Space, Place, and Self:
The (In)visible Archives of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*

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From our earliest days, we recognize the experience of visibility. Whether this be a wave from a driver as you cross the street or a friendly nod from a cashier, people are acknowledged through connection. Unfortunately, as one navigates life, visibility may produce negative encounters or interactions. Receiving an angry fist shake from the old woman you ding-dong-ditched or catching a disapproving glance from your parent are less-pleasant moments of someone noticing you. Still, among all these experiences, remains one constant: visibility. For many, visibility remains unnoticed, a normal and unassuming part of quotidian life. For others, though, visibility is a complex experience that is connected to diasporic experience, racialized injustice, and a fragmented understanding of the self. For Black people in America, there exists a liminal state of (in)visibility, where one's movements, actions, and markers of self are subject to the cultural inscriptions of sight. As a collection that details the quotidian experiences of a Black woman in white-dominated America, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* documents the broader and deeply personal experience of visibility for Black people living in the United States, with particular focus on the Black female experience. This essay examines (in)visibility in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen,* focusing on how the processes of visibility interact with the facilitation of identity and self. Drawing on theories from Jacques Derrida, Marlene Manoff, Thomas Jenson, and Judith Butler, I argue that *Citizen* reimagines the archive, making visible that

which is often rendered invisible by interrogating the ethics of being seen. By analyzing experiences of Black (in)visibility in *Citizen*, we can see how visibility can both facilitate and inhibit the identity of the diasporic self. As a collection that explores racial inequality in the United States, the motif of visibility reinforces the impacts of repressing trauma, in addition to showing how re-accessing and reclaiming visibility is central to the understanding of self. By claiming, remembering, and acknowledging the unique challenges of existing within the Black American diaspora, Rankine engages with a nationwide history while documenting trauma and encouraging healing.

As an archival piece, *Citizen* can be analyzed through the lens of Jacques Derrida and Marlene Manoff, who provide a basis of which to understand the politics of the archive. According to Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever*, "there is no political power without control of the archive" (Derrida 4). Similarly, Marlene Manoff understands the archive and its contents as "a recording of a particular perspective" that "cannot provide transparent access" (Manoff 14) to events that have occurred. Therefore, the archive can be defined by its ability to manipulate or distort history as those in power seek to control what is documented and what is excluded. It can be said, then, that as a space of political control, the archive and the stories, people, and events captured within it are susceptible to various forms of manipulation. For Rankine, this archival manipulation runs deeper than literary or media documentation. Rather, *Citizen* positions the Black body, memory, and self as an integral part of the archive, subject to the same processes of manipulation and power that are enacted upon literature, media, or journalism. It is critical to note that achieving "political power" and gaining "control of the archive" are embedded within processes of "memory" (Derrida 4). Consequentially, in excluding certain groups of people from the

archival record, one "is effectively excluded from the historical record" (Manoff 12). For Rankine, Black visibility is a key factor in memory and documentation. Through the depiction of racialized violence, Rankine suggests that stark white spaces result in the augmentation of Black bodies, rendering one either invisible or hyper-visible within their communities. In effect, *Citizen* depicts the oppressive white gaze as a distorting force that achieves power through discrimination of the Black body, memory, and self. As a counter-archive to mainstream American media, *Citizen* stands to provide an alternate reading of Black visibility and documentation that dissects the inescapable "condition of being addressable" (49) that affects Black Americans as they navigate daily life.

In *Citizen,* memory and the processes of documentation are not only affected by large-scale incidents of political power but are also shaped by harmful quotidian experiences that impact the diasporic self. To analyze the relationship between (in)visibility and Black diasporic identity in *Citizen*, I utilize Lily Cho's theoretical paper "The Turn to Diaspora" to provide context for the term diaspora, specifically how diasporic identity relates to power. Cho's paper is structured around diaspora as a subject formation with complex power relations and imbalances which in turn, create diasporas. According to Cho, the process of repressing, losing, and re-accessing diasporic identity is linked to "[turning] to and away from power" (Cho 1). In *Citizen*, the speaker exists within the broader group of Black American diaspora, while power in the collection can be read as the dominant White society, whose impact on the self is effective within all facets of the speaker's life. While watching television, buying groceries, or interacting with friends, the speaker is regularly reminded of her (in)visible identity as a Black woman. When a close friend confuses her name for that of her Black housekeeper, the speaker is unable to

interject or call attention to her error. Instead, she quietly reflects on her "fatal flaw" (42) of remaining silent. Similarly, the speaker recalls another encounter of a man bumping into her, only to exclaim that he "really didn't see [her]" (77) upon confrontation. Both encounters and the speaker's response to such suggest the impacts of power and visibility on memory. In each, her body was overlooked, rendered invisible and unimportant by those who occupy positions of power. Significantly, the speaker emphasizes that these interactions are not unique, but rather represent "the quotidian struggles against dehumanization" that "every brown or black person [experiences] simply because of skin colour" (24). By enduring regular incidents of (in)visibility, the speaker can no longer recognize if an incident is truly harmful or if her memory is concocting a racially charged scene that did not exist. Thus, through daily exposures to power, oppression, and micro aggressions, the speaker loses her ability to accurately perceive the self, resulting in augmented memory and an altered ability to document personal experience.

In addition to the harmful gap of documentation and memory that arises from inequal power structures, Rankine points to similar dangers of hypervisibility. By reporting on both the under-reported atrocities committed upon Black people in America alongside popular national media, Rankine explores the multi-faceted challenge of accurately archiving Black experiences. Throughout the collection, Rankine references the inequal socio-economic opportunities available for Black communities, including how this disproportionately affects their ability to self-document and share media through reportage. As forementioned by Cho, these social imbalances are the direct result of power structures that seek to oppress a minority through erasure or augmentation. Moreover, Rankine dissects the additional complications that arise in media when Black people are

the focal point of journalism and reportage. Tennis star Serena Williams, for example, faces severe discrimination and encounters white media reporters that seek to depict her as a furious, ferocious, and inappropriate black woman alongside her white counterparts. Thus, Rankine suggests that for Black people in America, visibility is not a simple concept. It is dangerous to be visible as a black person, as you may be labelled with harmful stereotypes or defined by regular quotidian accidents of microaggressions. Similarly, it is harmful to remain invisible, where one may neglect to acknowledge their own identity and importance. Altogether, experiences of visibility and being seen are neither desirable nor undesirable. Rather, existing in a state of (in)visibility is not a conscious choice that is accessible to Black communities, but is a cultural, bodily inscription that is enacted to entrap Black Americans in a liminal state of inhumane treatment through altered visibility.

In contrast to Rankine's previous depictions of documentation through media, literature, or story, Rankine also understands the body as an extension of the archive itself. Throughout *Citizen,* this body-to-archive relationship is exemplified as the protagonist reflects on her own inability to exist in a Black body without experiencing distortion from her surroundings. Despite experiencing harmful interactions or hurtful words from white passersby, she cannot consciously remember how she escapes these moments. Instead of "speaking out" (131), the speaker often finds herself isolated at home, tuned in to the reportage of national events. Critically, she points to the notion that her inherent discomfort of public spaces and an intruding distrust in others is the result of "the body [having] memory" (Rankine 28). Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* provides insight on the interaction between the body, memory, and power. Notably, her theory depicts the body as "a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source" (Butler 154). Although

Citizen does not always portray the body as passive, there remains a constant dialogue on the relationship between the speaker's body, memory, and understanding of self. For Butler, the body is a canvas upon which society projects their own biases, prejudices, and understandings. As such, Butler suggests that the body is a site of signification that is entrenched with the traditional roles and morals inscribed from one's surrounding society. For Butler, the body and the accompanying soul emerge through repetitive, minute acts that occur daily, shaping one's expectations of the self. Significantly, Butler acknowledges the detrimental impacts that bodily inscription has on the self. In *Citizen,* this inscription is seen as the speaker navigates her own prejudices about herself, other Black people, and white society. Despite her attempts to separate herself from the violent narratives around her, she knows that "you can't put the past behind you" because "it's buried in your flesh" (Rankine 63). As such, the speaker acknowledges the long-term effects of bodily inscription, in which "the body is the threshold" for each "objectionable call" (28) that passes through her. Through daily microaggressions and inaccurately documented physical, economic, or emotional harm, Rankine suggests that the white, political state of America augments the visibility of Black people, transforming the unique experiences of being Black that are "originally part of identity into a defiling otherness" (2382). As a counter archive, *Citizen* seeks to share painful stories, display art and document Black experiences to remove the (in)visible lens cast upon diasporic communities and allow Black identity to be celebrated, rather than shamed.

In addition to documenting acts of everyday violence through prose, *Citizen* uses visual cues to expose the conditions of Black (in)visibility. To emphasize the effects of visibility and Black representation, Rankine includes a statement from Zora Neale Hurston,

who says that she "[feels] most colored when [she] is thrown against a sharp white background" (Hurston, qtd. in Rankine 52). This contrasting visual is reflected on the book's cover, where a torn black hood against a stark white backdrop highlights the racial tension of representation in America. Hurston's statement alongside the cover art suggests that Blackness becomes hyper visible only through its contrast to dominant whiteness. In *Citizen*, this lack of visibility is not only related to bodily harm or verbal aggression, but also to the archive. Black stories, media, and experiences are rarely documented unless they are framed by white experiences, media, or journalism, which may fail to accurately depict Black stories. In response, Rankine seeks to disrupt the "white background" (52) of America, inserting documentary poetics of Black life to serve as representation for other members of the Black diaspora. Rankine's understanding of the predominantly white archive is further reinforced by Chris Marker, who notes that if one does not "see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black" (Marker, qtd. in Rankine). Marker's quote points to a distinct contradiction in racial representation. In the United States, Black people are often made invisible in public narratives while also being subjected to constant scrutiny and surveillance. This results in a tension between invisibility and hypervisibility, where the Black body is both overlooked but exaggerated in its racial presence. This condition relates directly to the politics of the archive. Through her integration of visual art, personal narrative, and cultural references, Rankine intervenes in the power hierarchies that isolate Black individuals. Instead of remaining silent, Rankine utilizes documentary poetics and accompanying art to offer a personal archive of living as a Black woman in America. As forementioned, the archive does not offer neutral access to the past, but rather reflects specific institutional perspectives (Manoff 14). Viewed in this context, the structure of

Citizen functions as a metaphor for the racialized dynamics within archival spaces. The speaker's Black voice, set against a white literary and visual backdrop, mirrors the experience of entering an archive shaped by whiteness and exclusion. Unlike the harmful racialized dynamics, by documenting experiences that are often ignored or distorted by dominant culture, Rankine asserts a form of authorship that challenges the augmentation of traditional archives. Altogether, *Citizen* works to preserve Black life within a broader cultural memory that might otherwise be "excluded from the historical record" (14) of America.

Although *Citizen* discusses the harmful outcomes of undocumented trauma, the collection also emphasizes hope for a different, illuminated future. By bringing attention to the violence enacted upon Black communities, Rankine creates a space for the body to break free from its "passive medium" (Butler 154) of social inscription and instead occupy a place of intentional visibility. In sharing experiences of hypervisibility, Rankine asserts that unbelonging is familiar amongst "some aspect of life for all black bodies" (52) in America. By documenting examples of injustice, physical harm, and verbal microaggressions, Rankine creates an archive that exposes the gaps of representation and equality for Black individuals. Still, it is undoubted that archives and their contents are biased spaces shaped by "political power" (Derrida 4) and cultural influence. Rather than remain impartial to the complexities of documentation, *Citizen* embraces the complicated relationship between documentation, race, and selfhood. As both a personal and collective archive, *Citizen* seeks to illuminate the everyday experiences of Black Americans and create a record that deepens our understanding of the Black diaspora in the United States. Though the novel insists that "no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived" (Rankine 24), the

speaker's act of "turning back upon [the] traumatic markers of self" (Cho 1) including memory, identity, and loss allows her to confront historical and personal traumas to begin the process of healing.

Where politics and power often dictate what is preserved for future generations, *Citizen* resists this control by preserving experiences that may otherwise go unrecorded. *Citizen* insists on visibility and remembrance. In the face of daily oppression, hypervisibility, and erasure, Rankine's stories provide recognition and documentation that allow for Black experiences to live on. Though the collection achieves a documentary space for Black voices, Rankine still acknowledges that the "recognition" of Black injustice "might break you apart" (24) in the process. Similarly, "recognition may illuminate the erasure" (24), allowing for one to clearly see the racist policies that augment diasporic identity in the United States. Regardless, Rankine emphasizes that "you can't know" whether this knowledge "creates a healthier if more isolated self" (24). Ultimately, the stories within *Citizen* enable the reader to intervene in the personal and political forces that shape visibility, memory, and identity. While this message does not provide a joyous conclusion to the issue of Black visibility and diasporic identity, it suggests that there is a possibility for healing that begins with acknowledgement and documentation. Through *Citizen*, Rankine gives voice to a generational history of struggle and a hope for change, where Black experience is not only recorded but seen, valued, and carried forward.

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