

The Body Remembers:
The Embodiment of Citizenship in the Visual-Textual Poetics of *Citizen: An American Lyric*

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For Traci and John

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Abstract

Published in 2014, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* combines prose poetry, photography, sculpture, and painting within its pages to convey the meanings of citizenship for Black Americans in the twenty-first century. Focusing on the visual-textual elements of the book, this thesis examines the bodies within *Citizen's* media and explains why this ambiguous, multimedia form of embodiment is crucial to understanding citizenship in the particular context of twenty-first century America. The interdisciplinary methodology of this thesis draws on visual culture, photographic theory, poetry studies, semiotics, and even book arts in order to access a scholarly toolbox as vast and complex as *Citizen*.

The first part of this thesis begins by laying out the tradition of photography as a means of bearing witness, remembering, and even oppressing Black citizens. Drawing on the precedent set by Emmett Till's death and his mother's use of his photograph, the first part explores the ethics of photographic embodiment and uses the vocabulary of semiotics to discuss the instability and debatability of meaning in photography.

Equipped with these theoretical tools, this thesis then turns inwards and examines the visual content within *Citizen*, specifically David Hammons's *In the Hood*, and Ken Gonzales-Day's *Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith in Marion, IN. 1930*. Both images depict an invisible embodiment of citizenship with the emptiness of Hammons's hood and the removal of the lynched bodies by Gonzales-Day that allows the reader to understand the external structures of power and race that shape Black citizenship.

Shifting towards the textual elements, this thesis closely examines Rankine's prose poetry and how it speaks in conversation with the images. Most literally, citizenship is embodied through the textual subject. Straying from the lyrical tradition of the emotive "I", *Citizen's* use of second-person pronouns creates an acousmatic voice that forces the reader into a passive, receptive subject. The body of this figure—constructed out of anecdotes told to Rankine and inhabited by the reader—experiences physical manifestations of racism and symptoms of racial fatigue. The repeated motif of the sigh serves as what Shermaine Jones calls "affective asphyxia," or the body's way of surviving everyday racism by choking trauma down. There, stored in the bodies of citizens is a lifetime of racial trauma.

Citizen's multimedia form is essential to its embodiment of citizenship because it endows the book with the power to express a multiplicity of experiences of Black Americans. The book is not about any specific, singular citizen as told by one author in one medium. Rather, Rankine speaks in conversation with the myriad artists whose work fills *Citizen's* pages as well as the reader, on whom the onus is placed to read the book, digest its contents, and make sense of a work of art as complex as the world it reflects.

Keywords: Race, visual culture, lyrical poetry, photography, American culture, embodiment

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INTRODUCTION

Barely louder than a whisper, her voice begins softly, slowly, hovering on each word. In a *National Public Radio* broadcast, Claudia Rankine reads aloud an excerpt from her 2014 book *Citizen: An American Lyric*. The cadence of her speech is even and controlled as she describes a neighbor's overzealous phone call, steeped in racist assumptions. There is a tonal dissonance between the stoic measure of her voice and the charged content of her words. Rankine reads:

You and your partner go to see the film "The House We Live In." You asked a friend to pick up your child from school. On your way home, your phone rings. Your neighbor tells you he is standing at his window, watching a menacing black guy casing both your homes. The guy is walking back and forth talking to himself and seems disturbed. You tell your neighbor that your friend, whom he has met, is babysitting. He says, no, it's not him. He's met your friend, and this isn't that nice young man. Anyway, he wants you to know he's called the police. Your partner calls your friend and asks him if there's a guy walking back and forth in front of your home. Your friend says that if anyone were outside, he would see him because he is standing outside. You hear the sirens through the speakerphone.¹

The passage details an example of a microaggression—an often subtle action, phrase, or behavior that perpetuates stereotypes and makes bigoted assumptions. The discriminatory reality of the microaggression is often masked behind the guise of a harmless mistake, a meaningless error, and in this case, the neighbor's assumption that the babysitter is an intruder. What lies

¹ Claudia Rankine, "In 'Citizen,' Poet Strips Bare the Realities of Everyday Racism, *National Public Radio*," January 3, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/01/03/374574142/in-citizen-poet-strips-bare-the-realities-of-everyday-racism>.

beneath the neighbor's failure of recognition are racist assumptions and stereotypes that follow Black Americans like shadows.

This passage is both a slice of *Citizen* and the real-world racial politics in America today, in which the actions of neighbors informed by implicit bias and racist stereotypes can mean danger and even death for Black citizens. As Claudia Rankine explains in the *NPR* interview:

I want to understand that there are two worlds out there, two Americas out there. If you're a white person, there's one way of being a citizen in this--in our country. And if you're a brown or a black body, there's another way of being a citizen. And that way is very close to death. It's very close to the loss of your life. It's very close to the loss of your liberties at any random moment.²

This duality that exists between the “two Americas” hearkens back to W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness, which he describes in his essay “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.”

Du Bois writes:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American,

² Claudia Rankine, “In ‘Citizen,’ Poet Strips Bare the Realities of Everyday Racism,” National Public Radio, January 3, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/01/03/374574142/in-citizen-poet-strips-bare-the-realities-of-everyday-racism>.

a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.³

Like Du Bois, Rankine highlights a de facto segregation that exists in the duality of identity: to be Black and to be American. However, while Du Bois describes these “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” in “one dark body,” Rankine locates this duality outside of the body. The “two worlds, two Americas” reflect a fractured nation, in which the meaning of citizenship differs amongst its white and Black populace. In the case of the neighbor’s phone call, the babysitter is both a trusted friend and a “nice young man,” yet he is simultaneously denied that “way of being a citizen” by the neighbor. Instead, he is “disturbed,” a “menacing black guy,” and a threat that must be policed. His denial to the narrator that there is no intruder because “he would see him” shows that he does not know that the neighbor is watching him; he is unaware that “the eyes of others” are upon him, relegating him into this secondary citizenship. His response conveys the suddenness that “at any random moment,” he can be one phone call away from death. This is the heart of *Citizen*: the everyday experiences and encounters of Black citizens with racism, microaggressions, and the centuries of anti-Black violence that are very much alive in present moments and present bodies.

These experiences, encounters, and bodies manifest throughout the book’s striking mix of photographs, works of art, and poetry. Its crisp white pages open to reveal images that are startling, perplexing, and even haunting. The face of a girl stitched onto the body of a deer, a ghostly black hood, an altered photograph of a lynching—these are a few of the many images that fill *Citizen*’s pages. Interspersed between these images are disparate blocks of text that vary in size and contain prose, video scripts, and lyrical poetry. It is a book laden with complexity, and

³ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” in *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

its unique form eludes traditional vocabularies for genre, medium, and style. In one effort to define its form, Mary-Jean Chan describes *Citizen* as a “hybrid text containing lyric essays, photography, public art and video scripts, which are juxtaposed for intertextual and polyphonic effects.”⁴ Chan’s definition excels in recognizing that the essence of *Citizen* lies in how each of the elements—and with them, the voices of their creators—coalesce on the page. This curated and collaged form—this deliberate juxtaposition of disparate elements alongside one another—is key to Rankine’s avoidance of casting a monolithic light on Black Americans; she manages to convey a multiplicity of experiences by incorporating a wide breadth of preexisting images, sculptures, and works of art. Even the situations in the prose poetry are woven out of real anecdotes told to Rankine by friends, colleagues, and neighbors.⁵

Within the title, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, lies a question: what does it mean to be a citizen when one is Black? Recalling the word’s etymology, a citizen is an inhabitant of a city and a member of something larger than oneself. Implicit in citizenship is a sense of belonging and a notion of status. In the author’s own words, “I called it *Citizen* because I wanted to ask: who gets to hold that status—despite everyone technically having it? How is it embodied and honoured?”⁶ The underlying assertion of Rankine’s question is that to understand Black citizenship is to understand how systemic racism, microaggressions, and anti-Black violence pervade the bodies of Black citizens. In other words, anti-Blackness is so embedded in the

⁴ Mary-Jean Chan, “Towards a Poetics of Racial Trauma: Lyric Hybridity in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*,” *Journal of American Studies* 52, no. 1 (2018): 137–63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000457>.

⁵ Claudia Rankine, “In ‘Citizen,’ Poet Strips Bare the Realities of Everyday Racism,” National Public Radio, January 3, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/01/03/374574142/in-citizen-poet-strips-bare-the-realities-of-everyday-racism>.

⁶ Olivia Djawoto, “Poetry in the Post-Truth Era: Formal Structures in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*,” *Forum: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts*, no. 25 (December 18, 2017).

history of this country, of both Americas, of all Americas. It manifests on a daily basis in acts of microaggressions, incivility, and even violence that occur between neighbors, colleagues, and citizens. It is latched onto signs, symbols, and imagined myths that pervade even the most mundane of objects like hoodies. It is felt in everyday experiences and stored within the body. In addressing Rankine's question, this thesis explores how citizenship is embodied within the book in the most literal sense by examining the visual and textual bodies that fill the book's pages.

Part one of this thesis focuses on the broader context and history in which *Citizen* is situated. It begins by laying out the tradition of photography as a means of bearing witness, remembering, and even oppressing Black citizens. Drawing on the precedent set by Emmett Till's death and his mother's use of his photograph, the first part explores the ethics of photographed bodies and uses the vocabulary of semiotics to discuss the instability of meaning in photography. By examining the precedent of Emmett Till and his mother and discussing the rise of video footage of police violence on Black bodies that circulates the internet, this first part lays out the life and death stakes that contextualize the photographs in *Citizen*.

Equipped with these theoretical tools, this thesis then turns inwards and examines the visual content within *Citizen*, specifically David Hammons's *In the Hood*, and Ken Gonzales-Day's *Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith in Marion, IN. 1930*. The use of the severed black hood in Hammons's *In the Hood* highlights what Judith Butler calls the "white racist imaginary," wherein articles of clothing become signs that transform their wearers into imagined threats. Gonzales-Day's photograph from his *Erased Lynching Series* subverts a history of lynching by removing the bodies of Shipp and Smith, thereby turning the viewer's focus onto the crowd of white perpetrators. Both images depict an invisible embodiment of

citizenship with the emptiness of Hammons's hood and the removal of the lynched bodies by Gonzales-Day that allows the reader to understand the external structures of power and race that shape Black citizenship. This invisible yet present embodiment manifests in the photographs and images in order to affirm and invoke the memory of Black victims without re-traumatizing viewers with graphic depictions of violence.

Shifting towards the textual elements, this thesis closely examines Rankine's prose poetry and how it speaks in conversation with the images. Citizenship is embodied textually through the subject of each sentence, the pronouns, and the visceral descriptions of breath, sighs, and aches. Straying from the lyrical tradition of the emotive "I", *Citizen's* use of second-person pronouns creates an acousmatic voice that places the reader into a passive, receptive subject. The body of this textual figure—constructed out of anecdotes told to Rankine and inhabited by the reader—experiences physical manifestations of racism and symptoms of racial fatigue. The repeated motif of the sigh serves as what Shermaine Jones calls "affective asphyxia," or the body's way of surviving everyday racism by choking trauma down. There, stored in the bodies of citizens is a lifetime of racial trauma.

Citizen's multimedia form is essential to its embodiment of citizenship because it endows the book with the power to express a multiplicity of experiences of Black Americans. The book contains enormity, ambiguity, and impossibility; just as it contains a plurality of experiences, it is also not about any specific, singular citizen as told by one author in one medium. Rather, Rankine speaks in conversation with the myriad artists whose work fills *Citizen's* pages as well as the reader, on whom the onus is placed to read the book, digest its contents, and make sense of a work of art as complex as the world it reflects.

PART I

The Photograph as Evidence

In Mississippi, 1955, Emmett Till was brutally murdered and thrown in the Tallahatchie River by several men including Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam.⁷ Tried and acquitted by a jury of their peers—all white men—Bryant and Milam’s charges were dropped, and with them went any semblance of justice for Emmett Till. After the recovery of her son’s body from the river, Mamie Till Mobley chose to hold an open-casket funeral, in which over 100,000 guests and photographers were confronted with the violent imagery of white supremacist violence incarnated in the remains of her 14-year old son.⁸ In her words—“Let the people see what I see. I believe that the whole United States is mourning with me.”⁹

Over sixty years later, Mamie Till’s subversive determination to expose the violence enacted upon her son endures in American memory. Claudia Rankine explains, “By placing both herself and her son’s corpse in positions of refusal relative to the etiquette of grief, she ‘disidentified’ with the tradition of the lynched figure left out in public view as a warning to the [Black] community, thereby using the lynching tradition against itself.”¹⁰ Rankine alludes to a physically violent and psychologically damaging practice, in which lynchers would leave their victims’ corpses in place long after death to serve as a grotesque reminder of the violent fate

⁷ Tasha Neumeister, “The Story of Emmett Till: Loyola University Chicago: Features,” Loyola University Chicago, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.luc.edu/features/stories/academics/thestoryofemmettill/>.

⁸ Neumeister, “The Story of Emmett Till.”

⁹ Claudia Rankine, “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html>.

¹⁰ Sophie Craig, “Poet Claudia Rankine on ‘Citizen’ and How Imagery Can Propel a Movement,” *The Columbia Spectator*, October 30, 2020, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/poet-claudia-rankine-on-citizen-how-imagery-can/docview/2455680463/se-2?accountid=14667>.

facing those perceived to transgress against the white supremacist hierarchy. Mamie Till Mobley subverted this history by voluntarily inviting photographers and funeral attendees to gaze upon her son's body in order to reveal to a larger public the violent realities facing Black Americans. In doing so, she reclaimed the image of the Black body, tearing it away from its weaponized use by oppressors and murderers. Additionally, Rankine references Mamie Till Mobley's subversion of this "etiquette of grief"—the quiet act of private mourning and the silence of victims' families. By eschewing this etiquette and instead opting for visible, public grief, Mamie Till Mobley invited "the whole United States" to mourn alongside her, which Rosa Parks recalled as a source of strength during her famous protest on a Montgomery bus three months later¹¹.

Utilizing the political power of the visual, Mamie Till Mobley's decision to display her son's mutilated corpse before both the funeral guests and the nation marked a watershed moment in American history, owing to the immediacy of the striking visual but not to the immediacy of its dissemination. In fact, the reality of Emmett Till's funeral was that "the whole United States" was not mourning with Mamie Till Mobley. Historian and author of *Let the People See: The Story of Emmett Till* Elliot J. Gorn explains:

Back in 1955, the African American magazines and newspapers printed it, not the "mainstream" press. For decades, few white people ever saw the photos of Emmett Till's body. They only began to see it 30 years ago in *Eyes on the Prize*—the civil rights movement documentary that first aired on American television in 1987. That's the first time the photo appeared in the mainstream

¹¹ Maureen Corrigan, "'Let the People See': It Took Courage to Keep Emmett Till's Memory Alive," *National Public Radio*, October 30, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/30/660980178/-let-the-people-see-shows-how-emmett-till-s-murder-was-nearly-forgotten>.

media and for a national audience. But for African Americans, the photo mattered immediately.¹²

The documentary Gorn references is the 1985 PBS feature detailing the American Civil Rights movement. Prior to the release of the film, the photographs of Emmett Till's body did not permeate the mainstream media, and the visual evidence of his brutal murder was contained within a limited audience. What Gorn points to is the disconnect between the news, journalistic reports, and images that circulated in the mainstream media compared to publications such as *Jet* magazine and *The Chicago Defender*. For the audiences of the latter, "the photo mattered immediately" because its imagery served as explicit evidence of anti-Black violence that had too often been overlooked by authorities, ignored by the justice system, and omitted from the historical record.

However, if photography is a form of "extended, loaded evidence" as Roland Barthes contends in *Camera Lucida*, then the evidence of Emmett Till's murder failed in its conviction of the murderers.¹³ Or perhaps more accurately, the lack of conviction failed the evidence of his murder. Specifically, the acquittal of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam dismissed the prosecution's testimonies and photographic evidence of Emmett Till's corpse by contesting the very truth of the image. By arguing that the corpse pulled out of the Tallahatchie River did not belong to Emmett Till, the defense implied that the photographed remains that Mamie Till Mobley wept over while on the stand were not of Emmett Till. Per the defense, the photograph contained *a* body, but it was not *his* body. Therefore, the trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam elucidated something fundamental to photography: the disconnect between the content and its interpretation. In terms of content, photography's role as evidence draws on its ability to capture

¹² Corrigan, "Let the People See."

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 115.

“that-has-been” or the *intractable*.¹⁴ This depiction of a past moment is wholly independent from the disputable meaning that arises in the current viewer. When used as evidence, the photograph depends not on *what* is seen, but *how* it is seen.

Here lies the separation between content and interpretation, subject and viewer, and past and present. At best, the consequences of such separation might be a foggy memory or a misremembered anecdote. At worst, this photographic disconnect yields the distortion of fact, the acquittal of murderers, and a dangerous effacement of history. These are the life and death stakes that accompany photographic evidence of anti-Black violence. The use of the photograph by the trial attorneys in 1955 and by Mamie Till Mobley set a precedent that revealed the disputable political power of the image. This precedent shines a light on Claudia Rankine’s curatorial and narrative decisions for using photographs in *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Given that photographs do not speak for themselves, it is incumbent upon the handler of this evidence to persuasively guide the reader towards the desired interpretation of its contents. Like an attorney in court or a mother addressing a nation, this is precisely what Claudia Rankine accomplishes with the visual media of *Citizen*.

The Ethics of Depiction

The case of Emmett Till and Mamie Till Mobley revealed the dual-natured politicalization of visual depictions of Black victimhood: first as a tool to harm and suppress Black Americans and second as a tool to acknowledge and affirm the realities of Black Americans. The question, then, is how to negotiate this concurrent, yet seemingly opposite duality. As Claudia Rankine asked in a 2020 lecture at Columbia University, “How do you represent, as in present again, recirculate, images of violence against Black people without

¹⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76-77.

retraumatizing Black people? When can we get the reality of the situation across without exploiting Black death?”¹⁵ What Rankine points to is this same precarious balance between the visibility and acknowledgement of Black victimhood and the gratuitous spectacle of Black pain. In other words, these images have the power to both affirm the lived experiences of Black Americans and simultaneously traumatize, terrorize, and oppress through graphic depictions of Black suffering.

Although white supremacist violence on Black bodies has existed long before the advent of the camera, this question of negotiating the image’s duality grows increasingly pressing with the rapid, prolific, and repeated dissemination of video footage documenting police brutality. Often caught on smartphones, body cams, and surveillance cameras, these videos transform the audience into witnesses with one click of a button. For Les Gray, this is a “perverse kind of *habeas corpus*”--a macabre act of “showing the body” that draws on the precedent of Emmett Till while raising new questions about the ethics of representation.¹⁶ For example, how can evidence be perverse? How do the digital dissemination of these videos and the role of the audience contribute to this perversity? In one answer, Rasul A. Mowatt explains that while “Emmett Till’s mother controlled the production and circulation of her son’s destroyed body...we, as people who become active in the calls for justice in cases of racialized violence, are not Mamie Till-Mobley. This is not our son. We did not make these images.”¹⁷ The questions Mowatt raises concern authority and complicity: what are the ethics of circulating

¹⁵ Sophie Craig, “Poet Claudia Rankine on ‘Citizen’ and How Imagery Can Propel a Movement,” *The Columbia Spectator*, October 30, 2020, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/poet-claudia-rankine-on-citizen-how-imagery-can/docview/2455680463/se-2?accountid=14667>.

¹⁶ Les Gray, “Using a Black Pedagogy of Care to Develop Ethics of Engagement with Police Brutality Videos,” *Performing Ethos: An International Journal of Ethics in Theatre & Performance* 10, no. 1 (2020): 113–15, https://doi.org/10.1386/peet_00025_7.

¹⁷ Rasul A. Mowatt, “Black Lives as Snuff,” *Biography* 41, no. 4 (2018): 777–806.

graphic images of anti-Black violence that are not one's own? Further, is the circulator complicit in the perpetuation of such violence? Is the viewer complicit as well?

Indexical Embodiment

In one of the most widely known examples of police brutality in the 1990s, Rodney King's violent assault by the Los Angeles Police Department was captured on video and aired on news stations across the country. The disconnect between the blatant evidence of King's assault and the failure to convict the officers sparked outrage that fueled the 1992 Los Angeles riots. However, in *Citizen: An American Lyric* Rankine never includes any stills or images from either videos. In fact, she never includes any explicitly graphic depictions of anti-Black violence at all. In *Citizen*, Rankine reconciles the two competing notions of visibility by collaging photographs, works of art, and video stills that do not "retraumatize" Black viewers, but still have the power to communicate the lived realities of anti-Black violence and the trauma of Black Americans. She does this by curating a collection of images, many of which depict invisible yet present bodies that serve as indices for the experiences of Black trauma.

Art historian and professor Terri Weissman offers one means of understanding the index when she calls it "a material trace of a past moment of physical contact that provides evidence--proof--of an existential truth."¹⁸ Her description is especially useful because it bridges the gap between the index's discrete moment and a larger truth. To put this in simpler terms, an oft-cited example of this sign uses smoke as an index for fire. By seeing smoke, the interpretant does not require "direct observation" of the fire in order to understand that one is ablaze. In this

¹⁸ Terri Weissman, "Whose Streets? Police Violence and the Recorded Image," *Arts* 8, no. 4 (2019): 6, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8040155>.

case, the existential truth lies in the interpretant's broader association of the signified with the signifier; the existence of smoke *means* that there was fire.

Historian, media theorist, and professor Kris Paulsen adds that indices are “clues that point to something not yet known or to something one can't be sure of...The great achievement of the index is its ability to signify without the benefit of convention, resemblance, or direct observation. This ability comes from the thought process it activates in the receiver.”¹⁹ This semiotical “receiver” or interpretant described by Paulsen shares the same role as both the viewer in photography and the reader in *Citizen*. The meaning divinated from the index depends upon the interpreter's ability to recognize the signifier as a “material trace” of the signified--a central idea of semiotics; signs are given meaning through the acquired cultural knowledge of the interpretant.

Using signs and indices, Rankine creates an empty embodiment of citizenship through her curation of images like David Hammons's *In the Hood* and Ken Gonzales-Day's *Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith, Marion, IN. 1930*. Rather than showing graphic images of bodies and violence, she employs the distance of the index from the signified in order to construct the contours which define Black citizenship without retraumatizing Black viewers.

¹⁹ Kris Paulsen, *Here/There: Telepresence, Touch, and Art at the Interface* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 29.

PART II

In the Hood



Image 1. *In the Hood* (1993) by David Hammons, photographed by Jake Naughton for *The New York Times*

Centered squarely on the cover of *Citizen: An American Lyric* is David Hammon's 1993 sculpture *In the Hood*, featuring a decapitated hood of a black sweatshirt, suspended in front of a plain white backdrop (Image 1). A wire strung within the edge of the hood's opening sculpts the limp fabric into an uninhabited concavity. Its hollow, shadowy form faces the viewer and endows the sculpture with a phantom gaze that confronts the reader with haunting solemnity. Shadows cast upon the hood's interior obscure the facial region and create a paradoxical sense of empty embodiment, in which the hood represents a figure that is both universal and nonexistent, inhabited and empty.

The sculpture gains an entirely new layer of meaning when collapsed from its three-dimensional form onto the two-dimensional book cover. The physical surface of the book's exterior differs between the white backdrop and the black hoodie and title text; whereas the white surface is matte, the hoodie is coated in a glossy sheen that reflects only the face of the reader when held at arm's length. The very form of the book positions the reader within the hoodie, confronting them with the haunting image of their own decapitated, hoodie-clad head and transporting the reader into the realm of the book.

Additionally, the suspension of the hood simultaneously evokes imagery of African masks as well as mounted taxidermy animals, killed by hunters and displayed atop wooden headboards as trophies.²⁰ Art critic Antwaun Sargent writes, "Considering Hammons's interest in capturing and conjuring Black spirits, his use of the hoodie can be seen as a totem, a way for him to mark, remember and cajole the presence of a lynched body or an African mask back into existence, in order to give it the space for consideration, and deserving acknowledgement."²¹ Therefore, the imagery of the sculpture simultaneously evokes an empty phantasmal figure that can be embodied by the reader and invokes the spirits of lynching victims, once left suspended as a macabre warning and now given space for contemplative remembrance and mourning. By positioning the black hood as both of these, the cover emphasizes the fluxes of the past, present, and future; as Rankine says—"The condition of Black life is one of mourning"—the reader is collapsed in the same space as these spirits on the page plane.²²

²⁰ Laura Hoptman, "David Hammons: MoMA," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.moma.org/artists/2486>.

²¹ Antwaun Sargent, "In the Hood: Antwaun Sargent," Het Nieuwe Instituut, August 10, 2020, <https://thehoodie.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/hood-antwaun-sargent>.

²² Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html>.

Created within two years of Rodney King's brutal beating by the Los Angeles Police, *In the Hood* demonstrates Hammons's masterful use of symbolism, characteristic of his oeuvre, which often incorporates "highly charged detritus" such as "chicken bones, bottle caps, and empty liquor bottles."²³ The use of the black hood connotes particularly charged symbolism of racist perceptions of Black criminality. Rankine observes, "A hoodie is worn by everybody: kids, white men, white women, Black men. But it clings to the Black body as a sign of criminality like nothing else."²⁴ Implicit in Rankine's words is the notion of *who* is interpreting, perpetuating, and reacting to this "sign" or index of Black criminality. In other words, for whom is the hooded sweatshirt a sign of Black criminality? In whose imaginations, preconceptions, and expectations does this sign manifest?

The repeated killings of Black citizens like Rodney King by the police point to what Judith Butler calls the "white racist imaginary," wherein "a white community is always and only protected by the police, against a threat which Rodney King's body emblemizes, quite apart from any action it can be said to perform or appears ready to perform."²⁵ In other words, the white racist imaginary perceives King's body to be emblematic of a threat, despite the contradictory reality of his body and actions. Rather than an unarmed citizen, the workings of white paranoia transform the visual of King into a threat. For this reason, visual evidence of police brutality is not just a matter of "simple seeing, an act of direct perception, but the racial production of the visible, the working of racial constraints on what it means to 'see.'"²⁶ Like

²³ Laura Hoptman, "David Hammons: MoMA," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.moma.org/artists/2486>.

²⁴ Antwaun Sargent, "In the Hood: Antwaun Sargent," Het Nieuwe Instituut, August 10, 2020, <https://thehoodie.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/hood-antwaun-sargent>.

²⁵ Judith Butler, "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 16-19.

²⁶ Butler, "Endangered/Endangering," 16.

Rodney King's assault, Trayvon Martin suffered the violent consequences of these "racial constraints" in his death in 2012. Martin was walking to his stepmother's house when neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman followed him, identified him as "suspicious," and fatally shot him.²⁷ What contributed to his "suspicious" appearance was his black hoodie.

Taking the symbolism of the hoodie even further, David Hammons's decapitation of the hood recalls the visual imagery of racialized violence; trauma to the necks of Black bodies pervades a history of lynching, asphyxiation, and strangulation, recently witnessed with the deaths of Sandra Bland and Eric Garner whose names are each recorded on page 134 of *Citizen*. Despite the piece's collapse from its original three-dimensions into the two-dimensional picture plane of the book page, the work maintains its ability to bring a brutal history of anti-Black violence into 1993 conversations of police brutality and contemporary depictions of Black citizenship by establishing histories, acknowledging lived experiences, and subverting stereotypes that coalesce in Black bodies.

Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith, Marion, IN. 1930

Like David Hammons's cover, the photograph titled *Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith, Marion, IN. 1930* creates a sense of empty embodiment that communicates anti-Black violence without graphically showing it. At first glance, the image is hauntingly familiar. Its permutations can be found in history textbooks, museums, and even on postcards that were once sold and sent as souvenirs--indices of material violence against Black bodies.

In the photograph, a crowd of white people stands beneath a tree. One man gestures upwards towards the black night sky, pointing supposedly to a Black victim beyond the camera's

²⁷ Mimi Thi Nguyen, "The Hoodie as Sign, Screen, Expectation, and Force," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 4 (2015): 791–816, <https://doi.org/10.1086/680326>.



Image 2. *Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith, Marion, IN. 1930*, an alteration by Ken Gonzales-Day of the Hulton Archive's *Public Lynching* (1930), featured in chapter six of *Citizen: An American Lyric*

frame of view.²⁸ However, the image has actually been altered to remove the bodies of Shipp and Smith, which suits Rankine's avoidance of explicitly graphic images that can retraumatize Black viewers.

In the original photograph, Shipp and Smith's beaten bodies appeared suspended over the heads of the white crowd. As Rankine earlier described in her reflection of Mamie Till Mobley,

²⁸ "‘It Was a Modern-Day Lynching’: Violent Deaths Reflect a Brutal American Legacy," National Geographic, June 5, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/photography/2020/06/it-was-a-modern-day-lynching-violent-deaths-reflect-a-brutal-american-legacy-1?image=lynching-history-11>.

lynched bodies were often left in open view to serve as a warning to Black communities and a reminder that such violence could be displayed, photographed, and documented without the conviction of the white perpetrators. As Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*, “there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.”²⁹ In the case of *Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith, Marion, IN. 1930*, the photographed bodies of Shipp and Smith were transformed into both literal and indexical possessions; they became a keepsake, a souvenir, and a warning. By altering the original photograph, artist Ken Gonzales-Day subverts this history of using visuals of lynched Black bodies to terrorize Black communities and turns the notion of the image as weaponry on its head.

Although similar to Mamie Till Mobley’s subversion of the lynching tradition, Gonzales-Day handles the bodies of Shipp and Smith in direct opposition to Mobley; he reclaims these bodies by erasing them rather than putting them in public view. While discussing the *Erased Lynching Series* (2004-2015), Gonzales-Day explains his artistic decision: “Rather than re-victimising those murdered in such collective, and often pre-meditated acts of killing, the work allowed the viewer to literally focus on the crowd—complete with their jeering and smiling faces.”³⁰ In doing so, this “allows the viewer to see, for the first time, the social dynamics of the lynching itself.”³¹ In other words, Gonzales-Day’s removal of the Black victims’ bodies

²⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2005), 10.

³⁰ “‘It Was a Modern-Day Lynching’: Violent Deaths Reflect a Brutal American Legacy,” National Geographic, June 5, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/photography/2020/06/it-was-a-modern-day-lynching-violent-deaths-reflect-a-brutal-american-legacy-1?image=lynching-history-11>.

³¹ “‘It was a Modern-Day Lynching.’”

serves to put on display the white focal point with incisive and critical attention. It turns predators into prey by refocusing the image from the original lynching onto the mob of lynchers.

Regarding the ethics of depiction, this erasure serves to both pay respect for the dead and deweaponize the violent imagery. Recalling Rasul A. Mowatt's words—"this is not our son"--the "violated," "symbolically possessed" bodies of Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Shipp do not belong to Ken Gonzales-Day, nor to Claudia Rankine, nor to the reader. In turn, this act of erasure removes the viewer's complicity; yes, indeed this photograph is still an index of a violent moment of the past, but the graphic spectacle of Black suffering is gone. The act of erasure becomes an act of revelation; now, the photograph is evidence of the white crowd, wielding the status of their citizenship in a country that permits them to commit egregious acts of violence with more or less impunity.

PART III

You, Me, Us, Them

Rather than a hollow black hood or an altered photograph, the bodies of the text manifest in the form of subjects and pronouns. Just as the images in *Citizen* are situated within a broader social and historical context, Rankine's prose poetry builds on the histories of African-American literature and lyric poetry. Specifically, chapter six of *Citizen* recalls the earlier work of *12 Million Black Voices* written in 1941 by Richard Wright. Alongside a selection of Farm Security Administration photographs curated by Edwin Rosskam, Wright's commanding prose narrates the mass exodus of Black Americans from the rural south into urban regions in the north during the Great Migration. Though written in separate time periods, both texts depict the experiences of Black bodies situated in white structures of power. Wright writes:

We have been told that we can sit where we please, but we are still scared. We cannot shake three hundred years of fear in three hours. We ease into a seat and look out of the window at the crowded streets. A white man or a white woman comes and sits beside us, not even looking at us, as though this were a normal thing to do. The muscles of our bodies tighten. Indefinable sensations crawl over our skins and our blood tingles. Out of the corners of our eyes we try to get a glimpse of the strange white face that floats but a few inches from ours. The impulses to laugh and to cry clash in us; we bite our lips and stare out of the window.³²

By describing the everyday experience of a Black citizen occupying space next to someone white, Wright conveys the fears, anxieties, and tension that Black citizens feel on

³² Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (The Viking Press, 1941), 100.

public transportation. Visceral details like the biting of lips and the tightening of muscles resemble the physicality of language in chapter six of *Citizen*:

You sit next to the man on the train, bus, in the plane, waiting room, anywhere he could be forsaken. You put your body there in proximity to, adjacent to, alongside, within. You don't speak unless you are spoken to and your body speaks to the space you fill and you keep trying to fill it except the space belongs to the body of the man next to you, not to you.³³

Here, Rankine describes the same tension that comes from negotiating space in public transit. Recalling Rankine's notion of two Americas, public transit is a site of duality and difference, wherein the bodies of Black citizens are subject to the workings of the white racist imaginary. For example, the phrase "anywhere he could be forsaken" refers to the microaggression of deliberately avoiding seats next to Black men, fueled by the fears of the white racist imaginary that all Black men are threatening. The difference, however, between Wright and Rankine's work is the use of pronouns; Wright's "we" declares a collective body, an aggregation of shared experiences unified in one strong voice. Rankine, on the other hand, uses a much more ambiguous, undefined second-person "you."

According to Sarah Nance and Kamran Javadizadeh, the second-person "you" in *Citizen* "paradoxically points toward a singular reader while also suggesting the impossibility of finding 'a stable referent in the reader who holds the book in hand.'"³⁴ In other words, Rankine's use of "you" is both singular in the fact that the reader becomes an individual subject, whose actions

³³ Rankine, *Citizen*, 131.

³⁴ Sarah Nance, "Memorial Time: Claudia Rankine, C. D. Wright, and the Temporal Space of Remembrance," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76, no. 2 (2020): 34, <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2020.0012>.

and decisions are written in the text, yet also universally plural in the fact that it can apply to all readers.

Olivia Djawoto describes this disembodied speaker as “an acousmatic voice, an unseen voice that coaxes the listener,” much like Pythagoras sitting “behind a curtain talking to his disciples, teaching them only through the use of his voice.”³⁵ What this does for readers is it “forces them to relinquish the sense of autonomy that exists for them outside the realm of the text.”³⁶ Rankine’s use of “you” simultaneously gives readers the power to step into the pages of *Citizen* while also casting them into the roles of passive subjects. Readers are told that they sit next to the man. They put their body there. They don’t speak unless they are spoken to. According to Elizabeth Chen, “This power exerted by the narrator onto the reader, deployed by the placement of the reader as a passive recipient, a subject without the ability to change the situation at hand, is itself a mimicking of power structures inherent in the systemic racism in the United States.”³⁷

However, what is curious about the self-called “American Lyric” is that its use of second-person pronouns strays from the tradition of lyric poetry, written oftentimes through the perspective of an emotive “I” subject. In “Poetry in the Post-Truth Era,” Olivia Djawoto considers the implications of Rankine’s use of pronouns:

Although *Citizen*, at first glance, appears to be the prelude to a personal and patriotic exaltation of America, Rankine abandons the first-person “I” and the

³⁵ Olivia Djawoto, “Poetry in the Post-Truth Era: Formal Structures in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*,” *Forum: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts*, no. 25 (December 18, 2017).

³⁶ Djawoto, “Poetry in the Post-Truth Era.”

³⁷ Elizabeth Chen, “Lessons from Hybridity: A Look into the Coupling of Image and Text in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Letters to Memory*, Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*, and Ilya Kaminsky’s *Deaf Republic*,” *Chapman University Digital Commons*, 17, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.36837/chapman.000196>.

lyric form entirely as if to say that her experience of citizenship is always qualified by the second-person “you” with which she articulates her critique instead. Racism in the American context is thus never something that can be claimed or denied by an individual, but exists beyond them as a shared condition of being an American citizen.³⁸

Here, Djawoto describes Rankine’s use of second-person pronouns as a means to avoid the lyrical tradition of a single expressive subject because “racism in the American context is thus never something that can be claimed or denied by an individual.” In other words, Rankine’s lack of an “I” subject is her denial of her own authority; unlike Richard Wright and Walt Whitman, it is a rejection that one person can speak for millions. With regards to the audience, this use of second-person pronouns creates a sense of embodied citizenship that is similar to David Hammons’s *In the Hood*; readers occupy the space of the “you” and place themselves within the text just as they recognize themselves in the reflection of the hood on the cover of *Citizen*. However, unlike the works by Hammons or Gonzales-Day, the textual body created by the “you” pronoun is not invisible. Instead, it is tangible and capable of feeling, aching, breathing, and remembering.

“The Body Has Memory”

Within the pages preceding Ken Gonzales-Day’s photograph is a body that remembers. It appears in the end of chapter six in a script from the video, “In Memory of Trayvon Martin,” created in collaboration with Rankine’s husband, filmmaker John Lucas. The text reads:

Those years of and before me and my brothers, the years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in

³⁸ Djawoto, “Poetry in the Post-Truth Era.”

three, two jobs, boy, hey boy, each a felony, accumulate into the hours inside our lives where we are all caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its roots our limbs, a throat sliced through and when we open our mouth to speak, blossoms, o blossoms, no place coming out, brother dear brother, that kind of blue. The sky is the silence of brothers all the days leading up to my call.

If I called I'd say good-bye before I broke up the good-bye. I say good-bye before anyone can hang up. Don't hang up. My brother hangs up though he is there. I keep talking. The talk keeps him there. The sky is blue, kind of blue. The day is hot. Is it cold? Are you cold? It does get cool. Is it cool? Are you cool?³⁹

In the beginning of this passage, Rankine anchors the photograph by using the imagery of the “throat sliced through” and “the tree inside us, its roots our limbs” in order to render visible the photograph’s invisible bodies. The explicit references to years “of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs, boy, hey boy, each a felony” articulate how the past endures; four centuries of American history manifest in present Black bodies. This includes the “passage” of trans-Atlantic slave trade, the “plantation” and slavery, “migration” and the mass exodus of millions of Black Americans northwards in the early twentieth century, “Jim Crow segregation,” and more. Years of history and centuries of trauma “accumulate into the hours inside our lives.” By using the word “accumulate,” Rankine’s language of time articulates the fluxes of the past; history is not static,

³⁹ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 89-90, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31822041280561>.

but emergent and unfolding through its endurance into the present moment and living bodies. The body has history; “the body has memory.”⁴⁰

Through the juxtaposition of the poetry alongside the image, Rankine creates a friction between the visible and the invisible; the text embodies the voice of a Black American, whose body contains “the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its roots our limbs” while the photograph renders such body invisible. Occupying either side of a two-page spread, the image and the text speak in conversation together. Unlike a caption or an illustration—wherein one element is dominant, and the other is complementary—the photograph and the prose create a larger meaning out of the friction and repetition that arise between the two elements.

One such source of friction is the differing use of the word “sky” in the phrase, “The sky is blue, kind of blue” and the literal appearance of the black night sky in the photograph. However, both elements blend the sky with the “brother”; the text reads, “the sky is the silence of brothers,” and in the photograph, the bodies of the two victims are simultaneously erased and enveloped by the black night sky. When juxtaposed together, the sky becomes blue-black, which recalls both a descriptor for dark skin and the color of a bruise—an index of physical trauma left on the skin.

Additionally, the word “hanging” serves as a homonym that appears in both the textual act of a phone call and the visual depiction of a lynching. It appears to mark an end, a terminus, in a conversation and a human life; for the caller to hang up the phone means that the one called is no longer there, yet this is not the case in Rankine’s language. The “though” in the phrase, “My brother hangs up though he is there”, implies a contradiction—that hanging up is not an entirely terminal act; instead the term is used in a liminal sense. “Hanging up” is a transitional phrase that describes the shift from the physical and corporeal, into the metaphysical and

⁴⁰ Rankine, *Citizen*, 28.

spiritual. In the photograph, the bodies are hanging invisibly, yet they are still there. Physical departure, invisibility, and death do not render the “called” nonexistent.

Instead, they exist through memory; “The talk keeps him there”. In other words, talking keeps his memory alive. Informing one understanding of memory is the idea that to “remember” is to “re”-“member”, or to rearticulate a limb, a part of a greater whole. It is to communicate the body of the past once more. Photography, poetry, and other media do so by serving as indices, invocations, and depictions of the body and keeping them in this undefined “there”. This enduring embodiment recalls Toni Morrison’s term “rememory” from *Beloved*. The protagonist, Sethe, describes rememory as, “a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there”.⁴¹ Referring back to the phrase “hanging up”, the rememory of the picture exists after the transition from the physical to the metaphysical. The question that is then raised by both Rankine and Morrison’s texts is: where is there?

In a literal sense, “there” is the following page (Image 3). Just as Sethe describes “a picture floating around out there outside my head”, the altered photograph sits on the opposite side of the two-page spread from the prose poetry and its first-person subject, “I”. The gutter of the book serves as a barrier that is both visible and invisible to the reader. It is visible in the sense that it is seen whenever the book is opened, but it is invisible because traditionally textual books often relegate margins and gutters to their physical construction and design rather than the actual narrative content. However, in *Citizen*, the gutter of the pages and the position of the visual-textual elements are meant to be read as a “hyperpanel”. Borrowing the term from comics theory, Harriet Earle defines the hyperpanel as ““everything that’s visible on an open comics page or two page spread’...Thus, what is displayed within the scope of a sweeping look is

⁴¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987).

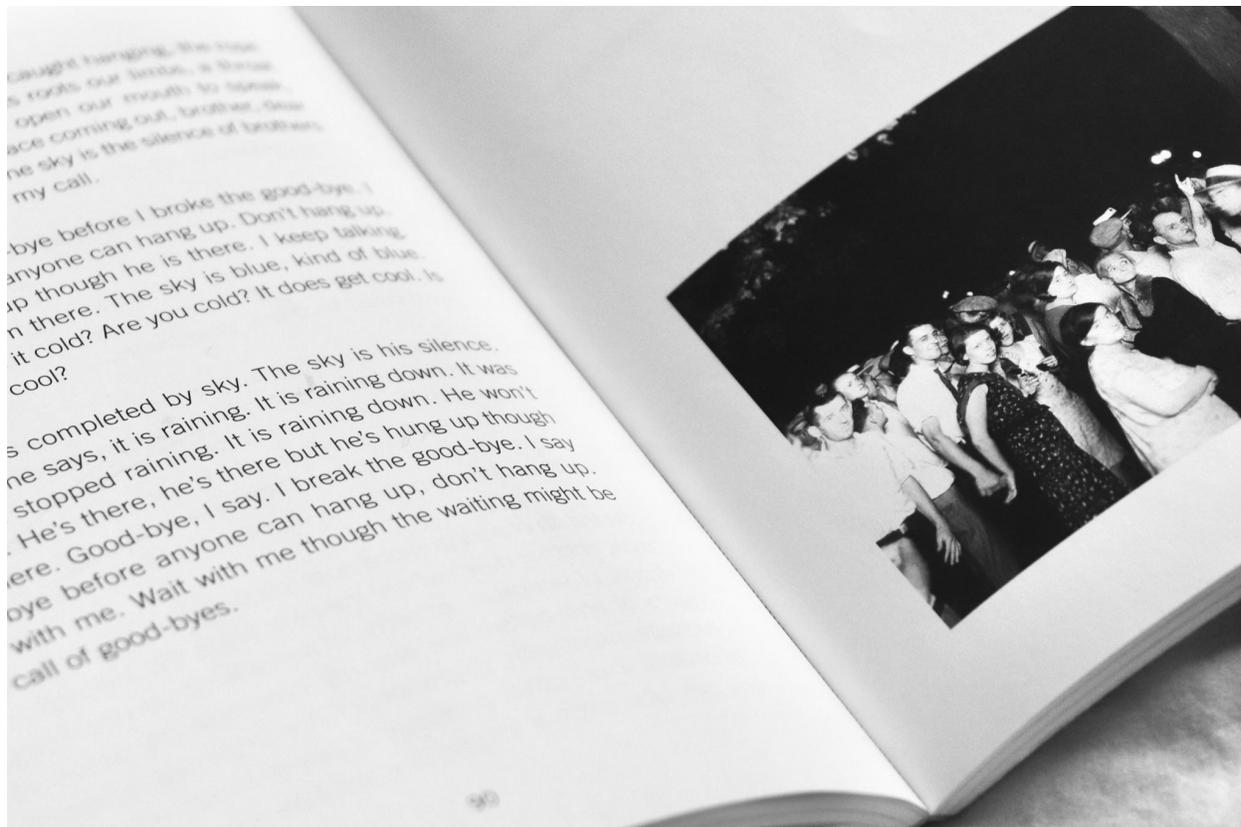


Image 3. Pages 90-91 of *Citizen: An American Lyric*

always carefully chosen, never random. Creators can use the physical layout of the page to create a larger image in the way the panels are displayed or to play with our sense of time.”⁴²

The multimedia elements, each with their own origins, authors, and temporalities, are printed on the pages that form the body of the book. Additionally, the dog-eared corners, fingerprints, and annotations left on its pages are indices of the reader’s body making contact with the body of another. If the body has memory, as Rankine writes, and the bodies of citizens have broader, cultural memory, then *Citizen* is a citizen in and of itself; its pages contain histories, lived experiences, and memories printed upon them, and its paper bears the marks of

⁴² Harriet Earle, “Framing Violence and Serial Murder in My Friend Dahmer and Green River Killer,” *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* 7, no. 1 (March 23, 2017): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.99>.

readers' hands, turning over, flipping through. The design, layout, and physicality of books are appreciated yet often overlooked by readers, but to understand how this book embodies citizenship requires readers to pay close attention to the very body of *Citizen*.

“Is It Cool? Are You Cool?”

In the final lines of the passage, the prose begins a pattern of repetition, oscillating between declarative statements—“The day is hot”—indications of uncertainty—“Is it cold?”—and direct questions—“Are you cold?” This repeated structure conveys three ambivalent meanings. The first is that it mirrors the fallibility of memory, in which the narrator remembers then doubts fine details like in the first chapter: “The girl is Catholic with waist-length brown hair. You can’t remember her name: Mary? Catherine?”⁴³ Here, the sentences follow the same pattern of declaration then uncertainty. In this vein, the pattern’s questions are self-directed, and the “I” subject is the same as the “you” subject.

In another reading, these questions form a dialogue between the narrator and a separate person. The silent response in between the questions, “Is it cool? Are you cool?” recalls the earlier phrase, “the silence of brothers.” Trauma inflicted upon the neck from rope and “a throat sliced through” render the respondent mute. In this sense, the sentences form the “talk” that “keeps him there”, and the “you” becomes “him.”

Lastly, the second-person subject invokes the reader, and the sensory questions interrogate the reader’s relationship with their environment and the environment of the photograph. “Are you cold?” places the reader within the realm of the book, dissolving any sense of voyeurism that comes with silently listening in on a phone call or invisibly observing a

⁴³ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 5, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31822041280561>.

murder. In this sense, “you” are caught. You are seen. You are complicit, and you are questioned. The eyes of the lynchers no longer stare back at the photographer. Now, their gazes travel through time, penetrating the page of your book, looking at you.

Affective Asphyxia

The embodiment of citizenship also appears in *Citizen*'s focus on the body's physical responses to racial microaggressions. Rankine references this theme of breath in chapter four:

To live through the days sometimes you moan like a deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets. Perhaps each sigh is drawn into existence to pull in, pull under, who knows; truth be told, you could no more control those sighs than that which brings the sighs about.

The sigh is the pathway to breath; it allows breathing. That's just self-preservation. No one fabricates that. You sit down, you sigh. You stand up, you sigh. The sighing is a worrying exhale of an ache. You wouldn't call it an illness; still it is not the iteration of a free being. What else to liken yourself to but an animal, the ruminant kind?⁴⁴

This passage depicts the act of sighing as a reflex—an uncontrollable, primal act of exhalation, which “you could no more control...than that which brings the sighs about.” The repeated reference to deer recalls an image of Kate Clark's *Little Girl* (2008) sculpture at the end of the first chapter (Image 3).⁴⁵ The work depicts a taxidermy deer body with the face of a Black

⁴⁴ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 59-60, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31822041280561>.

⁴⁵ Rankine, *Citizen*, 19.

person stitched or superimposed onto the head, evoking Hammons's similar theme of the separation between body and head. The deer girl is crouched vulnerably, gazing upwards and to the left of the viewer. "The ruminant kind" functions dually; it recalls *Little Girl* through the use of the word "ruminant," which literally describes deer and other animals that do not digest food all at once, but instead continuously chew on the undigested parts through a process of fermentation. Additionally, it also reflects the cyclical processes of rumination described in the passage; "Another sigh. Another stop that...You sit down, you sigh. You stand up, you sigh." In order to sigh, one must intake air, and microaggressions and racial trauma are a sort of



Image 3. *Little Girl* (2008) by Kate Clark, featured in chapter one of *Citizen: An American Lyric*

contaminant in the cycle of respiration. In other words, the act of sighing is the body's mechanism for expelling something undigested—something built up within oneself or lodged within one's throat.

While Shermaine Jones notes that Black Americans are often directed to “choke down” emotion and bury pain deep within themselves, *Citizen's* sigh is a method of preventing choking.⁴⁶ To choke down one's rage is a form of auto-asphyxiation, whereas the sigh is “the pathway to breath” and ultimately a means for survival and “self-preservation.” In chapter five, Rankine continues with this motif and juxtaposes it with a microaggression-induced ache:

A friend writes of the numbing effects of humming and it returns you to your own sigh. It's no longer audible. You've grown into it. Some call it aging—an internalized liquid smoke blurring ordinary ache.

Just this morning another. What did he say?⁴⁷

To refer to this recurring motif, Jones introduces the term “affective asphyxia” to describe the “precarious state between life and death.”⁴⁸ Not exactly inhalation nor exhalation, the sigh enables one to persevere as everyday microaggressions chip away at one's sense of self. The question “What did he say” resembles recurring moments throughout *Citizen* in which the text asks “Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard?”⁴⁹ What triggers the sigh is the recollection and rumination on a microaggression. Throughout these questions is the underlying disbelief and incredulity as to whether or not something offensive was just said, which, in turn, makes the emotional digestion of the microaggression difficult. Through this lens, the sigh is a manifestation of the racial fatigue that Black Americans in *Citizen* experience

⁴⁶ Shermaine Jones, “‘I Can't Breathe!': Affective Asphyxia in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*,” *South: A Scholarly Journal* 50, no. 1 (2017): 38.

⁴⁷ Rankine, *Citizen*, 151.

⁴⁸ Jones, “‘I Can't Breathe!'”

⁴⁹ Rankine, *Citizen*, 9.

from daily microaggressions, a lifetime of racial trauma, and a centuries-long history of anti-Black violence.⁵⁰

Recalling the formal tradition of poetry's line breaks as a visual cue for breath, Rankine encodes this notion of "affective asphyxia" within the punctuation and line breaks of the text. The use of semicolons and comma splices interrupts the reader's pattern of breathing, which follows the staccato cadence of many of the sentences: "Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets". The sigh's position between the fixed boundaries of inhalation and exhalation, and life and death, reflects its position between the period's hard ending of sentences and the text's continuous flow. Moreover, the whiteness of the page and its negative space are a visual extension of the sigh and serve as a release and break between the charged poetry and imagery. In doing so, the form of the pages seems to sigh, and the book becomes a body heaving and choking on the weight of the stories that it contains.

⁵⁰ Jones, "I Can't Breathe!"

AFTERWORD

In the wake of Emmett Till's death and the dissemination of photographs of his corpse, James Baldwin wrote, "It was myself in that coffin, it was my brothers in that coffin...I can't describe it so precisely, because it had been so mutilated, it had been so violated. It was him but it was all of us."⁵¹ Through his relation to the image of Emmett Till's body, Baldwin describes the transubstantiation of the corpse into a larger representation of Black trauma—one that was simultaneously Emmett Till and "all of us." Baldwin's words highlight the merging relationship between the depicted subject and the audience—a relationship that appears throughout *Citizen* and especially its cover. Here, the viewer inhabits the severed black hood, simultaneously recognizing themselves in the image, invoking the spirits of past victims, and reminding them of the multiplicity of Black Americans who share similar experiences. The power of the depicted lies in its openness and its ability to call upon the reader to step into the media before them. This power is precisely what Claudia Rankine wields in *Citizen*.

Weaving past and present together, *Citizen's* collection of photographs, sculptures, paintings, and prose displays the multiplicity of ways in which citizenship is embodied throughout the book. Drawing on the precedent of Emmett Till, photography's visual indices serve as loaded evidence of the literal bodies of the past. However, such depictions and forms of embodiment carry the dangers of retraumatization as negotiated in Ken Gonzales-Day's *Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith, Marion, IN. 1930*. The sculptures and paintings express visual metaphors of Black personhood as seen in David Hammons's *In the Hood* and Kate Clark's *Little Girl*. Each work is laden with signs and connotations associated

⁵¹ Maureen Corrigan, "Let the People See: It Took Courage to Keep Emmett Till's Memory Alive," *National Public Radio*, October 30, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/30/660980178/-let-the-people-see-shows-how-emmett-till-s-murder-was-nearly-forgotten>.

with Black bodies such as the hoodie and the animal. The textual “you” melds the body of the reader with that of the poetry’s acousmatic subject. In turn, affective asphyxia, the motif of the sigh, and physical traces of racial trauma percolate throughout the body of the text. With each element working in tandem with one another, these mediated bodies coalesce within the pages of the book to create a citizen that is both singular yet composed of many, personal yet deeply shared, and historic yet eternally enduring.

What my work has sought to do is illuminate the bodies within *Citizen*’s media and more importantly explain why this ambiguous, multimedia form of embodiment is crucial to understanding citizenship in the particular context of 21st century America. For centuries, documentation of Black bodies has existed through slave ship manifests, Farm Security Administration photographs, and video footage of police violence against Black citizens. Simultaneously, expressions of Black voices appear in work like David Hammons’s sculptures, Glenn Ligon’s paintings, and Richard Wright’s texts. These works of media comprise a vast history of Black bodies in America that cannot be forgotten. As *Citizen* reminds us: in order to understand the present and future, we must remember the past. Amidst a violent history in which Black Americans were for centuries denied citizenship and at times still are, this remembrance of bodies—this assertion of belonging—is crucial to understanding what it means to be a citizen today.

However, seemingly contradictory to my work is the fact that *Citizen* does not tell us precisely what it means to be a citizen. In fact, it holds more questions than answers. Claudia Rankine curates these images, writes this prose, and leaves the divination of its meaning to us, the ones who hold the book in our hands, see our faces on the cover, and flip its pages with our fingertips. In other words, what we take away from *Citizen* depends on how our uniquely

situated bodies make contact with the corpus of the text. For this reason, dear reader, what you have read has been my interpretation, bolstered by a diverse cache of academics and scholars, yet written by someone who is not Black but instead Asian. In combination with the other intersecting facets of my identity, I write with a very different relationship to systemic racism in twenty-first century America than Claudia Rankine. However, it was her words, “The body has memory,” that echoed in my mind in the wake of the 2021 shootings in Atlanta, Georgia. It is her words that I hear when my pulse races and my hands shake after encountering a racial microaggression in my own situations.

Indeed, this is a book that is specific to Black American citizenship, but it also possesses a broader level that speaks to the myriad experiences of minority citizenship. In fact, Rankine even states, “On the one hand, I am talking about institutionalized racism. But on another and I think equally important level, I’m just talking about what happens when we fail each other as people.”⁵² *Citizen* is about what happens when we fail to see each other, to understand each other, and to recognize each other’s humanity. It is about the failure to remember history, past legacies, and previous acts of violence that have resulted in the situation of our bodies, our lives, alongside those of our neighbors. And yet, it is also about the power of media—of image and text, photograph and sculpture situated alongside one another. It is about heterogeneous media speaking in conversation with one another, occupying shared space, coming together in the body of one book. Out of many—one.

⁵² Claudia Rankine, “In ‘Citizen,’ Poet Strips Bare the Realities of Everyday Racism,” National Public Radio, January 3, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/01/03/374574142/in-citizen-poet-strips-bare-the-realities-of-everyday-racism>.

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