

Review Article

Dislocated Voice and Fragmented Self: A Critical Review of Contemporary Lyric in the Works of Claudia Rankine and Ocean Vuong

Sura Hussein Mohammed Ali^{1*}

¹Department of Preparation and Training, Baghdad General Directorate of Education, Rusafa II, Ministry of Education, Baghdad, Iraq

*Corresponding Author: Sura Hussein Mohammed Ali

Department of Preparation and Training, Baghdad General Directorate of Education, Rusafa II, Ministry of Education, Baghdad, Iraq

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Abstract: Recent lyric poetry has begun to increasingly move from the Romantic conception of subjective unity to the unified forms of voice, which are fractured, relational and historically conditioned by trauma, racialisation and migration. The poets Claudia Rankine and Ocean Vuong are at the heart of these poetic trends; the forms their voices take engage dislocation, hybridity and bodily memory. This study seeks to look at the ways dislocated voice and fractured self are the core aesthetic and political forms in the work of Rankine and Vuong and to evaluate their importance to contemporary lyric theory. Close reading of the primary texts and synthesis of more recent scholarship in lyric theory and trauma studies, race studies, and migration studies are used for this critical, comparative review approach. The findings show how both poets employ fragmentation, unstable address and mixed modes to signify subjectivity as relational, historical and migrant and as racial. Vuong highlights structures of memory from the body, memory of migration, and "civic and documentary lyric", while Rankine foregrounds intimate, civic, and documentary memory, all of which collectively recalibrate the nature of the lyric voice in a contemporary context. The study ends by arguing that the present lyric is no longer a single, coherent subjectivity but is rather a dislocated, relational, and historically situated mode of expression. It introduces, in both aesthetic and epistemological ways, the theme of fragmentation, which opens a space for lyric to address trauma, migration, and racialised experience in the context of today's literature and to produce a lyric theory that enriches the critical transnational significance of modern scholarship.

Keywords: Contemporary Lyric, Fragmented Subjectivity, Dislocated Voice, Trauma Poetics, Racialised Lyric, Migration and Memory, Relational Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The lyric has undergone a marked transformation in twenty-first-century literary culture. If a unified "I" of inwardness, unity and expressive autonomy had been the dominant hallmark of earlier lyric traditions, then our lyric of the present reflects broken subjectivities, pressured by historical realities, collective vulnerability and shifting patterns of address (Passin, 2012; Taylor, 2013). Recent scholarship has pointed to the fact that the lyric of today no longer represents one interior voice but rather "relational, dispersed, socially mediated" voices of selfhood that emerge in relation to public discourse, historical memory, and institutions of power (Jackson and Prins, 2014; Skillman, 2019). Lyrically, then, there has been a significant location for the negotiation of the psychological and political impact of racialisation, migration, trauma and embodied precarity.

Fragmentation, discontinuity, silence, and the use of changing pronouns are common formal techniques in contemporary poetry that make the unstable consciousness readable (Pieterse, 2012; Richie, 2013; Bell, 2020). The formal ruptures can be seen not only as an experimental device but also as a space where traumatic memory is fragmented and where belonging is inexact (Chan, 2017; Lock, 2020; Kidd, 2025). That the lyric self does not emerge as a unifying presence but rather as a contingent formation, formed by the racial encounter, the migrant displacement, the affective inheritance,

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and social vulnerability. In this crucial space, Claudia Rankine and Ocean Vuong are formidable contemporary poets who have irrevocably transformed the concept of the lyric poem. In *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Rankine creates a civic lyric that is concerned with racialised public life and with dispersed collective speech, while Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* and *Time is a Lyric of Migration, Familial Memory, Grief, and the Vulnerability of the Flesh* (Javadizadeh, 2019; Sorlin, 2024).

This review examines how dislocated voice and fragmented self-function as central aesthetic and political structures in their poetry and assesses their broader significance for contemporary lyric studies.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Contemporary Lyric and the Crisis of Subjectivity

Contemporary lyric has undergone a substantial shift from the Romantic model of lyric interiority toward forms of relational and historically mediated subjectivity. Often a coherent speaking self with a voice rooted in feeling, inwardness, and expressive wholeness is valued in Romantic lyric. In contrast, current scholarship maintains that the lyric "I" is becoming more unstable in the present – that it is plural, socially produced, and no longer autonomous (see the work of Fisher, 2009; Matthews, 2012; White, 2014; and Jackson and Prins, 2014). The lyric speaker is not the clear, neutral focus of experience but often situates himself in several positions of address, one mediated by public discourse, one by social encounter, and one by collective memory. This instability is in line with the changes that have occurred in history over the last few decades as a consequence of globalisation, racism, immigration, and media saturation. Voice, therefore, is not only an individual's voice but also a historically formed voice that manifests itself in relation to structures of power, vulnerability and social recognition (Moore, 2010; Weidman, 2014; Javadizadeh, 2019).

2.2 Fragmentation, Trauma, and Memory

In the poetry of trauma and memory, fragmentation has become one of the hallmarks of the formal sensibilities of the present. The traumatic experience is generally not coherent, and memory of it can be delayed, a temporal rupture, and discontinuous. For this reason, poets such as the contemporary ones are often using interruption, repetition, silence, ellipsis, and incompleteness as formal techniques that can provide a sense of psychic dislocation and historical injury (Chan, 2017; Jeya, 2025; Nicolaescu, 2025; McLoughlin, 2026). The fragmentary lyric structures tend to echo the broken temporality through which traumatic experience comes back, rather than to present a string of stable narratives. This formal discontinuity also illustrates the fragility of memory. Memory is now seen as a process that is recursive and emotive rather than linear and restorative: bits, images, and sensations have fresh meaning and take new meaning as they are recalled and reconstructed in the here and now. In this context, fragmentation turns from a stylistic experiment to an epistemological occurrence whereby lyric expresses the limits of representation and the historical vulnerability (Caruth, 1996; Elias, 2004; Rouabhia, 2025).

2.3 Race, Migration, Embodiment, and Relational Identity

Two conditions which have come to the fore in modern lyric migration are those of race and migration. The elements of race and migration have become significant factors in modern lyric writing. Racialisation may help to shape the speaking subject in relation to institutions of surveillance, exclusion and vulnerability, while migration may help to shape experiences of geographical rupture, cultural translation and unstable belonging. They often result in lyric voices that are estranged, broken, and/or negotiated (Hesse, 2004; Western, 2020; Sorlin, 2024). The body is thus foregrounded as a crucial site in which to think through history, affect, and power in the contemporary lyric. The body is a medium of memory, vulnerability and social inscription, a body in which the experience of displacement is lived and expressed. Instead of thinking of identity as independent or enclosed, recent lyric generally thinks of subjectivity as relational, coming out of family, community, language, and public discourse. This relational identity theory focuses on the idea that the self is constituted through a network of historical inheritance and social interaction, rather than being pre-existing and existing independently of these networks (Jon, 2012; Butler, 2005; Zhu, 2024).

3. METHOD AND SCOPE OF REVIEW

This study adopts a critical comparative review approach to examine how contemporary lyric reconfigures voice, subjectivity, and formal self-representation in the works of Claudia Rankine and Ocean Vuong. The analysis combines close reading of primary texts with critical synthesis of recent scholarship in lyric theory, trauma studies, race studies, and migration studies. Instead of extensive textual commentary, the review focuses on formal and thematic patterning that reveals the connection between lyric expression and subject formation mediated by history (Jackson and Prins, 2014; Sorlin, 2024). The works looked at include *Citizen: An American Lyric*, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* and *Time is a Mother*. Works have been chosen for their example of important developments in lyric experimentation and social address in the twenty-first century. The five interrelated categories for comparative analysis are voice, fragmentation, memory, embodiment, and subjectivity. Through these analytical coordinates, the review examines how dislocated voice and fragmented self-function not merely as stylistic features but as central aesthetic and political structures of contemporary lyric (Javadizadeh, 2019; Zhu, 2024).

4. Dislocated Voice in the Poetry of Claudia Rankine

4.1 Collective Lyric and Unstable Address

An important aspect of *Citizen: An American Lyric* is the constant use of the second-person plural. Instead of anchoring the lyric speaker in a unified "I", Rankine continually uses the grammatical "you" as a variable place to displace boundaries between speaker, addressee, and reader. This pronoun does not point to a fixed identity but rather bounces between individual experience, collective racial memory, and public encounter. The result is an ongoing interplay of personal subjectivity and collective implication, of lyric utterance as a relation to others and not as a self-contained entity. More recently, it has been suggested that the "second-person" pronoun in *Citizen* creates shifting patterns of address and reference, making the reader a participant in the racialised "situations of address" that these shifts produce (Spinosa, 2015; Neal, 2016; Breger, 2012; Sorlin, 2024). Thus, the lyric voice is dislocated as it never has a single consciousness to stand in for it. Instead, "you" is a space of relational tension, a place of intimacy, estrangement, recognition, and vulnerability. In this precarious address, Rankine creates a social space where subjectivity is in constant negotiation, where it is encountered, interrupted, or made public (Javadizadeh, 2019).

4.2 Everyday Injury and Race

As is his poetry, Rankine is equally concerned with the quotidian forms of racial hurt and the mundane contexts in which the subject is formed. Racialised microaggressions, misrecognition and casual exclusions happen over and over again as moments that disrupt psychic continuity in *Citizen*. Such confrontations can be fleeting and seemingly insignificant, but they have lasting emotional significance as they repeatedly put the subject into the socially vulnerable situation. In its place, Rankine places race in the realm of the everyday, of the habitual, of the normal, revealing how public life becomes lyric in the repetition and abrasions of everyday life (Gorin, 2019; Sorlin, 2024; Wolff, 2025). Civic discourse, media commentaries, televised activities, and public speech also mediate her lyric voice. These external discursive materials interrupt the continuity of private utterance and displace the lyric self from autonomous interiority. The speaking subject emerges through collision with social language already structured by power, visibility, and racial hierarchy. Consequently, voice becomes historically and politically mediated rather than purely expressive. As Javadizadeh argues, Rankine's work reveals that lyric subjectivity is inseparable from the racialised conditions under which speech, recognition, and belonging become possible (Javadizadeh, 2019).

4.3 Formal Fragmentation and Documentary Poetics

Rankine's style of poetry is always disrupted by his formal experimentation. 'Citizen' and 'Don't Let Me Be Lonely' are a mixture of prose poetry, essayistic reflection, visual materials, documentary fragments, and meditative interruption. This "hybrid" form is a form of experience that opposes linear development, juxtaposing, discontinuing, and interrupting the lyric experience of the text. Stylistic innovation here is in more than just its effect. Discussions about the lyrical hybridity of Rankine focus on formal fragmentation as a reaction to racial trauma and a fragmented social experience (Chan, 2017; Qarni, 2025; Sabre, 2025). The difficulty of maintaining a coherent narrative in the face of repeated racial injury is registered in two ways: rupture and incompleteness. The difficulty of maintaining a coherent narrative under the conditions of repeated racial injury is registered in two ways: rupture and incompleteness. The lyric also extends beyond private speech, with the inclusion of public archives, media images, and civic discourse in the form of documents. The outcome is a fragmented lyric persona whose voice is heard in various textual modes but not in one single self-presence. Rankine's documentary poetics thus creates an aesthetic technique and a political critique of fragmentation, with the contemporary lyric capturing collective vulnerability just as much through formal instability and a dispersed way of speaking (McCracken, 2024).

5. Fragmented Self in the Poetry of Ocean Vuong

5.1 Migration, Inheritance and Broken Memory

Migration, inheritance, and broken memory are at the heart of Ocean Vuong's poetry. With *Exit Wounds* and *Time is a Mother*, lyric subjectivity is born from the historical afterlives of war, displacement, and refugee movements. Memory is seldom the same as a steady retention or logical autobiography. Instead, it is seen in patches, glimpses and partial returns, and links private experience to intergenerational memory. There is a decisive role of familial inheritance in this process. The speaking self is formed in part by personal memory, but also by the inherited affect, silence and trauma passed down through generations. Vuong's poetry is thus not linear, but rather recursive and fractured. The past and the present constantly overlap, creating a lyrical consciousness in the form of return, interruption, and historical reverberation. Vuong's poetics are recent, as scholarship has noted, which animates migratory memory as a relational network, where the self is always enmeshed with other histories, other languages and other temporalities of diasporic belonging (Nguyen, 2018; Zhu, 2024).

5.2 Body, Intimacy, and Vulnerability

The idea of embodiment is also a critical part of Vuong's self-constructive process of the fractured self. In his poetry, he constantly meditates on desire, loss, intimacy and grief using the softness of the flesh. The body is not just a metaphor; it is an archive of affect and historical commotion, a memory that is stored in sensation, touch, breath, injury and longing. Fragility is associated with experience of intimacy, bringing up both emotional instability and unresolved

historical baggage. Love and grief often go hand in hand in Vuong's lyric universe, and at times tenderness is indistinguishable from absence and vulnerability. This corporeal lyric sensibility is particularly relevant, as it connects private emotional experience with other scales of migration, war and familial inheritance. The speaking topic does not exist in isolation from history but is instead embodied in the speaking body. Therefore, intimate address is an important formal mode for relational subjectivity. The lyric voice frequently speaks to the missing parents, lovers, or remembered figures, and it is by this address that the self is formed through desire, attachment and affect. The vulnerability as a mode of historical and relational knowledge has been noted as a key aspect of Vuong's poetics of intimacy (Choi, 2021; Zhu, 2024).

5.3 Associative Lyric Movement and Imagistic Fragmentation

Vuong's disjointed personae are also expressed in associative lyric movement and disorienting imagery. Instead of the linear narrative development of a poem, his poems often use ellipsis, silence, abrupt transitions and temporal disjunction. Images may then come at each other suddenly, in the absence of a connecting explanation, creating associative movement, in which meaning is brought out by resonance rather than chronological sequence. The formal strategies create a field of perception that is dynamic: memory, desire and historical consciousness intersect. The image is also broken up, and this also shows the fractious nature of memory. The lyric speaker does not reconstruct experience in the form of 'narrative continuity' but in the form of 'flash of sensation', interrupted scenes, and imagistic return. Vuong's poetry has been described in recent scholarship as fragmented language, anachronic structure and imagistic discontinuity which produce a dynamic field of memory and queer relationality (Zhu, 2024). In this formal practice, lyric subjectivity is left open, provisional, and mobile. The self is not a unified interior but an array of affective traces, historical fragments and relational encounters. Vuong's poetics thus illustrates fragmentation as a method and condition of knowledge in contemporary lyric.

6. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

6.1 Shared Formal Concerns

Claudia Rankine's and Ocean Vuong's tones, as well as their poetic contexts, are distinct, but their formal and conceptual concerns are important ones that illuminate contemporary lyric. Fragmentation is a key compositional technique used by both poets. Their poems do not necessarily follow a single thread of narrative development but often are interrupted, juxtaposed, discontinuously timed, and move associatively. Such fragmentation is indicative of unstable subjectivity in which the lyric self is not located in the autonomous interior but is distributed across history, memory, and social contact. In both writers, the memory is traumatic, and there is a return or a recurrence, but not a linear recall. The civic scenes of racial injury in Rankine and the meditations on migration, grief and familial inheritance in Vuong show how the past keeps coming back in affectual "fragments" and in "discontinuous" "temporal structures" (Chan, 2017, p. 2; Zhu, 2024, p. 3). Their lyrical voices are likewise relational. Speaking topics are not the result of self-enclosed expression but rather through address, encounter and exposure to others. The poets' formal assertion of the historically mediated, socially contingent, and affectively unsettled nature of voice thus challenges the traditional lyric's inwardness (Jackson and Prins, 2014).

6.2 Key Differences

Despite these convergences, Rankine and Vuong diverge significantly in the scale, orientation, and discursive texture of lyric articulation. Rankine's poetry is fundamentally civic in orientation. Her work draws from the realms of public speech, visual archives, media discourse, and civic language, developing documentary poetics. However, in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, collective racial address can be a lyric voice, as can be singular self-presence. The second-person pronoun is crucial in constructing a space of racial encounter, where the lyric utterance is always tied to public recognition, social injury, and political visibility (Sorlin, 2024). Public discourse thus breaks through lyric interiority, creating a voice that is social and that is implicated in the collective.

In contrast, Vuong's poetry is lyric and intimate. Here in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* and *Time*, memory, intergenerational inheritance, grief, and body vulnerability are the main coordinates of the lyric subject. Vuong foregrounds interiority, the affective and mnemonic interiority of the migrant, over the public interiority of the document, mediated by intimate address, sensory imagery and embodied recollection. Often, his lyrical voice manifests itself through moments of tenderness, loss, desire, and historical afterlife. While Rankine's lyric turns outward toward civic structures of racialised encounter, Vuong's lyric moves inward toward the affective textures of family, displacement, and embodied remembrance (Zhu, 2024).

6.3 Contribution to Contemporary Lyric Studies

Taken together, Rankine and Vuong make a substantial contribution to contemporary lyric studies by expanding lyric beyond the paradigm of autonomous subjectivity. Their works demonstrate that the lyric "I" can no longer be understood as a stable interior centre detached from historical conditions. Rather, voice is found to be historically contextualised, socially mediated and relationally constructed via race and migration, memory, embodiment, and collective vulnerability (Javadizadeh, 2019). Theoretically, this change in emphasis has significant consequences, as it redefines 'lyric' not only as personal speech but also as a process of negotiating histories of the public sphere, affective inheritance, and

social exposure. What is also important is the manner in which both poets utilise fragmentation as an epistemological and political practice. Fragmentation is not only a form of experimentation or ornament. Instead, it is a way to mark the boundaries of plausible storytelling when racial hurt happens, migrations take place, traumatic memories linger, and history is precarious. Rankine's and Vuong's formal discontinuity, unstable address, and dispersed textual structures expose how the lyric of the present can speak to and through the experiences of knowledge that are broken and the modes of belonging that are contested. As such, their poetry plays a central role in the debates of lyric subjectivity, representation and social form of the twenty-first century (Zhu, 2024; Sorlin, 2024).

7. Critical Gaps and Future Directions

While in recent years, scholarship has advanced the study of contemporary lyric in the work of Claudia Rankine and Ocean Vuong, critical lacunae are present. First, there is a need for more comparative transnational lyric studies that do not focus on the individual author but reference a larger circulation of migration, racial formation, colonial memory, and diasporic flow. Current critiques tend to focus on racialised and migratory subjectivity in singular nation-states and so leave the study of how lyric voice circulates beyond the limits of these historical transnational formations (Jackson and Prins, 2014; Zhu, 2024). Additional work on the topic of multimodality, visuality, affect theory, embodiment and diaspora lyric circulation is also required. The dialogue between text, image, documentary material and visual interruption in Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* is particularly fertile for future research. Likewise, a more thorough examination of how memory, affective fragility, and the mediation of the senses circulate in the body of poetry by Vuong would be fruitful for studies of his poetry. These methods would go beyond a mere textual analysis of lyric forms (Chan, 2017; Sorlin, 2024). Finally, modern lyric criticism could use more focus on the role of the public historical structure in the mediation of private emotion. Intimacy, loss, exposure, and recollection go hand in hand with racial narratives, travels, citizenship, and common memory, as Rankine and Vuong show. To this end, lyric ought to be explored in future scholarship as a relational form that makes the personal feeling historically visible and politically meaningful (Javadizadeh, 2019).

8. CONCLUSION

This review has shown that lyric in the present day, as seen in the poems of Claudia Rankine and Ocean Vuong, is being reconfigured with dislocated voice and fragmented subjectivity. In both poets, lyric expression shifts from an interiority to relational, history-empowered, and socially contextualised self-conceptions, which are influenced by race, migration, trauma and embodiment. The civic and documentary poetics of Rankine's address and form, as well as the fragmentation of Vuong's lyric as migratory, intimate, corporeal, and affective, bring into the light the racialised public sphere. Together they show the fragmentation as an aesthetic strategy and epistemological condition of lyric. Comparative transnational studies should be extended, multimodality and affective embodiment examined, and the deployment of lyric in the globalised mediated world of public history and private vulnerability explored further.

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