

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Athena Michelle Lathos for the degree of Master of Arts presented on May 23, 2017.

Title: “A Sea of Grief is Not a Proscenium”: Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* and the Spectacle of Racist Violence in Cyberculture.

Abstract approved:

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In her 2016 article “Beyond Rights as Recognition, Black Twitter and Posthuman Coalitional Possibilities,” Pritha Prasad argues that the hashtag, one of the decade’s most omnipresent features of digital communication, functions as “a performative composing medium that not only demands relationality” and “call[s] for the recognition of both the Black body and human beyond humanist, economic, and juridical frameworks” (56). Though work like Prasad’s is timely and insightful, my own project examines the racist and inimical, rather than humanist and embodied, qualities of digital spaces that circulate images of the black body. From the violation of Kara Walker’s sculpture *A Subtlety* on Instagram to the proliferation of a racist meme called “Trayvoning,” my paper suggests that by flattening the contexts and histories of black death, supposedly “disembodied” forms of digital media more often serve to enact and reenact forms of violence against the black body. This phenomenon recalls the history of similar circulations in American history, from lynching postcards shared as “souvenirs” in the 19th century to the release of torture images in America’s Abu Ghraib prison complex. Using these racist images as its

stable context, my project employs Claudia Rankine's mixed-media compilation of images and poems, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, to argue that the artistic practice of reassembling historically-contingent media has the critical function of intervening in the rapid and inescapable spectacularization and circulation of black death. With her attention to obfuscating assemblages--in both her own text and in her use of the opaque visual art--Claudia Rankine effectively challenges the powerful "mastering" gaze of the digital age without removing the context or corporeality of racist violence.

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“A Sea of Grief is Not a Proscenium”: Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* and the Spectacle of  
Racist Violence in Cyberculture.

by  
Athena Michelle Lathos

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Athena Michelle Lathos, Author

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: “Redirecting the Gaze on the Spectator”: Defying the “Overmediated Consciousness” through Surreal Collage and Visual Delinking.....	11
Chapter 2: “Because White Men Can’t Police Their Imagination”: Advocating for Critical Spectatorship in New Media Environments .....	30
Bibliography .....	55

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Kara Walker's <i>A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby</i> .....	5
2-4. Instagram Photographs Taken with <i>A Subtlety</i> .....	9
5,6. Creative Time's #KaraWalkerDomino Signs in the Domino Sugar Factory. ....	9
7. Safiya Umoja Noble's Work on Google's Autosuggest Feature .....	16
8. The 2012 "Trayvoning" Meme .....	18
9. Released Abu Ghraib Photograph of the Torture of Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh...	20
10. Salaheddin Salat's "Statue of Liberty" Painting .....	20
11. Forkscrew Graphics' <i>IRaq</i> posters .....	20
12. Wangechi Mutu's <i>Family Tree (Original Land)</i> .....	26
13. Glenn Ligon's <i>Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)</i> .....	28
14. Kate Clark's <i>Little Girl</i> .....	36
15. Caroline Wozniacki "Mimicking" Serena Williams .....	3
16. Josh Lucas' Alteration of <i>Public Lynching</i> .....	3



## Introduction

And most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of grief is not a proscenium, a male wailing is not a dancing bear.

- Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*

In her 2016 article “Beyond Rights as Recognition, Black Twitter and Posthuman Coalitional Possibilities,” Pritha Prasad examines the cultural functions of the hashtag, one of the decade’s omnipresent features of digital communication and political discourse. She reads the hashtag as “a performative composing medium that not only demands relationality through repetition, recirculation, and retweeting, but also acts as an affirmative mechanism that quite literally locates subjects ‘in the flow of relations with multiple others’ ” (56). Through an analysis of Black Twitter<sup>1</sup>, Prasad reads hashtags as positive and communal forms of political protest, particularly as they are employed by black activists on social media. In her reading of the hashtags #AliveWhileBlack and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, which circulated after Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown were killed by police in 2012 and 2014, respectively, Prasad argues that hashtags “extend posthuman epistemology as they exhibit a profound reflexivity about the notions of both embodiment and humanity and call for the recognition of both the Black body and human beyond humanist, economic, and juridical frameworks” (56).

An examination of Prasad’s work calls attention to an important methodological distinction, and certainly one which will impact the theoretical concerns of my own project. By

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<sup>1</sup>Because “Black Twitter” is a relatively new term in the circles of both academic and popular culture, I will include Prasad’s useful definition here. She writes, “[Black Twitter] has been used widely as a heuristic in mainstream media to describe a countercultural movement on Twitter among mostly Black users, other people of color, and allies. As Shani O. Hilton of *Buzzfeed* describes, users who might be considered members of Black Twitter are almost always interested in issues of race in the news and pop culture” (69).

claiming that Black Twitter “[calls] for the recognition of both the Black body and the human,” Prasad is embarking upon a posthumanist project. The terms “posthuman” and “posthumanism,” though often muddled in the early years of these developing disciplines, have evolved into very separate frameworks for thinking about the form, function, and development of the figure of the human being. The concept of the posthuman is discussed at length in N. Katherine Hayles’ influential book *How We Became Posthuman*. In her introduction, Hayles describes the “posthuman view” as one that “thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of the process that began before we were born” (3). Though it is a common misperception that the notion of the posthuman defies liberal humanism, Hayles claims that the history of the term<sup>2</sup> reveals quite the opposite. She writes, “For [Norbert] Wiener, cybernetics was a means to extend liberal humanism, not subvert it. The point was less to show that a man was a machine than to demonstrate that a machine could function like a man” (Hayles 7). It follows logically, then, that a critique of this extension of liberal humanism is the methodological foundation for the term “posthumanism” itself. Indeed, in Cary Wolfe’s instrumental *Posthumanism*, he writes, “posthumanism in my sense isn’t posthuman at all— in the sense of being ‘after’ our embodiment has been transcended— but is only posthumanist in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself, that Hayles rightly criticizes” (xv). Though Hayles’ and Wolfe’s contributions are in agreement on this point, it is important to highlight the difference between their separate projects for the purpose that while

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<sup>2</sup>As Hayles reminds us, this continuation was an important theoretical foundation of the 1953-1954 Macy Conferences on Cybernetics, which were attended by interdisciplinary researchers Norbert Wiener, John von Neumann, and Warren Culloch, and were intended “to formulate the central concepts that, in their high expectations, would coalesce into a theory of communication and control applying equally to humans, animals, and machines” (7).

some critics have used the words “posthuman” and “posthumanism” interchangeably, both terms have different theoretical contexts and connotations.

To that end, in the introduction to “Beyond Rights as Recognition,” Prasad defers to Rosi Braidotti’s notion that “technologically mediated points of reference often appear to be neither organic/inorganic, male/female, nor especially White” (Braidotti 56, qtd. in Prasad) and claims that Black Twitter’s use of hashtags intervenes in the fantasy of a postracial digital space by 1) fostering a vernacular tradition (that is, in the tradition of Henry Louis Gates’ interpretation of “signifyin”) and 2) developing an anti-racist epistemology, or an archive of events and utterances that disrupt racist narratives and depictions of the black body in both news media and popular culture. When we consider her argument in terms of the difference between “the posthuman” and “posthumanism,” according to the definitions provided by Hayles and Wolfe, we can determine that though Prasad claims that Black Twitter “extends posthuman epistemology,” her analysis is actually an extension of *posthumanist* epistemology, especially insofar as she believes that Black Twitter activists subvert the “disembodied” qualities of Twitter (i.e. anonymity) by posting pictures of themselves alongside hashtags that refer to incidents of racial bias and police brutality. The posthumanist methodology of Prasad’s work is perhaps most clear in the thesis of her argument: that the compositional features of contemporary digital culture allow marginalized black Americans to reclaim a reference to the black body even as that body continues to be subject to normative dehumanization.

Though Prasad suggests that Black Twitter activists “reimagine protest spatialities and thus challenge the analytical utility of online–offline binaries,” (69) in practice, she primarily figures the work of Black Twitter authors in the form of a “rhetorical imaginary,” an ideal online space that is ontologically separate from the “offline” world and its material occupants. This

feature of her work tends to neglect the intricate and often violent integration of these subjectivities in public spaces. One of the clearest examples of the way in which racist attitudes manifest in the complex on- and offline blurring of viral phenomena occurred the spring of 2014, when a New York public arts organization called Creative Time unveiled contemporary American artist Kara Walker's sculpture *A Subtlety* (Figure 1). *A Subtlety* was constructed inside the Domino Sugar Factory, a 132-year-old refining plant slated for demolition in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The central feature of the sculpture, a 35-foot high sphinx built with polystyrene foam and covered in white sugar, was constructed with the face of a "mammy" caricature and introduced with the subtitle: "an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World," and quickly became the subject of critical admiration. A *New Yorker* art critic named Hilton Als, for example, labeled the piece "triumphant, rising from another kind of half world—the shadowy half world of slavery and degradation as she gives us a version of 'the finger.' "



**Figure 1: Kara Walker's *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby***

**Source: Photograph by Jason Wyche; posted on [www.dilettantearmy.com](http://www.dilettantearmy.com)**

Though certainly triumphant, Walker's enormous sphinx does not simply arise from a "shadowy half world of slavery and degradation," but instead embodies its very materiality. Constructed of bleached sugar and surrounded by molasses attendants, the sculpture explicitly refers to the relationship between black bodies and the Transatlantic slave trade, and specifically to the enslaved Africans forced to produce the lucrative cash crop on Caribbean plantations. In fact, according to archaeologist Robyn Woodward, "The growing and milling of sugar cane... 'was the primary reason for bringing ten million Africans to the New World' " (Pringle). Furthermore, of all crops produced in through the Transatlantic slave trade, sugar required the

most rigorous and physically painful labor to produce (Beauchamp 65). American abolitionist Fanny Kemble's *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*, a historical account that includes the author's observations of labor practices on sugar plantations, illustrates the way in which narratives about sugar production became part of the rhetoric circulated by the anti-slavery movement:

When I am most inclined to deplore the condition of the poor slaves on these cotton and rice plantations, the far more intolerable existence and harder labour of those employed on the sugar estates occurs to me, sometimes producing the effect of a lower circle in Dante's 'Hell of Horrors,' opening beneath the one where he seems to have reached the climax of infernal punishment. (106, qtd. in Beauchamp 65)

Though the sphinx is the clear centerpiece of Walker's *A Subtlety*, the Domino Sugar Factory itself, which housed the sculpture, also refers to the capitalist system that required the production of sugar to function. The factory "was the largest working sugar refinery in the world during the mid-19th century, and opened mere decades after the end of the infamous Triangular Trade that fed American slavery" (Pazzanese). In this way, when each of the component parts of Kara Walker's sculpture-- the sugar sphinx, the molasses attendants, and the Domino Sugar Factory-- are considered as a whole, it is abundantly clear that the sculpture refers to the exploitation of black bodies before, during, and after the Transatlantic Slave Trade. And yet, despite the clear *lack* of subtlety with which Walker represented violent racism through her sculpture's full title and historically-charged construction materials, many audience members of *A Subtlety* were either unaware of or indifferent to this history. In what rapidly became a social media

phenomenon, hundreds of *A Subtlety*'s spectators took pictures of themselves interacting with the sugar sculpture's body parts in profoundly racist and derogatory ways, particularly by taking "selfies" with the naked sphinx as if performing sexual acts (Figures 2, 3, and 4).



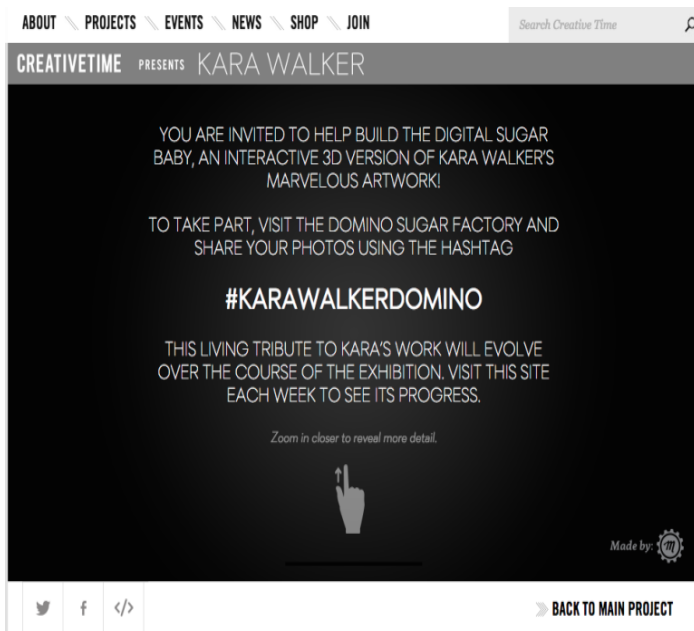
**Figure 2-4: Instagram Photographs Taken with *A Subtlety***

**Source:** Public Instagram photographs posted on <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/karawalkers-sugar-sphinx-spawns-offensive-instagram-photos-29989>

What these audience members did not know, however, is that Kara Walker anticipated these responses to her project, and filmed the interior of the factory during the exhibition of her sculpture as a sequel to *A Subtlety*. The film was exhibited under the title “An Audience,” and went on display at Walker’s Sikkema Jenkins & Co. Gallery in New York City in November of 2014. The exhibit, titled *Afterword*, also contained Walker’s notes, sketches, and drawings made after the project, as she “contemplated the personal impact of this large and popular work, which drew in over 130,000 spectators<sup>3</sup>” (Sikkema Jenkins & Co.). Through her analysis of the exhibition of *A Subtlety*, “Queering Sugar: Kara Walker’s Sugar Sphinx and the Intractability of Female Sexuality,” Amber Jamila Musser writes that the responses of these spectators, as well as Walker’s plan to fashion them into a second iteration of her project, “goes beyond showing the ways that black bodies are still victimized and moves toward thinking about how race and sexuality *work now*” (164, emphasis my own). Musser’s explanation, and particularly her suggestion that race and sexuality work differently now-- that is, in the age of New Media-- underscores an important feature of the racist images taken of the sugar sculpture. When most audience members entered the Domino Sugar Factory, they had already been exposed to the work through the rapid proliferation of selfies taken with the sphinx and released under the hashtag #KaraWalkerDomino (Figures 5 and 6).

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Sikkema Jenkins & Co. curation notes, “In the main gallery is the severed left fist of the sugar sphinx whose gesture recalls the Afro-Brazilian *figa*, a talisman of good luck, which in ancient times has alternated as a fertility symbol, a rude gesture, and a protector against harm. The fist is presented along with new works on paper, including the large scale interpretation of J.M.W. Turner’s *The Slave Ship* (1840) in watercolor, and several of the young boy attendants.”



**Figures 5,6: Creative Time's #KaraWalkerDomino Signs in the Domino Sugar Factory**

**Source: Figure 5: Author's screenshot of the front page on <http://creativetime.org/karawalker/digital-sugar-baby>**

**Figure 6: Photograph posted on <http://www.makeable.com/love/karawalker>**

The proliferation of racist responses to *A Subtlety* exemplify the way in which digitized phenomena in the 21st century are daily witness to (and, as Musser would claim, *subject* to) a more convoluted blurring of online and offline subjectivities than is represented in Pritha Prasad's formulation. For example, the desire of the audience of *A Subtlety* to participate in hashtag is certainly communal from a social standpoint. The audience members of Walker's sculpture expressed a desire and volition to photograph themselves with the sugar sphinx and attach the #KaraWalkerDomino hashtag to the resulting image, thus connecting themselves to a diverse network of audience members who visited the Domino Sugar Factory with the same purpose. However, it is that same desire to participate in a cyber-community of Twitter and Instagram users that results in a re-circulation of exploitation here, a physical and discursive violation of both the body of the sphinx (a figure which already embodies racist violence) and those of black visitors witnessing its degradation.

In fact, Musser's argument in "Queering Sugar" is based upon a compilation of anecdotes written by black audience members who attended the unveiling of Walker's piece and articulated the layers of suffering that accompanied that act of witness. Perhaps the most famous of these affective narratives is Nicholas Powers' "Why I Yelled at the Kara Walker Exhibit," published in a New York newspaper called *The Independent*. In the article, Powers writes about his three visits to the Domino Sugar Factory to see *A Subtlety*, each of which were marked by a painful experience of watching white spectators<sup>4</sup> violate the sculpture. He describes the experience as one that reflected Du Bois' notion of double-consciousness, "of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," and writes that by the time he had witnessed the constant degradation of the statute for the third time, he was so angry that he yelled, "You are recreating the very racism this art is supposed to critique!" Though Powers praises Kara Walker's early work, his article ultimately condemns the social impact of *A Subtlety*. He writes, "Instead of challenging the racial power dynamics of white supremacy, Walker and Creative Time, in their naivety or arrogance, I don't know which, simply made the Domino Sugar Factory a safe place for it." In "Queering Sugar," Musser refers to Nicholas Powers' testimony as an example of the way in which "narrated conflicts between expectations and reality illustrate the way that a framework of violation undergirds representations of black women and highlights the limits of consent and the difficulty of proximity" (159). Ultimately, she argues that these public internet narratives and conversations-- which Kara Walker appears to have anticipated--suggest, "What

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<sup>4</sup> Though not all of the audience members who took offensive selfies with Walker's sculpture were white, Powers refers to acts of white supremacy here. Because my own project is interested in white Americans who participate in white supremacist circulations of racist spectacles, my argument focuses (and will continue to focus) particularly on white spectators committing acts of violation through digital media.

is at issue is not a corporeal violation (although we might argue that its ghost remains) but an affective one”<sup>5</sup> (Musser 162).

The fact that the Domino Sugar Factory did in many ways become, as Powers noted, a “safe place” for white supremacy certainly has both affective and corporeal consequences. These consequences would not have the same resonance if the sculpture had not become a prodigious viral phenomenon. Because it was exhibited in 2014, *A Subtlety* entered a media environment that not only allows, but actively encourages cultural objects to spread with a rapidity and infectiousness that certainly justifies the use of the word “viral” to describe the proliferation of popular internet content. The demands and attributes of Cyberculture itself constitute the “framework of violation” that Musser gestures to, particularly when a group of spectators approach a cultural object with a strong desire to share it through a smartphone application or social network.

## Chapter 1

### **“Redirecting the Gaze on the Spectator”: Defying the “Overmediated Consciousness” through Surreal Collage and Visual Delinking**

As Jim Ridolfo and Dànienne Nicole DeVoss argue, the common practices of composing a post on social media radically destabilize conventional ideas about the circulation and production of texts by deprivileging the “humanist and romanticized notion of the solitary author”; in the culture of Twitter, for example, authorship is instead “distributed, horizontal, and shared” (qtd. In Prasad). In “New Media, Old Racisms: Twitter, Miss America, and Cultural Logics of Race,” J. David Cisneros and Thomas K. Nakayama track the way in which racist beliefs and utterances

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Powers explains that the capacity of the sculpture to inflict pain on racialized bodies was its most significant failure. He explains, “I wondered...if exposing the details of Black victimization was truly freeing if it simply triggered the pain of people of color, and in the precarious atmosphere of the nearly all-white art world at that.”

manifest themselves through these practices of horizontal digital authorship. They examine Twitter in particular because of the significant “context collapse” of the medium, which is described in the following terms:

Context collapse refers to the ways in which many social media platforms collapse social, geographic/spatial, and temporal contexts that are key to understanding and interpreting specific messages...Twitter, for example, “flattens multiple audiences” into one (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) because it does not rely on an exclusive audience/addressee, and it is not tied to a specific community of interest or identity. In other words, “context collapse” means that Twitter is addressed to an invisible and acontextual audience. (117)

The effect of an author addressing this “flattened audience” has been described as an unprecedented form of “publicized privacy,”<sup>6</sup> or a phenomenon in which “social media users engage in status updates and tweets as, on one hand, forms of self-presentation and social validation to a mass public, and, on the other hand, as forms of self-disclosure and/or self-expression to specific/intimate users” (117). Indeed, it is the self-preservation and social validation of social media participants that often goes overlooked in studies like “Beyond Rights as Recognition” and “Queering Sugar.” Though I am certainly not the first critic to critique the fantasy of a post-racial, disembodied internet, recent criticism of this fantasy has been more concerned with demonstrating the inimical qualities of Cyberculture than to question precisely

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<sup>6</sup> This term is attributed to M. Sloop and J. Gunn. However, Cisneros and Nakayama defer to Jessica Vitak’s notion that, “More than other new media technologies, social networking coincides with the blurring of public and private, the mixing of the intimacy and specificity of the personal, the anonymity and generality of the public, and everything in between” (117).

*why* and *how* the desires of social media participants mobilize phenomena like the compulsion to take a selfie with Kara Walker's sugar sphinx.

If we are to couple desires like self-preservation and social validation with the particular ethos of the social network medium, or one in which "Privileging circulation almost to the exclusion of other concerns, composers' decisions anticipate future considerations of composing" (Prasad 65), it is easier to understand how the desire for both relationality and community, though certainly ideal from the standpoint of activism, also serves to create an environment in which an author's impulse to share a cultural subject with a "flattened audience" results in a willingness to flatten the subject into an object-- that is, removing it of both its context and complexity--until it becomes an ideal vehicle for social participation. It follows, then, that the omnipresence of social media in material spaces like the Domino Sugar Factory relies upon a significant and often intentional oversimplification of difficult works about race like Kara Walker's<sup>7</sup>. Importantly, these reductive framing devices can be quite literal. Until the fall of 2015, for example, Instagram users were required to upload images that fit within a small square frame size, which, logically, also obligated them to crop out pieces of the image that did not fit inside the application's mathematical parameters (Dave). Perhaps more often, though, the "frame" of social media is socially absorbed, figured into a kind of anticipatory gaze that readies the image for quick circulation and an outpouring of both criticism and praise.

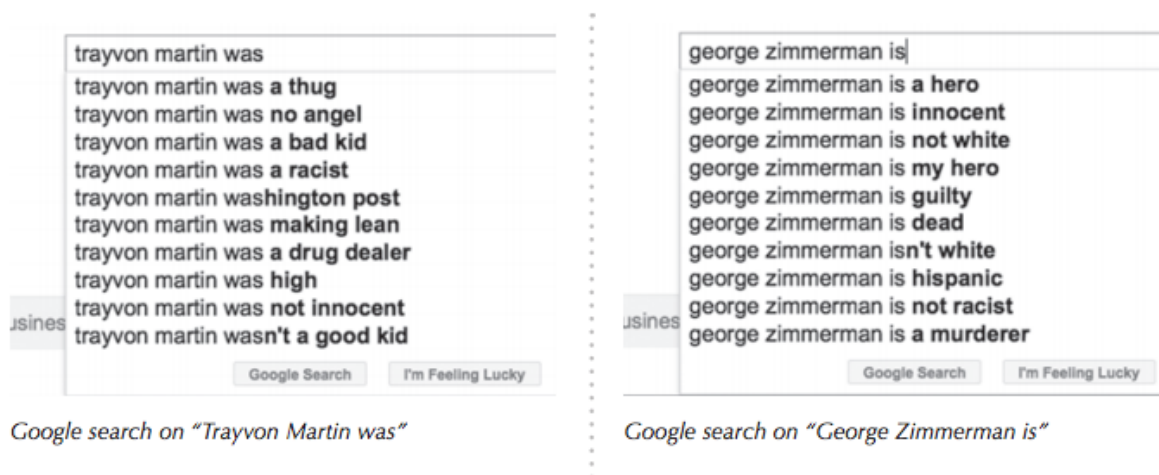
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<sup>7</sup> In this project, I employ "difficulty" in a manner consistent with Samantha Pinto in her book *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic*, which inspired much of my thinking in this project. Pinto writes that she employs the word "difficulty" to refer to "the intense engagement that reading opaque, formally experimental texts requires of the modern reader. This challenging literacy recasts the constellation of terms that theorists associated with transnational, postcolonial, and diaspora studies have coined to describe similarly intense, ethical relations across various axes of difference: 'contact' (Pratt), 'affiliation' (Said), 'translation' (Edwards), 'poetics of relation'/'cross-cultural poetics' (Glissant), 'encounter' (Friedman)...Difficulty is a way to group these relational terms regarding conflict and community together and to think about how that might relate to bodies of literature, rather than just to bodies represented in literature" (4).

This framing is particularly interesting in terms of the reception of *A Subtlety*, which was initially described by white art critics as a powerful and even comedic symbol of reclamation. I agree with Amber Musser's reading of this first outpouring of praise, which she labels a patent idealization of the sphinx's agency and a proliferation of the contemporary notion that "desirable sexuality goes hand in hand with liberal subjectivity" (Musser 156). In other words, many critics thought that because the sphinx possesses an imposing female form that exaggerates her sexual features, she is unequivocally rendered as a powerful agent. Musser describes the optimistic rendering of the agential sphinx as itself a kind of discursive "sugarcoating" which "provides pleasure for those who believe in the ideology of colorblindness because it creates a narrative of endurance or even uplift and assuages white guilt by presenting a figure of black domination" (158). Furthermore, she reminds us that these initial responses completely elide the capitalist discourse of the piece: the sphinx is not simply an emblem of goddess-like "nobility," but a conspicuous emblem of the wealthy Egyptian empire (and, ironically, a symbol of ambiguity itself). Incidentally, in the framing of the sculpture on social media, this capitalist connotation was not only neglected in descriptions of *A Subtlety*, but also literally removed from the frame of the image. Limited by Instagram's 2014 algorithm, most photographs could not contain the fullness of a panoramic image of the piece, thus removing any reference to its most significant appendices: the fifteen molasses sculptures of child laborers carrying baskets of unprocessed sugar.

The circulation of racist images through the social technologies of the internet is not a phenomenon particular to the consumption of art like Kara Walker's, but is also a pervasive feature of current news media practices and even the most supposedly objective spaces of the internet, such as popular search engines. My thinking in this respect is informed by Safiya

Umoja Noble's work at the intersection of Information Studies and critical race theory. Noble investigates the way in which search engine algorithms, cloaked websites, and social media platforms propagate racist ideologies in New Media platforms of the 21st century. In her 2014 article, "Teaching Trayvon: Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle" Noble draws upon Guy Debord's work to demonstrate the way in which the spectacle of violence against the black body is recasted for the purposes of commodification and white pleasure. She tracks the commodification of the spectacle of Martin's death on both sides of the political spectrum, critiquing liberal media outlets "who were heavily invested in defending Trayvon from being portrayed as a criminal while deflecting attention from larger systemic and structural critiques," (16) and denouncing Fox News for misrepresenting Martin as a "thug" in order to market to the conservatism of their regular base of viewers. In her analysis of the media coverage of Martin's death, Noble asserts that the negative representation of Trayvon Martin, that is, the narrative that depicted him "wearing sagging pants and flipping the bird to the camera," ultimately "moved through social networks and in the blogosphere throughout the Zimmerman trial *as fact*" (Noble 16; emphasis my own). The phrase "as fact" here is representative of Noble's current work on algorithmic bias in internet search engines, which suggests not only that many contemporary Americans consider the internet an objective "archive" of aggregated news and data, but that many internet platforms perpetuate racist depictions of minority populations. For example, Noble asserts that Google's autosuggest feature (Figure 7) "sustains the spectacle of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman," and notes that "it has come under scrutiny for the ways in which it demonstrates how popular searches bias our understanding of complex ideas like race and gender" (Noble 20).



**Figure 7: Safiya Umoja Noble's Work on Google's Autosuggest Feature**

**Source: "Teaching Trayvon: Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle," in *The Black Scholar*.**

And yet, despite the dangerous implications of these features of digital platforms, it is not only the dissemination of false and prejudiced discourse that problematizes the circulation of "the spectacle" in the news and on social media platforms, but the particular manner in which the decontextualized circulation of the spectacle has mobilized through new media. One of the most violent examples of the "meme-ification" of Trayvon Martin's death was a 2013 social media phenomenon called "Trayvoning," (Figure 8) in which "young men (mostly white) posed and took pictures of themselves for circulation on the Web" (Noble 22). In the words of David Leonard and Lisa Guerrero in their article "Playing Dead: The Trayvoning Meme and the Mocking of Black Death": "Trayvoning recasts and performs injustice by turning someone's pain and suffering into a spectacle of white pleasure that further denies the humanity of black people." Noble, along with Leonard and Guerrero, observes that the spectacle of black death reassembled or presented for white pleasure is an unmistakable continuation of centuries-old white supremacist entertainments. Blackface minstrelsy, an American form of entertainment that

began when a white actor named Thomas Dartmouth Rice “imitated a slave whom he had seen dancing to a song named ‘Jumpin’ Jim Crow,” exploded in popularity in the mid-1800s. During this era of American history, “well-known stereotypes of African Americans were cultivated and refined: the loud-mouthed plantation mammy, the overdressed male dandy, the sexually promiscuous light-skinned woman, and the compliant Uncle Tom” (“Minstrelsy”). Leonard and Guerrero trace the tradition of blackface minstrelsy to depictions of black suffering in 21st century American news media, focusing particularly on the news coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the way in news agencies presented the natural disaster as a “scene of white popular enjoyment, wherein the purging/drowning of black people provided an opportunity for white Americana to revel in its entitlement to remain relatively indifferent to this nearby theater of breathtaking devastation” (Rodriguez, qtd. in Leon and Guerrero). Though the spectacularization of black suffering is certainly present throughout America’s history, Noble contends that new technologies facilitate the practice of circulating “pleasurable” images of and references to black suffering with very particular-- and largely unprecedented—modes and consequences. She writes, “The power of the neoliberal historical moment is the constant decontextualization and ahistorical approach to making sense of our realities. It divorces the historical production of ideologies of racism from the moment, and it invents new terms like ‘postracial’ to foment the erasure of the past” (23).



*Popular "Trayvoning" photos circulating the Internet circa summer 2013*

**Figure 8: The 2012 "Trayvoning" Meme**  
**Source: "Teaching Trayvon: Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle," in *The Black Scholar*.**

The decontextualization and lack of historicity in the "Trayvoning" trend recalls the circulation of racist selfies taken with Kara Walker's sugar sculpture and Creative Time's decision to market the piece the exhibition through the #KaraWalkerDomino hashtag rather than a description of the cultural significance of the piece. When Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter users participated in the hashtag's proliferation, they effectively replaced that lack of context of the sculpture with a context of their own: one of humor, self-promotion, and social participation.

In "Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib," Dora Apel compares the "pleasurable" circulation of black suffering in lynching photographs-- which were

taken and shared as communal memorabilia” in the form of postcards-- to the release of torture images from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. She writes, “It took decades of struggle... to transform lynching photography from a support of white supremacy into an antilynching weapon through the mass publication of lynching photos” (Apel 99). Though Apel draws multiple connections between the circulation of lynching postcards and the Abu Ghraib photos, she ultimately asserts that lynching postcards maintained their popularity because they were sanctioned by white communities, and “became ways of reliving the erotic thrills of torture and mutilation produced under the guise of righteous civic actions,” while the Abu Ghraib images “were meant to circulate only within the community of American military personnel, their families, and friends” through compact discs and email. After the Abu Ghraib photographs were finally released in a 2004 *60 Minutes* segment on CBS News (and subsequently circulated online), Apel claims that the public’s moral outcry was much more rapid and “with a more instantaneous effect” than it was at the height of lynching in the United States. Ultimately, Apel traces the antiwar responses to the Abu Ghraib photographs in exhibitions, news media, and art culture, questioning whether or not the release of the photographs had the intended effect of bringing justice to the victims of torture:

When is the power of an image turned against itself, transforming it into a picture that opposes the very thing the photograph means to uphold? We can affirm that different meanings are produced according to the arenas in which those images circulate, and that the association of photographs and artworks with the status of the real is critical to producing both a successful countereffect and an effectively persuasive protest art. It depends on us. (100).



**Figure 9: Salaheddin Salat's "Statue of Liberty" Painting**  
**Source:** "Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib," in *Art Journal*.



**Figure 10: Salaheddin Salat's "Statue of Liberty" Painting**  
**Source:** "Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib," in *Art Journal*.



**Figure 9: Salaheddin Salat's "Statue of Liberty" Painting**  
**Source:** "Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib," in *Art Journal*.

In Apel's view, the phrase "it depends on us" implicates both artists' and consumers' roles in crafting and responding to the contexts of human suffering. Her analysis here recalls Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay "Paranoid and Reparative Reading," which counts public executions among its examples of violent protest images gone awry. She writes, "it used to be opponents of capital punishment who argued that, if practiced at all, executions should be done in public so as to shame state and spectators...Today, it is no longer opponents but death penalty cheerleaders...who consider that the proper place for executions is on television" (Sedgwick 140).

Though Apel is skeptical that violent images can produce changes in spectators or state, she suggests that the framing is one of the ways in which potential social changes that result from the consumption of images "depends on us." In particular, she points to the activism of visual artists that critiqued the torture in Abu Ghraib by using a now-famous image of Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, an Iraqi prisoner who was forced to wear a hood and stand on a wooden block in a position reminiscent of the crucifixion (Figure 9). One of these paintings, by Iraqi artist Salaheddin Salat, was painted alongside an image of the Statue of Liberty on a heavily-trafficked street in Baghdad, that is, where the immediate context of both the images would be known (Figure 10). Another, released in 2004 by a design company called Forkscrew Graphics, was posted in New York City subways after the torture images were released on CBS News (Figure 11). These images, which recreated the Abu Ghraib photos in the form of iPod advertisements, were placed alongside the same Apple advertisements that they were satirizing, pointing to the patent "commercialization" of the war in Iraq (Apel 97). By expressing skepticism in the simple "release" of violent spectacles, but pointing to the importance of framing, location, medium, and context in her analysis, Apel's methodology echoes Marshall

McLuhan's claim that "media are make aware agents, not make happen agents" (McLuhan 48). In other words, if the public is simply "made aware" of images of the exploitation of racialized bodies, spectators' pleasurable consumption of those images through the technologies of New Media can reinforce and extend the pernicious scopophilia that caused photographers<sup>8</sup> to document acts of violence in the first place.

In "Torture Culture," Apel concludes, "Geoffrey Sire has argued that although images can still unnerve us, it is much harder now to penetrate our 'overmediated consciousness.' The images that still have such *power are those that allude to the real*" (Apel 97; emphasis my own). It seems though, that rather than simple "allusion" to the real, which pieces like *A Subtlety* certainly foster with their overt gestures to the institutions of capitalism and slavery in the United States, the rapid and decontextualized features of new media and digital technologies require different frames of reference in order to keep the images from reproducing "the gaze of mastery" and the spectacle of black death. Because even blatant references to the violent history that accompanies a racialized body or a cultural object often ignored in cyberspace, an entirely new framework of presenting and sharing images of both racialized bodies and cultural objects is necessary.

For the remainder of this project, I will perform an analysis of *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine's mixed-media meditation on race in America, to argue that the artistic practice of reassembling abstract texts and images has the critical function of intervening in the seemingly inescapable circulation and spectacularization of black death. With her attention to obfuscating historical assemblages-- in both her own hybrid text and her curation of work from artists like Wangechi Mutu and Glenn Ligon-- Claudia Rankine effectively challenges the impact

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<sup>8</sup> When I refer to the scopophilia here, I am referring to the pleasure of those that took souvenir photographs of lynchings or those who photographed Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib; that is, those who captured images of violence for the purposes of amusement rather than activism.

of the powerful “mastering” gaze of the digital age without removing the context or corporeality of racist violence.

In 2014, Rankine, a Jamaican-American poet, published *Citizen* with a dark green hoodie as its cover image. At the time of the book’s publication, several commenters on social media platforms like Facebook claimed that the hoodie referred to the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin. The hoodie, as Noble reminds us, was regularly used to frame Martin as a “thug,” and the majority of the art created to memorialize him depicted him wearing it. Despite the tendency of both news outlets and social media users to associate the hoodie with Trayvon’s death, the severed hood sculpture on *Citizen*’s front cover was not, in fact, created in reference to the 2012 shooting, but instead constructed by American artist David Hammons in 1993 (Forgenie). However, because the hoodie was presented without a caption or description, the photograph of the sculpture was circulated without reference to Hammons’ intentions or the political and racial climate that inspired him to create the piece after the 1992 Rodney King riots. The result of the absence of temporality in the presentation of hood had an important impact: it suggested that the discourse of white supremacy in 1992 is so similar the discourse of white supremacy in 2012 that the severed hood could refer to both incidents of violence.

The entirety of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* grapples with the complexities of form, context, and historical reference that accompanied the reception of its cover image. Though marketed as a compilation of poems, the most conspicuous feature of *Citizen* is its unconventional hybrid form. The book is constructed of seven chapters, none of which are crafted by precise organizational principles, but are instead composed of photographs, screenshots, sections of prose, free-verse poems, and pieces of visual art which-- like David Hammons’ sculpture-- often lack explicit contextual information. In fact, titles, dates, and other

data about the artworks can only be found in the bibliographic data at the end of the book. The uncanny nature of many of these images, as well as their stark formal differences, endows the text a capacity to perplex and disorient the reader with its unusual amalgam of media forms.

One of the most striking examples of *Citizen's* collection of abstract artwork is *Sleeping Heads* (2006), by Wangechi Mutu, a collage of human limbs arranged in the form of a human face. Mutu, a contemporary Kenyan artist whose work is often described as “Afrofuturistic,” is best known for her fantastical collages of human and humanoid forms. According to Maro David, the theoretical framework of Afrofuturism “challenges the post-human ideology of an imagined raceless future. It recognizes that blackness still has meaning in the virtual age, and...still implies that which is primitive and antithetical to technological progress” (698). This definition of Afrofuturism, which emerges as a posthumanist critique of a liberal humanist “raceless” future, certainly applies to Mutu’s mixed-media paintings, which “[fuse] the history of colonialism and its iconographic shards of diaspora, displacement, migration, and globalization with images of cybernetic, postbiological hyphenated black, brown, and white bodies” (Stiles 343). In *Concerning Consequences: Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma*, art critic Kristine Stiles calls Mutu’s work “visual creolization” and even a kind of “visual forensics,” which revisits the “crime scenes of racism, classism, and colonialism” in unexpected ways. Stiles explains that this mixture of form and historical reference has a particular intersubjective function. She writes, “The very structure of collage, installation, and film--with their disjunction, morphing, and editing of forms and materials-- can be theorized as resembling the structure of traumatic dissociation, with its unpredictable and corporeal flow of images, words, smells, sounds, and feelings” (Stiles 358). However, Mutu’s method is not only to demonstrate the nature of historical trauma, but to “re-present” it to her audience, indeed, to “draw forth the otherwise

submerged experiences of those who have been terrorized, and thereby to transform viewers into new secondary witnesses” (Stiles 358). In this way, Mutu’s work often replicates the *Citizen’s* chief thematic concerns as well as Rankine’s formal choices, which place familiar objects in unfamiliar settings and unfamiliar objects in familiar ones in order to slow down the relationship between viewer and art object and imbue it with a lingering affective resonance. For example, Mutu’s *Family Tree (Original Land)* (Figure 13) presents the image of a “transgendered figure” whose face is composed of both the image of an Ethiopian Surma bride and the head of a colonial magistrate. The costume of the magistrate itself hybridizes the clothing of African royalty with the clothing of British and Scottish colonists. The form of a tree grows through the center of the figure, and is held in place by the image of a royal pearl necklace. According to Stiles, Mutu’s technique in this piece, which is reflective of many of her collage figures, is reflective of “what decolonial theorists like Walter Mignolo call ‘delinking,’ that is, the act of uncoupling from imperialist modernity, whether through images or local practices” (Stiles 347). It is worth noting that this decolonial gesture is not so formally abstract so as to remove the references to historical and geographical contexts altogether. Though they take up a new visual form once reassembled, many symbols in *Family Tree* are patently recognizable as colonial, tribal, and natural objects.



**Figure 12: Wangechi Mutu's *Family Tree (Original Land)***

**Source: Photograph of the collage posted on  
<http://nasher.duke.edu/mutu/art.php>**

Though the pieces of art in *Citizen* are often decontextualized with regard to their paratextual framing, almost all of the art in *Citizen* contains references to and representations of historical and contemporary violations of the black body. Particularly emblematic of the historical considerations of Rankine's collage work is Glenn Ligon's 1992 piece *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)* (Figure 13). Glenn Ligon is an African-American artist whose visual art takes historical objects or literary phrases and recasts them as sculptures, abstract paintings, etchings, and performance pieces. In "Messages

that Construct an Electric Charge,” Holland Cotter writes his experience viewing Ligon’s 1988 painting *Untitled (I Am a Man)* at the Whitney Museum:

You perceive it in stages: first as words, a reading experience; then, as you get closer, as a looking-at-art experience; then, holistically, as a thinking experience. If you linger over his work a little, give yourself to it, you’ll get something from it. The temptation, with visually reticent art, is to breeze through the show, but that’s like keeping your iPod at a concert. You get a sense of what’s going on, but you’re preprogrammed and sticking with that.

Though Glenn Ligon’s *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)* is constructed in a different medium than *Untitled (I am a Man)*, it fosters the same viewing experience that Cotter describes: a perception in stages. Each etching is taken from Zora Neale Hurston’s famous 1928 essay “How it Feels to Be Colored Me.” The etching on the left reads “I do not always feel colored” and the etching on the right reads “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.” The words are stenciled legibly in the upper part of the frames, but become increasingly blurry until they end, as Cotter notes, in “a kind of miasma.” Always, though, he contends, “language is at the center.”

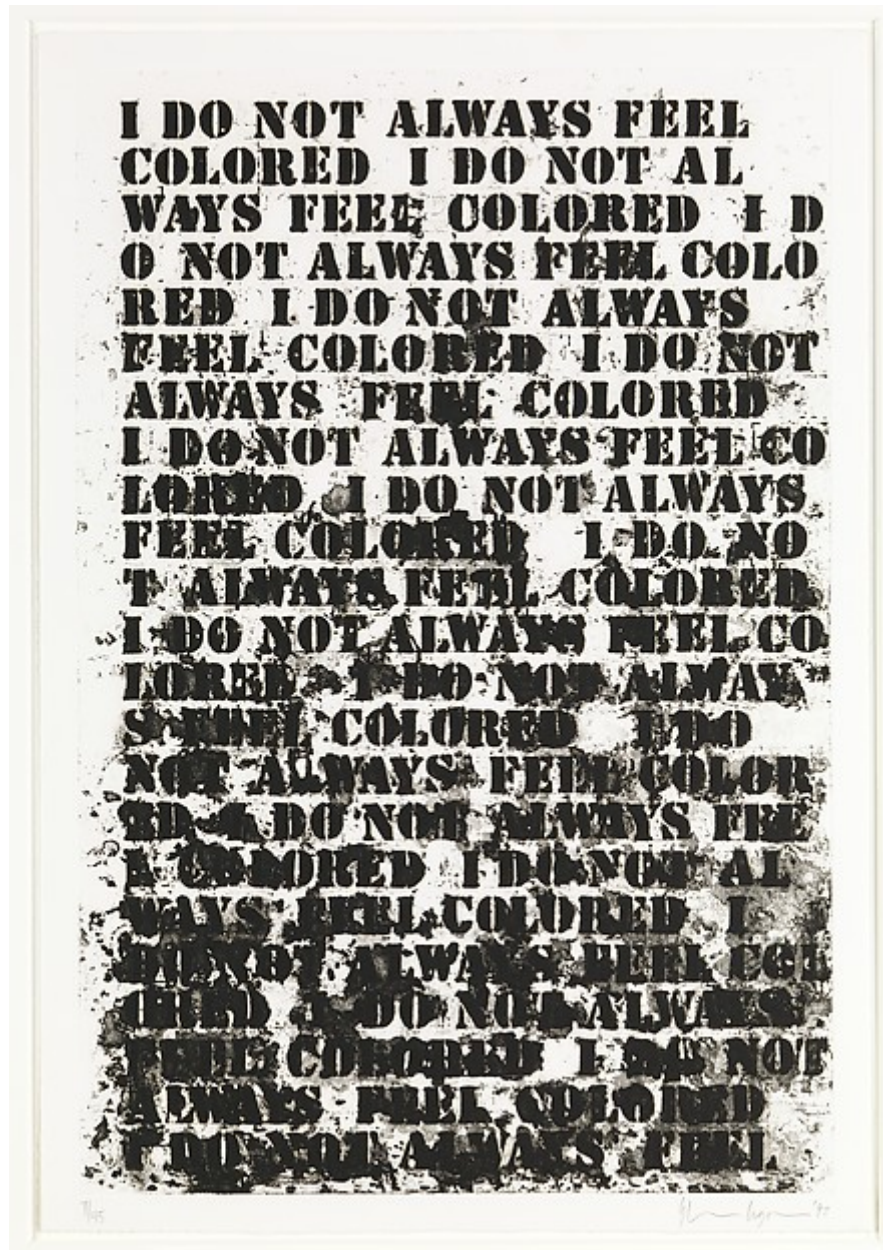


Figure 13: Glenn Ligon's *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*

Source: Photograph of the piece as found in Rankine's *Citizen* (53).

While Ligon's etchings are undoubtedly interested in displaying Hurston's powerful sentences, the convoluted nature of their lower sections, in which Hurston's repeated language dissolves into a mass of illegible ink, troubles the relationship between the viewer and the

stenciled words. In *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*, Amber Jamila Musser notes that Ligon himself once described the etchings as demonstrative of “the *disappearance* of language” (111; emphasis my own). She writes that “An encounter with Ligon means moving away from representations of the body and toward understanding the spaces, sensations, and affects of interpellation” (110). These “spaces, sensations, and affects” are experienced in the body of the viewer rather than represented explicitly on the canvas, a feature of the piece that substantiates Musser’s claim that Glenn Ligon’s art “evokes corporeality but rarely includes figural representations of bodies” (110). Certainly, though, one could argue that the corporeality present in Ligon’s work is not necessarily experienced solely in the body of the viewer, but also in the physicality of the “blur” itself, which at the bottom of each etching’s frame becomes something much more like a black body than an empty erasure of Hurston’s language. Because Hurston’s sentences invoke a recognizable form of liberal humanism, in that she “does not always feel colored” except when “thrown against a sharp white background,” it is worth considering in this case that Ligon’s black, corporeal blur functions not as a “disappearance of language,” but as a critique of Hurston’s humanist language.

In this way, given the examples of both Mutu’s and Ligon’s work, we are provided with two artists whose methodologies function as microcosms of Rankine’s own collage. Mutu’s strange “assemblages” of black and white, human and animal, biological and cybernetic bodies reproduce the traumas of racist violence for her viewers with the same move toward affective obfuscation that Ligon provokes with his visual “smearing” of language significant to the corporeal legacy of racist violence.

## Chapter 2

### **“Because white men can’t police their imagination”: Advocating for Critical Spectatorship in New Media Environments**

Your power to rearrange what has been presented to control you is your most powerful weapon.

- Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainana to Wangechi Mutu

The pickup truck is a condition of darkness in motion. It makes a dark subject. You mean a black subject. No, a black object.

- Claudia Rankine, “June 26th, 2011/ In Memory of James Craig Anderson”

In “Small change: realism, immanence, and politics of the micro,” Heather Love takes up Mark Seltzer’s term “the new incrementalism,” which characterizes the tendency of American academics to limit the subjects and objects of their studies to an increasingly small scale. She explains, “With respect to the novel, there is a turn to the study of minor characters; with respect to affect, minor feelings; with respect to political forms, little resistances, infantile subjects, minute, therapeutic adjustments; with respect to perception, the decelerated gaze<sup>9</sup>” (419). Love also tracks critical skepticism of microcosmic analyses that claim to more closely approximate the reality of lived experience, pointing, for example, to *The Antinomies of Realism*, in which Fredric Jameson “registers the appeal of immersion in the real at the same time that he points to its limits, arguing that in an unjust and violent world the mere reflection of reality is a form of violence” (Love 432).

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<sup>9</sup> Love explores anxieties of scale in both politics and the academy, referring to the work of critics like Sianne Ngai, who “sees [Lauren] Berlant’s turn to minor and diffuse affects as informed by political commitments responsive to those conditions: ‘Scaled-down affects are the ones that best register [the] only seemingly paradoxical becoming ordinary of social, political, and environmental crisis’ ” (422).

If the question of scale is such a central concern in both political thought and academic study, then the contemporary conception of the racist microaggression<sup>10</sup> is certainly a recognizable example of anxieties of scale in response to pernicious social phenomena. In “Small Change,” Love argues that *Citizen* “gave the genre of the microaggression a place in American letters for the first time” (423). Undoubtedly, with its collection of mixed-media representations of racist encounters of an “everyday” scale, *Citizen* engages with various recognizable forms of the microaggression, though perhaps not precisely with the same resonances that accompany the term as it is deployed in online forums. In a particularly brutal instance, Rankine’s speaker<sup>11</sup> attends her first therapy session with a specialist in trauma counseling. Finding the speaker on her property (which contains her at-home therapy office), the therapist “yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?” Rankine writes this section, as she does the majority of her prose pieces, in the second person. She continues, “It’s as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German pinscher has gained the power of speech...you manage to tell her you have an appointment...Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that’s right. I am sorry. I am so sorry, so, so sorry” (18).

Placed alongside this narrative is American artist Kate Clark’s sculpture *Little Girl*, a taxidermied infant caribou hide with a human face (Figure 14). The piece is bizarre in its composition: the creature’s face is constructed of animal hide rather than human skin so as to

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<sup>10</sup> Though Love tracks the concept of the microaggression to psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce’s work in the 1960s, which “addressed the long-term effects of everyday racism on African Americans,” (423) the term is certainly perhaps most identifiable today as it is discussed and circulated widely online. Love notes that “Chroniclers of small-scale verbal and nonverbal assaults use hashtags to gather and correlate evidence of racist violence on such sites as Twitter and Tumblr,” (423) a statement that recalls Pritha Prasad’s analysis of Black Twitter. However, it is worth noting that the concept of the microaggression became so recognizable that it was entered into the *Merriam-Webster* in February of 2017 (“Microaggression: A Not So Subtle Growth in Usage.”).

<sup>11</sup> The speaker in Claudia Rankine’s work has received a great deal of critical attention, especially for the fact that Rankine has noted in several interviews that the “microaggression” prose pieces in *Citizen*, though written in either first or second person, are inspired by or drawn directly from the experiences of others. In fact, Love notes, “Rankine has explained that while she was writing *Citizen*, she called her friends and collected their stories of everyday racism. The book is thus a social and collective portrait of race relations in the contemporary United States that remains tied grammatically and experientially to the lyric subject” (437).

appear part of the caribou's "natural" form; and yet, the thick seams visible at the places in which the two bodies are attached call attention to the sculpture's collage-like constructedness. Interestingly, as *National Geographic* writer Kathryn Carlson reminds us in an article on Clark's body of work, "The word 'taxidermy' originates from the Greek words taxi and derma and translates to 'the *arrangement* of skin.'"



**Figure 15: Kate Clark's *Little Girl***

**Source: Photograph of the sculpture as found in Rankine's *Citizen* (19).**

Though Kate Clark's own understanding of the significance of her work is that "in the Western World, humans are so separated that we have no reason to connect with [wild] animals anymore" and that "We have become so *other*," her work explicitly refers to the politics of

looking. If we are then to return to Rankine's poem, placed alongside Clark's *Little Girl*, we are provided with a frame for an anecdote that includes-- in Rankine's often minimal style-- no conclusion or exegesis. This visual frame both foregrounds the treatment of an unknowable "otherness" and circumscribes the power contained in a look that converts images of skin and physical features into discursive categories. However, it is also notable that the unsettling nature of Clark's piece also forecloses other kinds of observation. Of this phenomenon, Carlson notes that "most people don't even realize that [Clark] often changes the sex of the animals. Going through her sculptures you will see female faces with antlers attached—an appendage usually sported only by male animals."

Though Clark's caribou is clearly constructed to destabilize the gaze of the human subject as she views the animal subject, the most salient physical qualities of the caribou are not confined to its animality (or rather, its rendering of animality "stitched" to a human face), but also its patent vulnerability. The caribou is curled in a position that is markedly fetal, and its legs are bent inward, highlighting their palpable awkwardness and fragility. The most prominent feature of the sculpture's vulnerability is the very occasion of its construction: the practice of taxidermy requires the death of its subjects<sup>12</sup>. In this way, the sculpture is both subject-- a reference to the existence of a young, living caribou-- and object, a stuffed carcass as art object. However, if we are to consider Rankine's description of the speaker's therapist-- who "barks" at Rankine's speaker "as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German pinscher has gained the power of speech," we are led to understand that not only is the caribou associated with death by nature of its animality (and the medium of taxidermy), but that the therapist is also rendered

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<sup>12</sup> Importantly, as Rankine herself reminds us, taxidermy is also associated with the predator/prey relationship that is foundational to hunting. She writes that upon viewing Clark's sculpture she, "was transfixed by the memory that my historical body on this continent began as property no different from an animal. It was a thing hunted and the hunting continues on a certain level. So when someone says, 'I didn't know black women could get cancer,' as was said of me, I see that I am not being seen as human'" (Berlant).

animalistic in the encounter-- that is, compared to a dog breed associated with aggressive, guarding behaviors, and certainly here placed in a position of power that refers to the subject position of the white supremacist as she encounters Rankine's speaker in her backyard.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon discusses "the internalization-- or better, the *epidermalization*-- [of] inferiority" (13, emphasis my own).<sup>13</sup> In "The Woman of Color and the White Man," Fanon provides even further examples of the way in which racialized modes of thought are both psychological and "epidermal." He writes, "not only must the black man be black, but he must be black in relation to the white man" (110), and "there one lies body to body with one's blackness or one's whiteness, in full narcissistic cry, each *sealed* in its own particularity" (45; emphasis my own). After a white boy on a train calls out, "Look, a Negro!," Fanon writes that "The glances of the other *fixed* me there" (109; emphasis my own). In both these cases, this "sealing" or "fixing" function suggests that the boundaries of subjectivity-- particularly as they are traced by the binaristic structures of racist thought-- are not solely constructed and maintained through psychological means, but are instead a complex woven interface of the psychological and corporeal. Fanon's understanding of the "epidermalization" of inferiority holds a particular kind of resonance with Clark's sculpture, particularly as she uses the epidermis of animal species to shape an approximation of the features of a human faces. Fanon's depiction of the racist encounter implies that it is not always a scopophilic "mastering" that makes a gaze between two disparate subjects problematic, but instead the freezing or "fixing" of social attitudes like racism in the space of an intimate encounter. If "mere reflections of reality" can become "forms of violence," as Jameson suggests, then Clark's work actively challenges the reality of the sealing of white supremacy in the intersubjective gaze through an aesthetically

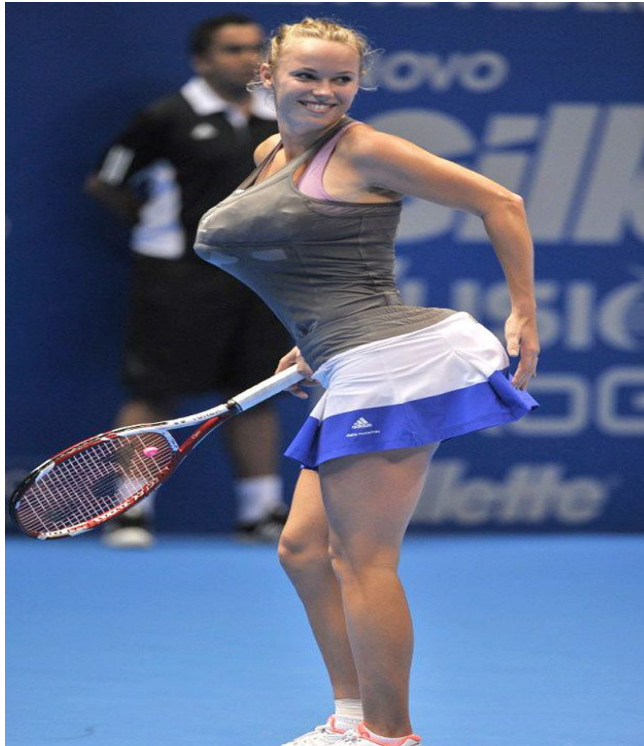
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<sup>13</sup> The full quotation is as follows: "If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: -- primarily, economic; subsequently, the internalization-- or better, the epidermalization-- of this inferiority" (Fanon 13).

surreal “assemblage” of human and animal species. And yet, as I have noted previously; Clark’s piece does not have the function of completely erasing the violence of racism by presenting that which is visually bizarre. Instead, the vulnerability of the caribou-- its fragility, its status as a hunted animal selected for death-- assert the affective resonance of the racist microaggression experienced by the therapist’s client.

Beyond crafting encounters with the bizarre or surprising in the text, exemplified by the pairing of Kate Clark’s abstract taxidermy sculpture with a second-person prose poem, Rankine conspicuously withholds images that readers might expect to see placed alongside narratives written in the realist mode. Perhaps the best example of this pattern in *Citizen* is Rankine’s description of the frequent and violent racism endured by American tennis player Serena Williams. Delivered in the plain style and objective tone of a nonfiction essay, this section contains some of the most explicit framing and interpretive work in the book. Remarking on the documentarian style of this portion of *Citizen*, Heather Love writes,

The facts speak for themselves with the antiliterary quality that both Levine and Jameson identify with realism. We can also trace this realist, documentary, and antiliterary impulse in the lyric tradition: from the ‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads,’ in which William Wordsworth announces his intention to avoid ‘falsehood of description’ and ‘look steadily at my subject’; to Walt Whitman’s suggestion that the purpose of the modern imaginative faculty is ‘to give ultimate vivification to facts, to science, and to common lives’; to the documentary poetics of the 1930s; and to contemporary experimental poetry that makes extensive use of transcription and found text. (440)



**Figure 15: Caroline Wozniacki “Mimicking” Serena Williams**  
**Source: AFP/Getty Images, as found Rankine’s *Citizen* (37).**

While the Serena Williams prose piece is certainly documentarian in nature, and Love’s commentary provides a useful understanding of the tone and form of *Citizen*’s essay-like section, it is important to note that Love’s analysis in “Small change” rarely discusses the visual elements of Rankine’s multimedia collage; elements that I argue are central to the reader’s experience of both the text of the book and of Rankine’s intervention in white supremacist ways of looking. With regard to the Serena Williams portion of the book in particular, the visual accompaniments to the essay are not those that the reader might expect. As she introduces Williams, Rankine writes, “What does a victorious or defeated black women’s body in a historically white space look like? [Williams] brought to mind Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.’ This appropriated line, stenciled on canvas by Glenn Ligon...seemed to be ad copy for some aspect of life for all black bodies” (25). And yet, though Ligon’s work is featured in *Citizen*, it does not appear in the section in

which it is described. Neither, interestingly, does a photo of Williams, whose body is the subject of the piece. Instead, the reader is provided with a large photograph of Danish athlete Caroline Wozniacki, the the number-one player in the Women's Tennis Association before Serena Williams. The photograph (Figure 15) shows Wozniacki cruelly satirizing Williams body by "stuffing towels in her top and shorts, all in good fun, at an exhibition match" (Rankine 36).

In Rankine's estimation, the significance of this photograph is that Wozniacki here "finally gives the people what they wanted all along by embodying Serena's attributes while leaving Serena's 'angry n----- exterior' behind...[and] in this real, and unreal, moment, we have Wozniacki's image of smiling blond goodness posing as the best female player of all time" (36).

Online, the image was accompanied with news story titles addressing the "controversy" of whether or not Wozniacki's gesture was offensive: "Racist? CNN wants to know if outrage is the proper response" (Rankine 36).

In an interview with Lauren Berlant in *BOMB Magazine*, which addresses many of the preoccupations of my own project, Rankine responds to Berlant's discussion of the function of images in *Citizen* with her own interpretation of the Wozniacki photograph. She writes, "The position of tennis player Caroline Wozniacki's hands emphasizes her enhanced Hottentot Venus figure, as if her audience might miss an intention that outruns the mimicking of Serena Williams's body" (Berlant). Certainly, Wozniacki's bodily positioning and confident smile suggest a kind of conspiratorial knowing, a belief that her actions are unequivocal and readily-accessible referents to Serena Williams' body. By extension, Wozniacki's gesture, performed for what Rankine reminds us is the historically white world of tennis, asserts that Williams' curvy form is her most recognizable-- and therefore defining--feature. Importantly, though, the subject-made-object of specularly, Serena Williams' body, is never visually represented to the reader.

Furthermore, the photograph's background-- which the reader might expect to provide a context to the moment at hand, is blurred. This blurring effect enhances the contours of Wozniacki's body, gestures, and face, providing her the spotlight that her satirical performance asks from the public while surprisingly removing the observing public from view. In other words, we do not see an audience laughing along at Wozniacki's joke, as we might expect, but instead the blurred contours of a tennis lineman, who looks away in what seems to be an expression of disapproval. In this way, Rankine's decision to pair a complex history of racism levied against Serena Williams' body with this particular image has a subversive function; readers turn the page to the photograph with this history squarely in mind, and Wozniacki's caricature appears frozen in all its awkwardness and cruelty as a result.

Rankine's curation of the Serena Williams text and its surprising visual appurtenance in the form of Caroline Wozniacki's corporeal "joke" function, as do many of her mixed-media assemblages, to highlight the great ironies of embodiment in the history of racism in the United States. As Rankine addresses this history through a poetic treatment of stop-and-frisk policies, Hurricane Katrina, the local and national conflicts that accompanied the trial of "the Jena Six," and the murder of James Craig Anderson, she continually emphasizes the crux of these ironies: the black body is conspicuous, sexualized, figured in a sphinx the size of the warehouse, stopped by police for no discernible reason, and yet, simultaneously, not conspicuous enough in the imagination of a white woman to tell Rankine's speaker apart from another black colleague<sup>14</sup>.

The black body, then, as many critics have remarked, is rendered both invisible and hypervisible.

But what, then, are we to do with concerns like Jameson's, which warn against the

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<sup>14</sup> I refer here to a short narrative in *Citizen* that describes a microaggression from the perspective of an anonymous speaker. After confusing the speaker for another black woman, the colleague sends her a letter "referring to 'our mistake'" (43). Rankine writes about the incident in the second-person: "Apparently your own invisibility is the real problem causing her confusion. This is how the apparatus she propels you into begins to multiply its meaning" (43).

dangers of realism, or at least those that suggest that the reproduction of a white supremacist moment only cements the racialized violence of the spectacle into the social frameworks of lived reality even further? In her *BOMB* magazine interview with Lauren Berlant, Rankine describes the presence of this anxiety in her own process of creating *Citizen*: “The difficult thing about this ‘immanence’ or indwelling is that it holds and prolongs the violence of supremacist spectacle in a body and shuts it down in other participatory ways. The reality, moment, narrative, or photo locks down its players and gets read as a single gesture” (Berlant).

Despite the anxiety of such a “prolonging of the violence of the supremacist spectacle” in her interview with Berlant, and in the text of *Citizen* itself, Rankine seems to have negotiated these concerns not only with the mixed-media collage of the text itself, but also with a figuration of the black body as an assemblage of its own kind: a site at which these large-scale histories of racist violence intersect with and are compounded by smaller scale moments which are not so simply dismissed as representations of the macro manifested as micro. Rather, these bodies are rendered abstractly, in both the unusual artistic forms that I have previously mentioned, and also in moments of temporal and spatial flux. Rankine’s poetic conception of racialized body is in some ways quite similar to Jasbir Puar’s interpretation of the assemblage in *Terrorist Assemblages, Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Throughout the book, Puar draws upon Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the assemblage as a “collection of multiplicities” with “has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature” (211). She employs her own definition of the term as a critique of the academy’s focus on intersectionality as the dominant hermeneutic of cultural analysis:

As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components—

race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion—are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency. Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification: you become an identity, yes, but also timelessness works to consolidate the fiction of a seamless stable identity... (211)

Though I have previously spoken about Claudia Rankine's "assemblage" of texts at the level of her curation of the artifact of the *Citizen* itself, as well as her selection of visual art that itself assembles historically-rendered and formally abstract elements, I would like to employ Puar's rendering of the individual as a non-identitarian embodied assemblage to argue that Rankine similarly figures the black body as a site of complex multiplicities. Through a careful examination of Rankine's fluid, nonrepresentational free verse poems, it does not not often seem, as Heather Love notes, that microaggressions are rendered only as "[points] of articulation in a larger circuit of violence" (436), but instead as sites of even more complex intersubjective, temporo-spatial, and affective crossings. While there are numerous examples of body-as-assemblage or narrator-as-assemblage throughout the text, one of the most striking includes a poem labeled only by a date, February 26, 2012, and the phrase "In Memory of Trayvon Martin." To the left, the reader finds a prose poem that corresponds to a video available on the internet. This intertextual moment is part of a series called "Situation videos" created as collaborations between Rankine and John Lucas. The narration that corresponds with the video is as follows:

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 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. (90)

Here, in such a compact form, a speaker with no discernible identity provides an affective and historical-- or, perhaps better said in this context-- *historicizing* account of the history of racist violence in America, a history that traces “the years of passage plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling.” In some of the poem’s more abstract lines; however, Rankine’s speaker describes the way in which these histories “accumulate into the hours inside *our* lives where *we are all* caught hanging, the rope inside us” (90; emphasis my own). The notion of a history contained in a kind of collective racialized body, inside the boundaries of even a brief moment, is also figured in the Zinedine Zidane collage in *Citizen*. The central focus of this particular collage is an infamous incident at the 2006 World Cup in Berlin, in which Zidane, a French soccer player with Algerian descent, head-butted Italian player Marco Materazzi and was removed from the game. The piece includes a series of captured frames from the moment just before the incident. According to lip readers watching the tape, Materazzi called Zidane, “Big Algerian shit, dirty terrorist, n-----,” a slur which is repeated like a refrain through the collage. Interspersed among both the “freeze frames” of the game and Materazzi’s invectives are quotations from black literary figures such as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin.

Perhaps the most striking line in the World Cup collage is a quotation attributed to Frantz

Fanon, which responds to the the brief words “Big Algerian shit, dirty terrorist n-----” with the extensive, embodied history of colonial violence that ties the Algerian soccer player and the anti-colonial activist together.<sup>15</sup> Fanon writes, “Clearly, the Algerians who, in view of the intensity of the repression and the frenzied character of the oppression, thought they could answer the blows received without any serious problem or conscience,” (Rankine 12) remarking, in a surprising way, *through* the collage in the position of a sports announcer-- that is, seeming to directly respond to the event at hand by virtue of the collage’s mixed-media format.

Writing in particular about the Serena Williams portion of *Citizen*, Heather Love explains, “African American literature has often been understood as an effort to take seeing away from the state and give it back to those most affected by the violence of a supposedly impartial gaze. The...‘you’ that is the seeing eye of the book is the inheritor of that tradition...But the ‘you’ at the center of *Citizen* is also a HawkEye line judge, aligned with the impersonal, technological gaze that has been wielded against African Americans” (Love 439). Though Love’s interpretation of Rankine’s multivalent use of the second-person is incisive, I would argue that, again, she has not quite considered the way in which the “you” invoked in the text is paired with multimedia collages that challenge the white spectator. In the Zidane collage, Rankine’s decision to combine screen captures like those from the 2006 World Cup game alongside powerful rhetorical claims from prominent black writers serves to provide a kind of reclaiming function through intertextuality. Fanon’s quotation, for example, placed directly above the video frames of the encounter between Materazzi and Zidane, seems to speak on Zidane’s behalf even as the screen-capture medium renders him effectively silent. It is no wonder, in that respect, that another feature of this multimedia collage-- Zidane’s own commentary about the event, are

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<sup>15</sup>Though Fanon was an Afro-Caribbean writer born in Martinique, he moved to Algeria in 1953 and is well-known for his participation in the movement for Algerian independence from France (Nicholls).

placed in bold: “Do you think that two minutes from the end of a World Cup final, two minutes from the end of my career, that I really wanted to do that?” (124). Entering a chorus of voices of black intellectuals throughout the globe, Zidane’s textual “voice” pairs with the slowed-down screen-captures to challenge the rapid mode of consumption that accompanied this international event. The result is that Rankine has provided the reader with an exhortation to “read” the moment in the manner in which it was experienced-- not simply through the disembodied medium of the television, but as a brief microaggression that collected the global, historical violence of slavery and prejudice in the site of an Algerian soccer player’s body and exposed it to a televised moment of white supremacy.

The careful combination of a single moment of racial violence and the history of African diasporic and African American literature, an assemblage that is collected in the body of a single individual’s racialized body, is a feature of *Citizen* that is rendered perhaps most profoundly in an untitled prose poem at the end of the book. Rankine writes, “You are you even before you/grow into understanding you/ are not anyone, worthless,/ not worth you” (139, lines 5-8) and “The start of you each day,/ a presence already--/Hey you” (140, lines 11-13). This “hey you,” repeated like a refrain throughout the poem, certainly substantiates Heather Love’s interpretation of the “you” as both a reference to a subject who inherits the history of racism *and* an address to the white supremacist creating that tradition<sup>16</sup>. But here, the “hey you” functions more precisely to recall the affects of shame and guilt produced by interpellation. Indeed, the “hey you” in this particular poem interfaces powerfully with the line “The worst is feeling is that you don’t belong so much/ to you--” (146, lines 9-10); the implication being that “you” belong to the white

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<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Love’s analysis of Rankine’s diction is extensive. She examines its manifestation in the books several generic forms--” the insult, the comeback, the caption, the epitaph, and the title” and the fact that it exhibits “tones and stances that might be read as pedagogical—interrogative, corrective, patient, exasperated” (437). Love also investigates the ways in which Rankine both employs and subverts the form of the “lyric” that *Citizen*’s subtitle, “An American Lyric” suggests as its form.

supremacist, the white gaze, and the state.

Through an anecdote about Judith Butler, Rankine reminds readers that to be “exposed to the address of another,” certainly through the means of a second-person “you,” is a condition of profound vulnerability. Responding to an audience member, who asks her “what makes language hurtful,” Butler responds, “We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness...is carried by our addressability” (Rankine 49). Though the anecdote ends with Rankine employing the “you” that characterizes the “inheritor” subject of address: “After considering Butler’s remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts,” it seems equally likely that if we all “suffer from the condition of being addressable,” then Rankine’s multivalent “you” could also be employed to call out to the white reader in the very moment of the supremacist encounter. This feature of *Citizen*’s second-person address is often reflected in the form of the indignant, challenging statements that follow the moment after a microaggression has occurred: “*Why are you pulling me over?*” (106); *What did you say?*” (14); and, perhaps most poignantly, in a piece about news coverage of Hurricane Katrina, “*Did you see their faces?*” (86).

To the right of the “In Memory of Trayvon Martin” poem, interspersed with these challenging repetitions of “hey you,” Rankine has placed an image of two lynching victims in 1930; in fact, “the most iconic photograph of lynching in America”<sup>17</sup> (“Strange Fruit: Anniversary of a Lynching.”). Though this photograph is widely-known as a mobilizing spectacle of violence against black Americans, in *Citizen*, Rankine has edited the photograph so

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<sup>17</sup> According to a 2010 segment on NPR’s “All Things Considered,” “Eighty years ago, on Aug. 7, 1930, Lawrence Beitler took what would become the most iconic photograph of lynching in America. Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith were lynched in the town center of Marion, Ind., for allegedly murdering a white factory worker, Claude Deeter, and raping his companion, Mary Ball. But the case was never solved.” Reportedly, this image was also the inspiration for “Strange Fruit,” the 1939 song written by Abel Meeropol and famously recorded by Billie Holiday (“Strange Fruit: Anniversary of a Lynching.”).

that the bodies of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, the two victims of the Indiana lynching, are removed from the image. What remains is a photograph in which the crowd of spectators (Figure 17) are depicted in all their grotesque enthusiasm, pointing to a space underneath the trees that is, at least to the reader, completely empty.



**Figure 16: Josh Lucas' Alteration of *Public Lynching***

Source: Getty Images; altered photograph found in Rankine's *Citizen* (91).

In a 2014 interview led by Ratik Asokan from a San Francisco magazine called *The Believer*, Asokan comments that the video which depicts audience's reactions to Caroline Wozniacki's satirization of Serena Williams' body, which is included as a "Situation video" alongside Rankine's nonfiction essay, "reminded me of a watered down version of your

reworked lynch mob photo,” to which Rankine responds,

The idea of redirecting the gaze on the spectator, of being interested in liberal subjectivity, of observing the people who would normally not claim racism as their thing is of interest to me. The cameraperson was clearly thinking the same thing. These people, with the benefit of the doubt, are not supremacists and yet they will step into this moment, find it funny, and in doing so, they willingly disconnect themselves from the histories and realities of black people and the treatment of black and brown people in this country.

While the crowd’s pleasure in the spectacle certainly merits attention, and easily recalls the significance of Kara Walker’s own meditation on the “willing disconnection” of white spectators in “An Audience,” it is also important that Rankine has performed her own erasure here, removing the context and corporeality of racist violence just as I have previously argued that internet culture has done in cases like *A Subtlety* and the phenomenon of “Trayvoning.” By denying the viewer the ability to see the lynching victim hanging from the rope, Rankine removes the reader’s capacity to participate in the pleasure of the spectacle-- to be caught in a moment of looking like the white spectators who have “stepped into the moment” of the photograph. However, though Rankine removes the subject of the spectacle, she does not erase the resonance of its violence. By placing “In Memory of Trayvon Martin” beside the photo, Rankine employs the collage form to demonstrate the ways in which the event “accumulate[s] into the hours inside our lives where we are all caught hanging, the rope inside us.” In this way, the poem portion of the collage itself functions to replace the “missing” body, providing a textual “body” that serves to render the sociocultural and affective impact of a lynching without

becoming complicit in the circulation of an object of such patent specularity and violence.

### Conclusion

At the end of her interview with Rankine, *The Believer's* Ratik Asokan notes, "The last and, in many ways, most harrowing image in the book, is British Romantic William Turner's *Slave Ship*... I would have probably missed the slave's leg if not for the close-up you provide." Claudia Rankine responds that image operates at the "lightning speed of those micro-aggressions," and asserts that, "If you look you don't see the bodies being dumped in the ocean...until you *look*. Others can go through the day thinking, 'Nothing has happened in this day at all.'...You can see [the image] as a sunrise or a sunset, not as a mass murder, not as the approaching storm" (Asokan).

In this way, it is clear that when Rankine's examination of her own curatorial choices are considered, she is advocating for the kind of active looking that her formally abstract poetry and multimedia assemblages invoke in the readers of *Citizen*. By providing a version of the "close-up" on the printed page, Rankine does the work of looking critically for us, exhorting the viewer to slow down and process the often perplexing collages in the book more thoughtfully. The content of Rankine's prose poems certainly substantiates Tana Jean Welch's claim that Rankine "responds to the culture of information by writing poetry that engages the complexity of existence while emphasizing material interconnectedness and embodiment" (124). However, Welch's interpretation of Rankine's poetics concerns Rankine's 2004 collection, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, and it is perhaps more accurate in the context of *Citizen* to note that Rankine is advocating for a method of critical spectatorship rather simply an acknowledgment of the existence and significance of the black body itself. This notion is made resonant in the poem "In

Memory Of...,” which, in a notable reversal of Glenn Ligon’s painting, contains the names of black Americans killed by police violence, a list which is added to with every printing of the book, but fades into a white space which conflates white supremacy with invisibility, grief, and forgetting. Rather than calling attention to embodiment here, Rankine is instead calling attention to a mode of racist thinking that leads not just to the theoretical erasure of the black body, but to the modes of encounter and thought that result in the violent encounter, or, as the final line of the poem suggests, “because white men can’t/ police their imagination/ black people are dying” (135, lines 1-3).

In a 2016 article in *The Atlantic*, Venkatesh Rao discusses the social and interpersonal implications of new digital culture through the example of the proliferation of the Harambe meme,<sup>18</sup> a meme based upon the death of a Western lowland gorilla of the same name who was killed after a child entered his enclosure in the Cincinnati Zoo. After Harambe’s death, his image became a widely popular meme on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. According to Rao, though most people soon forgot the circumstances of Harambe’s story, “a flood of memes emerged anyway: the late Muhammad Ali towering over a knocked-out Harambe, an oddly lewd one featuring actor Danny Trejo, and one featuring Harambe in a version of the trolley problem.” Ultimately, Rao concludes a history of the meme with the claim: “The slain gorilla [itself] signifies nothing. Except maybe our increasingly weird post everything world.” He writes that the meme was “perfect” because of “its ability to replicate,” and explains that “In a reversal of Marshall McLuhan’s classic dictum, Harambe is the message that became a

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<sup>18</sup> The word “meme” has a complex social and linguistic history; however, its current usage is attributed to Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), in which he wrote, “We need a name for the new replicator, a noun which conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (Dawkins 3, qtd. in Volk). For a useful description of the term’s etymology before and after Dawkins, see the University of Chicago’s *Theories of Media Keywords Glossary*. The Oxford English Dictionary currently defines meme as: “An image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations. Also with modifying word, as *Internet meme*, etc.” (“meme, n.”).

medium, capable of carrying any signal, without becoming identified with any of them. A meme in the original sense intended by Richard Dawkins: a cultural signifier that spreads simply because it is *good* at spreading” (Rao).

In “The Complicated Appeal of the Harambe Meme” the *New York Times*’ Katie Rogers tracks the same features of the “simple” proliferation of the same meme; however, she narrows her focus to some of the most problematic of the meme’s circulations, including an instance in which an African-American actress named Leslie Jones’ personal website was hacked, and nude photos of her released alongside pictures of Harambe. In her analysis of the event, she cites an interview with Whitney Phillips, an assistant professor at Mercer University, who “said that the life cycle of a meme like this one — which has been remixed and repurposed for humor and cruelty — has a way of dulling our sense of the offline implications of an online joke” (Rogers).

It is always worth reiterating that the consequences of such a dulling are not restricted to a reiteration of racist rhetoric. There is no shortage of examples of the way in which the offline participants in Cyberculture have entered the spaces of material reality to commit horrific acts of racist violence. In 2016, for example, Dylann Roof, a South Carolina teenager active in several neo-Nazi forums and blogs, murdered nine black Americans in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. In “Inside the Trail of Dylann Roof” a *New Yorker* piece concerned with Roof’s trial, Jelani Cobb explains, “In writings found during a search of his prison cell, [Roof] imagined himself the last stalwart of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. He wrote that ‘segregation was not a bad thing. It was mostly defensive.’ ” Importantly, this sentence is one of the mildest examples of Roof’s violent neo-Nazi ideology, which was described in detail on his personal website: [lastrodhesian.com](http://lastrodhesian.com), before the site was removed. According to Cobb, when investigators questioned where Roof developed his ideology,

he responded, ‘It’s all there on the Internet.’ ” In fact, in his white supremacist manifesto, Roof explains that the development of his beliefs began, in many ways, by “researching” the Trayvon Martin case. He once remarked, ‘I read the Wikipedia article and right away I was unable to understand what the big deal was. It was obvious that Zimmerman was in the right. But more importantly this prompted me to type in the words ‘black on White crime’ into Google, and I have never been the same since that day’ ” (Cobb).

Though Roof’s participation in online white nationalist communities-- and the existence of these websites themselves-- is certainly cause for alarm, digital racist communities demonstrate a kind of transparency in that they often proclaim their violent, supremacist intentions outright. Perhaps the more pernicious danger, as images continue to circulate in digital spaces, is the pervasive incidence of racism obscured behind the new symbology of internet culture, and often masquerading as innocuous or apathetic humor. In a timely article in *Real Life Magazine*, “Apocalypse Whatever: the making of a racist, sexist religion of nihilism on 4chan,” Tara Isabella Burton tracks the developing “religion” of 4chan “trolls” and “shitposters,” or internet-users who post nonsensical comments and satirical memes in order to derail, confuse, or introduce irony into online conversations. 4chan, an anonymous social media forum, has a complex and dangerous recent history of creating a racist symbology and “alt-right” culture of its own design. For example, 4chan users are considered largely responsible for fostering the proliferation of the Pepe the Frog Meme<sup>19</sup> and participating in the creation of a white nationalist

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<sup>19</sup> In 2016, Anti-Defamation League added this meme, a cartoon image of a “sad frog,” to its “Hate on Display” database. According to the *Los Angeles Times*’ Jessica Roy, the character first appeared in a comic called “Boy’s Life” by Matt Furie, but “took a life of its own on the internet.” She explains, “In some instances, Pepe wears a Hitler mustache, and his signature message is replaced with ‘Kill Jews Man.’ In others, Pepe poses in front of a burning World Trade Center, dressed like an Orthodox Jewish person with a yarmulke and payot. He’s also been spotted wearing a Nazi soldier’s uniform and in a KKK hood and robe.” The meme’s hateful connotations began on a 4chan message board called /rk9/, “associated with some of the least savory elements of the Internet,” and has been associated with the 2015 mass shooting in Umpqua Community College shooting in Roseburg, Oregon as well as the 2014 mass shooting in Isla Vista, California (Roy).

lexicon specifically designed to evade algorithms that are capable of identifying hate speech on social media platforms.<sup>20</sup> Through thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard and Walter Benjamin, Burton warns that the circulations of these “ironic” images and vocabularies in supposedly “disembodied” online white nationalist communities have real-life consequences for people of color in particular. Through her discussion of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Burton reminds us that “Walter Benjamin characterized Europe as a society whose ‘self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.’ But he also warned that ‘all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.’” Or, in a more concise statement summing up the impact of racist circulations of digital media, Burton writes “The battlefield of the meme wars may be largely incorporeal. But the Trump presidency is no less real.”

Is it any wonder then, in light of the way in which the digital culture of white supremacy-rendered in “Apocalypse Whatever” as sufficiently communal, and with a strong enough “shared discourse”<sup>21</sup> to constitute a “religion”-- that *Citizen’s* multiply-voiced narrator begins the book with her screens turned off? In *Citizen’s* opening sentence, Rankine’s narrator writes, “When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows” (5). It is particularly interesting, with this first scene in mind, that Tana Jean Welch suggests that Rankine’s poetics themselves serve to “interrupt” the pernicious valences of current digital and media cultures. Alongside Joan Retallack’s *Poethical* Wager, she explains that mass media “strives for simplistic, naive, and fantastical representations

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<sup>20</sup> The lexicon consists of words with “coded” racist meanings. For example, “googles” refers to black people, “skypes” to Jewish people, and “skittles” refers to Muslim people. Most of these terms have etymological histories that refer to other events in internet culture; all of them are created to evade hate-speech algorithms and to create a common culture among a community of racist 4chan, Reddit, and Twitter users (Tingle).

<sup>21</sup> Burton writes, “Every time a meme is replicated or a symbol is reused, it only strengthens the socially determined bond of meaning. The constructed narrative of uniqueness and freedom that an alt-righter adopts in fact depends on the collective meanings ascribed by his group to his actions. To put it simply: Shitposting only matters insofar as it lets you feel in on the joke, and being in on the joke demands an in-group agreement of what the joke actually is.”

of reality, as opposed to ‘imaginative engagement with [realistic] material complexity,’ ” (26) and concludes that “innovative writing is one way ‘to stay warm and active and realistically messy’ while disrupting the ‘shiny freeze-frames’ (5) of mass culture” (26). Though Rankine’s writing in both *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen* certainly calls attention to the material, and even engages with it particular to disrupt the “shiny freeze-frames” of mass culture,” its creative function is much more invested in the relational than in the embodied. As we know from Pritha Prasad’s investigation of Black Twitter, embodiment, even as it seeks to reclaim erasure or exploitation in the mode of *A Subtlety*, is not often capable of intervening in a history of racist moments and circulations that has existed since the popularity of lynching memorabilia.

In a 2014 interview with *The New York Times* after the publication of *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine explains the book’s hybrid form serves ‘to create openness and surprises, and to make the world more integrated” (Lee). We can think of such an integration here as a form of assembling or the creation of assemblages, which, as I have noted, is present the level of the textual artifact of *Citizen* and its contents, but also its protagonists, all of which integrate the different “scales” of white supremacy just as they do features of historical contextualization and formal abstraction. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we can think of these assemblages as themselves archiving the kind of complexity that is lost in decontextualized digital media, a danger which Safiya Umoja Noble argues has become increasingly pressing as more people begin to consider the internet as a source of objective data without considering the profound influence of corporate interests, unsubstantiated rhetoric, and search engine algorithms that fail to account for facticity. It is perhaps fitting then, that Claudia Rankine closes the interview with *The Believer Magazine* with a powerful endorsement of what Samantha Pinto calls “the centering of an innovative archive” (16). She writes,

Part of my process is archival. I am invested in keeping present the forgotten bodies...There are all these men and women who have been killed, like James Craig Anderson, that make the news for a day or two and many people haven't heard about them. You ask them, and they just haven't heard. When these killings are forgotten, people then begin to say things like, 'that was from Jim Crow,' 'that was from the 50s,' 'this type of thing doesn't happen anymore,' ...No—this happened last summer, this happened this summer, this happened in August. I think it is necessary to keep reality present, we all need to be facing the same way; we need to be negotiating the same facts. Then together we can have a sense of how racism stays present, how it stays vigilant, focused on its target.

Could mixed-media assemblages that combine elements of the bizarre and the ordinary, the macro and the micro, and the temporal and archival have a kind of reparative function in a sociocultural environment in which the “mere reflection of reality,” in the form of selfies, memes, and news media, is indeed, as Jameson suggests, itself a form of violence? Though Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, and the art objects she selects from the work of Mutu, Ligon, Clark, and others, cannot comprehensively deter the “overmediation” particular to 21st century digital culture, the way in Rankine's work obfuscates simplistic readings, refers to erased, disembodied, or decontextualized histories, and exhorts the reader to engage in more critical forms of looking certainly seems to offer reparative possibilities. At the end of her interview with Claudia Rankine, Lauren Berlant suggests that though many of the images contained in the books unequivocally invoke grief and suffering, others-- like Nick Cave's floral *Soundsuits*, produce a kind of aesthetic joy in and of themselves, or, as she describes it, “ ‘the pleasure of beautifully executed art, of being stopped in one's tracks...the pleasure of composition, the forcing of a

different attention' ” (Berlant). Indeed, Berlant's words here, indicative not only of Rankine's use of visual art as such but also of the equally beautifully-executed entirety of *Citizen*, have a particular resonance with the second Fanon quotation in Rankine's 2006 World Cup collage: “It is the White Man who creates the black Man. But it is the black man who creates” (Rankine 128). As Dora Apel suggests, it does indeed depend on us to ensure that violent images do not produce their own undoing, and it is our obligation-- particularly as we become more firmly embedded in blurring of “online” and “offline” realities-- to slow down and look more critically at the results of that creation.

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