory robotic, predictable, and stale. Many in its current crop of dissenters have thus pled for greater diversity and range. As Eve Sedgwick puts it, “The trouble with a shallow gene pool […] is its diminished ability to respond to environmental (e.g. political) change.”

Disclaiming its normative stakes, in other words, divests theory of mechanisms that might better counteract the homogenizing, deadening effects of internal policing. Hence, a paradoxically anti-normative normativity gets blamed for both cloistering theory and stonewalling long-overdue soul-searching and renewal.

Although these cries of (to further play on Sedgwick) “your anti-normativity is so normative” can have a gotcha air about them, it is worth pausing to reflect on just how creedal that edict has become. Along with norms, a slew of interrelated (often, liberal or enlightenment-based) grammars—reason, progress, universality, development, humanism, the individual, legality, freedom, and so on—are regularly prosecuted for modernity’s crimes, in ways that can seem to drive a wedge between a watered-down liberal versus full-throated leftist position.

Hence, a term like rationalism can telegraph seemingly infinite threats, whether Weber’s “iron cage” of rationalization, or Frankfurt School outcries against the social conformity instilled by instrumental reason, or the neoliberal efficiency today routinely spectralized. Hence, for decades variants of anti- or ir-rationalism have reigned supreme, allowing otherwise discordant theories to rally around a cluster of shared foes. Not surprisingly, the language of prescription is often pegged such a common rival.

Within literary studies and aesthetic criticism, such an explanatory economy has left an even deeper imprint. As the last chapter essayed, a long tradition of aesthetic theory has defined art and literature through various anti-rationalist oppositions: to objectivity, facts, universals,
abstractions, norms, calculation, valuation, translatability, and even common sense. Often, what are cast as the perils of specifically instrumentalism or didacticism oversee those divides, barricading not only the aesthetic but also humanistic inquiry writ large from reason and its artifacts. Here, too, the language of prescription has been a frequent placeholder for everything the literary or aesthetic is understood to repudiate and thwart. In contrast, when literary forms or genres are instead seen to disseminate, enfranchise, or otherwise ratify reason’s edifice (such as through modes like realism or constructs like the self-determining liberal subject), they are met with critique, frequently aim at uncovering the submerged contradictions they cast a smokescreen over. When a container for ideology (versus destabilization of it), literature thus gets submitted to a debunking project that, in the same breath, exorcises from everything esteemed about aesthetic experience logics like incorporation, integration, assimilation, unification, and naturalization.

In questioning this mindset, what follows, in some sense, embraces certain of reason’s bequests—in an overture influenced by important antecedents from within as well as without theory’s precincts. Among others, one must certainly include Jurgen Habermas’s account of communicative reason and discourse ethics; Martha Nussbaum’s work demonstrating how reason can steer faculties like the emotions; Bernard Williams’s efforts to stabilize notions of “truthfulness” even when “truth” may be elusive; and, more contemporarily, Toril Moi’s attempt to replace debates about “epistemological uncertainty” with matters of responsibility, action, and judgment. At once, this chapter’s call for prescription is very much in league with Amanda Anderson’s attention to the ways that “intellectual and aesthetic postures are always also lived practices.” Yet one of this book’s core arguments has been that any effort to overcome theory’s resistances requires attention to the epistemic sway of paradox—or to how
such blinding dedication marinates a formulaic reluctance about reason. Commitment to paradox has anointed a series of methodological watchmen standing guard over theory’s quarters—although in a paranoid style that exaggerates rationalism’s dangers, amassing them into a veritable army of foes.

But at once, insistence on the value of reason does not require its vindication wholesale, as either an untrammeled good or independently adequate answer to theory’s disappointments. As what I’ll claim as merely one of prescription’s ingredients, reason leavens its intellectual practice with tools and pursuits that the traditions of theory too hastily dispose of: evaluation, application, calculation, judgment, criteria, differentiation, procedures, things like Williams’s truthfulness, and a collection of other resources. In many respects, theory guillotined reason to retain only its unthinking, automatic functions—thereby inheriting its negative, skeptical energies while forfeiting its constructive, productive, creative ones. That crucial labor of building, fashioning, developing, assembling, sustaining, perfecting, and so on is what follows will aim to resuscitate.

But of even greater importance, there remains a separate need to keep reason in check. Theorists know well the fictions of mastery securing conventional defenses of reason (Kantian and otherwise), reminding us why it represents far from a surefire fix. In addition, the story I’ve told about conviction in paradox (whether as the ontology of the modern or an antinomian truth) can clarify other liabilities of what one might deem a thoroughgoing cognitivism. As Chapter One argued, whereas reason engineered paradox as a way of knowing, the traditions of theory elevated it into something sacrosanct. Hence, while anti-rationalism may to us today appear an inevitable byproduct of dedication to paradox, such faith has all along been subsidized by reason and its stronghold, being furthermore erected on a dualistic bifurcation of body from mind, as
we’ll continue to confront. Yet while reason may have been the main architect of that partition, the destiny of theory was to further fragment it, collapsing what began as a division into an infinite sea of indeterminacy that merely exacerbates cognitivism’s side effects. With everything solid fully dissolved into paradox, modern experience becomes not only fractured, incoherent, and contradictory but exuberantly so—as a fundamentally rationalist thesis gets converted into a messianic religion. The hierarchies reason installed by training a skeptical, discrediting eye on the (alleged) experiential unities it supersedes are thus only further stratified and entrenched by theory, with its parallel suspicion of claims to integrated, harmonious truth and knowing. These cognitivist priorities are why I’ll describe prescription as requiring a lot more than a mere recovery of reason but also bases for cultivating experiential integrity, fullness, and trust conventionally railroaded by the superior truth of paradox.

One might, in turn, expect the aegis of the postcritical (or post-theoretical) to better reapportion the provenance of reason and its many offices. Allegiance to reason, we know, has long demarcated theory from analytic and other brands of philosophic thought, and by some accounts, contemporary efforts to catapult theory into some manner of “beyond” promise not only to temper its anti-normativity but also to rechart that frontier, newly accessing theory’s rationalist bearings through attention to things like knowledge, consciousness, and objectivity.13 But as Chapter Five explored, many of what masquerade as new theoretical approaches subscribe to the same logic of paradox I’ve questioned, and this has likewise been true of recent thought labeled postcritical. While concerns about critique, paranoia, symptomatic reading, anti-formalism, suspicion, semiotics, and so on capture a lot, the postcritical alternatives they feed into have failed to extricate theory from its present impasse. In fact, many of those alternatives exhibit hallmarks of paradox, whether perpetuating aesthetics of friction, contradiction, and
rupture or through overly tidy inversions of a given scourge into its binary Other. Resulting are foreseeable impasses, including either/or analysis that empties out a vast middle ground—a ground I’ll instead claim as prescription’s central domain. But the point is that postcritique can leave us in the same wasteland of deracinated causes and motives, line-drawing problems, and leveled distinctions that this book has come to know well. Prescription, in contrast to other swan songs for theory, marshals a very different analytic repertoire, one equally poised to evaluate the postcritical.

Yet beyond these and other affinities, prescription deserves its own exposition. As a terminology, its merits are to remain relatively free of the baggage saddled to adjacent idioms (like normativity, instrumentalism, or rationalism), hopefully permitting a more responsive and multi-directional repurposing. Supplementary, prescription registers the view that theory has gotten certain things right and others wrong, doing some things well and others poorly. To stay with skirmishes over reason, the example of anti- or ir-rationalism is instructive. There is no question that insights into the unreasoned cores of politics, language, ethics, consciousness, the subject, and so on are critical—in ways rationalism erroneously and to its detriment denies. However, that awareness neither explains everything nor tells us how to proceed in its wake; whatever explanatory force irrationalism carries does not readily translate into a practice for scripting action or decision-making. We’ve extensively examined how theory generally resolves that impasse by either resigning itself to contradiction or valorizing it as an ethereal therapy. But as an applied practice, a prescriptively oriented theory asks what we do with life’s many wells of unreason. Far from gainsaying them, prescription asks how we navigate, rectify, quell, resolve, transcend, or otherwise respond to this crux of paradox.
The term *prescription* carries multiple valences in medicine, optometry, and other branches of science, in a set of meanings also apposite to its critical-theoretical bearings. Within those technical disciplines, prescriptions typically react to and thereby legitimize an initial diagnosis, often regarding an affliction or dysfunction or malady. However, that diagnosis thereafter becomes an object of treatment, management, and care. Theorists, we’ve seen, have tended to amplify even isolated diagnoses to totalize them into large-scale structural phenomena, with the effect of universalizing those underlying realities to foreordain them as chronic and inevitable. But prescription moves beyond that preliminary stage of diagnosis, tackling even negative or life-threatening results by seeking to mitigate, reduce, or cure them. What this means is that a theory of prescription adopts a very different posture toward its findings, entertaining a wider range of prognoses as well as remedies. A prescriptive practice does *not* presume that the symptoms it interprets are fated to remain determinative or persistent or immutable; rather, most prescriptions proceed with the assumption (or, at least, hope) that the conditions they act upon will prove malleable, fixable, and otherwise amenable to intervention—even if strictly palliative.

Another divergence, then, involves how prescription hinges on a relationship to the norm or status quo contrary to the axiomatics of most theory. Prescriptions commonly aspire to restore balance and homeostasis—in other words, to stabilize and normalize—the organisms they treat. While at times prompted by circumstances wherein the normal or commonplace has turned internally sabotaging or problematic, at others prescriptions aspire to restore an individual or ecosystem to a preexisting state of wellbeing and functionality. These types of prescriptions redress situations wherein something is broken, or ailing, or otherwise failing to live up to routine, established workings and behaviors. Such prescriptions, for instance, are operative when deviations from the norm risk impinging on or derailing an individual’s (or environment’s) day-
to-day, habituated practices and/or ability to support itself. These prescriptions accordingly proceed by leveraging the customary or status quo as a baseline to be restored. For instance, most optometric prescriptions are algorithms tailored to restore the codified benchmark of 20/20 vision, and (as I grab the fifth pair of my new accessory 1.5 reading glasses) that optimum provides a welcome guideline endowing the act of prescribing (and reliance on it) with purpose, certitude, clarity, and ease, while being transferable to and valid within a wide gamut of contexts. As a criterion, 20/20 eyesight is a generalizable formula (or yardstick with universal relevance) that permits each unique case to be standardized.

The labor of prescription is thus lubricated by calculable metrics, which expedite its practice and attune criteria to singular cases. In arenas like medicine, a prescription’s compliance with such measures and associated arithmetics actively predetermines its fruitfulness and success. Concrete, trusted, and well-practiced indices, in other words, are indispensable to the qualitative differentiations informing any process of prescription. A prescriptive theory therefore summons the very resources of valuation, calculation, and comparison theorists have often condemned as the scaffolding of structural oppression. I’ll actively challenge those warrants at length below, but the point for now is that such evaluative resources are the lifeblood of any applied practice, catering its abstract exercise to the idiosyncratic, mutating variables at stake in concrete cases and scenarios.

Clearly, prescriptions are therefore highly situationalist, just as even a select medical treatment’s durations and dosages can vary wildly. A lot of prescriptive care is prophylactic, dispensed to ward off or keep life-imperiling risks at bay. These prescriptions are preventative and precautionary, whether involving diagnostic testing or the dietary, therapeutic, and other recommendations we all abide to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Others are palliative, like chronic
pain treatment that merely allays suffering by blocking or inhibiting its receptors. Some prescriptions thus strive to render symptoms negligible or innocuous, controlling their disruptions. Far from last, countless others are instead issued with the ambition of cure or remedy; yet here, too, their tactics are far from uniform. Whereas some attack the offending disorder, others exhaust its appetites. Yet beyond such divergences, nearly all are steered by some conception of relative health or flourishing or sustainability or success. In contrast to theoretical emphases on failure, negativity, and the limit, such contrasting parameters are exactly what establish a given prescription as a new baseline or protocol. Prescriptions get naturalized as authoritative standards after being verified by repeated trials, even while continually calibrated by predictive odds. Hence, whereas in fields like cancer treatment success is rarely perfect or guaranteed, as an overall barometer it nonetheless coordinates prescription as an ongoing, dynamic process. This dynamism also extends from the reservoirs of pooled, accumulated knowledge that both facilitate and winnow any prescriptive practice. Prescriptions are not only deputized by but productively germinated, capacitated, ordered, and refined within the environments that entangle them.

Of course, what counts as success in one case versus another can mean very different things, just as different criteria (whether of endurance or cure) supervise different prescriptions. Health is one frequent objective many prescriptions, medical and otherwise, pursue. Yet given how that measure is far from absolute or clear-cut, its determination is usually chaperoned by a constellation of other interrelated ideals (maintenance, wellbeing, fitness, fortitude, flexibility, nutrition, and so on), which are likewise brought to bear on individual cases as well as their surrounding ecologies. Below, I’ll examine the lines of reasoning that have led theorists (at times, rightly) to deplore these sorts of objectives, denouncing their disciplinary, exclusionary,
hierarchizing, normalizing, oppressive, neoliberal, and other invidious effects. But such indices are nonetheless intrinsic to the cultivation of any complex ecosystem, which often require gradualist regimens aimed at purely incremental progress.

Given how success invariably falls somewhere along a continuum, risk-based statistics are factored into most prescriptions. Oftentimes, prescriptions themselves act as variegated tools for estimating and weighing granular, messy gambles as well as prospects. The more serious a condition, the more puzzling are the inexact, contradictory odds informing the available treatment options, meaning that prescriptions by definition juggle cost-benefit, pro-con, potentially delicate and agonizing probabilities. Yet we all elect to follow certain prescriptions versus others, despite that maze of contingency. This caprice in part derives from the fact that prescriptions are never made in a vacuum; they by definition amalgamate multiple idiosyncracies, like individual medical histories and psychological make-up. Yet the legion of complications potentially resulting from any prescription further will elude a politics of ideological purity—just as globalizing assertions of systemic liability will not make those tradeoffs easier to stomach. To the contrary, prescriptive practices refuse to abstract or displace isolated types of injury or victimization (and agency over them) onto a failed, contaminated method or structure. Further muddying these waters, many prescriptions navigate species of uncertainty that actively materialize when targeting the bad (such as in chemotherapy or radiation for cancer) jeopardizes other bases of health or equilibrium (potentially even sabotaging an entire immune or respiratory or cardiovascular system). Yet precisely these dicey calculi are why prescriptions are directed by authoritative statistics, stabilizing guidelines, and veteran decision-making practices. Contrary to the decisionism often championed by theorists,
the risky business of prescription is piloted by a proceduralist logic, including guarantees like predictability and precedent.

Other of prescription’s key features and how they defy theoretical doctrine are highlighted below. The foregoing dynamics, however, also bring us to certain ironies. Theorists, we’ve seen, have been inclined to decry not only the homogenizing, conformity-inducing effects of large-scale, authoritative structures but also the structural design of suffering and dispossession. It is commonplace to derive global truths about the tyrannies lurking within the system from individualized harms, in reasoning that enlarges what is cited as constitutive contradiction into an explanatory principle. Yet opportunities for beneficence and care are rarely universalized through a parallel progression or sweep. In effect, while injury and debility almost automatically get explained as all-enveloping, the workings of justice and ethics flail and flounder, often on their own limits in a relay wherein that impossibility can prove a certain radicalness. Yet a prescriptive remapping of this cartography will elicit very different insights into not only wrongdoing and misfortune but also their just alternatives. As I’ve suggested, the shared data and collectivized wisdom informing prescription are also vehicles for democratizing its lessons, distributing its beneficial outcomes equitably and comprehensively. In turn, these liaisons between the particularized case and prescription’s globalizing purview might seem to resonate with what Jose Munoz calls the “singular plural” and “belonging-in-difference,” which for Munoz likewise broker a release from theoretical orthodoxy. Yet Munoz’s refusal of what he calls “the antirelational approach” with its “romance of singularity and negativity”\textsuperscript{16} still leads him to a utopian aestheticization of rupture and its “anticipatory illumination.” That vehement anti-presentism, or what Munoz calls opposition to “the lull of presentness,” is predicated on its
own romance of exemplarity and deferral that fails to extricate justice from a condition of
distance, impossibility, and foreclosure.\textsuperscript{17}

We could further consider the economics of these senses of prescription and how they
aerate left politics of purity. Theorists know well evils like the pharmaceutical industry’s
corporate consolidation, cause for everything from predatory drug-pricing to (in the United
States) lobbying against universal health care. Yet even acknowledging that usury, the vast
research networks incentivizing pioneering, life-saving discovery and innovation are more
complex.\textsuperscript{18} We know that many treatments especially for rare conditions would not exist but for
these massive if costly infrastructures, raising questions about how those overheads are
subsidized. For instance, what ratio of such outlays should be included within the price of the
rare life-saving drug versus offset against the costs imposed on an entire population of
consumers?\textsuperscript{19} There are certainly equitable reasons to favor the wide distribution of those
expenditures, rather than inflicting them solely on the unlucky victims of unusual disorders. Yet
blanket condemnation of the corporate-neoliberal sins of pharmaceutics, even if correct, risks
neglecting this sliding scale of more versus less exploitative practices.

To return to the individual’s role in all of this, imperatives like self-determination assume
an unexpected flavor within a prescriptive context. Seeing as the yield of any treatment is rarely
black-and-white, and paired with the vagaries of personal desire, medical scenarios are
testaments to the safeguarding of consumer choice. Despite being supported by statistical data
and other such indicators, most prescriptions are simultaneously modulated by individual
preference, with its intangible, amorphous aspects. But it is precisely in order to preserve and
respect individual choice that prescriptions leverage rationally verifiable calculi and other
standards—which escort, referee, and anchor freedom’s otherwise dizzying machinery. This
mooring of freedom within institutionally accrued expertise is, in other words, what allows for its actualization. Rather than to categorically dismiss the sinister or coercive byproducts of whatever guises of authority shepherd prescription, they materialize within the gradations, intricacies, and grey areas yoking choice to authority.

Two further points are worth underscoring. The first involves the ubiquity—and, in fact, unavoidability—of the ways prescriptions arrange daily life. We all conform to prescriptions (whether self- or externally imposed), and that reliance lends generative rhythms, routines, and integrity to experience.\(^\text{20}\) In the realm of health, it is a truism that everyone elects to follow one diet versus another, to get physical exercise or not, to follow a regular sleep pattern or instead refuse one, and so on. Those regimens can be healthy, or gratifying, or capacitating, or they can instead self-undermine and restrict. Hence, many argue that sheer compliance with routine habits (like predictable sleep) will inherently nourish and sustain—on physical, mental, and emotional levels. In short, prescriptive practices are things most of us not only consent to but actively cultivate, and those rational (or irrational) practices permeate all aspects of being. Defying compartmentalization, the prescriptions we follow affect us holistically to disburse comprehensive effects, just as an allergy medicine can create mental lucidity while an extra glass of wine do the opposite. There are certainly profoundly equalizing aspects of this universal beholdenness to prescription.

What I’ve hoped, second, is to begin to convey the harvest of a prescriptive theory. More than anything, that language solicits application; it positions curated practices of health, wellbeing, success, justice, sustainability, and so forth within theory’s horizons. The Interlude already reflected on the texture of a prescriptive style. But another of its generic components is a methodological provisionality and ecumenicism. Far from uniform or one-size-fits-all, theory
aimed at prescription—or at application and practice—will necessarily be situationalist, shifting, and combinatory, mobilizing a collage of reconstellating tactics and approaches tailored to whatever circumstances arise. This catholic mix finds an analogue in a body of comparatively eclectic, genre-bending critical-literary-theoretical writing that has gained academic acclaim of late. That emergent corpus similarly tests, tampers with, and breaks down the partitions conventionally categorizing literary production as well as criticism—and for reasons, in Rankine’s *Citizen*, we’ll understand as deeply prescriptive. Its thought experiments escape certain academic silos, along with a sterile sequestering of intellectual life from practice. *Citizen* rebels against those protocols to fuse journalism with memoir with fiction with other aesthetic experiments, and precisely by integrating those modes does it foster an experiential immersion that might itself transform the sheer act of reading into prescriptive engagement.

**Reading *Citizen* and the Snares of Paradox**

Since its 2014 publication, *Citizen* has been a lightning rod, captivating academic readers and populating college-level syllabi. It has also entered the public limelight, such in a widely circulated photograph of it being read in the background to Donald Trump at a 2015 campaign rally. Many causes for *Citizen*’s celebrity status are not mysteries, as its themes strike multiple nerves. First and foremost, *Citizen* ruminates on the present-day guises of racism within the many arenas of popular culture, politics, professional sports, media reportage, academic discourse, and private life as well as friendship. Written during an era marked by rising incidents of police brutality and things like voter suppression, many sections deliver astute commentaries on the present-day anatomy of state-sanctioned racism. Others instead recount proximate, intimate encounters with racial insensitivity and mistrust, magnifying its often insidious, subtle,
and equivocal effects. And with frequent meta-theoretical digressions, it actively courts its academic audience, in an almost self-conscious address.

Citizen’s unique form, a mashup or amalgamation of genres, has been much noted, as it samples not only multiple textual modes but also photographs and reproductions of artwork. These combinations led to Citizen’s nomination as a finalist for the 2014 National Book Critics Circle Awards in the categories of both poetry and criticism (the former of which it won), along with countless other accolades. Yet those formally innovative features, I’ll argue, also carry deeply prescriptive implications. As its word arrangements tamper with the predictable cues governing poetry and prose alike, its many visual images similarly work to unseat the primacy of cognition. Together arousing a welter of affective and other responses, those hybridizations further activate multiple registers of (reading and other) experience, even while almost every passage somehow concerns the dilemma of how best to respond to racism. While its clashing modes bombard the reader with an endless volley of racist encounters that index racism’s devastating toll, that collage at the same time fulfills an evidentiary function, becoming multi-perspectival to enact representational impediments to authenticating racism and its enormity.

One thread thus weaving together Citizen’s tapestry of otherwise unrelated scenes involves their manifold glimpses of racism’s contemporary guises, issuing a damning indictment of the stranglehold exerted by structural oppression on society. Frequently, Rankine captures that violence by inscribing it on the physical body, through motifs that recur. For instance, many passages develop a metaphors of strangulation and breath to comment on not only police brutality but the toxicity of American culture. Whereas the Rodney King beating “somehow cut[s] off the air supply in the US body politic” (117), small-scale insults (like when the speaker is called the name of a friend’s black housekeeper) have a similar effect, serving to “dry out the
tongue, and clog the lungs” (7) or to be placed “in a chokehold, every part roughed up, the eyes dripping” (pg). Such imagery stimulates the same claustrophobia, shock, and panic described in the speaker, just as through repetition *Citizen* collapses individual suffering into the crimes perpetrated by the larger sociopolitical structure.

Together, these aggregated scenarios render a damning diagnosis of the devastating effects of contemporary racism. Rankine’s tone is often clinical, with pared down, colloquial language. Yet that feint of removal is simultaneously undercut by *Citizen*’s present-tense verbs, clipped sentences, visceral rawness, and (as I’ll discuss) second person “you.” One scene that finds the speaker playing both physician and self-medicating patient enacts such ambivalence:

The head’s ache evaporates into a state of numbness, a cave of sighs. Over the years you lose the melodrama of seeing yourself as a patient. The sighing ceases; the headaches remain. You hold your head in your hands. You sit still. Rarely do you lie down. You ask yourself, how can I help you? A glass of water? Sunglasses? The enteric-coated tablets live in your purse next to your license. The sole action is to turn on tennis matches without the sound. Yes, and though watching tennis isn’t a cure for feeling, it is a clean displacement of efforts, will, and disappointment. (62)

That passage entertains a sequence of different prescriptions, cataloguing what are held out as failed remedies culminating with self-anesthetization (watching television without the sound). Those symptoms and corresponding treatments could certainly elicit a metaphorical or even allegorical interpretation. For instance, “sunglasses” recall the paradoxical hyper-visibility *cum* invisibility foisted upon black bodies, and the “enteric-coated tablets”’s proximity to the speaker’s state-issued driver’s license might ironize Rankine’s title, as narcotic self-obliteration is aligned with the self-erasure inflicted by an official badge of civic belonging. “Water” and “sunglasses” likewise mine the liminal terrain separating a defense mechanism from willed oblivion from nutritive self-care.
From one angle, then, sequences like the above unleash a maelstrom of paradox, producing ambiguities similar to those riddling Rankine’s prose. Indeed, one might take the second-person “you” as a combined crystallization and amplification of constitutive paradox. Akin to how the interjected “I” confuses the roles of patient and physician, that oscillating perspective might seem to offer a classic statement of the “double consciousness” first theorized by W.E.B. Du Bois—a predicament Du Bois notably explained in terms of “paradox.” Du Bois configures this “two-ness” comprised of “unreconciled strivings” and “warring ideals” as, however, not a weakness but rather a source of complicatedly creative inspiration. To be sure, Du Bois’s meditations opening The Souls of Black Folk are notably gestural and brief, especially given their enormous influence. Yet they also evince a faith in the transformative capacities of paradox—here, for converting marginality and self-fragmentation in a condition of heightened awareness. Since providing the blueprint for many other influential theorizations of race, anti-coloniality, and resistance, this embrace of “paradox” is what for Du Bois brokers a victim’s ability to supersede and gain the upper hand over racism’s many degradations. While arguably dialectical, the alchemy of paradox converts the pain of self-disassociation into a badge of an elevated (i.e. modern) consciousness.

However, Rankine’s “you” stages more than self-dissociation, at once interpellating the reader. On the one hand, that second person collectivizes, incorporating the reader into the speaker’s orbit of suffering. Paired with present-tense verbs, Citizen is immersed within the here-and-now, dialing up its emotional volume. But on the other hand, that “you”’s tenor is accusatory, in what can resemble an onslaught of ad hominem attacks. Accordingly, one might conclude that much of Citizen’s potency lies precisely with this persistent ambivalence, in a
Catch-22 simultaneously constitutive of racism’s anatomy. *Citizen’s* episodes recurrently pose lose-lose situations, presenting the speaker as damned whether she protests or acquiesces.

Citing these dynamics, critics have almost uniformly read *Citizen* as an account of microaggression—of what (at least prior to the Trump era) many decipher as one racism’s contemporary faces. On the level of form, its kaleidoscope viewpoints capture how a gradual buildup of small-scale, non-overt insults and degradations can exert profoundly damaging psychic and physiological effects. Typically, microaggressions are defined as subtle, confusing, and at times unintentional displays of “aversive” (rather than overtly aggressive) racism, causing “attributional ambiguity.”

Whether in verbal epithets or other behavior, the low-grade, casual nature of such racism can be difficult to confirm, document, and condemn—hurdles that *Citizen*’s responds to by amassing a fractal evidentiary proof. This murkiness is furthermore why microaggression can unleash cycles of self-blame and self-doubt. As a version of gaslighting, it de-legitimizes the objective reality of its victims by maneuvering grey areas that become tricky to pinpoint or label.

But another way to explain things is to say that microaggression, by design, capitalizes on paradox. Like other guises of sociopolitical wrongdoing, its perpetration actively weaponizes paradox, even while an ensuing haze of unverifiability shields it from censure. *Citizen* repeatedly lays bare this enabling logic, showing how microaggression exploits a liminal zone wherein active bias becomes indistinguishable from mere inadvertency. Scrambling intent, it in effect dissolves agency and responsibility alike into a web of deferred, elusive origins and markers. Like other textbook cases in the workings of paradox, microaggressions succeed by vacating the normative signposts and other expectations usually identifying a given behavior as deviant or inappropriate, confiscating the criteria (legal or otherwise) that categorize and thereby penalize
racism. Microaggression thus exemplifies how the snares of paradox can produce a moral and evaluative vacuum or morass.

This elusiveness might seem to illumine similarities between microaggression and trauma. Indeed, microaggressions can appear to manipulate the very diagnostic authority possessed by trauma, although in an inverse relation. We’ve considered how claims to unverifiability endow trauma with simultaneous legibility, weight, and incontrovertibility. These conflicting epistemic properties are why trauma is often theorized as a radical provocation or challenge to the evidentiary paradigms and other protocols of law, disclosing what law must exclude. But those same features are in many ways parallel the properties constitutive of microaggression. Microaggressions, too, reside within spaces external to or excepted from law’s parameters, often fully preying upon its loopholes and ambiguities (for instance, evading the legally cognizable categories of hate speech, defamation, and discrimination). As such, microaggression can be strangely parasitic on an indeterminacy and untranslatability paralleling that according to which trauma theory understands victimization, for instance similarly disrupting temporality to delay comprehension (as Citizen repeatedly portrays). Yet with microaggression, those time lags immunize not witnessing and testimony but rather wrongdoing and abuse against diagnostic-evidentiary clarity and certitude.

Thus uncanny mirror images of one another, trauma and microaggression are both constituted by and breed snowballing conditions of paradox. Yet the habits of prescriptive reading Citizen curates simultaneously interrogate those conditions, including the frequent tendency to transfigure paradox into an antinomian therapy, for reasons we’ll continue to consider. The contradictions saturating Citizen equally dramatize troubling liabilities of intellectual absorption with paradox, in particular suggesting such insistence can directly produce
the evaluative-normative vertigo that allows microaggressions to thrive with impunity. Relatedly does *Citizen* reckon with the casualties of accounts of victimization that venerate its unverifiable, indeterminate status, showing how they endow crimes like microaggression with a symmetrical auto-immunity. Far from capacitating, reasoning that enshrines paradox as an antidote or cure can end up mystifying both agentive responsibility for and the experiential fabric of those harms. Yet as a crucible in how the optics of paradox obfuscate and dissemble, *Citizen* simultaneously entertains a number of prescriptive exits from that worldview of consuming, totalizing paradox.

**Keeping Paradox in Its Place, or the Ingredients of Prescription**

While *Citizen* indicts structural paradox as the backbone of contemporary racism, that diagnosis is not the end of the story. Rather, many passages akin to the above likewise quest for “a cure for feeling” that would transcend such captivity to paradox. Throughout, the speaker’s many racialized encounters elicit a markedly diverse range of responses. While frequently inducing despair, some incidents instead engender affirmative, proactive reactions, such as when the mistreatment of a child in the subway spurs a form of collective action. As *Citizen* describes the bystanders, “The beautiful thing is that a group of men began to stand behind me like a fleet of bodyguards, she says, like newly found uncles and brothers” (17). Other passages bear witness to private, intimate protests on the speaker’s part, such as when a demeaning lunchtime commentary on affirmative action baldly concludes: “This exchange, in effect, ends your lunch. The salads arrive” (13). Naturally, these extreme variations in *Citizen*’s modes of response are accompanied by wildly fluctuating emotional-affective-bodily states. Here, too, whereas some offenses “clog the lungs,” other passages instead answer painful episodes with sentiments like laughter, humor, and occasionally even joy, as one verse relates “the kiss the world offers” (154).
The deviations within this spectrum of rejoinders to microaggression are magnified by Citizen’s structure and form. With abbreviated vignettes, the abrupt oscillations between the speaker’s juxtaposed yet contrasting affective and behavioral states are placed into high relief. Thereby highlighting the qualitative differences distinguishing one response from the next, this formal logic simultaneously makes available a continuum of legitimate strategies for managing racism. Crucially, Citizen refuses to harmonize that cacophony of responses, which instead contend for authority to produce tensions that the reader must negotiate. With its documentary style authenticating not only the reality of microaggression but also the integrity of the speaker’s (and reader’s) gut-level feelings, the quandary of how to resolve and critically assess the respective merits of those mutating responses is ultimately delegated to the reader. This evaluative burden inheres on multiple levels. Citizen’s moods, first, interrogate the symmetry between a given affront and the speaker’s retort, raising questions of fit, effectiveness, and proportionality. While the second person solicits identification, these formal features require a certain critical distance, inviting evaluative judgments that weigh the exact emotions Citizen importunes the reader to undergo. We might therefore say that its structural logic actively requisitions criteria and other determinations capable of guiding those assessments—prompting a mode of participatory engagement that is simultaneously experientially immersive and prescriptively evaluative. On the one hand, those comparisons pertain to matters of balance, relationality, and proportion, given how Citizen’s vignettes belong to a larger progression. But on the other, it stops short of dictating the algebras according to which those findings should be scaled—here, again, assigning responsibility for the content of such evaluative criteria to the reader.
At once, these determinations are choreographed to modulate along with setting and circumstance, just as each aggravating offense differs measurably. Naturally, a response pertinent to one microaggression will fail to address another—discrepancies *Citizen’s* form renders pronounced. What these alterations, in one sense, vivify is what I’ve referred to as the situationalist, provisional status of prescriptive analysis as well as its underlying criteria. Attuned to contingency as well as context, prescription necessarily requires an elastic, fluent methodological toolkit, geared to tackle whatever challenges materialize. Yet what that fluidity further does is to untether and, as such, de-naturalize the link between a particular diagnosis and its corresponding explanatory matrix. In particular, *Citizen’s* smorgasbord of legitimate responses to racism severs the automatic nexus that attributes isolated instances of oppression to an intrinsically, incurably oppressive structure. While verifying its systemic nature, Rankine nonetheless suspends the axiomatics that oppression will prove foundational, constitutive, and totalizing, along with the corresponding onus to dismantle, deconstruct, or otherwise tear down that structure in its entirety. Just as *Citizen* entertains modes of response to chronic injustice that do not stultify or otherwise tie the speaker’s hands, it does not ontologize those oppressions or write them into modernity’s genetic code.

*Citizen’s* form and content alike therefore baffle a range of stock methodological assumptions—many of which have been particularly doctrinal within critical race studies. For instance, critical race theorists have routinely dismissed the labor of “valuation” as suspect. As Lisa Marie Cacho representatively concludes in *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (2012), “[v]alue is made intelligible relationally […] it needs negativity.” 29 For Cacho, mechanisms of Othering—or the production of racialized, queered, disabled, and different categories of “others”—are necessary to the constitution of all
positive value, and hence all acts of relational assessment become sullied by those effects.

Launching similar critiques, others have instead seized on adjacent terminologies. For Alexander G. Weheliye, “comparison” and “calculability” are instead the chief culprits. As Weheliye cautions in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014), the “law” or “grammar” of comparison “will merely reaffirm Man’s existent hierarchies” and thereby “deem some forms of humanity more exceptional than others,” leading Weheliye to champion “relationality” (contra Cacho) as an alternate, extra-juridical metric free of such errors. Importantly, Weheliye subscribes to a conception of race that blames racialization less on acts of classification than on “differentiation” and “hierarchization,” thus leading him to eschew the very intellectual activities we’ll continue to grapple with.

Hence, even important studies like the above fall victim to limiting logical and other missteps. Certain of those errors descend from a long tradition of, as Paul Gilroy puts it, viewing proximity to racial terror as the “inaugural experience” of modernity and thus constitutive of enlightenment rationalism. But Weheliye and Cacho carry out further slippages that, perhaps ironically, can help to clarify the need for prescription. First, both mistake merely incidental analytic tools (i.e. calculability) as determinant and, secondly, they aggrandize the influence of others (i.e. hierarchization) to treat them as both primary and sufficient. So they single out one or two elements of racialization’s architecture and assign them with disproportionate blame. While acts of differentiation (or calculation, or valuation) may indeed facilitate racism in many cases, that reasoning is neither central nor controlling nor even its root cause. Simply because a given intellectual faculty has been enlisted to rationalize injustice in certain (or even many) instances should neither inherently bankrupt it nor reduce its potential yield in different uses and contexts. Just as such analytic devices play a negligible if non-existent role in many other manifestations
of racism, we could undertake an inverse thought experiment: to identify the ways those tools are crucially necessary to document, substantiate, inculpate, penalize, and globally combat sociopolitical wrong. Indeed, scalar algebras like valuation and differentiation are (as Citizen suggests) some of the most potent weapons we possess for laying siege to racism’s edifice—in other words, for battling the very structures Weheliye and Cacho collapse them into. What such conflations do, then, is to jettison the intellectual resources best suited to evaluating, proving, and opposing injustice.

Such reasoning is ultimately sustained by elisions I’ve described as broadly symptomatic of dedication to paradox. For one, it imagines rights, politics, citizenship, and other social entitlements to operate according to a zero-sum game: distributed and taken way through a finitely sub-dividable pool or pie. Any group’s increase in power automatically and proportionately detracts from the net social gains and resources of others. However, that logic rests on a set of strikingly passé economical-statistical warrants, producing a naïve and falsifying picture of socioeconomic and political opportunity. At the same time, other familiar moves enter into play. Cacho and Weheliye take a specific locus or relay of exclusion and generalize its contradictions (i.e. that value depends on its inverse of negativity), in order to write exclusion into modernity’s (constitutive and inevitable) chromosomal makeup. We’ve wrestled at length with this ontologization of fatal paradox; but for Cacho and Weheliye it leads to further conversions, namely of negative diagnoses into redemptive cures. Even if prosecuting calculation for collusion with racism’s vast crimes were to make sense, its embargo will not, however, shut down the larger conspiracy. Simply expunging all calculation is hardly a recipe for fixing or improving real-world phenomena of racialization. Even more, the fact that something may be a contributing factor does not turn its reverse or antithesis into an automatic antidote. So
even if we accept the proposition that calculative reason becomes exploitative, that does not transform “incalculability” into a vector of justice and ethics. Lubricated by paradox, these transactions accordingly reinscribe yet another binary scheme (the calculable versus incalculable) to empty out the vast middle ground of qualitative distinctions, with a further effect of predictable line-drawing problems.

Yet that intermediary ground is where most real-world instances of oppression reside, therefore also marking the terrain of a prescriptive theory. For the calculable versus incalculable, we could certainly substitute a series of other oppositions: the juridical versus antinomian, instrumental versus singular, or even liberal versus radical left. But exclusive attention to those diametrical poles likewise levels the many gradations that in fact comprise prescription’s territory. Overly categorical, reasoning like the above thus occludes various sites of possibility, imposing constraining methodological cordons on theory. Whereas in contrast, precisely the prescriptive criteria and other goals we’ll continue to canvass can instead enable us not only to survey that ground but also to cultivate and improve it.

**Progress and Reform.** Within Citizen’s flurry of clashing responses to microaggression, its arc is nonetheless telling. Without resolving those fluctuating states, it maps an incremental route to progress. While especially at first chronicling pain and debilitation, its tone and perspective gradually emerge from those conditions to achieve something closer to self-affirmation and care. We might, as such, describe that trajectory as itself a prescriptive one. Even while many sections depict the speaker incapacitated by destructive events and their residues, others propose strategies for fending off and otherwise metabolizing racism’s toxic effects. Whether by reclaiming words that embed epithets or the speaker’s embrace of her own embodied
sensations, many interludes enact a process of working through and self-stabilization—scripting an odyssey that similarly administers *Citizen*’s overarching structure. That spirit is further something its concluding segments outwardly commemorate, in a mood verging on the hopeful, constructive, and even celebratory. It culminates with lyrical pleas to “let it go” and “move on” (151); with feelings of “desire” (153); and with images of being not only kissed by but also “lov[ing] this world” (154-5).

This cumulative, painstaking working through is something we might tie to a philosophy of progressive reform—bringing us to another collection of theoretical edicts it disobeys. Appeals to “progress” naturally place disputes over the status of history and history writing on the table, along with the usual view that dominant histories will lend sanction to power and oppression. Left, revisionist historiography has therefore systemically chipped away at those received plottings of history, exposing their dark liaisons through genealogical and other critique. Beyond clichés regarding history being “written by the victors,” this suspicion over mainstream historiography has placed a web of adjacent terms under related pressure: continuity, linearity, reform, maturation, unity, mastery, development, civilization, among others. As we considered in Chapter One, excavating what are seen as those terms’ antitheses (paradox, indeterminacy, discontinuity, accident, chance) has represented a chief strategy for not only dismantling triumphalist histories of progress but also warding off their countless sins. Yet this revisionist logic frequently partakes of an aestheticization of redemptive paradox that, here again, transforms what began as a template of critique into an independently salvific ethic.

There are accordingly questions about whether this dismissal of progress and reform has not been too categorical and too hasty. We can start with *Citizen* to grasp why. The afterlives of the civil rights movement are clearly among Rankine’s themes, as *Citizen* revisits key episodes
in that long struggle—although mainly to rewrite them in ways that challenge their revolutionary underpinnings. One such incident, occurring on a crowded train, replays without naming Rosa Parks’s legendary role in the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, a role for many crowning Parks as “first lady of the civil rights movement.” Rankine’s present-day saga in available seating on public transportation is, however, triggered when a woman stands “all the way to Union Station” instead of taking the sole empty seat next to a man. Citizen speculates over the significance of the vacancy, for the man “more like breath than wonder,” activating that recurring motif. While conspicuously leaving race unspecified (as across much of the text), Rankine’s speaker chooses to inhabit that space, in what is cast as a statement of resistance and solidarity. That gesture is nonetheless conveyed in strikingly understated terms that, moreover, root it in the private (versus public) and corporeal (versus cerebral). As the text relates: “you put your body there in proximity to, adjacent to, alongside, within” (131). Her alliance with the stranger is thereafter cemented through touch: “shoulder to shoulder” “your cotton coat touches the sleeve of him” (132).

However, when a mother and child enter the car expecting other passengers to move, their pact is honored overtly: “It’s then that the man next to you turns to you. And as if from inside your own head you agree that is anyone asks you to move, you’ll tell them we are traveling as a family” (133). Dense with symbolism, Rankine generalizes this scene to pertain to “the train, bus, in the place, waiting room, anywhere he could be forsaken” (131). And while Parks hovers as a kind of unstated beacon, this small-scale, modest struggle refuses to lionize the public legend, instead furnishing an instruction manual for sociopolitical engagement that is local and readily available to the ordinary, non-heroic actor. It is further key that two dated tributes for men killed by police brutality (Jordan Russell Davis and Michael Brown), introduced with the language “In Memory,” succeed this incident (134). Thus bookended, Rankine’s minor
crucible in collective action transforms into a global commentary on the criminal justice system. In my version (on a page that differs among copies), the sequence terminates with other words likewise on a blank page—“February 15, 2014 / The Justice System”—presumably to document its corresponding demise.

Just as such passages detect meaningful change within the most routine of events and contexts, Rankine’s prose often evinces an almost uncomplicated sincerity. With the phrase “traveling like a family,” Citizen locates progress not within a “disturbing spectacle of paradox” (as for a thinker like Joan Scott), even while documenting a highly indeterminate injury. Rather, this scene becomes paradigmatic due to its straightforward, commonsensical status, with an ardency bordering on the cloying. The fact that public transportation becomes an engine of history further grounds the text’s temporal and developmental logics within the humdrum, nonexceptional, and day-to-day. Indeed, this gradualism might appear to rally the reader, given how we, too, negotiate analogous spaces in our daily lives. Just as microaggressions take hold in private, monotonous settings, Citizen identifies growth and opportunity within those same locations. Although its accretion of microaggressions looms large, it thus promotes concrete, realistic occasions for intervention within that structure, harnessing what Caroline Levine might term its affordances.

Over Citizen’s sweep, those small-scale achievements gradually amass to forge incremental, lockstep change. We can again contrast this prescriptive orientation with various theoretical staples. Far from singular or exceptionalized, that project is introduced as practically available for mundane actors (like the reader) within the here-and-now and commonplace. Incommensurate to a telos of deferral, delay, and the “to-come,” this presentism is annexed to “The start of you, each day, / a presence already” (140). Likewise neither accommodationist nor
quietist, its reformist spirit instead democratizes access to the ethical and just. Relatedly, we might reflect on how the speaker’s self-actualization eludes the usual snares of irresolution, difficulty, and impossibility. Although recounting an exchange with a stranger, Rankine’s prose does not etherealize or otherwise fixate on the man’s radical Otherness; to the contrary, her language emphasizes his sameness, kinship, and proximity. These emphases likewise model a prescriptive mindset, holding it out as a kind of cognizable, tangible, lived commonsense capable of being emulated and internalized through ongoing repetition and practice.

*Health, Healing, and Recovery.* In accordance with the above, *Citizen’s* concludes by elaborating a vision of “repair” (132), “care” (143), “patience” (140), “vigilance” (149), and “waiting, wait up” (144). This ethos returns us to the nutritive, holistic senses of prescription. At one point, the goal of “patience” is emblematized accordingly: “Through a share of all remembering, a measure of all memory, is breath and to breath you have to create a truce— // a truce with the patience of a stethoscope” (156). Along with *Citizen’s* recurring metaphors of breath, this imagery reflects on the texture of historical remembrance. At first blush, a “truce” might encode self-betrayal or passivity—once again, the risk of accommodationism—yet *Citizen’s* tonal and figural inventory rewrites those associations. While acknowledging a preexistent fight, a truce relinquishes or provisionally suspends that embattled position, restoring a kind of balance. This emphasis on poise and sustainability is further concretized via its reference to a stethoscope, an implement designed to measure the equilibrium and stability of a larger homeostatic system. For the practitioner, moreover, those indicia of health can only be accessed through experiential immersion within that system’s rudimentary, continuous functions—namely, the rhythmic background noise of a heartbeat, circulating blood, and
expanding and contracting lungs. That diagnostic economy of a stethoscope importantly takes normalcy, regularity, and consistency as optimums.

These emblems, as I’ve suggested, marshal a notably integrated, rounded approach to the subject—one neglecting to bracket body from mind. A parallel refusal to compartmentalize emotional wounds from their corporeal side effects oversees many of Citizen’s vignettes, which variously find the speaker at the drugstore, arriving at therapy, at home self-medicating, and undertaking countless other self-help remedies in effort to alleviate her interwoven symptoms. While many fail, a steady return to health is nevertheless another objective ultimately attained over Citizen’s course, in a prescriptive arc that naturalizes health (like success) as not only a salutary ambition but also a legitimate diagnosis. While a target, health thus emerges as a desirable baseline and status quo—something to seek out even within a sick, ailing culture. In a mindset clearly de-privileging rupture, impossibility, and the negative limit, Citizen instead affirms modes of sustainability, functionality, and persistence as viable projects for theory.

This ambition of health clearly returns us to the many medical-scientific resonances of prescription, along with the nutritive regimens enabling it. By definition, many prescriptions are designed to maintain conditions of wellbeing and resilience—or to prolong healthy, normal psychological and physical states of existence. Hence, it is worth pausing to reflect on why a suspicion of health has been not only deep-seated but often vehement. There is certainly a comprehensive theoretical literature delineating how appeals to health function to discipline, pathologize the normal, hierarchize, and exclude, among other liabilities. We might accordingly cite the influence of Foucault along with specific veins of psychoanalytic thought as installing theory with what Amanda Anderson characterizes as a “depressive” position. As Anderson argues, this negativity further engrains a vision of power as structural and chronic—versus
environmental and amenable to change and intervention. “Collaps[ing] systemic forces into the
subject,” these “limiting” views, for Anderson, also tellingly map onto a classic divide between
radicalism and liberalism. One further thrust of Anderson’s study is to demonstrate how a
theoretical investment in the depressive subject has rendered “systems critique” the primary
activity of theory, identifying an orientation not only interdicting the many sorts of activities
I’ve aligned with prescription but also foreclosing health (and progress, success, and so on) as
legitimate goals or diagnoses.

Jasbir Puar’s widely read 2017 *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* offers a
textbook illustration of the repercussions of such a mindset. Puar foremost assails the category of
disability for its exclusionary logic, being buttressed by racial, economic, and other privileges
that, under capitalism, render it a commodity. Hence, Puar describes her method as a
“destabilization” of that category, exposing the three “vectors” evoked in her title to “exist in a
mutually reinforcing constellation”—thus in another zero sum game. Yet Puar’s approach will
feel familiar for additional reasons. For one, she coins the notion of “debility” to correct ideas
about progress and overcoming implicit to “a neoliberal politics of exceptional
responsibilization” at stake in “disability.” In essence, whatever advances disability activism
has achieved are, for Puar, sullied by how they reinforce health as an invariably “neoliberal”
optimum. As we might expect, another reason disability becomes exemplary for Puar involves
how it “reveal[s] a central contradiction” of capitalism—namely, that capitalism depends on the
production of debilitated populations, thereby universalizing its logic as a *fait accompli*. Lethal
structural paradox gets ontologized, without an escape hatch from its totalizations. This is in part
because Puar’s study conflates all the wildly varying manifestations of capitalism-neoliberalism,
collapsing them into a single phenomenon. But especially important, here, is how that reasoning
villainizes discourses of health as innately violent: fortified through hierarchies that exact their exclusions on other lives. We might not be surprised that rights are likewise indicted as part of the problem.39

Whereas Puar’s study substantializes paradox, theory that conversely extols that quality’s ethical energies, we’ve seen, is often invested in near identical formulations of the subject—similarly positing chronic, incurable dysfunction as a foregone conclusion. Indeed, the sorts of traumatic remembrance Citizen undergoes are typically seen to run up against their own temperamental, ineradicable, and what Cathy Caruth calls “enigmatic core”40—in other words, to surface through a relay of impossibility and failure. Hence, even when rescued through a telos of ethically redemptive paradox, theory’s dominant vision of the fissured, self-divided subject (as Anderson suggests) works to pathologize the healthy and the functional. In contrast, whatever practices (whether legal, therapeutic, or intellectual) strive to restore wholeness, coherence, and stability to a victim are deemed re-traumatizing: attempts to totalize trauma’s unruly, inscrutable, disruptive features through an imposition of normalizing orders of truth and valuation. What emerges, then, is a definitional economy that grants legitimacy and authenticity to trauma only when it (un)verifies its tangled repressions—and that casts wellbeing as a threat to be warded off.41

I’ve been arguing that, in stymying the translation of wounds like those at stake in Citizen into measurable, evidentiary, and hence actionable categories and claims, such thinking surrenders the very resources a prescriptive theory should instead foster. But such conceptual frameworks also confiscate accounts of literary and aesthetic experience that fail to revel in paradox, ambivalence, friction, tension, indeterminacy, inconclusivity, and their analogues. As Chapter Three considered, the elusive truth of a paradox-riddled subject also ingrains paradox as
an intellectual modality and style. That mystique of indecision has thus presided over the
disfavoring of certain literary and aesthetic genres—realism being perhaps the prime example.
But there is an impetus to redraw that familiar cartography by espousing representational modes
geread instead to endow human experience with qualities like intelligibility, presence, clarity,
purpose, and integrity—qualities we’ll continue to examine.

_Tarrying with the Positive: Bodies and Affects._ We might thank a prescriptive
attunement to health and healing for helping to broker an altered disposition, or what Rita Felski
calls “critical mood.” Not surprisingly, many recent referenda on theory have looked to affect
as a platform for staging their interventions. For some, the failings of theory can be blamed on an
overly bleak, cynical outlook, manifest in an emphasis on dismantling, critiquing, demystifying,
and tearing down. Along with things like building and construction, some have therefore
sought to make room for more confirmatory, celebratory sentiments like hope, optimism, and
even utopianism. This impulse to lend affect central billing has, in some cases, caused
particular affects to act as effective pivots around which debates about the state of entire
subfields can seem to rotate. For instance, within queer theory, those disputes have revolved
around what some term its “antisocial turn,” and analogously in critical race theory
“Afropessimism” has offered such an axis. At once, others have scrutinized the sociopolitical-
critical freight of highly specific emotional-experiential registers, seemingly heeding Eve
Sedgwick’s call to mine exactly such qualitative distinctions.

Many of the foregoing are impulses this chapter shares, although by undertaking a
comparative assessment of the scalar and qualitative distinctions separating divergent affects. A
similar enterprise motors _Citizen_, as it travels through a continuum of negative, disabling moods
to arrive at something (along with health and fullness) closer to affirmation. Like a lot of imaginative literature, *Citizen* assigns monumental importance to the political acumen of embodied feelings. Whether provoking stagnation or overcoming or resistance, bodily perceptions choreograph its parade of responses to microaggression. At times collectivizing, affects are similarly extolled as consciousness-raising, as Rankine implores: “How difficult is it for one body to feel the injustice wheeled at another?” (116). Many passages thus demonstrate the intelligence of corporeal registers of knowing, even insisting that bodily-affective engagement must precede other action. As one passage asserts, “Each moment is like this—before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced” (9). Hence unlike theorists such as Sianne Ngai who dismiss affects as “strikingly equivocal as judgments,” and “ambiguous” “as a direct result of the contradictory mixture of feelings at the foundation of each,” within *Citizen* bodily-emotional life actively serves to process, document, and assess otherwise uncategorizable circumstances.  

While thus testifying to the basic acuity of affect, *Citizen*’s structural logic simultaneously referees their respective merits. Throughout, Rankine’s language and imagery arouse the very moods and sensations her speaker endures, entreating us to try on, test, and experientially evaluate those modulating states. As we, too, journey through painful debilitation, the affirmative note on which *Citizen* ends thus represents more than a destination; its arc fashions health and welling as criteria primed to favor some affective-bodily responses over others. Beyond endpoints, health and functionality are accordingly configured as types of yardsticks—in relation to which other affects can be scaled and measured. *Citizen*’s form thereby inculcates not only attentiveness to those modulations but also the onus to adjudicate them, beckoning for evaluative metrics capable of being thus applied. Just as the speaker makes what is
held out as an agentive choice to dwell within certain affects versus others, it models prescriptive decision-making in motion.

This all might seem to incite a classic standoff between reason and emotion—a split not only literary critics but moral philosophers have probed for centuries. Not surprisingly, recent affect theory has frequently staked its positions along those established battle lines. Whether to counterpoise reason to emotion-feeling-affect or, with somewhat greater subtlety, to stage a quarrel between affect versus “emotion” or “sympathy” or some other badge of normativity, many contemporary proponents of affect spectralize rationalism’s multifarious dangers (and champion various irrationalisms as an antidote to them). For some, those threats are condensed within distinct faculties, whether intentionality or cognition or instrumentalism.

But beyond this fray, deeper questions exist about whether the “turn to affect” merely fans, or instead reins in, longstanding theoretical proclivities. While its newness is much hyped, does affect entail an exodus from psychoanalysis, deconstruction, the linguistic turn, and so on, or merely double down on those traditions as well as their hang-ups? These matters could absorb us at length, and surely depend on the debates at issue. However, one thing a prescriptive account of affect clarifies is the entrapment of most affect theory within the epistemology of paradox it might promise to escape, as affect often merely creates a new label or container for a predictable veneration of indeterminacy, openness, and play. Eugenie Brinkema’s *The Forms of the Affects* offers a case in point. Brinkema rightly identifies certain landmines affect theorists routinely stumble upon, like enlarging affect into a monolithic category or instead construing it vis-à-vis what it is not. Hence, Brinkema’s self-professed “formalist” approach foremost resists the premise that affect is “the forgotten underside of the linguistic turn,” instead defining affect in terms strikingly similar to the diffuse, aleatory linguistic play and deferral of a written text.
As such, Brinkema valorizes the illegibility, unverifiability, and irreducibility that allow affect’s “autonomous potentialities” to unravel and undo meaning—reveling in the inarticulate, contentless speech of autonomized discourse that deconstruction has long prized. These dimensions of affect become comparatively subversive of the self, precipitating a “shed[ding] of the subject” nevertheless accompanied by “many wild recoveries”—leaving us with a prototypical reminder of how the kinetics of paradox seamlessly convert loss into an exuberant plenitude.

Yet to pose the reverse question, what would it mean to instead conceive affects as dense with evaluative content and therefore custodial of a prescriptive practice? Cognitive narrative theory offers one approach to reconciling the ostensible “effortlessness” of affects with their acuity. As Lisa Zunshine describes in *Why We Read Fiction*, many real-life (and literary) interpretations are both context-specific and informed by cognitive endowments hardwired into our mental architecture; so whatever spontaneity might animate affect is secured by “nested levels of intentionality” “embedded” through accumulated adaptive advances in cognition. Whether we agree with Zunshine’s science, she offers a language for theorizing the trust and authority these responses demand—as well as a framework for releasing affect from paradigms that either exalt its insurgently ethical-political-resistances (as for Brinkema) or reduce it to a mediation of successive phases in capitalism (for thinkers like Sianne Ngai, Frederic Jameson, and Lauren Berlant). Those paradigms that in different ways insist on the contradictions structuring affect (along with the aesthetic broadly) problematically vacate its evaluative, qualitative, scalar properties and potential—either minimizing or overlooking those prescriptive faculties.
Another way to parse these matters is pursuant to the imprint of dualism and its corollaries—which also scaffold epistemologies of paradox. We’ve considered multiple times how deeply ingrained dualism is to modern ways of knowing, fully giving birth to the self-distancing, abstracted, paradox-riddled modern subject. Yet one thing dualism does is to rob experience of a certain integrity, just as desires for experiential wholeness and immanence are often castigated as the root of all that is un-ethical. Hence, the fractures integral to modern subjectivity are counterpart to suspicion of the body and its unmediated, unitary, integrated experience. The same partitions that elevated mind turned the body and its self-present, undifferentiated claims into perhaps the original object of the skepticism and doubt since foundational to modern critique. Whatever objectifying anti-materialisms shape modern knowledge have thus, in crucial senses, been all along self-directed—in an anti-biologist relay likewise authoring modernity’s racializing, gendering, and other oppressions. Even today, hostility to harmonious attachment to material practices is what buttresses both secularism and anti-Islamic sentiment. While deriving from complex ancestries, the linguistic turn and its autonomization of discourse, I’ve argued, only strengthened this anti-materialist, anti-essentialist fabric. In turn, it has supported a chain of other antifoundationalisms, while demanding a persistent undermining of anything stable, enduring, or fundamental.

By now, we know this story well. But a few further things are key. First, it is important to recall how this de-legitimization of bodily experience underwrites the epistemology of paradox. And while specifically rationalist skepticism claims a long lineage, the distinct anti-normativity germane to theory has, perhaps ironically, amplified dualism’s axiomatic status, even while subverting other of reason’s insignia. Merely the latest brand of cognitivist dismissal, the dissolution of self-present meaning into a play of paradox usurps reason’s sovereignty to
capitalize on the self-same dominance theory decries. But of greatest concern are the many resistances these optics enforce—resistances that have long imposed a straightjacket on activities like prescription. Among anti-normativity’s chief patrols, dualism erects a series of intellectual-methodological tripwires that, at the same time however, demarcate everything a prescriptive theory aims to release and recover. While we’ve already considered many of those goals, central among them is precisely the integrity and integration of experience that modern paradox comes along to fragment. To put things differently, dualism fractures, segregates, and hierarchizes experience into conflicting registers, installing constitutive contradiction within the formerly co-existent and enmeshed. Yet one might say that this dissonance is exactly what *Citizen* reacts against, as it aspires to vest its lyric subject with exactly such experiential fullness and integrity—an integrity theory continues to foreclose.

Many interludes wrestle with not only the tentacles binding bodies to discourse but also how variants of dualism influence our interpretive habits. Multiple segments contain metatheoretical crucibles of reading and analysis. Some protest the residues of historical violence sedimented within language, showing them to mete out real-world effects. For instance, a photograph toward *Citizen*’s opening reproduces a suburban street sign for “Jim Crow Rd,” marking how “only words” translate into and condone concrete oppressions. Other examples more overtly lament the cognitive partitions implicit to semiotics regimes of knowing, captured within Ralph Ellison’s famed observation, “[p]erhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word” (122). Yet surrounded by a catalogue of other influential commentaries on race extending over multiple pages, the visual arrangement of those many quotes embedding Ellison’s comment simultaneously enacts the very logic of partition he protests. While framed as a meditation on Zinedine Zidane’s notorious 2006 World Cup final
“headbutt,” that sequence is subdivided by miniature green rulers composed of small photographs of players on a bright green soccer field. This visual apartheid thus actualizes what might be minimized as a purely intellectual injury to lay bare its material consequences. Here, it is not accidental that the Zidane incident concerned not only the body’s metabolization of racism but how cognitivism can obstruct and refract those experiences.

Other sections instead involve reflexive scenes of reading, writing, and analysis. One such auto-critical moment similarly probes the nexus yoking textual language to bodily perception. Oscillating between cerebral (“intention”) and corporeal (“gestural”) channels of expression, *Citizen* ruminates:

> Words work as release—well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture. A pulse in a neck, the shiftiness of hands, and unconscious blink, the conversations you have with your eyes translate everything and nothing. What will be needed, what goes unfelt-unsaid—what has been duplicated, redacted here, redacted there, altered to hide and disguise—words encoding the bodies they cover. And despite everything the body remains. (69)

In what resembles the editing of prose, writing is embraced as therapeutic: an outlet or “release” for feelings. But at once, Rankine’s language cautions against the “well-oiled” ease with which those “translations” become misleading distortions that eclipse feeling’s substance (the “pulse,” “blink,” etc). With the repetition of “redacted,” textual encryption is charged with that “disguising”— occasioning a suspicious hermeneutic. Yet it is importantly the autonomization of writing that “duplicates” or divides meaning to sever the textual from the experiential, miring interpretation within a quest for complexity, difficulty, mystification, and paradox. In defiance of those layers of “encoding,” Rankine asserts the body as something stable and reliable that “remains.”

*Citizen* thus models alternate, non-suspicious reading practices. In fact, its self-categorization as lyric might index the experientially alive, immersive mode of aesthetic
engagement it requisitions. As Jonathan Culler classifies the lyric, *Citizen* “attempt[s] to be [] an event,” or “a scene, a here and now.” Culler also explains the significance of poetry’s nonmimetic status, which can entail reflexivity like *Citizen’s*: “poetry is frequently about poetry, about the subject’s relation to the production of poetic figures.” But key to *Citizen’s* lyric immediacy, and what arguably sets it apart from other incarnations of that genre, is its arousal of intense sensorium, which above all ground reading within bodily perception and its self-present, unabstracted species of knowing. This embeddedness (and corresponding obviation of suspicion) is not secondary or incidental to *Citizen’s* politics, as I’ll continue to argue. Rather, it centers experience to foster multiple vectors of trust, in a constellation stemming from self-trust in the integrity of experience. That spirit, I’ll further submit, ramifies within the text to the surrounding sociopolitical institutions that harbor the forms of sociopolitical life Rankine investigates.

This curation of trust is why *Citizen’s* aesthetic features might seem to elude the optics of paradox—an optics, I’ve argued, that has regulated literary criticism virtually since its classical geneses. *Citizen’s* poetics effectuate something other than a staging of radical ruptures and epiphanic breaks, or contradiction and collision, or ethical disclosures of Otherness and radical difference. Here, too, it productively thwarts the sort of anti-materialist bracketing that renders all interpretation impossible through its “methodical undoing” of meaning and own “residues of indetermination.” While a working through of paradox shapes *Citizen’s* trajectory, that quality does not emerge as the literary’s *sine qua non*. To the contrary, *Citizen* demands a very different framework for conceiving aesthetic experience—one that moves beyond paradox. As a laboratory in how art can cultivate things like certainty, clarity, and trust, that project, moreover, begins with a taking seriously of bodily-affective ways of knowing, which *Citizen* shows to be densely and complexly evaluative. Hence, the corporeally and immanently alive modes of
engagement it solicits do more than disobey the partitions conventionally securing theologies of art’s redemptive paradoxes, breaking them down. In addition, those engagements integrate experience, fostering forms of trust and integrity that lay the groundwork for alternate practices of prescriptive reading.

**Self-Possession, Agency, and the Subject.** These prescriptive dimensions of bodily-affective perception can help us reassess another cluster of hefty constructs long inciting theoretical indignation—agency, self-possession, individualism, autonomy, the subject. Few notions have met with greater opprobrium from left intellectuals than that of property. This is not surprising, given the formidable influence of Marxist thought—as well as the basic fact that capitalism has been the dominant force shaping modern property relations. Yet those conjunctures have encouraged a seamless conflation of all expressions of property with phenomena specific to capitalism, causing theorists to treat each and every instance of property as an unambiguous avatar of capitalism’s predatory, voracious appetites. Thus castigated as inherently colonizing, ruthless, rapacious, and competitive, that construct further gets impugned for the sum of modernity’s exclusionary violences: slavery and racism, gender bias, settler and other forms of colonialism, the carceral state, and a multitude of other wrongs. Its implications for the individual subject are comparatively toxic, fated to encourage privatizing, egoistic, atomistic, and other avaricious behaviors.

As before, it would be counterproductive to issue a wholesale denial of these views: of course, capitalism has represented an inordinately destructive, mercenary system. Nonetheless, we can ask what is occluded by the near-biblical status of those doctrines, along with their homogenizing, reductive ideas about property. Even within feminist theory, its function is
regarded as truly mixed. Rights to property have represented a central platform of feminist agitation across geographies and histories, viewed as a direct pathway and necessary stepping stone to other avenues of empowerment, whether in the sense of Virginia Woolf’s “room of one’s own” or actual economic resources. And of course, the guarantee of property rights to women directly extricated them from that objectifying status. Overly categorical assumptions about property thus activate countless line-drawing problems, as their monolithic assumptions blunt meaningful variations between its divergent uses. As a constellation of practices, neither all manifestations of property nor all assertions of property rights are equal or the same. To the contrary, their caliber fluctuates situationally, relative to the changing needs and interests at hand. In overdrawing that institution’s foundational violence, theorists ontologize its most egregious extremes, while erasing the way it emboldens and enables. While a proprietary logic no doubt lent ideological sanction to many historical and contemporary crimes, that does not transform its abolition into a readymade cure.

*Citizen* is a lesson in exactly those circumstances wherein the logic of property works to capacitate, as Rankine’s speaker struggles to achieve forms of self-possession. As one lyric concludes: “The worst injury is feeling you don’t belong so much / to you—“ (146). Hearkening to the crimes of slavery, other sections condemn the contemporary commodification of black bodies, such as within the sports franchise and prison industrial complex. Yet despite those legacies of dispossession, *Citizen* pursues self-ownership as a route to agency and authority alike. As elsewhere, those negotiations are crystallized within embodied sensations, encounters, and metaphors—conceptual registers that bleed into one another. An opening sequence contemplates a 12-year-old memory of being told by a classmate: “you smell good and have features more like a white person” (5). While a paradigmatic instance of Othering, subsequent
passages nonetheless salvage “smelling good” as a badge of self-actualization. One incident sufficiently offensive as to induce “puke” concludes with exactly such imagery: “you pull yourself to standing, soon enough the blouse is rinsed, it’s another week, the blouse is beneath your sweater, against your skin, and you smell good” (8). This repetition of “you” and “yours” casts that odyssey of self-claiming as active and intentional, with Rankine’s incantatory second person ritually reenacting, over and over, the fraught task of embracing the very body and self that racism stigmatizes and negates.

Such phrasing vivifies further intricacies of Citizen’s second person. That perspective might seem to place the category of the subject under erasure, suspending or dispersing the lyrical “I” to execute its figurative death. As I’ve suggested, Rankine’s “you” almost aggressively interpellates the reader, collectivizing and alienating at once. Just as Citizen’s eclectic archive becomes collaborative, its beseeching “you” ensnares the reader within the speaker’s successive ordeals. Thus implicated, we are, however, relegated to an ambivalent zone straddling the opposing roles of fellow traveler and antagonist. Indeed, one might speculate as to whether Citizen’s academic acclaim extends from exactly these slippages: does it incorporate us (and our academic theories) within its compass of suffering, or are we instead cast out as perpetrators? Either way, its “you” conjures a panorama of judgment and interrogation—placing text and reader alike on trial even while refusing to arbitrate those ambiguities.

But at the same time, Citizen’s second person forges and assembles an “immanent you” that, through repetition, enacts a self-hailing—a performative utterance that consolidates, anchors, and objectivizes Citizen’s self-possessing, self-authorizing lyric subject. This painstaking process of self-stabilization and recovery also coordinates Citizen’s developmental arc. We’ve seen how embodied self-knowledge offers one horizon of subjectification, as the text
clarifies: “feelings are what create a person, something unwilling, something wild vandalizing whatever the skull holds. Those sensations form a someone” (60). Yet that exercise in self-incorporation is simultaneously jeopardized by the injustices infusing sociopolitical practices like the one named in its title. One passage, for instance, memorializes the self-betrayals demanded by that institution by emblazoning the words “LONG FORM BIRTH CERTIFICATE” as the backdrop to two pages recounting (without naming) Obama’s botched inaugural oath of office (112-3). Obama’s missteps might be taken to emblematize the impossible standards administering political inclusion—standards contrived to guarantee racialized failure.65 Other passages instead enlist sarcasm to problematize that ontology of the liberal subject, chiding: “Listen, you, I was creating a life study of a monumental first person” (72).

Cognizance of these and other contradictions underwriting the liberal individual do not, however, derail Citizen’s efforts to constitute and sustain a viable “you.” One can certainly explain that project as a rejoinder to microaggression, with its assaults on the legitimacy of subjective experience. As such, the effort to assemble a livable, coherent, self-reliant subject becomes crucial to transcending those injuries. Some passages overtly delineate those links:

To be left, not alone, the only wish—
to call you out, to call out you.

Who shouted, you? You

shouted you, you the murmur in the air, you sometimes
sounding like you, you sometimes saying you,

go nowhere,

be no one but you first—

Nobody notices, only you’ve known,

you’re not sick, not crazy,
not angry, not sad—
It’s just this, you’re injured. (145)

The repetition and enjambments of “you, you” simultaneously localize and thereby authorize an otherwise elusive, fragmented subject, even as the gestures of “shouting” and “calling out” accentuate its deliberate, intentional nature. This integration of a shattered “you” furthermore works to impose direction on the paralysis of “going nowhere.” And that onus, importantly, precedes the speaker’s identification of unhinging feelings as “injuries”—a label that categorizes and, in turn, assuages formerly disorienting self-doubt. While diagnosing a broken system, *Citizen* nevertheless recounts a process of successful self-centering that, moreover, lends coherence and veracity to the “known”—in effect, endowing subjective experience with integrity.

Building on all of this, a retrieval of agency represents another of its responses to overwhelming paradox. Along with the subject, agency (and by extension intentionality, will, autonomy, and so on) has long occasioned critique, condemned as the logic of sovereign mastery as well as hostage to dangerous fantasies of untrammeled freedom. In many ways, this disposition only intensified with post-Saussurian linguistics, with its liquidation and dispersal of agency into an infinite chain of linguistic play. What ensues is that, when agency has been theorized, an optics of paradox refract and dissipate it. As Judith Butler describes such a diffuse agency, “To be excluded from the universal, and yet to make a claim within its terms, is to utter a performative contradiction of a certain kind.”66 Given this, it is not surprising that recent post-critical challenges might set out to recuperate that category, whether as an independent goal or understudied locus. For instance, one of Felski’s aims in essaying the “limits of critique” is to contend with the ways criticism has discounted the agency of literature, for instance through a
Historicist inflation of context and its influence. Felski’s theory of attachments conversely reconceives texts as “active mediators” that broker links and connections shedding light on literature’s “social lives.”

Yet efforts like Felski’s nonetheless raise questions about what a revival of agency should look like. Felski is, of course, heavily indebted to Bruno Latour, whose actor-network theory takes seriously the agency of non-human actants, distributing it widely across a spectrum of non-intentional objects and sites. One clear virtue of Latour’s materialism is to substitute theory’s overly negative posture with an affirmative stance of care toward those “gatherings” and “assemblies.” However, there remain questions about whether that focus becomes overly sweeping, erasing crucial distinctions and eliding matters of accountability and choice (even if those matters would invariably re-center the human). Such concerns echo those I’ve already raised about some affect theory, which similarly liquefies agency into the aleatory movements of visceral forces (often resembling a written text). We could accordingly debate whether this theoretical ghosting of agency and its analogues (responsibility, intentionality, autonomy) is best understood as a legacy of the linguistic turn, a position Toril Moi develops in Revolution of the Ordinary. But there are deeper questions about whether many “postcritical” “recoveries” of that category merely devise new grounds for vacating agency of its evaluative dimensions—further mystifying determinations that instead require stabilization via prescriptive criteria.

Akin to what Moi decries, Citizen offers a playbook in how language games can conceal exactly such determinations. Many passages are tutorials in the workings of metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and other rhetorical figures. While at times amplifying meaning, in others cases such figures obscure it. A section elliptically reflecting on the murder of James Craig Anderson mimics news reportage—in a parody begging to be read as a rebuke to both new
materialist theories and poststructuralist ideas about rhetoric. Adopting the media’s gaze, it describes “the pickup truck [] beating the black object to the ground,” relying on parallel sentence structures across consecutive lines to configure “the pickup” as an actor turned weapon. Yet that conversion masks accountability, deceptively vesting objects with causal force. In one sense, an autonomization of discourse is shown to author those obfuscations, as: “James Craig Anderson is dead. The pickup truck is a figure of speech” (95). But while rhetorical play subverts content, exaggerating the causal force of non-human actants produces symmetrical effects. Both interpretations of this lyric sequence, moreover, caricature and thereby interrogate the academic proclivity to aggrandize structural oppression. As a metonymy, “the pickup” stands in for not only individual culprits but also the system at large (or at least rural white America). But that generalization of agency onto the system displaces and occludes the self-determining choices of isolated social actors. Explanations for injustice that engulf individual decision-making and accountability within a totalizing structure cast a smokescreen over those prescriptive evaluations.

_Citizenship, Inclusion, and the Logic of Rights._ Citizen’s title certainly problematizes its ultimate stance toward that institution. Does Rankine foremost level damning critiques of citizenship and its failures? Or does the title herald civic inclusion as a guiding ambition and even principle? Naturally, its pointed commentaries are colored by ambivalence. Like its allusion to Obama’s Oath of Office, one could sincerely debate whether citizenship represents a source of what Lauren Berlant would term “cruel optimism” or instead a valuable objective.71 Nevertheless, there is little doubt such meditations cohere Citizen’s disparate episodes and referee its developmental arc, as the speaker entertains various strategies for mitigating,
tempering, and even overcoming citizenship’s exclusionary limits. As one interlude comments, “Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on” (151).

In such a spirit, *Citizen* interrogates the assumptions informing most theoretical treatments of the dual constructs of citizenship and rights. Those standard theorizations, we’ve seen, almost uniformly refract them through an optics of paradox, typically to enshrine what I’ve called the master category of exclusion (along with its corollaries of the exceptional, singular, and exemplary) as foundational and paradigmatic. This privileging of exclusion not only has left a vast theoretical footprint (whether within discourses of Otherness or biopolitics or debates about the canon) but also engrains a series of near tautological premises, exacerbating the very perception of stultifying paradox that critiques of exclusion derive from to begin with. That conceptual matrix has likewise hardwired a number of antipathies—above all, to goals like assimilation, inclusion, and naturalization (legal and figural), which are seen clear-cut forms of accommodationism and selling out. While traceable to seminal thinkers like Arendt and Marx, such a logic posits a kind of zero-sum game, in which the pursuit of individual rights is understood to exact almost automatic forfeitures and costs.

This conceptual terrain is something a prescriptive theory surveys anew. One casualty of the optics of paradox lies with its severing of law from justice, opposing those domains to ontologize what are condemned as the lethal paradoxes of law’s originary exclusions. Manichean, this pervasive anti-legalism works to dismisses any and all recourse to law as an inevitable betrayal, a view equally standard within leftist legal scholarship. Such a mindset has been particularly controlling, and understandably so, within theorizations of race, as we started to explore earlier. Here, Saidiya Hartman’s groundbreaking *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* can exemplify such thinking, while further
illustrating its implications for ideas about the subject. A study of Reconstruction, *Scenes of Subjection* derides that era’s legal advances, namely African Americans’ newly minted rights, as merely the latest façade of bondage. In certain respects, Hartman’s claims are factually correct: Reconstruction did witness what Douglas A. Blackmon dubs “slavery by another name.” Facilitated by the speedy evisceration of the Reconstruction Amendments and Civil Rights Act, those travesties were presided over by the Supreme Court.\(^\text{73}\) However, Hartman’s assertions are supported less by historical data than a Foucaultian vision of disciplinary power, one wherein slavery was “supplanted by the liberty of contract that spawned debt-peonage, the bestowal of right that engendered indebtedness and obligation and licensed naked forms of domination and coercion, and the cultivation of a work ethic that promoted self-discipline and induced internal forms of policing.”\(^\text{74}\) As such, Hartman ends up advocating a wholesale denunciation of law and legality, since Reconstruction’s failures “need to be located in the very language of persons, rights, and liberties.”\(^\text{75}\) Yet beyond its totalizing logic, such thinking conceives individual agency as inevitably dwarfed and, in turn, neutered by the titanic scope of the oppressive structure. And Hartman preserves no room for granular attention to the small-scale victories as well as defeats of isolated actors in highly contextualized spaces—which, it goes without saying, were likewise enabled by those same languages of persons, liberties, and rights.

With its innumerable references to civil rights history, *Citizen* does—like Hartman—rail against the standards of compliance long compulsory for disenfranchised populations seeking to “prove” their civic entitlements.\(^\text{76}\) But its despair is modulated by glimpses of citizenship’s inescapable value. Through almost philosophical dialogues, some sections actively adjudicate different routes to sociopolitical membership. One such dialogue unfolds through the many voices that together contemplate the Zidane World Cup incident. While a dark prognosis of
racism’s cyclicality, its roster of legendary thinkers also issue multiple calls to arms. An almost meta-critical statement from James Baldwin reads: “This endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful” (128). On the same page, Frederick Douglass galvanizes: “But at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don’t know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution…” (id.). Inspiring, these lines conspicuously champion the very categories left theorists like Hartman write off, extolling them as beacons guiding the “fight” and “struggle.” Baldwin claims “identity” as, while ambivalent, nonetheless an objective—something to “achieve” and “confirm”—that furthermore promises to consolidate the “authority” of the subject. The quote from Douglass differently underscores the strategic, situationalist character of resistance, while affirming the need for will and resolve. In harnessing ideals often methodologically scapegoated, such statements refuse to reduce the broken system to its corruptions, instead averring its susceptibility to improvement and repair. The contradictions of “identity” and intentionality Baldwin cites, for example, are construed as neither immobilizing nor disciplinary nor ideological snares. To the contrary, Baldwin’s verbs cultivate “identity” and “authority” as goals, just as his sentence structure prioritizes “beauty.” Needless to say, such assertions are pointedly prescriptive, seeking to rouse, stir, and channel “resolved” and principled “action.”

It’s worth pausing to further delineate why this confirmatory stance departs from certain programmatic ideas about exclusion and exceptionality. We’ve observed how the logic of paradox transmutes the failed universalities of citizenship and rights into a redemptive Otherness or outside—a site of exemption foundational to yet uncapturable by the polluted system. Yet multiple ironies extend from this mode of antinomianism. For one, it anatomizes wrongdoing as
a forgone conclusion while exiling ethics to a deferred condition of fugitivity, impossibility and, in Derrida’s thought, being “without guarantees.” In addition, this relay of exceptionalization purges justice-ethics of multiple qualities I’ve sought to recuperate: the ordinary, commonsensical, here-and-now, trustworthy, accustomed, verifiable. In contrast: what would it mean to seek out justice within the contours of normal, predictable rhythms that lend structure to received, lived practices? And to find it within minor, if concerted, variations to our established patterns of relating? How could justice be reconceived as practicable, accessible, and foreseeable for generalizable actors, something to be incrementally sought after and realistically attained?

Throughout, we’ve likewise considered the fractures and dispossessions understood to constitute the (modern) subject. Within deconstructive-psychoanalytic thought, those paradoxes riddling the self are typically understood to fully occasion ethics—in a transit that at once pejoratizes qualities like identity, coherence, unity, stability, reliability, and presence as barriers to the ethical. That topography of selfhood thus repudiates goals like self-trust and self-knowledge as impediments to, versus germinal of, justice and ethics. But here, too, we can remap these equations. Akin to *Citizen*’s pursuit of self-possession, an account of the integrated, self-identical subject might enable alternate insights into justice and ethics. Rather than disruptive and deferred, could justice be rooted within self-present, familiar perceptions and practices? And therefore something worthy of trust? What would it mean to conceive justice as a vehicle for restoring or sustaining qualities like balance and proportionality? To put this differently, could justice and ethics reside within the nutritive regimens that fashion habitable practices of selfhood, and might prescriptive criteria help to curate those regimens? Many existing vocabularies for justice—equality, fairness, generosity, impartiality, charity, neutrality—reflect such a sensibility.
We can return again to *Citizen* for a vision of what this might look like—a vision importantly far from Pollyanna-ish or sanitized. Rather, the speaker’s quest for self-grounding repeatedly emerges through gritty, uneasy imagery. As one opening passage verifies the legitimacy of the outrage microaggression incites: “The wrong words enter your day like a bad egg in your mouth and puke runs down your blouse, a dampness drawing your stomach in toward your rib cage” (8). This unsettling barrage of sensations (cold, acidity, foul tastes and smells) nevertheless directs the imagination inwardly, activating gut-level reflexes. While registering an unpleasant shock, the authority of those visceral reactions is affirmed, answering the self-doubt induced by microaggression with a mode of self-authentication. This recurrent insistence on the integrity of what “only you’ve known” (145) thus weaves together a larger fabric of trust and commitment—one with decidedly sociopolitical implications.

**Law, Legality, and Institutions.** Given the anti-establishment bent of much theory, institutional forms and practices have instead generally elicited substantial mistrust.\(^7\) One could route those misgivings through multiple intellectual genealogies. Whether based in anxieties about social conformity and homogenization, Weberian theories of rationalization, the ethos of the avant-garde, or recent work on neoliberalism, the liabilities and costs of institutional existence are frequently prioritized. Condensed in idioms like bureaucracy, corporatization, standardization, efficiency, social engineering, economization, and management, those threats have vastly overshadowed whatever virtues or benefits institutional life is seen to afford, in a mindset also rife within left scholarship on law. Naturally, contemporary discourses of the corporate university take such thinking even further.
Yet confined by one-dimensional assumptions, those standard views miss a lot. In many ways, they exemplify the consequences of methodological neglect of differential and qualitative determinations. Clearly, not all institutions or institutional cultures are the same, and theory has lacked sufficiently fine-tuned metrics for indexing those scalar discrepancies. We saw earlier how popular analytics like neoliberalism and biopolitics totalize oppression to mask the crucial divergences separating one manifestation of a given syndrome from the next. Attention to the nuances and variations within and between discrete institutional forms and agendas can instead illumine, in Sedgwick and Frank’s words, “how things differentiate: how quantitative differences turn into qualitative ones.”78 One ambition of a prescriptive theory is therefore to leverage granular criteria gauged to index those relative successes and failures—along with their root causes and many other distinguishing factors. Does a particular phenomenon result from the status quo endemic to a given institutional form, or instead mark either aberrancies or deviations from the normal? What do those algebras tell us about the health, functionality, and sustainability of an institution’s baseline conditions? One problem with blanket anti-institutionalism thus involves how it blinds us to the generative facets of institutional life, including the capacity of institutional forms to integrate, enrich, and empower.

Contrary to theory’s formulaic skepticism, institutional structures offer invaluable contributions to group as well as individual life—many of which emerged within the medical senses of prescription. It goes without saying that institutional practices confer meaning, endowing isolated actions with context and purpose. By integrating those individualized activities into collective itineraries, they likewise breed interpersonal solidarity and exchange. Institutions, we know, can be laboratories in cooperative choice and decision-making, fashioning democracy in miniature while also amalgamating bodies of collaborative expertise. Recent social
scientific literatures studying the breakdown of communal public life directly attribute that collapse to failures of trust—here, trust in the political, legal, and other institutions comprising the backbone of society. As an applied practice, a prescriptive theory therefore demands that we develop vocabularies for accessing and affirming those dimensions of institutional existence, precisely to cultivate and restore those vectors of trust that have been eroded.

We’ve at length wrestled with the vehement critiques of legal institutions left theorists have raised—critiques so thoroughgoing as to reduce terms like the “juridical” and “legality” to epithets or bad words. Arguably more than any other institutional syndicate, law gets condemned as actively built upon deep structural injustices and exclusions. Hence, theorists have erected various methodological and practical tripwires, cautioning that recourse to legalism will invariably “usurp” or “turn[] left projects against themselves.” But this tendency to write law’s errors into its genetics represents another mode of ontologization that elides—rather than disarticulates—the many different errors law can fall victim to. Something similar, of course, happens to its opportunities, which get written off all together. While not to discount law’s frequent obeisance to power, a prescriptive approach disambiguates the wildly varying causes and effects of its brokenness. That process of qualitative differentiation, moreover, might charter a more ecumenical, variegated set of intellectual responses to law and legality—some that oppose its deficiencies and others that aim to publicize, endorse, and perpetuate its successes. Precisely by parceling out this middle ground can we ascertain the legal system’s openings in addition to its closures, seizing upon chances to intervene within its current architecture. As such, this stance queries whether theorists have jettisoned invaluable legal tools, principles, precedents (like the rule of law itself), and procedures.
Sections of *Citizen* model such a prescriptive approach to law. As I’ve suggested, Rankine’s text is preoccupied with the impact of law on American society—an impact in many ways catastrophic. Yet it simultaneously contemplates something like Levine’s “affordances,” affordances repeatedly gauged by analogizing law to sports. Such a comparison is routine; even Chief Justice John Roberts famously evoked the judge-as-umpire parallel in his confirmation hearing (although to insinuate an arguably disingenuous philosophy of judicial restraint). Beyond the “neutral referee” fantasy, multiple other bases exist for likening those two arenas, whether their adversarial stance, finite duration of their matches, or rules designed to level their figural playing fields (such as handicaps in golf). Both law and sports are also shored up by comprehensive systems of precedent, which participants must respect in order to succeed. Their theaters are highly ceremonial, with public rituals legitimizing their outcomes. And in contemporary America, the sports franchise and law both differently impose forms of hypervisibility on black bodies.

Memorable incidents from professional and collegiate sports lend illustration to *Citizen*’s more philosophical reflections. Just as the Zidane headbutt becomes such a flashpoint, another central section (published separately as a feature in a 2015 *The New York Times Magazine*) takes Serena Williams’s career as a referendum on the tolls of discrimination, at length recounting the injustices inflicted on Williams by non-neutral referees. Demystifying a façade of equality and fairness, those digressions simultaneously weigh the evidentiary force of such public events—in Williams’s case, an objective authority contrary to that cemented by the official record of losses and wins. Athletics are furthermore integrationist. Just as sports merge bodily and mental competencies, their popular settings bring people together, in competition and spectatorship alike. Yet while collectivizing, sporting events also dramatize the dependence of democratic
participation on predictable rules and procedures, which govern both the underlying game and audience behavior. Indeed, exercise and everything it cultivates (health, wellbeing, functionality) are paradigmatically prescriptive: while often grueling, exercise regimens and habits also effectuate outcomes like fortitude, skill, growth, mastery, and success.

In *Citizen’s* terminal scene, the speaker reflects on her own adventures in tennis in exactly such terms. This sequence that “end[s] what doesn’t have an ending” finds her in bed relating “yesterday”’s events to her partner. In particular, she describes how, in an occurrence preceding an appointment to play tennis, a stranger relocates her car to a different parking space, after “Our eyes met and what passed passed as quickly as the look away” (159). Located within *Citizen’s* maze of microaggressions, this incident certainly invites such an interpretation. But despite those links, the speaker’s reaction modulates its psychic-affective impact. Instead of transforming it into a crucible allegorizing the grip of structural oppression, Rankine’s repetition of “passed passed” *both* captures microaggressions’ lethal inadvertency *and* enacts a process of containment and transcendence. Rather than “worry[ing]” her suspicions of the stranger, the speaker continues to her tennis session, as the passage closes with a meditation on the sunrise—“slow and cloudy, dragging the light in” (id.).

Assuming she played a game, her partner asks, “Did you win?” But the speaker again inverts that adversarial posture into a prescriptive one, replying in the lines that conclude *Citizen*:

“It wasn’t a match, I say. It was a lesson.” (159) One might take those words as cautionary, akin to the expression “being taught a lesson.” But at once, *Citizen’s* final image conveys a willing submission to the rules of the game, presumably in effort to master them. Neither revolutionary nor oppositional, tennis is recast as a learning experience: a site of incremental instruction, improvement, and growth. Declaratively interjecting “I say,” that shift in consciousness is
Furthermore deliberate and intentional—a strategic, willed embrace of everything tennis represents. Such skill clearly requires compliance with established rules and protocols—protocols that, again, mirror those enabling the legal system. Yet within athletics, those rules additionally facilitate enjoyment and pleasure—pleasure embedded within and capacitated by mindful knowledge of and conformity to a set of accumulated, well-tested institutional practices.

In such ways, *Citizen* concludes with a powerful statement of what it might mean to work within our existing institutional structures, without minimizing their limits. Yet by neither romanticizing nor becoming alienated or hamstrung by those failures, it instead charts a gradualist progression beyond paralysis to arrive at constructive, self-actualized engagement. Along with that reformist sensibility, the speaker’s tennis lesson testifies to the perfectibility of institutional practices: to their responsiveness to evolutions within a sociopolitical milieu.

Acceptance of those rules likewise involves more than mere trust in their basic coherence or legitimacy; it requires willingness to have one’s actions molded and guided by that system. Indeed, the gratification of a sport like tennis derives precisely from the predictable, stable, established, and widely translatable character of its authorizing conventions. That continuity explains why tennis (like any game) successfully migrates across players and environments, generating a kind of common language. As its own metonymy for politics, this synchronicity of individual fulfillment and institutionalized practice is, we might say, the fabric of social belonging. Hence, one could in addition take this example as a directive: to dwell within our existing institutional structures precisely in the spirit of cultivating and remaking them. As with tennis, entanglement within the rhythms, patterns, customs, and routines facilitating social and political life is a steppingstone not only to individual mastery of a system. That immersion also precedes awareness of how or why any institutional culture should be critiqued, altered, refined,
sustained, enriched, and/or expanded. No tradition can be built or refashioned from a position of experiential distance, aloofness, or neutrality.

Citizen’s closing tribute to tennis—a tribute packaged within an extended exposé of that game’s many flaws—thus itself exemplifies prescriptive practice at work, enacting modes of engagement simultaneously applicable to Rankine’s title. Just as the speaker recounts her lesson within the intimacy of a bedroom, citizenship practices are implied to pervade all spheres of existence, public and private. Far from confined to idealized realms like the voting booth or courtroom, Citizen locates the exercise of citizenship and rights within the most mundane, routine, un-exceptional of spaces. That gesture, I’ve argued, renders those routines readily available—for ordinary actors to emulate, customize, and inhabit. In so doing, it further demonstrates how experiences of citizenship furnish meaning, shape, and purpose—prescribing citizenship as one criteria among many.

Citizen’s critiques, as it rails against the many maladies afflicting the body politic, are therefore directly wedded to the constructive, affirmative dimensions of its imaginative project. While vesting experience with integrity, that fusion of critical questioning and postcritical rebuilding is integrationist on additional levels. Indeed, this spirit of the “both/and” is one we might describe as a praxis. Quandaries about how theory can and should translate into a praxis have long occupied (and continue to vex) theory, so it is not surprising that they would animate a defense of prescription. But insofar as the “theory era” compounded a historic rift between intellectual play and its real-world bearings, those fractures are something a prescriptive theory promises to mend.
7. Sedgwick despairs of how paranoia has itself ironically acted as a “prescription.” Find page.
8. See *The Theory of Communicative Action*.
10. *Revolution of the Ordinary*, 134-5. One might be tempted to supplement that roll call with thinkers like Richard Rorty, interested less in reason but instead a rescue of liberalism (although only to imbue that category with all the hallmarks of the postmodern).
13. As Sedgwick comments of paranoia/suspicion, it “knows some things well and other poorly.” *Touching Feeling*, 130.
14. See discussion below.
16. Id., 12.
17. *[Indeed, the cost of such research absorbed in the price of any given drug, accordingly to some studies, can make up XX% of its eventual price.]*
18. While those treatments are frequently exorbitantly and even preclusively expensive, their net cost frequently does fall significantly short of the actual expenditures incurred by pharmaceutical companies in conducting and thereafter developing the research that fed into those efforts to save and support isolated lives.
20. For the view that criticism is undergoing a “collective shift” toward such writing, see Amitava Kumar, [https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/influential-books?essay=Kumar](https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/influential-books?essay=Kumar)
21. We could include texts like Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, include.
22. In addition, see pages 55, 59, 60, 75, 112, 117.
25 Check Wikipedia and update.
26 For a discussion of the explanatory authority of trauma. See Didier Fassin and Richard
Rechtman, The Empire of Trauma. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, date)
27 For the language of curation, see Nathan K. Hensley, “Curatorial Reading and Endless War,”
28 This is impetus partially inspired by Eve Sedgwick’s thought. Indeed, prescription in many
ways answers Sedgwick’s call to study “how things differentiate: how quantitative differences
turn into qualitative ones…” (106). Sedgwick notably draws upon both structuralism and
systems theory in order to thereby probe the “many-valued.”
29 Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected (New
30 Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the
Human (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2014), 12-13. We could certainly note the prioritization of
exclusion that derives such reasoning.
31 (1993), 73. [Note to me: Check chapter two of The Black Atlantic for second half of this
sentence?]
33 Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man (Cambridge, MA: Harvard,
1996).
37 Id., 20, xv.
38 Id., 7.
39 Puar’s thought, however, reduces the body to a mere screen for power and tool for value
extraction.
40 “Trauma and Experience: Introduction,” in Trauma: Explorations in Memory (Baltimore, MD:
41 There is, of course, a related tradition of dismissing ideas about health and flourishing as a
markers of a false consciousness and ideology. Add and cite Sara Ahmed.
42 The Limits of Critique, 6.
43 See Ann Kornbluh, forthcoming.
44 See Munoz; Chris Castiglia, The Pratices of Hope: Literary Criticism in Disenchanted Times
(NYU, 2017); Jonathan Lear book; [Terry Eagleton, Hope Without Optimism].
46 Thanks to Dean Franco for this point! For example, see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, The
Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study (Minor Compositions, 2013).
UP, 2012); Anne Cvetkovich, Depression; Lauren Berlant; Cruel Optimism. Sedgwick
complains of how “the mushrooming, self-confirming strength of a monopolistic strategy of
anticipating negative affect can have […] the effect of entirely blocking the potentially operative
goal of seeking positive affect” (Touching Feeling 136).
48 Our Aesthetic Categories, 19
49 Cite Hume and others.
51 Fill out this cite.
52 Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2012), xii. Brinkema’s first chapter also powerfully associates a suspicion stance toward affect with the logic of modernity, wherein the externalization of affect becomes something demanding interpretation.
53 Id., , Xiv.
54 Id., 23-24.
55 Id., 25.
57 For instance, Ngai zeroes in on the affects named in her title because they index economic processes and the subsumption of various social competences under capital. See *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 13.
58 See *Fictions of Dignity*.
60 We could alternatively state this in terms of what Sedgwick calls an anti-essentialism, anti-biological, and anti-naturalism. Circa 108.
61 See Catherine MacKinnon, *Only Words*.
63 “The Resistance to Theory,” 15, 20. De Man defined the “resistance to theory” as variously “a resistance to the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language” and “a resistance to language itself or to the possibility that language contains factors or functions that cannot be reduced to intuition.” (17, 13).
64 Include discussion of Basquiat.
65 Cite Berlant and audition for citizenship.
67 *The Limits of Critique*, 162.
68 Id., 164, 173, 184.
71 Insert cite.
72 See Chapter Two, page.
74 (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 120.
75 *Scenes*, 6.
76 Hartman discusses “the burdened individuality of freedom” (130).
Cite Caroline and Anna for anti-formalism?

Cite Jed Stiglitz.

Include cites to Butler and others
