

Also by Claudia Rankine

*Plot*

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Coeditor with Juliana Spahr:  
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DON'T LET ME BE LONELY

*An American Lyric*

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Mahalia Jackson is a genius. Or Mahalia Jackson has genius. The man I am with is trying to make a distinction. I am uncomfortable with his need to make this distinction because his inquiry begins to approach subtle shades of racism, classism, or sexism. It is hard to know which. Mahalia Jackson never finished the eighth grade, or Mahalia's genius is based on the collision of her voice with her spirituality. True spirituality is its own force. I am not sure how to respond to all this. I change the subject instead.



We have just seen George Wein's documentary, *Louis Armstrong at Newport, 1971*. In the auditorium a room full of strangers listened to Mahalia Jackson sing

"Let There Be Peace on Earth" and stood up and gave a standing ovation to a movie screen. Her clarity of vision crosses thirty years to address intimately each of us. It is as if her voice has always been dormant within us, waiting to be awakened, even though "it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, (and) through the thousand darkneses of murderous speech."

Perhaps Mahalia, like Paul Celan, has already lived all our lives for us. Perhaps that is the definition of genius. Hegel says, "Each man hopes and believes he is better than the world which is his, but the man who is better merely expresses this same world better than the others." Mahalia Jackson sings as if it is the last thing she intends to do. And even though the lyrics of the song are, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me," I am hearing, *Let it begin in me.*

In my dream I apologize to everyone I meet. Instead of introducing myself, I apologize for not knowing why I am alive. I am sorry. I am sorry. I apologize. In real life, oddly enough, when I am fully awake and out and about, if I catch someone's eye, I quickly look away. Perhaps this too is a form of apology. Perhaps this is the form apologies take in real life. In real life the looking away is the apology, despite the fact that when I look away I almost always feel guilty; I do not feel as if I have apologized. Instead I feel as if I have created a reason to apologize, I feel the guilt of having ignored that thing—the encounter. I could have nodded, I could have smiled without showing my teeth. In some small way I could have wordlessly said, I see you seeing me and I apologize for not knowing why I am alive. I am sorry. I am sorry. I apologize. Afterwards, after I have looked away, I never feel as if I can say, Look, look at me again so that I can see you, so that I can acknowledge that I have seen you, so that I can see you and apologize.

A friend tells me this story: She goes to a bathhouse in Los Angeles and sees an old woman with an identification number on her arm. The markings begin with the letter A.

I saw her concentration-camp number and that it started with the letter A. My cousin has the same one. So I said, "My cousin was in the same concentration camp as you. Auschwitz."

I was in Auschwitz, but how did you know?

Because of the A.

It turns out the A's collision with Auschwitz is pure coincidence. The A in the identification number stands for the German word for worker—*arbeiter*.



You think the A stands for location, but it stands for function.

What my friend wanted to communicate to me about that conversation was that "Frieda Berger and I had defied history in order to have it. She was supposed to be dead, and I was supposed to have never been born. And we both lived, and found each other in LA, and she was able to tell me this detail about the letter A. A detail that allows me to begin to be true to her life as precisely as it is lived."

When I remember this story half a year later it is because of its detail of correction. The fact that Ariel Sharon wishes to exile Yasir Arafat from Palestine immediately pulls this mis-equation from my memory.

You think the A stands for location, but it stands for function.

Sharon's desire to exile Arafat allows me to feel tender toward Sharon. I think of him waking in the middle of the night, after he has slept enough to feel almost awake. I think of him waking into this thought, a thought that strips the Israeli/ Palestinian conflict of all its complexities. Simply separate Arafat from his people. I see him forgetting that Arafat is already exiled, that he himself in the eyes of some is also in a state of exile. Sharon's solution is so simple it makes me want to touch his face.

Arafat exiled. It is not a reasonable wish. Eventually Colin Powell will tell Sharon this. Arafat is the legitimate, recognized leader of the Palestinians. He is also not every Palestinian who believes in his right of return. He is not every person who still holds on his person the keys to his former home. Arafat is not the leader of Hamas. But at some hour, for Sharon, the security of Israel rests within a body and its location. At some hour Sharon feels the desperation of displacement as devastation, an impotence. He works it out, and at some hour Arafat's location as alien, as exile, is to be Sharon's greatest contribution to the road map to peace in the Middle East, greater than any function he presently serves.

