

# The Aesthetics of Racism in Claudia Rankine's

## *Citizen: An American Lyric*

By

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## Norwegian abstract

I denne oppgaven undersøker jeg på hvilken måte rasismen i USA i dag er fremstilt i Claudia Rankine sitt verk *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Dette er en bok som blander en rekke ulike sjangre, og som inkluderer et utvalg bilder og illustrasjoner. Rankine beskriver eksempler på rasisme i helt hverdagslige settinger som finner sted på for eksempel arbeidsplassen, på offentlig transport og butikken, men hun tar også opp temaer som masseskyting, lynsjing, og kjente saker fra media om politiskyting og vold.

Jeg fokuserer diskusjonen min på tre hovedaspekter som jeg mener illustrerer nåtidens rasisme i USA, og disse er (u)synlighet (“(in)visibility”), utviskelse (“erasure”), og stillhet (“silence”). Dette er begreper jeg opplever at forfattere og andre skribenter bruker i artikler og anmeldelser om boken, men som ingen egentlig definerer eller går dypere inn i. Jeg har derfor forsøkt å definere disse i sammenheng med rasisme, og jeg analyserer på hvilken måte jeg mener Rankine fysisk viser leseren tilstedeværelsen av disse i boken. *Citizen* bidrar til å bevisstgjøre og engasjere leseren til å gjenkjenne disse tre aspektene ved rasisme.

Oppgaven har tittelen “The Aesthetics of Racism”, noe som kan virke forvirrende da mange tenker på estetikk som ‘læren om det vakre’. Estetikk kan derimot også omhandle de underliggende prinsippene til et kunstverk, og i oppgaven argumenterer jeg for at usynlighet, utviskelse og stillhet fungerer som disse prinsippene i *Citizen*. Videre mener jeg at dette også kan illustrere rasismen i USA i dag, og hvordan det har blitt en del av selve samfunnsstrukturen, noe som gjør at det får en mer permanent karakter, og dermed virker umulig å bryte.

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## Introduction

Perhaps this is how racism feels no matter the context – randomly the rules everyone else gets to play by no longer apply to you, and to call this out by calling out ‘I swear to God!’ is to be called insane, crass, crazy. (Rankine, *Citizen*, 30)

The past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow.  
(Rankine, *Citizen*, 72)

In my thesis, I explore in what ways racism is portrayed and described in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*. The main areas I look at are (in)visibility, erasure, and silence, and they each have their own chapter. They are all closely related; however, they also differ in some ways, which will become clearer throughout my discussion and analyses.

The title itself “The Aesthetics of Racism” may be confusing, even provoking, because usually one thinks of “aesthetics” as *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, as: “the philosophy of the beautiful” (“aesthetics, n”), and it leads to asking: what is beautiful about racism? However, this definition is only a small part of the other ways *OED* defines the term, and I choose not to focus on that part. The definition also says, “the distinctive underlying principles of a work of art or a genre, (...)” (“aesthetics, n”). This is how I choose to define aesthetics in my thesis, as I argue that (in)visibility, erasure and silence are all underlying principles of *Citizen* as a work of art, and I attempt to find the ways Rankine is able to describe and show these principles to the reader. I argue that the very essence of *Citizen* is that Rankine uses these three underlying

principles to show how racism has become a part of the structures of the U.S. society, and that these structures seem to be permanent and impossible to change. However, by presenting the principles, she makes the reader aware of the permanence of the structures, which I suggest is one of the most important aims of the work.

## **Background**

During the summer of 2017, I went traveling to Brazil. While staying in Sao Paulo, I went to an art institute called “Tomie Ohtake”, where they display national and international art, architecture and design exhibitions. As I wandered around the institute, I came across an exhibition called “Osso – Exposição-apelo ao amplo direito de defesa de Rafael Braga”, which means “OSSO exhibition-appeal for the right to defense of Rafael Braga” (“Osso exhibition-appeal”). I noticed a large banner on the wall saying: “O RACISMO É ESTRUTURAL”, which I with the help of my Brazilian friend, translated into “racism is structural”.



*Figure 1: Graziela Kunsch. Untitled (O Racismo É Estrutural). From Tomie Ohtake Institute.*

This banner caught my interest immediately, having just finished *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine yet another time. I eagerly continued to wander through the exhibition, which included a number of illustrations, photographs, and textual bits, though unfortunately all in Portuguese. One of the items displayed was a simple sheet with twenty black and white photos on it (Figure 2). Each photo was a headshot of someone from the shoulders and up. They had been altered by changing the contrast in the photo, and it was not possible to see the person's facial traits or skin color, only the silhouettes.



Figure 2: Anna Maria Maiolino. From the series *Fotopoemação* (1979-2014). From Tomie Ohtake Institute.

Another part of the exhibition was a collection of nine items, some of them were illustrations, sketches, and photographs, and they were all stitched together in a collage (Figure 3). Among these items were sketches of human head skulls and of animals fighting, and what looked like the blueprints of a ship, bringing to mind associations to slave ships. There were also photographs portraying an African American man standing naked; one of the photos shows him

from the side and another from behind. Again, I associated this with slavery and interpreted it as perhaps a part of a “catalog” for selling slaves at auctions. Since the pieces of the collage were stitched together, there were some loose threads, and one of those were placed in a way that it looked like the man in the photograph had a tail. It might have been a coincidence, but even so, it gave him a feature associated with animals, which fits well with ideologies of race and inferiority of previous centuries where slaves were looked upon as animals and “savages”.



Figure 3: Rosana Paulino. *A Permanência das Estruturas*. From Tomie Ohtake Institute.

Two of the pieces in the collage were parts with fragments of text saying, “A PERMANÊNCIA DAS ESTRUTURAS” all over with red letters, which means “the permanence of structures”. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, permanence means “the state or



quality of lasting or remaining unchanged indefinitely” (“permanence, n”). I interpret this as one way of looking at the development of slavery and its implications, and the realization of the fact that even though slavery ended, it transformed into something else, something more difficult to spot. Racism is still present today, and instead of disappearing, racism has become a part of the structure of the U.S. society, which injures the ones exposed to racism. It sets the premises for their lives and contributes to a “vicious circle”, which becomes difficult to get out of, and this is the reality that Rankine describes in *Citizen*.

### **Citizen: An American Lyric by Claudia Rankine**

Claudia Rankine was born in 1963 in Jamaica, and later moved to the U.S. Since she published her first collection of poems in 1994, she has published several other collections of poetry as well, like for example *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* in 2004, which Steven R. Serafin defines as an “experimental multigenre project that blended poems, essays, and visual imagery in a meditation on death” (Serafin). *Citizen: An American Lyric* was published in 2014, and its publisher Graywolf Press, describes it as “an innovative work of poetry, prose, and visual images that addresses racism in America” (“Citizen in the classroom”). Rankine says in an interview with *The New Yorker's* Alexandra Schwartz that her work with *Citizen* partially began by her asking her friends and acquaintances the following:

“Tell me a moment when you suddenly found yourself feeling invisible or internally unsettled by something that came down to a moment that you then read as racism, but I want it to happen between you and a friend.” I didn't really care too much about what people were doing in Ferguson, at this level. I meant in their day-to-day working lives.

And then, as people began to tell me stories, I began to see it in my own life, everywhere, happening, and I just started writing them down. (Schwartz)

As seen, at this point in the process, *Citizen* was not about the “greater context” involving situations concerning racism familiar in the media, but rather about those moments of everyday racism that occur in people’s lives on a frequent basis. However, Rankine includes poems, stories, and names known from situations that have been covered in the media, so her work probably evolved into a fusion of the two outer edges. The fact that she writes about racism in these different contexts can help explain the need for a different type of form.

*Citizen* is divided into seven sections, which are referred to in Roman numbers. The various sections include poetic fragments, prose, and scripts. On the back cover of the book, *Citizen* is categorized as both “essays” and “poetry”, and this shows how difficult it is to confine the book to one genre. In addition to the various types of text, *Citizen* also contains photographs, illustrations and other types of imagery. In the sixth section, there are scripts for “video situations”, which Rankine has made in cooperation with her husband John Lucas, who is a filmmaker and photographer. In these video situations, which can be found on her website, Rankine narrates various kinds of video recordings with passages from *Citizen*.

Since the publication in 2014, Rankine has been very vocal about her work and its context. She has given lectures and interviews where she has commented on several aspects of *Citizen*. She has made a strong connection between herself and the work, and this is why I throughout my thesis choose to write “Rankine does this” or “by doing so, Rankine shows” rather than writing “the text does this”, as I suggest that Rankine’s own voice is very present. However, when a writer talks this frequently about her or his work, it can make it challenging for others to write about it, as one feels that “everything has been said”, and that it is difficult to come up with

something new and original. It also feels uncomfortable to challenge the author's own thoughts and opinions. That being said, it does not mean that the writer's own word is always the answer to everything concerning the work of art, and it does not exclude others from interpreting the work.

*Citizen* made the *New York Times* bestseller list in 2015 and has been nominated to several awards throughout the past few years. It was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award in two categories, both "poetry" and "criticism", where she won the first one. Michelle Dean points out in *The Guardian* that it was the first time that any book had received two nominations, and that this dual nomination suggests "that the NBCC is convinced of the continual social relevance of poetry, an art form which, in recent years, has been often – and prematurely – pronounced dead" (Dean). In his review of *Citizen* in *The Huffington Post*, Dean Rader writes that it was one of the "most-talked-about book of American poetry in 2014" (Rader). However, not everyone agrees that poetry is the most important aspect of Rankine's work, like for example Kate Kellaway from *The Guardian* as she writes that "Claudia Rankine's book may or may not be poetry – the question becomes insignificant as one reads on. Her achievement is to have created a bold work that occupies its own space powerfully, an unsettled hybrid – her writing on the hard shoulder of prose" (Kellaway). Similar to Kellaway, there are also others who have argued that *Citizen* is a kind of hybrid text, like for example Mary-Jean Chan in her article in the *Journal of American Studies*. She suggests that "*Citizen* is a work that seeks to extend the lyric's possibilities through creating a hybrid text containing lyric essays, photography, public art and video scripts, (...)" (3), and continues to argue that, "Rankine's own work emerges out a critical awareness of the need to refashion the lyric in response to the tribulations of being a black citizen in contemporary America, (...)" (Chan, 3). This shows how *Citizen*'s content is demanding a certain form, and this form is often the center of discussion in

reviews about the book.

Though people tend to focus on the experimental form, there are also those who focus on what remains traditional about it. Rader suggests in his reviews that *Citizen* “uses form to underscore meaning” (Rader), and he argues that this “participates fully in the poetic tradition” (Rader). He also comments on the categorization of *Citizen* as both “essays” and “poetry”, and in his opinion, the use of the two different genres complements rather than contradict each other. Another aspect that Rader mentions as traditional is how *Citizen* addresses the audience, and I suggest that addressability is a keyword in *Citizen*. Addressability can be defined as the “the property or quality of being addressable” (“addressability, n”), and comes up in several reviews of the book.

Jonathan Farmer, for instance, claims that “addressability is at the heart of *Citizen*, the reason that her “you” marshals such immediate force and leaves behind such intimate unease” (Farmer). This addressability is connected to Rankine’s use of pronouns in *Citizen*, which I suggest is an important part of how she addresses the audience. She uses “you” in most of the encounters she describes, which at first may confuse the reader as to who this “you” is, and I argue that it is a way of engaging the reader from the very beginning. This is seen in the first sentence in the first page: “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” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 5). The reader automatically questions who Rankine writes about, is she talking to me or who is this person? Rader also spends time on the pronouns in his article, especially on how the use of “you” shifts throughout *Citizen*: “(...), for just that one sentence, “you” means someone else. It imagines - assumes - an all-white audience and, in the process, erases Rankine, who will resume the role of “you” one sentence later” (Farmer). Using pronouns like this becomes an important tool for Rankine to establish a connection between her and the reader.

As mentioned, Rankine plays around with the pronouns, and it is a large part of how she addresses the reader. According to Holly Bass from *The New York Times*, this is “the challenge of making racism relevant, to those who do not bear the brunt of its ill effects is tricky” (Bass). Bass continues writing that “it’s easy to presume the “you” is always black and the “she” or “he” is always white, but within a few pages Rankine begins muddying the personas and pronouns in a way that forces us to work a little harder” (Bass). Paula Coccozza from *The Guardian* takes it even further by saying that “*Citizen*’s “you” refuses to denote a single addressee, let alone one gender or one racial identity” (Coccozza). It contributes to engaging the reader, which was mentioned above, and Coccozza writes that “(...) its shifts keep the reader mobile, continually asking: Which one am I? Where do I fit in? It is impossible to read without questioning your own part in the racist social structures it recounts” (Coccozza). It is not only confusing to read, but it can also be challenging to describe these situations where the pronouns are shifting. In my thesis, I refer to the persons from the different encounters according to the pronoun which is used in the situation. It might be for example “you” or “I”, and therefore, sometimes a sentence may look like this: “The ‘You’ in the situations does this” or “The ‘I’ does that”. As seen, there are many who have discussed the form of *Citizen*, but its content also takes up a lot of space in different articles, reviews, and research about it.

During my research of *Citizen*, I came across another master thesis written about it, by Asli Hersi at the University of Stavanger. In her thesis “Rethinking Racism in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*”, she writes that it is a study of Rankine’s approach to the African American racial experience (Hersi, 1), and that the “thesis is designed to analyze and contribute to the discussion on *Citizen* and its approach to racism” (Hersi, 22). Hersi discusses some of the keywords which the present thesis is about like, for instance, “invisibility”, as she argues that Rankine describes as a “lack of representation in American history” (17). Hersi also uses

“hypervisible” a few times, but she does not define the term in any other way than as invisibility’s counterpart (17). “Erasure” is mostly used as she quotes from *Citizen*, while the term “silence” is only mentioned a few times during the thesis when briefly writing about gaps which are left in the book. There is a lack of a thorough explanation of these terms, which is visible in for instance Hersi’s thesis, but also in reviews and articles about *Citizen* as well.

As seen, I have come across the terms mentioned above, among them “invisibility”, “hypervisibility”, “erasure”, and “silence”, but only in a rather “superficial” way. They are used frequently when describing the experience of African Americans, like for instance in reviews of *Citizen*, but the terms are almost never really defined or described in any depth. This is where I contribute to the discussion, as I make the terms my main focus, attempting to define them, and analyze in what ways they are shown, described or even just present in *Citizen*. Only then can one perhaps ponder the meaning of the book. As a result, I do not spend much time on writing about African American history or explain all the names Rankine mentions in *Citizen*. Neither do I delve into the discussion of poetry in order to analyze what genre the book should be categorized as. Parts of what the analyses in the three chapters show is that the history of African Americans still affects their daily lives seeing as it has become a part of the structures of the society.

### **How past history is still a part of today’s U.S.**

Holly Bass from *The New York Times* writes in her review of *Citizen* that: “And while the themes of this book could have been mined from any point in America’s history, Rankine sets the whole collection resolutely in the present. Contemporary content and contemporary form mirror each other” (Bass). While I do agree with this to some extent, I argue that the last sentence is a bit simplified. The content is indeed contemporary as it concerns instances of everyday racism in

today's U.S.; however, in the end, American history is the root which causes the problems. This is seen in the second epigraph, where Rankine writes that, "the past is a life sentence; (...)" (*Citizen*, 72). In one of his essays in *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, Mikhail M. Bakhtin responds to a question of how he would evaluate the current state of literary scholarship. This is an essay written in 1970, and even though Bakhtin concentrates on literature of past epochs, his thoughts are well applicable to Rankine's work as well. He writes that "we usually strive to explain a writer and his work precisely through his own time and the most recent past (...)" (3), and he continues: "we are afraid to remove ourselves in time from the phenomenon under investigation. Yet the artwork extends its roots into the distant past" (4). These thoughts are transferable to the discussion of Bass' statement above. The "phenomenon under investigation" here is racism's form today, and one must remove oneself in time, as Bakhtin suggests, in order to see new layers of meaning. It makes sense that one cannot only focus on the present time in order to discuss racism because racism in the U.S. is a direct result of previous treatment of African Americans.

Everyday racism is the pressing matter in *Citizen*, and Rankine describes these encounters as well as the various reactions to them. It is possible to compare racism to literature in Bakhtin's quotes, like for example when Bakhtin suggests that "literature is an inseparable part of culture and it cannot be understood outside the total context of the entire culture of a given epoch. It must not be severed from the rest of culture, (...)" (2). I emphasize that even though he writes about literature in past epochs, I argue that his thoughts can be used in this context as well. This means that racism becomes an inseparable part of culture (of American culture in this case), and racism cannot be understood without looking at the greater context of U.S. society. As the exhibitions in Sao Paulo showed, "racism is structural", and the structure of racism today has deep roots in the past.

Rankine points this out in a powerful way throughout *Citizen* as she refers to American history, like for instance via names and memories of the past. She then mixes this with recent events from the U.S., which creates a link between the past and the present. An example of a link like this is seen when she describes an encounter at a Starbucks café. “When the stranger asks, Why do you care? you just stand there staring at him. He has just referred to the boisterous teenagers in Starbucks as niggers (*Citizen*, 16). She then continues, “Come on, no need to get all KKK on them, you say” (*Citizen*, 16). Here, the use of Starbucks as the scene of the encounter immediately places it within the present, and it becomes an example of how “common” a situation like this is. At the same time, when bringing in KKK, Rankine reminds the reader of all the history preceding this moment. This situation, taking place at a Starbucks café, resembles another incident which occurred in April this year, which gained severe media attention. Two African American men were arrested at a Starbucks café after having asked to use the restroom. They were not paying customers and were asked to leave the premises. The police were called after the men refused to leave, and according to a news report by Kelly McCleary and Amir Vera from *CNN*, other customers tried to tell the police that the men had done nothing wrong (McCleary and Vera). The police later claimed that the police officers had followed the correct procedures; however, Starbucks issued an official statement where they apologized for the incident and claimed that “Starbucks stands firmly against discrimination or racial profiling” (McCleary and Vera). This incident shows the very real reality that Rankine addresses in *Citizen*.

Another passage where Rankine creates a link between the past and the present is in one of the scripts from the sixth section, the one called “In Memory of Trayvon Martin”. Rankine writes, “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, (...)” (*Rankine*, 89). It is almost like she cites the entire history in



one long run-on sentence, and one of the terms she mentions is “profiling”, which is present in *Citizen* in many ways, like when it is mentioned in a quote like above, or via names like “Trayvon Martin”.

Profiling has been debated in the media following cases like the one with Trayvon Martin, but also in Michael Brown’s case, and other similar incidents. According to American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), racial profiling “is a longstanding and deeply troubling national problem despite claims that the United States has entered a “post-racial era” (“Racial Profiling”). Furthermore, they write that “it occurs every day, in cities and towns across the country, when law enforcement and private security target people of color for humiliating and often frightening detentions, interrogations, and searches without evidence of criminal activity and based on perceived race, ethnicity, national origin, or religion” (“Racial Profiling”). This is the major theme in the script “Stop and Frisk”, which will be discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

Profiling was discussed as a possible reason for why Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in 2012, and it led to a national debate regarding the subject. Martin was a seventeen-year-old African American boy who got shot by a white man, George Zimmerman, who according to an article by Greg Botelho from *CNN* was a “neighborhood watch volunteer” (Botelho). He called the police saying that Martin looked like “a real suspicious guy” and that “this guy looks like he’s up to no good, or he’s on drugs or something” (Botelho). Despite being told by the police to wait, he chose to follow Martin, and according to Botelho, they got into an argument, which ended in Zimmerman shooting and killing Martin. He later claimed this was due to self-defense as he said that Martin attacked him. This caused a stir in the U.S., and there were many demonstrations to gain attention to racial profiling.

The discussion has so far been centered around the literary work’s relation to the past and the present; however, the future of a work is equally important. As established, it is important

that when reading a literary work or seeing a work of art, one should never simply interpret it in the time or epoch of the work. Bakhtin is also concerned with the future of the work, as he writes:

the work cannot live in future centuries without having somehow absorbed past centuries as well. If it had belonged *entirely* to today (that is, were a product only of its own time) and not a continuation of the past or essentially related to the past, it could not live in the future. Everything that belongs only to the present dies along with the present. (4)

This means that a work will never be able to continue into the future if one chooses to only view it through the writer's own time. One of the ways that Rankine pushes her work further into the future is for example seen on pages 134-135 taken from the script "Making Room" in the sixth section. The first page consists of a list, where it says, "In Memory of" on the entire page. In the edition of the book that I have used, there are eight names on the list and the first one reads "In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis". The list gradually vanishes as it turns grey, and eventually disappears. Then there is a small white gap on the next page before it says, "because white men can't / police their imagination / black men are dying" (*Citizen*, 135). By doing this, there is a sense of continuation, letting the reader know that the list is not finished. On the Graywolf Press' website, page 134 is found as a PDF and is frequently updated. The last version now includes eighteen names ("Citizen in the classroom"), but on their website, they have also included a nineteenth name, which for some reason is not yet added in the PDF. The making of this reveals the nature of *Citizen*, and it becomes Rankine's way of showing how her work also extends into a future. There is also a sad realization about this because Bakhtin's theory is equally applicable to this point when it comes to racism, not only the previous discussions. This means that racism will also continue into the future as it has absorbed past centuries because it is not, as Bakhtin

describes it, something that only belongs to the present.

## **This thesis**

*Citizen* is a complex work, which is part of why it leads to so many different discussions. It combines the past with the present as well as providing it with a way to connect with the future. It also combines genres with a blend of poetry and prose, as well as mixing the textual with the visual. As mentioned above, I add to the discussion of the work by focusing on three aspects in *Citizen*, which are (in)visibility, erasure, and silence, as others mainly refer to these in order to describe the content of the book. This links back to “the aesthetics of racism”, which I defined previously, as I look into these terms as the underlying principles of *Citizen*. I analyze how Rankine describes the presence of these principles in her work, as I argue that they are of major importance when it comes to her way of portraying racism in the U.S. today.

In Chapter 1: “(In)visibility”, I investigate “invisibility” and “hypervisibility”, and relate them to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of perception from *The Primacy of Perception* from 1964. By using Merleau-Ponty as a framework, I look into how it is possible to describe something which is on the outside of our visual field. I am interested in finding out how Rankine attempts to describe the existence of people who are unseen at certain moments in their everyday lives. Furthermore, I move on to explore what happens when someone is “hypervisible”, which means that they are seen, but in a way that hides their individual qualities due to stereotypes overshadowing them. Finally, I look into if it is possible to be trapped in the intersection between invisibility and hypervisibility, which I refer to as the “paradox of invisibility”, exploring how the invisible can be visible.

Chapter 2: “Erasure”, is concerned with the attempted erasure of history and language. It

revolves around recent examples from, for instance, Texas where severe changes in language in school textbooks, as well as the removal of important keywords in state guidelines on how to teach subjects like the Civil War, show how erasure takes place. I look into how Rankine describes erasure in her work, and focus the discussion around images as well as some textual examples. By applying the concept of Sarah Dillon's work with the palimpsests, I argue that a complete erasure of history and language is close to impossible due to the fact that clues or traces are left behind.

Chapter 3 is called "Silence and silencing". As in the previous two chapters, I explore how Rankine is able to bring the terms that are usually not thought of as visual into presence. Silence is typically thought of as an audible phenomenon, which perhaps makes it more difficult to visually demonstrate it, but somehow, Rankine manages to make the reader both witness and almost «hear» silence. However, I also investigate how Rankine depicts silence when it is broken, and what kind of traces silence leaves behind.

## Chapter 1: (In)visibility

I am an invisible man. (...). I am a man of substance, flesh, and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. (...). When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me. (Ellison, 3)

The notion of being either invisible or hypervisible is an important theme in Rankine’s *Citizen*. In addition to tropes of erasure and silence, I suggest that her ways of demonstrating (in)visibility show what racism looks like in the U.S. today. In this chapter, I look at the aesthetics of (in)visibility and relate it to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of perception which are gathered in *The Primacy of Perception* from 1964. One of the chapters shares the same title with the book, and in it Merleau-Ponty writes: “if we consider an object which we perceive but one of whose sides we do not see, or if we consider objects which are not within our visual field at this moment – (...) – how should we describe the existence of these absent objects or the nonvisible parts of present objects?” (13). His thoughts on this matter can be applied to the theme of (in)visibility and race. How does Rankine describe the existence of the people who are unseen? Furthermore, I also look at what it is like when they are present, as in the sense of being hypervisible, which is a way of seeing that removes one’s own self and temporarily replaces it with something else. I will return to this later when I discuss hypervisibility.

Moreover, I want to see how Rankine describes the nonvisible parts of someone who is hypervisible. By “nonvisible parts” within the topic of (in)visibility, I argue that this is connected

to how African Americans tend to lose their individual qualities because they are seen as an indistinguishable group where everyone shares the same characteristics. However, by using Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on perception, I argue that these qualities are not lost, but that they are "hidden" or not within our visual field at the moment of seeing. I also discuss the paradox of how the invisible becomes visible, and how individuals can be trapped in the intersection between the two, which will be exemplified through Serena Williams later in this chapter. This paradox is closely related to parts of what I look at in the next chapter on erasure, namely how something that has been attempted erased ends up being unintendedly preserved.

The epigraph above is taken from Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* from 1952, and it is about an unnamed African American man who considers himself socially invisible. It shows that even though the form of racism has changed, the feeling of not being seen in society is not something new. Racism is not as overt as it used to be, for example in the Jim Crow era; however, it is still present. It is important to note that it does not mean that overt racism does not occur in the U.S. anymore. In *Citizen*, Rankine shows dozens of examples from people's daily lives, and how they experience racist behavior, which sometimes is different than what we usually think of as racism. This is related to something called "perceived racism", which I will return to shortly, but it also relates to different ways people define racism.

In *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes that in the United States nowadays, most Americans do not claim that they are racists, but that "they don't see color, just people; (...)" (13). In my opinion, this type of utterances is a great part of why Rankine has written *Citizen*, to show how people are still racists, but in a different way than what we usually think of as racism. Bonilla-Silva also claims that "(...), most whites insist that minorities (especially blacks) are the ones responsible for whatever 'race problem' we have in this country" (13). Furthermore, he says that

“most whites believe that if blacks and other minorities would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and complain less (particularly about racial discrimination), then Americans of all hues could ‘all get along’” (13). This is a provocative statement because it encourages to forget the past and its message functions as a very clear reason for why *Citizen* is so desperately needed.

The content of the statement above relates to several of the topics in my chapters. For example, the urge to “stop thinking about the past” is about forgetting events in the past, and it links to erasure. It is also claimed that African Americans and other minorities should work hard, and in *Citizen*, Rankine shows how they *do* have to work hard, namely to avoid that history becomes forgotten: “(...) you are reminded that a friend once told you there exists the medical term – John Henryism – for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure. (...). You hope by sitting in silence you are bucking the trend” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 11). This shows how attempts of erasure are clearly happening, that it affects people in a negative way, and also how silence becomes a result of this. The second half of the statement quoted above tells African Americans to “complain less” and says that if they follow that advice as well as the others, they could all “get along”. What Rankine does is that she illustrates the everyday situations where people are exposed to racism, which becomes a way of illustrating various encounters that African Americans are told not to complain about.

Rankine shows different reactions to these encounters, as seen in the following example: “Another friend tells you you have to learn not to absorb the world. She says sometimes she can hear her own voice saying silently to whomever – you are saying this thing and I am not going to accept it. (...)” (*Citizen*, 55). This is an example of how the friend of the “you” in the situation is telling how she is distancing herself from racist behavior in her daily life, but also how her advice is to not “absorb the world”, which is almost like telling “you” not to be so addressable.

However, only a few pages earlier, Rankine writes about the philosopher Judith Butler who says that “we suffer from the condition of being addressable. (...). Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways you are present” (*Citizen*, 49). Therefore, it seems difficult to take the advice of the friend from the situation above. The other person, the “you”, seems to have some trouble with this guidance, especially when it comes to the “get along”-part:

You take in things you don't want all the time. The second you hear or see some ordinary moment, all its intended targets, all the meanings behind the retreating seconds, as far as you are able to see, come into focus. Hold up, did you just hear, did you just say, did you just see, did you just do that? Then the voice in your head silently tells you to take your foot off your throat because just getting along shouldn't be an ambition”.

(Rankine, *Citizen*, 55)

It is as if Rankine responds to the statement that Bonilla-Silva discusses, the idea that African Americans should complain less, work hard, and try to get along. The last sentence of the quote above comes off as very powerful when she says that “getting along shouldn't be an ambition”, which contradicts the opinions of the “many white people” that Bonilla-Silva refers to.

As just discussed, Rankine brings up different ways of reacting to racism. However, the point of many of the situations is that it is not always blatant racism, which means that it is not always easy to recognize how or why it is racist. She shows this by writing that “each moment is like this – before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced, it has to be seen” (*Citizen*, 9). This is true for all experiences that human beings go through; however, Rankine spends time on the reasoning after the racist incident. That reveals what kind of experiences she writes about: “(...). Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I



think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? The moment stinks. (...)” (*Citizen*, 9). It becomes clear that even the person who is subjected to racism might have trouble recognizing the situation. This resembles a term called “perceived racism” which Franklin et al. write about in “Racism and Invisibility”, claiming that perceived racism can cause life stress for people of color (14).

Furthermore, Franklin et al. refer to James M. Jones who argues that the traces of modern racism are often manifested on an institutional level within the American society meaning that it can be invisible to many white Americans (14). This links to my thesis statement about how racism is a part of the structures of the U.S. society today. It also resonates with what Bonilla-Silva writes about how white Americans say that African Americans should work hard, complain less and try to get along because statements like this can be linked to the term “perceived racism”. This term was coined by Clark et al. who suggest that “the perception of racism is the most important aspect of its impact” (qtd. in Franklin et al., 14) because according to their research, perceived racism is not limited to those experiences that may ‘objectively’ be viewed as racism (qtd. in Franklin et al., 14). Perceived racism fits well with Merleau-Ponty’s ideas about paradoxical perceptions and how the perceived thing can only exist if someone perceives it. This coincides with some of the situations which Rankine describes in *Citizen* as they have not necessarily been defined as racism in an objective way, but it is still perceived:

You are in the dark, in the car, (...); he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there.

You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having.

Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me? (...). (Rankine, *Citizen*, 10)

In this incident, it becomes clear that “You” perceives the situation as negative, as seen when “You” questions the conversation, and wonders if it is an experiment. The situation has not been defined as racism in an “objective” way; however, the subjective experience of the person in the car tells us that it is perceived as inappropriate and that it creates a stressful situation. This concurs with what Clark et al. believe as they claim that the perception of a situation is the principal aspect of racism. This relates to (in)visibility as well because the subjective feeling of not being seen or valued is not necessarily easy to define as racism in an objective manner.

## **Invisibility**

Invisibility, as well as hypervisibility, are recurring keywords when reading interviews and reviews of *Citizen*. Alexandra Schwartz writes in her interview with Rankine from *The New Yorker*, which was discussed in the Introduction, that “the condition that she [Rankine] describes is one of being alternately invisible and “hyper-visible,” watched too closely or not seen at all” (Schwartz), and Schwartz does not delve into these terms any more than this. Kenna O’Rourke writes in another review that “(...), Rankine strives not to “make it new” (as the modernists would have it), but to make it legible – to articulate the contradictory state of invisibility and hypervisibility, of aggressions and microaggressions, that black citizens endure daily in a society that continues to position them as “other” (O’Rourke). Similar to Schwartz, O’Rourke brings up the concepts of invisibility and hypervisibility. She does not go much further into these terms, but I will add to the discussion by attempting to define the terms within a framework, but also by

exploring how Rankine brings them into presence in *Citizen*.

In the introduction to this chapter, we saw that Merleau-Ponty asks how to describe the existence of objects outside of our visual field, as well as the nonvisible parts of objects that are present (14). He proposes some ways to answer this this, for instance, he tries to argue that he *represents* the unseen sides to himself; but he contradicts his argument by saying that “since the unseen sides of this lamp are not imaginary, but only hidden from view (...), I cannot say that they are representations.” (13-14). This means that he believes that the unseen parts are present, but simply hidden from our visual field for a moment. Even though individuals are deemed invisible does not mean that they are imaginary or representations of something, but somehow, they have been hidden from our view. What Rankine does is that she tries to find ways to bring these hidden sides to presence again. Merleau-Ponty continues to write that “I grasp the unseen side as present, and I do not affirm that the back of the lamp exists in the same sense that I say the solution of a problem exists. The hidden side is present in its own way. It is in my vicinity” (14). This is one of the main ideas that I will use in my arguments because the idea of presences is applicable to the topic of invisibility.

Rankine provides the reader with several examples of invisibility in different everyday contexts. As just discussed, the presence that Merleau-Ponty is concerned with is important in these situations because they show how the idea of presence may differ. Most of the incidents are random encounters between strangers while some are between people with close relationships. In the following, Rankine describes a situation where a boy who is knocked over by a man in the subway:

He’s okay, but the son of a bitch kept walking. She says she grabbed the stranger’s arm and told him to apologize: I told him to look at the boy and apologize. Yes, and

you want it to stop, you want this child pushed to the ground to be seen, to be helped to his feet, to be brushed off by the person that did not see him, has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself. (*Citizen*, 17)

In this example, the boy is invisible to the stranger, but by applying Merleau-Ponty's ideas, it means that just because the boy is unseen, it does not mean that he is not present. Instead, the boy becomes the object which is hidden from the man's visual field, and the question remains: how can we describe his "existence"? In this particular scenario, someone actually tries to force the man to see the child's existence as seen when "She" grabs the man's arm and tells him to look at the boy. The frustration of the situation comes from the fact that the presence of the boy is not acknowledged properly (or at all in this case).

The last sentence "has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself" resembles the epigraph from Ellison where it says, "when they approach me they see only my surrounding, themselves, (...)" (Ellison, 3). This becomes a way to describe what this stranger is able to perceive, or more importantly, *wants* to perceive. This is where the situation differs a bit from Merleau-Ponty's discussion as he describes someone who seems eager to see and perceive, and who is active in engaging in this process, while in Rankine's description it is different. This still links to what Merleau-Ponty writes concerning the subject's role in perception: "The perceptual synthesis thus must be accomplished by the subject, which can both delimit certain perspectival aspects in the object, the only ones actually given, and at the same time go beyond them" (16). He suggests that the one who perceives can be restraining certain aspects of the object, which will be seen in other examples later. Merleau-Ponty further claims that perception is paradoxical, saying that "the perceived thing itself is paradoxical; it exists only in so far as someone can perceive it" (16). Again, this relates to the line above where it says, "has perhaps

never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 17), as the boy is not perceived by this stranger, and ends up not existing and being invisible in this particular man’s world.

The previous example from Rankine was about the boy who was knocked over. The next situation is similar to the first one as they are both encounters with strangers, but it differs as we here can read the communication after the woman has been overlooked:

In line at the drugstore it’s finally your turn, and then it’s not as he walks in front of you and puts his things on the counter. The cashier says, Sir, she was next. When he turns to you he is truly surprised.

Oh my God, I didn’t see you.

You must be in a hurry, you offer.

No, no, no, I really didn’t see you. (Rankine, *Citizen*, 77)

In this situation, the woman is overlooked by the male stranger, but she is acknowledged by the cashier. Her presence is there, but it is partly hidden, and this means that she is in the intersection between visibility and invisibility, the paradox that I introduced earlier. She exists to some extent, but only because the cashier perceives her presence. The man is made aware of the woman he passed in the line, and we see his reaction and their brief conversation. The word “surprised” combined with a gap makes the reader pause for a moment, taking in the situation. Furthermore, the woman offers a way out like an apology for the man. By doing this, she comes off as the

weak link in the encounter, and she gives him the control to her existence. However, he does not take the opportunity; instead, he emphasizes that to him she was indeed invisible by saying “no, no, no”. Rankine leaves the readers with the last sentence, which firmly confirms the woman’s invisibility, and it comes off as very final because the rest of the page is left entirely blank.

The two situations discussed above are some examples of how invisibility is carried out in normal everyday life. According to Anderson Franklin and Nancy Boyd-Franklin, “encountering repeated racial slights” can create “psychological invisibility” (33), and they talk about “an invisibility syndrome” (33) or simply an invisibility paradigm. They expand by explaining that this psychological invisibility is a subjective feeling where a person struggles with beliefs that their personal talents and abilities are not being acknowledged or valued by other people as well as the larger society due to racial prejudice (33), and in short “a feeling of not being seen as a person of worth” (33). The part about their personal talents and abilities is what hypervisibility challenges and/or hides, and I will return to this shortly.

## **Hypervisibility**

When writing about *Citizen* and Rankine, Schwartz suggests that “the condition that she [Rankine] describes is one of being alternately invisible and “hyper-visible, (...)” (Schwartz). As we now have looked more closely at invisibility, we will now go further into the term “hypervisibility”. In his chapter in *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought*, Lewis Gordon writes about how “blacks face problems of hypervisibility” (98), and that “the paradox is that hypervisibility is a form of invisibility. For to be hypervisible is to be seen, but to be seen in a way that crushes the self under the weight of a projected, alien self (...)” (98). He refers to this as “epistemic closure” and explains that it “means to be seen in a way that closes off the process of

inquiry and understanding, to be seen without being seen, to be encountered without the modalities of interrogatives, to be ‘known’ as ‘nothing more to know’” (99). These ideas fit well with the notion of hypervisibility in *Citizen*.

In *Citizen*, when someone is hypervisible, it happens in a way that is very similar to Gordon’s definition. Usually, the person who is hypervisible is seen as a part of a collective group rather than being seen as the individual he or she is. The personal traits of the person are hidden from our visual field, and it coincides with that Gordon claims about how the self is crushed because an alien self takes its place, and how they are seen without being seen. This also relates to Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts when he asked how one should “describe the existence of absent objects or the nonvisible parts of present objects” (13). Earlier, I looked at how to describe the existence of absent objects in connection to invisibility, and now I will turn to the other part, namely how to describe the nonvisible parts of an object that is present. As just mentioned, in situations where African American individuals are hypervisible, the gaze of white people makes their personal characteristics vanish as these turn into their nonvisible parts, and they are seen as a collective group sharing the same characteristics. Gordon claims that they are seen without being seen, which is true here as the way some white people look at African Americans locks them within a certain “box”. They become trapped within this box filled with stereotypical traits, for example, connected to crimes, and it is an example of what Gordon refers to as epistemic closure where there is no opportunity for a process of understanding. Rankine comments on seeing African Americans as one unit several times, for example in the beginning of the book as she writes: “Do you feel hurt because it’s the ‘all black people look the same’ moment, or because you are being confused with another after being so close to this other?” (*Citizen*, 7). Here, she describes the common mishap by white people, where they think and assume that “all black people are alike”, which contributes to seeing hypervisibility as being part of a collective

group.

The subject of losing one's individual characteristics is a large part of the script "Stop and Frisk" from the book's sixth section, which Rankine has made in collaboration with her husband John Lucas who is a photographer and filmmaker. "Stop and Frisk" contains descriptions of an African American man going home from work, just like any normal day. As he sees and hears police cars, there is a change in the tone: "I left my client's house knowing I would be pulled over. I knew. I just knew" (Rankine, *Citizen*, 105). The man becomes hypervisible, and it relates to what Schwartz describes as being "watched too closely" (Schwartz). It shows how visible African Americans become in certain situations, and there is a significant contrast to the incident in the drugstore where the woman is overlooked.

Rankine also shows how often this happens when she writes "each time it begins in the same way, it doesn't begin the same way, each time it begins it's the same" (*Citizen*, 107). She does not necessarily refer to exactly this type of situation as seen when she contradicts herself in the sentence ("it doesn't begin the same way"). Rather, it shows that it does not matter how it begins because the result is always the same: African American individuals become part of the collective group where their characteristics are lost. This is seen through the sentence: "And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description" (Rankine, *Citizen*, 105). This is the same type of contradictory language she uses in the previous sentence about how it begins and continues to emphasize her point, that African Americans are viewed as one unit, and that somehow, they are all suspects in situations like in this description. It fits well with Gordon's idea that the individual is seen, but in a way that crushes his real self.

In *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race*, Patricia J. Williams comments on the same types of challenges that are brought up in *Citizen*. She writes that "how, or whether,



blacks are seen depends upon a dynamic of display that ricochets between hypervisibility and oblivion” (17). She also argues that “if, moreover, the real lives of real blacks unfold outside the view of many whites, the fantasy of black life as a theatrical enterprise is an almost obsessive indulgence” (17). She refers to this as “voyeurism”, meaning that whites will create fantasy constructions about black lives, which resembles the invisibility paradigm that Franklin and Boyd-Franklin write about. It also resonates with the epigraph where it says, “When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – (...)” (Ellison, 3). The same types of “figments of imagination” are seen in several places in *Citizen*: “And when the woman with multiple degrees says, I didn’t know black women could get cancer, (...)” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 45). Apparently, the speaker has some sort of fantasy construction about black people and their “ability to get cancer”. Again, this relates to perception and what Merleau-Ponty says about how the perceived thing only can exist if someone perceives it. It also corresponds with Gordon’s definition of hypervisibility because the fantasy construction connects to what he says about how the epistemic closure prevents the process of “inquiry and understanding”. The alien self, in this case, becomes “black women”, as the woman in the doctor’s office is not seen for her own self.

Rankine brings up the idea of the self in other places as well when she writes that: “(...), sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American positioning” (*Citizen*, 14), and it shows that as long as this “historical self” is present, there will be misunderstandings and fantasy constructions leading to hypervisibility. The invisibility paradigm that Franklin and Boyd-Franklin write about corresponds with the idea of fantasy constructions as they claim that it is based on people’s biased attitudes about African Americans and the authors write that it stems from superficial contact rather than intimate social contact with the African American community

(Franklin and Boyd-Franklin, 35). This is true to some extent in *Citizen* where many of the situations are simply random ones occurring with strangers like the one just discussed which took place at a doctor's office. This "voyeurism" and the fantasy constructions relate to another way of displaying how African Americans are seen when visible, which is the upcoming subject for discussion.

In some places in *Citizen*, African Americans are portrayed as visible by either being "the other" or being different than what is considered "normal" (white). Rankine brings this up in one of the encounters she describes:

Standing outside the conference room, unseen by the two men waiting for the others to arrive, you hear one say to the other that being around black people is like watching a foreign film without translation. Because you will spend the next two hours around the round table that makes conversing easier, you consider waiting a few minutes before entering the room. (*Citizen*, 50)

Rankine's use of the words "outside" and "unseen" contributes to the sense that the person listening to the conversation does not belong, and therefore becomes "the other". There is arguably a hint of sarcasm in the last sentence where Rankine remarks that the round table will make conversation easier. In their article "(In)visibility Blues: The Paradox of Institutional Racism", McDonald and Wingfield write that "another manifestation of marginality is highly conspicuous "visibility", where racial/ethnic minorities are overexposed as unique "Others". That uniqueness generally stems from being the minority, or one of very few, in a given environment" (29). This article focuses on institutional racism, which fits well with the above example outside the conference room as it apparently took place in some sort of a workplace. McDonald and

Wingfield also argue that hypervisibility can mean that members of a minority group feel that they are viewed by the dominant group, either as an individual or as a group, as “exotic spectacles, (...)” (32). Their personal characteristics are hidden, and instead, they are looked upon as something visually striking.

### **The paradox of invisibility**

As seen, there are examples of both invisibility and hypervisibility in *Citizen*. However, sometimes there is also a paradox of visibility, for instance when an individual is trapped between the intersections of both invisibility and hypervisibility. This “trap” can be looked at in several ways, but they are closely related. Merleau-Ponty connects the paradox with perception and the subject, and he argues that “the perceived thing itself is paradoxical; it exists only in so far as someone can perceive it (16). Another way to look at the trap is through what Franklin and Boyd-Franklin call “the paradox of invisibility”. They explain that people can experience an inner conflict where you must make a choice about how to make yourself visible while at the same time striving for acceptance (34). They write that this can often be seen when observing African-American men as “their recognition and treatment are based on stereotyped notions about black men” (35), meaning that to make themselves visible, they might be reinforcing a stereotype at the same time. However, sometimes there is no individual choice as visibility is “being determined by imposition of stereotypes” (34). In the second section, Rankine spends a lot of time on the tennis player Serena Williams and some of her experiences on the tennis court, and as one of those individuals who is trapped in the intersection between hypervisibility and invisibility.

The second section of the book begins with the presentation of a You Tube-artist called

Hennessy Youngman (or Jayson Musson as his real name is) who has posted a video on “How to Become a Successful Black Artist”. I suggest that some of the points he mentions are “white people’s” stereotypical views on African Americans, and therefore his video immediately adopts a sarcastic undertone. As I interpret his message, he claims that to become “successful”, you will also have to be hypervisible. This is seen in the points he makes, like for example, his main one is that one should “be angry” and show an “angry nigger exterior” (Youngman), and this connects to Gordon’s ideas because then this “alien self” (the angry self) takes over for the real self. Furthermore, Youngman says that slavery is “a source of black gold” and you will always have slavery to fall back on (Youngman). He concludes by saying that if you are angry, unpredictable, exotic, use slavery and a “black intellectual language”, you will become a successful black artist (Youngman). According to Rankine, Youngman’s suggestions in the video are meant to “expose expectations for blackness (...)” (*Citizen*, 23), and these expectations are typically stereotypes. If African Americans behave like these expectations, it may lead people who believe such things into thinking that they are right and that the stereotypes are real. This may lead to the epistemic closure that Gordon describes when the process of understanding will be closed off.

As previously mentioned, Serena Williams is an example of how someone can be trapped in the paradox of visibility. Rankine writes about how Williams experienced a series of bad calls at the 2004 US Open, where the chair umpire Mariana Alves repeatedly said that the ball was out even when “everyone else” saw that it was inside the lines (*Citizen*, 27). Rankine comments that “though no one was saying anything explicitly about Serena’s black body, you are not the only viewer who thought it was getting in the way of Alves’s sight line” (*Citizen*, 27). This links to the concept of “perceived racism” that Franklin et al. write about, where it does not matter if anyone has objectively called it out as racism as long as it is perceived as discrimination based on race. However, this situation is only the first of two, and parts of why the second situation leads to a

strong reaction from Williams is linked to what Rankine writes about how: “the body has memory. (...). The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness – all the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflapping resilience does not erase the moments lived through (...)” (*Citizen*, 28). Williams is subjected to a behavior that she perceives to be racist because of previous experiences, which in turn leads to the feeling of being hypervisible, but not on her own terms.

Since Williams is a well-known tennis star, she is already visible to others in many ways. However, in some situations, she turns hypervisible and reacts accordingly. For example, when she participated in US Open in 2009, five years after the first situation, she experienced that during an important point in the match, a line judge made a wrongful call against Williams. Her reaction to this was: “I swear to God I’m fucking going to take this fucking ball and shove it down your fucking throat, you hear that? I swear to God!” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 29). When Williams lashes out like this, it puts her in a hypervisible space where her presence is extremely strong, and to some people, she might come off as “angry and unpredictable”. However, she has not asked to be seen like this, and she tries to deny this hypervisible presence. This was seen in 2011 when she played the US Open final. After being called out for interfering with her opponent’s concentration, her response was: “aren’t you the one that screwed me over last time here?” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 32), and she replied her own question with: “Yeah, you are. Don’t look at me. Really, don’t even look at me. Don’t look my way. Don’t look my way, she repeats, (...)” (*Citizen*, 32). In this situation (as well as the others), Williams is watched very closely by the crowd, by the umpires, and the people who watch the event on TV. She is incredibly visible, so when she says, “don’t look at me” and “don’t look my way”, she basically asks for something that is quite impossible. According to Merleau-Ponty, she exists as long as someone perceives her, and therefore, she cannot make someone *not* perceive her when already visible, which makes

the paradox present.

Rankine has included an image in the section about Williams, which functions as a visual description of perception and the paradox of visibility. The image displays what looks like a person who wears some sort of a costume, and it is from an exhibition by the artist Nick Cave (Figure 4). The Jack Shainman Gallery writes that he is “well known for his *Soundsuits*, sculptural forms based on the scale of his body” (“Nick Cave”). The original thought behind these forms is described as it says that “*Soundsuits* camouflage the body, masking and creating a second skin that conceals race, gender, and class, forcing the viewer to look without judgment” (Jack Shainman Gallery). The sculpture in this image bends forward, so it looks like it has a garden on top of the back with appealing flowers in it.



Figure 4: Nick Cave. *Soundsuits*. Photo by James Prinz. From Citizen.

Even though the original point of Cave’s exhibition is to be able to look at the person without judgment, its function differs in Rankine’s context and particularly because of the placement of the photo. It is placed after Rankine writes about how Williams performed a celebratory dance after a victory, and how the media referred to it as a “crip-walk” and that she

did it “over the most lily-white place in the world (...)” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 32). Later, a reporter asks Williams whether she is a gangster since the crip-walk is a gangster dance (*Citizen*, 33). This question immediately places Williams within the large collective group that removes her own characteristics, and gives her the characteristics of “gangsters”. Instead of seeing the human being within Serena, people see the eye-catching crip-walk. The image of the sculpture with the flowers has the same effect as one sees the flowers rather than what is on the inside. They are eye-catching and beautiful, but it makes the person on the inside vanish, which means that the flowers become the image of the alien self while the crushed self is hidden underneath. The difference between Williams and the sculpture is that where the flowers are considered beautiful and appealing, her victory dance is considered a “tasteless, X-rated joke inside a church (...)” and “immature and classless” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 32). In this situation, Williams is present and she is perceived, but still, her real presence is denied. This functions as a response to Merleau-Ponty’s question on how to describe the nonvisible parts of a present object. We see that Rankine tries to describe William’s hypervisible existence through the media’s eyes which present her as stereotypical.

William’s incidents on the field are similar to an example that Franklin and Boyd-Franklin’s bring up in order to illustrate what kind of behavior being treated as invisible can lead to. They write about an African American man named Bill who experienced invisibility in many ways in just one night, and he believed that these instances were due to his race (35). Combined they were too much for him to handle and it culminated in “throwing his body angrily across the hood of the final offending taxi” (35). Thus, according to Franklin and Boyd-Franklin, these racial slights “branded him with stereotyped assumptions; then, this act of frustration appeared to reaffirm them”. When Bill reacts like this, he places himself within the collective group where he loses his individual qualities, as seen because “Bill supported a generalized notion that black men

have poor impulse control, are dangerous, and should be avoided” (35). Returning to Williams, her situation is similar to Bill’s in some ways. Instead of being treated as invisible, she becomes hypervisible when she talks back to the line judge, and she reinforces stereotypes about African Americans when it comes to anger. Rankine comments on how it seems that African Americans are aware of how these stereotypes affect their lives, as she writes, “a rage you recognize and have been taught to hold at a distance for your own good” (*Citizen*, 25). This relates to Franklin and Boyd-Franklin’s theories because according to them, an important part of the invisibility paradigm is that African American men have to use a lot of energy to stay vigilant to other people’s stereotypes about them (35), and that they must “devote intrapsychic energy to discerning, preventing, and ameliorating such negative presumptions” (35). This leads to an eternal inner conflict on what kind of choices one should take in various situations, for example, whether one should act or not when it comes racial slights.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how various degrees of (in)visibility are present in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*. Throughout the book, Rankine demonstrates how individuals are seen (or not seen) in different situations, and how they are subjected to the notion of being either overlooked or hypervisible. Merleau-Ponty’s question of how to describe something that is on the outside of our visual field or how to describe the nonvisible parts of a present object has been important. This has been the major framework for analyzing the aesthetics of (in)visibility. There is a paradox when it comes to how someone can be invisible at one point and then turn into the opposite. As seen, most of the times when individuals are hypervisible, they are seen either as a part of a collective group where everyone has the same characteristics (typically stereotypes about African



Americans), or they struggle with visibility because the choice on how to be visible is not present, and they become hypervisible in someone else's terms.

By showing all of this, Rankine gives the reader an opportunity to interpret how racism is still present in the U.S. today even though few people claim to be racists, as Bonilla-Silva writes about in his book about the new color-blind era. When people claim that they do not see race, they may end up saying racist things, and in turn, this becomes a part of an attempt to normalize certain behaviors. An example of this normalization is that a name like "Jim Crow" is used as a street address in the U.S. today, and this is more related to erasure because it is not about whether a person is seen as invisible or hypervisible, but rather how parts of for example history are attempted erased. The next chapter is about this subject as I argue that displaying examples of erasure is another way that Rankine comments on racism's place in the U.S. today.

## Chapter 2: Erasure

And still a world begins its furious erasure – (Rankine, *Citizen*, 142)

In 2016, Rankine was awarded the MacArthur “genius grant” and chose to use the money she received to found “The Racial Imaginary Institute (TRII)” (Thrasher). According to TRII’s website, “(...) ‘racial imaginary’ is meant to capture the enduring truth of race: it is an invented concept that nevertheless operates with extraordinary force in our daily lives, limiting our movements and imaginations” (“About: TRII”). In September 2017, they gave out their first collection of multi-medial responses to the issue “Whiteness”. In their own words, they “(...) focus on whiteness because we believe that in our current moment whiteness is freshly articulated: the volume on whiteness has been turned up” (“About: TRII”). They continue to say that “given that the concept of racial hierarchy is a strategy employed to support white dominance, whiteness is an important aspect of any conversation about race” (About: TRII). I suggest that at the same time as “the volume of whiteness has been turned up”, the volume of blackness is turned down as a result of erasure.

In addition to (in)visibility and silence, I suggest that Rankine portrays today’s racism in the U.S. with examples of erasure of history and language in her work. Erasure is one of the three underlying principles discussed in the Introduction. I argue that a complete erasure is very difficult or even close to impossible because in some ways, there might still be traces of what has been attempted erased. However, this does not mean that sometimes elements might be removed in the process. I focus my discussion on images because Rankine has included a number of images in the book, taking the form as either photographs, paintings and other works of art. I

include some of the images in this thesis, as I have taken a picture of them from *Citizen*. This concerns the figures 4, 6, 7, 8, and 9. The overarching theme when interpreting the images in *Citizen* is erasure, but (in)visibility might be touched upon again.

## **What is erasure?**

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, erasure is defined as “the action of erasing or obliterating”, “the place where a word or letter has been erased or obliterated”, and “total destruction; wiping out” (“erasure, n”). According to *Online Etymology Dictionary*, erasure consists of “erase” and a suffix, and the root is from the Latin word “erasus”, which is the part principle of “eradere”, and it means “scrape out, scrape off, shave; abolish, remove” (“erase”). Looking at the etymology of the word erasure, it especially relates to the subject of the palimpsests which I will come back to later.

“Efforts to force collective amnesia are as old as conquest”, Parul Sehgal writes in his article “Fighting ‘Erasure’” in *The New York Times*, and in the past years, there have been several uproars in the media in the U.S. concerning erasure in connection to race. This means, for example, omitting important keywords regarding racial history from textbooks used in schools, as I will return to later in this chapter. It is also about the media, and how different newspapers or magazines choose to articulate themselves when reporting about incidents connected to African American crimes. One of the situations that Sehgal brings up relates to a former police officer who was on trial for sexually assaulting several black women (Sehgal). However, many people felt that media was ignoring the case, and they started calling this out on social media by using the word “erasure” in their posts and hashtags. In this particular case, people commented on the fact that crimes against black women were not covered in the media in the same way as crimes

against black men, meaning that in this case it concerns gender as well as race. Sehgal defines erasure as “the practice of collective indifference that renders certain people and groups invisible”. His definition indicates that erasure is closely related to invisibility, which was looked at in the first chapter. Sehgal chooses to use the term “collective indifference”, which fits well with how “the world” is often seen as the agent of erasure in *Citizen*. I will return to this later when I discuss the normalization of Jim Crow.

There are also other situations from the U.S. concerning erasure in relation to race and history, especially when it comes to language, removal of words, and what kind of knowledge that is taught to children in school. In 2015, there was a turmoil in the media originating in Texas when it turned out that a geography textbook referred to slaves as “workers” in a chapter about patterns of immigration to the U.S. In an article by Laura Isensee in *The National Public Radio*, the mother of the boy who discovered the error, Roni Dean-Burren, is interviewed and she says, “that the word – “workers” – was an attempt to erase that hard writing that slavery has had on the paper of our society” (Isensee). Dean-Burren continues to say that «the caption's language speaks to larger issues of social justice and the Black Lives Matter movement” and of how the slaves’ “stories, their lives, their bodies — they didn't matter enough to call it what it was,” (Isensee). Isensee writes about how this incident led to a debate about the power of language when it comes to interpreting history (Isensee). This case is noteworthy; however, it is not the only one when it comes to the topic. According to an article from 2015 in *The Washington Post*, several million students were to start using new textbooks within social studies that were based on “state academic standards that barely address racial segregation. The state’s guidelines for teaching American history also do not mention the Ku Klux Klan or Jim Crow laws” (Brown). In addition to this, the guidelines put sectionalism and states’ rights before slavery as the reasons for the Civil War (Brown). According to Brown, a Republican board member, Pat Hardy said that

“slavery was a side issue to the Civil War” (Brown) when the guidelines were set in 2010. These instances fit well with the definitions of erasure in relation to the removal of words, which leads to important parts of history being removed as well.

Toni Morrison is one of many writers who contributes to the discussion of erasure. In *Playing in the Dark*, she addresses issues of whiteness and blackness. Even though some of her ideas arguably are slightly outdated since the book came out in 1992, many of them are still relevant today. Morrison writes that she brings up these issues due to “delight, not disappointment” (4); however, they contribute to the discussion of erasure, and what erasure leads to. She writes about the literary tradition in the U.S., and how it has been stripped of a black presence in many ways. She discusses a certain type of “knowledge” consisting of “a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics” (Morrison, 5), and how:

this knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence – which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture – has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture’s literature. (Morrison, 5)

It is important to note that American literature is no longer “free” of African American literature, but it demonstrates a tendency that was true for a long time when it comes to “traditional canonical literature”, usually dominated by white male authors. However, Morrison’s perspectives still fit the cases that were looked at earlier concerning the textbooks where slaves

were referred to as “workers”, or where important terms were omitted by the state guidelines.

Morrison shows how attempts of erasure are not something new, as it has been going on since the “very beginning” of the United States’ history. She suggests that “the contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of literary imagination” (5). She writes about literature, but it is equally important that the black presence is not removed from history, from our language, or from other areas in society because that will contribute to what The Racial Imaginary Institute says about how “the volume of whiteness is being turned up”.

In his review of *Citizen* in *Slate Magazine*, Jonathan Farmer writes that “Claudia Rankine’s poems explore how to write about yourself when your language pretends you don’t exist” (Farmer). This removal within language resembles the examples above when the role of slavery in U.S. history is “downplayed”, and therefore, using Morrison’s ideas, removing black presence. As racism has become more “invisible” compared to the overt form of racism displayed previously in history, one can say that the history of African Americans becomes a victim of others’ attempts of erasure. Related to this is Farmer’s comment on Rankine’s use of personal pronouns, and that “she can share a language that embodies the persistent, heavy burden of being so prominently erased” (Farmer). This raises the question of how to share something that is not present. What Farmer may have in mind is that what Rankine does in *Citizen*, is that she creates a new kind of platform which becomes a place where a different kind of language exists, and this language gets to speak about certain things in a time where parts of the language are taken away. Farmer writes that Rankine’s argument is “that in persistently erasing the reality of being black, we’re damaging the very same, very human bodies we fail to recognize” (Farmer). In *Citizen*, Rankine does the opposite as she persistently emphasizes the reality of being black in the U.S. today, and brings out the bodies that are not being recognized.

## Erasure in Citizen

Rankine brings up erasure in different ways in her work. She mentions the term directly, but she also uses images, photographs, and illustrations in various ways. Already on the second page in her book, Rankine chooses to include a photograph. It shows an “all-American” residential area. There is what appears to be the backside of a stop sign in focus in the middle of the photo. At the top of this sign, the street name is visible: “Jim Crow Rd” (Figure 5). In the background of the sign, the color white dominates as there are two large white houses, and one of them has a white car in the driveway.



*Figure 5: Michael David Murphy. “M093-10-900.jpg”.*

The photographer, Michael David Murphy, has also taken other pictures from the same street, which can be found on his website. He writes that “in 2007, there’s still a place called “Jim Crow Rd.” It runs through a typical southern neighborhood, (...)” (“Jim Crow Road”), and his description of the street name using the word “still” might indicate some of his reasons for documenting it. Jim Crow Rd. is found in Florida, and Murphy writes that it is close to Forsyth

County, “known for its famous ‘sundown town’ that existed well until the ‘80s” (“Jim Crow Road”). According to the website of America’s Black Holocaust Museum (ABHM), a “sundown town is a community that for decades kept non-whites from living in it and was thus ‘all-white’ on purpose” (Loewen et al.).

Murphy’s photograph is a different example of erasure than the ones that were previously looked at from Texas. In the other cases “Jim Crow” and “Ku Klux Klan” were omitted from textbooks; here one of these terms is made into something ordinary, a simple street in American suburbia. This links back to the “collective indifference” Paul Sehgal writes about because using “Jim Crow” as the street name becomes an agreed upon erasure of memory. Murphy writes on his website that “the road crosses behind an Elementary school, right past the playground. One wonders if the kids there are still being taught what Jim Crow means, (...)” (“Jim Crow Road”). His reflections are similar to the textbooks which have been discussed previously, and it shows that actually there are places where kids are not taught what that means.

The attempts at normalizing the name have not gone by in silence as the street name has led to some controversy, and there are residents who have expressed that they wish it could be changed. In an article on *CBS 46*, however, the road is reported to be named after a man called Glenn C. Crow, who had the nickname Jim Crow. His family is tired of everyone thinking that the street name is connected to racism, as Randy Crow says that “quite honestly, I don’t think my grandfather ever gave much thought to the Jim Crow laws, (...), the man himself never had a racial bone in his body” (“Family says”). Later in the article, he says that “I’ve been in the courthouse many a time with him and they [were] colored, they [were] white, it was no difference to them, (...), [he] shook their hands, called them by their first name. Everybody was equal to Jim Crow” (“Family says”). Though it can be possible to understand that his family is upset, it seems like Randy and his family are somewhat ignorant of the real issue. The fact is that by using



Jim Crow as the street name, the risk is that it can be normalized which we have seen can contribute to the process of erasure.

In Murphy's photo, the houses in the background of the street sign are what one could describe as "typical American", so it is like Rankine asks her readers if Jim Crow is also something typical American, something normal. The placement of the image is significant, not only because it is placed on the second page, but also because of the text surrounding it. It comes after a passage about two girls, where a white girl copies a black girl for a test at school, and how the two girls are never caught by the teacher who surveils them. "Sister Evelyn must think these two girls think a lot alike or she cares less about cheating and more about humiliation or she never actually saw you sitting there" (Rankine, *Citizen*, 6). The last sentence relates to invisibility, and the photograph of Murphy reinforces the notion of something (or someone) being erased or being invisible. To name a street Jim Crow, regardless of who it is named after, becomes a way of normalizing the name in the society.

Furthermore, it tells the world that there is no point in holding on to "old" or "outdated" history or memories. An example of this is seen in the fourth section of the book: "You like to think memory goes far back though remembering was never recommended. Forget all that, the world says. The world's had a lot of practice" (Rankine, *Citizen*, 61). By using the "world" as the agent, it fits well with Sehgal's "collective indifference" where erasure becomes something which is "agreed upon" by a collective group. This notion is also seen in this chapter's epigraph: "And the world begins its furious erasure -" (Rankine, *Citizen*, 142). I suggest that it shows one way of how African Americans are told to forget their experiences and memories and accept the ongoing normalization. Rankine continues: "Feel good. Feel better. Move forward. Let it go. Come on. Come on. Come on" (*Citizen*, 66). I argue that Rankine demonstrates the pressure from society to forget and to leave behind parts of history as well as the continuous racist encounters.

In *Languages of Visuality*, Azade Seyhan refers to Walter Benjamin's idea that "photographs neither presume nor preserve meaning. Meaning can only be the result of reading/interpreting the image" (Seyhan, 231). This is quite the opposite of what John Berger claims about the same topic in *Ways of Seeing*. He writes about different perspectives of what an image is:

An image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance. Every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as it often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however, slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. (Berger, 9-10)

Where Benjamin thinks that photographs do not presume meaning until it is interpreted, Berger believes that it is not a "mechanical record", and that you can find a meaning behind it by looking at the photographer's intentions, and not just as a result of the image. Perhaps, there is a compromise between the two. Berger claims that when the photographer is actively selecting the perspective, the photo is not completely "free of meaning" as Benjamin argues. However, *additional* meaning is added to the photograph in the process of interpreting it, which coincides with Benjamin's opinion that meaning only is the result of reading the image.

If we return to the photograph of Jim Crow Rd. and look at it from the perspective of Berger's ideas, the photographer chooses to capture the street sign from this angle for a specific reason. He challenges the society to why it is okay to normalize it, which he also backs up with his comments by the pictures on his website. An additional meaning is gained from interpreting

the photo with whatever background knowledge one has about Jim Crow and that era in American history. The problem that occurs in connection to this process of erasure is: what kind of meaning and interpretations will the photograph contribute to if we enter a future where the term “Jim Crow” is removed from textbooks? As stated, naming a street Jim Crow Rd. is an attempt of normalizing parts of history, and therefore it is an attempt of erasure at the same time. However, this type of erasure can only succeed outside of memory, and that is why it fails, as Rankine writes: “The world is wrong. You can’t put the past behind you. It is buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard. Not everything remembered is useful but it all comes from the world to be stored in you” (*Citizen*, 63). This quote illustrates how deep the roots of the past are, and that it has become a part of the structures of society. Rankine shows how this makes it difficult to normalize or erase history completely. She also gives examples of reactions to these attempts of erasure: “Who said that? (...). Did she really just say that? (...). Did I hear what I think I heard?” (*Citizen*, 63). Memory provokes reactions to attempts of erasure, and it stops or slows down the process, which shows how a complete erasure is not possible.

## **Traces of removal**

In *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*, Sarah Dillon writes about the history of palimpsests. She uses the definition from *Oxford English Dictionary* as a starting point for her discussion. A palimpsest is a manuscript which has been used several times to write on, and in order to make room for something new, the original writing is removed (Dillon, 12). She writes that palimpsests are “created by a process of layering – of erasure and superimposition – (...)” (12), but in her opinion the dictionary has omitted one interesting fact, namely that the first writing often just seemed to be have been removed, but that “it was often imperfectly erased”

(12). As new methods of resurrection have been discovered and improved, it has been possible to read the different layers of the palimpsest several years later. Paradoxically, what has been attempted erased, is in fact preserved, which is the opposite of the original intent. This paradox makes these different processes of erasure that we look at much more complex. What is attempted to be removed, and what does it mean when it remains? In some cases, it might even become more visible than it was before it was attempted removed, which I will come back to in connection with the other images and artworks I bring up.

Dillon refers to Josephine McDonagh and her work with seeing the palimpsests in connection to various nineteenth-century texts and reminds the reader that McDonagh's theories are restricted to that century and that her study does not claim anything when it comes to modern literature (Dillon, 3). However, one of McDonagh's theories is that "although the process that creates palimpsests is one of layering, the *result* of that process, combined with the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script, is a surface structure (...)" (qtd. in Dillon, 4), which she refers to as "palimpsestuous". McDonagh continues to explain the difference: "Where 'palimpsestic' refers to the process of layering that produces a palimpsest, 'palimpsestuous' describes the structure that one is presented with as a result of that process, and the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script" (qtd. in Dillon, 4). Dillon points out the fact that a palimpsest actually ends up being a complex piece where unrelated texts are involuntarily entangled (4). However, in some of the pictures that I analyze later in my thesis, I am not sure I agree with Dillon that all the layers are unrelated, although they are still entangled and as Dillon describes it, "interrupting each other" (4). Looking at the process of erasure through these theories about the palimpsest, it strengthens my point that complete erasure is not possible because there will always be traces of the original material somewhere in the layers, and that these traces will in some way affect the other layers.

Another photograph that Rankine includes in *Citizen* displays a well-known image of a lynching scene from 1930 where Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith were killed by a lynch mob (Figure 6). However, the picture has been altered by Rankine’s husband, John Lucas, as he has removed the two hanging bodies. The picture is a part of the script “February 26, 2012 / In Memory of Trayvon Martin” from the sixth section of the book.



Figure 6: Hulton Archives. *Public Lynching*. From *Citizen*.

The placement of the photo is noteworthy, as it follows two pages filled with text, and then there is a page that is all blank except for the photo. However, it is not placed at the top of the page as one would normally expect, instead, Rankine has placed it at the bottom of the page, leaving a white gap above it. The importance of these gaps will be further discussed in the third chapter about silence. Parts of the script are filled with references to lynching: “(...) 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, (...)” (Rankine, 90). By doing this, Rankine creates an

image for her readers, and as they read this, pictures of lynching they have seen throughout their lives might appear in their minds. However, when Rankine inserts the photo without the bodies, it can create a “mismatch” between the imagined images and the photo in the book. It may be her way of demonstrating what erasure looks like, and compares to the textbook example where slaves were referred to as “workers”. The reality is stored in our minds, but erasure endangers it as it edits the history.

As a spectator, the first object that catches one’s eyes is the crowd of people who watch the scene. This can be both because of the lighting of the photo as well the placement of the crowd, which is in the front of the photo, while the tree is located in the back. In the original photograph, one’s gaze is drawn to the two bodies hanging from the tree first before seeing anything else in the photo. When looking at the altered picture, one notices that it is characterized by a sharp contrast between black and white. For example, the people who are gathered are white, and most of them are also dressed in white clothes, which attracts the light from the camera flash and it makes the crowd look very bright, almost like a collective white unit. The rest of the photo, meaning the tree, its leaves and the background in general, is very dark with parts that are basically black. The stem of the tree is barely visible to the right in the picture while its leaves catch some of the light from the flash at the top left of the photo. It may seem like Lucas has also altered the contrast, and made the background even darker as in the original photo you can see the tree more clearly. Other than this, the background in the photo is all black except for some glimpses of light right above the crowd. The photo relates to The Racial Imaginary Institute’s ideas about how the volume of whiteness is turned up, as the placement of the photo after the white gap is a way of demonstrating how much space whiteness takes up as it takes up a lot of space on the page.

I suggest that the altered photograph is a way of showing what historical erasure looks

like. It creates a platform and re-inscribes the language, seeing as parts of the language have been attempted erased like we saw in the examples from the textbooks earlier. Looking at this photograph, there are clues in it which tells the spectator that something has been erased from it. This slightly resembles Merleau-Ponty's ideas which we looked at in the first chapter, as he asked, "how should we describe the existence of these absent objects or the nonvisible parts of present objects?" (13). Therefore, just because something has been attempted removed, does not necessarily mean that it is not present. For example, in the photo, we see that the crowd look at something and that there is one man who points his finger to the dark blank space. He directs our gaze, though as we look to see what he points at, there is nothing there except a black gap and a tiny glimpse of light. His pointing shows us that there must be something more to the picture and that "something" is one of the many traces that one will find according to Dillon's theory of palimpsests. The bodies have been erased from the photo, but by combining the clues in the photo with our memory, it is difficult to completely erase it. Another way to understand that something is missing is of course that the picture is well-known, and many of us have seen it before. Again, this is connected to memory as we saw with the picture of Jim Crow Rd. Therefore, we know what is missing, and it creates another type of reaction. It is provoking, and it makes the spectator wonder why they have been removed. When removing the bodies, what else is excluded? It is as if African American history is sidelined in the same way as the board member from Texas argued that slavery was a side issue in the Civil War. Erasure becomes a way of "cleansing" the past.

The faces of the people in the crowd are also important to consider. Although most of them glance at the point where the bodies originally hang, some people look directly into the camera while others stare at something that happens behind the camera, towards the right of the photographer. There are various expressions among them ranging from serious to smiling faces,

and they can tell us something about the atmosphere among them on this day. Despite some of them looking serious, the faces in the crowd do not indicate that they watch a horrific scene. They could easily have been gathered there for some other reason like for example watching a concert or a show of some sort. The man who points his finger is one of the most serious-looking people in the photograph. The way he looks directly into the camera while pointing may indicate that he issues a warning. Another man in the photo, seen to the left next to a woman in a black dress, smiles at the camera. He almost looks satisfied, like he enjoys being there, and there is a stark contrast between this face and the scene we know takes place behind him. The faces of the crowd become a representation of what Sehgal writes about “collective indifference” when he defines erasure. Even though the lynched bodies have been removed from the original photo, their faces still show the same reactions since that part has not been changed, and they become an image of reactions to erasure. There is a situation in *Citizen* where Rankine comments on how words and body language interact, which relates to the subject about the body: “What will be needed, what goes unfelt, unsaid – what has been duplicated, redacted here, redacted there, altered to hide or disguise – words encoding the bodies they cover. And despite everything the body remains” (Rankine, 69). However, in the photo, the bodies do in fact not remain, which can mean that everything is in fact not always preserved as with the palimpsests.

Rankine has also included two different artworks by an artist named Glenn Ligon. According to a biography about him on Guggenheim’s website, “combining painting, photography, and conceptual practices, Ligon has addressed issues of racial and sexual identity in his work” (“Glenn Ligon”, Guggenheim). On Art21’s pages, his work is described: “in Ligon’s paintings, the instability of his medium – oil crayon used with letter stencils – transforms the texts he quotes, making them abstract, difficult to read, and layered in meaning, much like the subject matter he appropriates” (“Glenn Ligon”, Art21). This description shares several



similarities with what Dillon says about palimpsests. They consist of several layers, and each layer holds a text or a meaning, but the ones that have been attempted removed are difficult to read. The palimpsests and Ligon’s work are created in similar ways, by erasing and superimposing elements in the work.

The first artwork is found in the third section, and it covers two pages (Figure 7). The background is white, and then there are bold black letters on it including two famous quotes from Zora Neal Hurston’s essay *How It Feels to Be Colored Me*: “I do not always feel colored” (qtd. in Rankine, *Citizen*, 52) and “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (qtd. in Rankine, *Citizen*, 53). Halfway down, the letters are “smudged”, and eventually, you cannot read the words anymore.

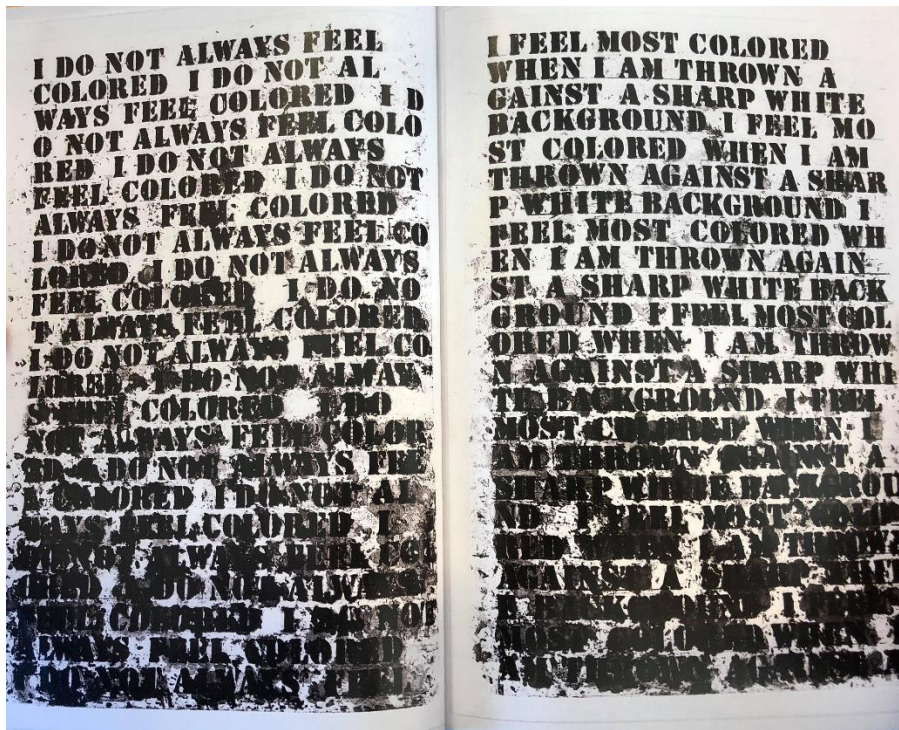


Figure 7: Glenn Ligon. *Untitled: Four Etchings*. From *Citizen*.

In the second section, Rankine writes about Ligon, and she refers to his work as “(...) the ad copy for some aspect of life for all black bodies” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 25) when describing how he transforms “the words into abstractions” (*Citizen*, 25). As with some of the other examples of attempts at erasure we have looked at, this image is also closely related to invisibility. Ligon emphasizes the meaning behind the words by making them visible like this seeing as he puts the capital and bold black letters on the white background. Looking at the artwork, it seems like someone has started the process of erasing the words, and by doing so, the experiences of being black are taken away as well as the language to express them. This indicates that the process of erasure has started. However, the black smudges color onto the white background, which is a way of commenting on how the history of black inevitably “bleeds” into the history of white. It creates a “stain” that is difficult or impossible to remove. That is because Rankine lets us know that it, meaning black history, is not supposed to be removed, and it is not even possible, because it leaves a mark. This is linked to the paradox addressed earlier when talking about Dillon, and how the things that are attempted erased in fact are preserved.

The last image I want to discuss is another piece by Ligon, which is titled “Untitled (speech/crowd) #2”. It is based on fragments of a photograph, and as the previous work, this image also takes up two entire pages (Figure 8). It is difficult to notice anything but gray, black and white dots when seeing the photo for the first time. However, when studied more closely, one sees that there is a crowd of people watching someone, as we can assume seeing as the work has “speech/crowd” in the title. The photo is blurry, and there are small black dots covering it as if the artist has dipped a brush in black paint and splattered it on the photo. The people in the front of the crowd are the most visible, and then the faces become more difficult to discern. Approximately in the middle of the photo, the faces turn simply into spots, and it is impossible to see that these spots are people. It also looks like there are several layers to the image, because in

some places, parts of one layer have been torn or scratched off, leaving little black uneven spots. This photo is perhaps one of those who matches the Latin meaning of the word “erase” best, which is to “scrape off”.



Figure 8: Glenn Ligon. *Untitled (speech/crowd) #2*. From *Citizen*.

The torn off pieces in the image only reveals a black layer underneath, leaving a dark gap. What does this black gap mean or what is it referring to? A void like this is very “finite” and it can refer to several things, especially within the theme of erasure. Rankine writes that, “(...), the problem is not one of a lack of memories; the problem is simply a lack, a lack before, during, and after” (*Citizen*, 64). Lacks in language and history are created by attempted erasure and may take the form as black gaps. For example, language will be filled with these gaps when important terms and words are removed from textbooks and guidelines. This will, in turn, affect history because the vocabulary for expressing certain events will be gone. The problem is not the lack of

memories, as Rankine says, the problem is that lacks begin to appear. This is in turn closely connected to another way of interpreting these gaps, namely as a way of showing what silence looks like. If there is a gap, there is a pause, and the gaps in language and history will be silent because they are no longer filled with meaning. Silence is a prominent theme in *Citizen*, and the focus in the third chapter, so I will not spend time on discussing it further here.

It is possible to compare “Untitled (speech/crowd) #2” to the photo from the lynching scene. They are both photos of crowds, but in very different ways: one is a photo of an all-white crowd while the other shows an all-black one. Both crowds are watching something, but you cannot see what they look at. We know the real object in the first picture, and from the title of the image, we can assume what they watch in the second one. In the picture of the white crowd, the contrast between white and black is very sharp, and the motive (meaning the crowd) is very clear. In Ligon’s work, however, the image lacks stark contrasts, and it is mostly blurry and messy. The image becomes a black mass where both the motive and the features are difficult to distinguish, and again it fits well with the meaning of the black gap already discussed. In addition to this, the placement of the artwork is noteworthy. It is placed in the script titled “Stop-and-Frisk”, which I also discussed in the first chapter. We saw how African Americans risk being seen as one collective group without any individual characteristics, as seen in the recurring motif of the script, that “(...) you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 108). The same thing happens in the photo as it is difficult to distinguish the people in it. The topic in “Stop and Frisk” raises the discussion of racial profiling, which was discussed in the Introduction, and the contrast between the lynching photo and the piece by Ligon might be a way of demonstrating how that never happens to white people, and that it is a part of the U.S. racism.

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, Hennessy Youngman’s tutorial was explored as it lets his

audience know how to make it as a “successful black artist”. He spends a lot of time on anger as a “key to success”, but Rankine points out that he does not address the anger that is “built up through experience and the quotidian struggles against dehumanization every brown or black person lives simply because of skin color” (*Citizen*, 24). As discussed in relation to invisibility, she writes that this anger does not change anything and that “no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived” (*Citizen*, 24). It is possible to link this to several of the images and theme discussed in this chapter, like for example the two pieces by Ligon. The first one with Hurston’s text comes off as much more visible than the second one; however, it does not change the way the image is understood, or more importantly, the experiences that are expressed through the Ligon’s images. Even if the experiences are spelled out in words on this white background, or the experiences are shown through a blurry image with torn spots leaving black gaps, they both portray what attempts at erasure look like. Even though I argue that complete erasure is nearly impossible or that it is very difficult, it does not exclude the possibility that fragments might end up becoming erased in the process. Rankine writes that “recognition of this lack might break you apart. Or recognition might illuminate the erasure the attempted erasure triggers” (*Citizen*, 24). She perhaps indicates that recognizing and acknowledging the process of erasure, for example via the black gaps in language or history, can be devastating, and it is similar to the disappointment about the realization of the fact that no amount of visibility will alter how one is perceived (Rankine, *Citizen*, 24).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have examined the term erasure and explored how Rankine displays erasure in her work. I have seen that the form of erasure varies as I found examples of it in images, both

photographs and art pieces, as well as text examples, from both *Citizen* and stories from the media. Rankine includes vastly different images, with an altered photo from a lynching scene in one end of the scale, and an “ordinary” picture from a suburban area in the U.S. in the other. In this way, she demonstrates the variation and difference of form of erasure, and how the images represent one aspect of the process. The definitions of erasure emphasize the process of removing or obliterating something, like a word or a letter. In the first photograph, of Jim Crow Rd, nothing is removed; however, the name is attempted normalized, which is arguably one way of trying to erase. In the second photograph, the lynched bodies are removed, which is a powerful means of demonstrating erasure. In the first artwork by Ligon, it shows how black history creates a mark on white history, and this brings the discussion back to Dillon. I examined her work with the palimpsests, and used her perspectives as a way of interpreting erasure. One of the most noteworthy aspects of the palimpsests is how intended erasure ends up becoming unintentionally preserved, and how in the end, it ends up being more visible than it was before it was removed. This is true for the first work by Ligon, as it raises more questions when the sentences are smudged out. The last piece that was looked at was the second piece by the same artist, and it shows yet another aspect of erasure as it illustrates how erasure may take the form of a black void. Silence stands out as an example of a consequence of erasure because if for instance parts of someone’s language is attempted erased, it will create gaps which makes it more difficult to express experiences. The memory of what was once there takes the form of silence, which the next chapter is about because silence plays a major role in *Citizen*. Rankine finds ways to bring silence into presence, and when it does, it engages the reader in a different way than (in)visibility and erasure.



## Chapter 3: Silence

Silence is not simply what happens when we stop talking. It is more than the mere negative renunciation of language; it is more than simply a condition that we can produce at will. When language ceases, silence begins. But it does not begin *because* language ceases. The absence of language simply makes the presence of Silence more apparent. (Picard, xix)

Usually, when we think of silence, we think of it in terms of an audible phenomenon. However, as Max Picard writes in the introduction to *The World of Silence* (as seen in the epigraph), it is not just about what happens when the talking stops. Silence is something more than just the lack of sound and language. It is both thematically and visually prominent in *Citizen*, which is interesting due to the “collision” between audio and sight. How can a writer demonstrate silence as a phenomenon in a text? What Rankine does is that she invites the reader to read, witness and experience silence in different ways. She visualizes what history has silenced, and it shows how closely intertwined silence and vision are.

We can talk about silence and silencing, and there is an important distinction between these terms. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, silence is defined as “the fact of abstaining or forbearing from speech or utterance (sometimes with reference to a particular matter); the state or condition resulting from this; muteness, reticence, taciturnity” (“silence, n”). To silence, on the other hand, is defined as “to cause or compel (one) to cease speaking on a particular occasion; also, to overcome in argument” (“silence, v”). In the history of oppression, silencing, therefore,

becomes the action of the oppressors, while silence may be one of the reactions of the ones who are oppressed.

In the first two chapters of my thesis, my main focus has been on (in)visibility and erasure, and the discussion has centered around the aesthetics as well as the social implications of these tropes. This third and final chapter will focus on silence, and some of the already discussed encounters from *Citizen* may be relevant to a discussion around this subject as well. In Chapter 2, we saw, for instance, examples of the textbooks and state guidelines where parts of the language had been removed or changed. These types of changes can leave gaps of silence, and one can claim that attempted erasure is an attempt to silence others. The three tropes discussed in this thesis are closely related, and it might be difficult to separate them from each other. Silence and (in)visibility are especially intertwined because they are both discussed in terms of the visual in this thesis, even though silence is an audible phenomenon. However, in my thesis, I relate (in)visibility more to the perception of individuals, while silence may become the trace of something which has been removed. In this chapter, I investigate in what ways Rankine describes silence in *Citizen* by looking at different types of it, what happens when it is broken, as well as exploring the traces of silence.

### **What is silence?**

Silence is something we encounter every day as a natural part of any conversation, and it does not always have to signify anything but a small pause in order to wait for others to talk. There are many writers and researchers who have dedicated their time to silence as a subject, and therefore, there are also many different definitions of silence. Dr. Ikuko Nakane, a writer, and researcher within applied linguistics, writes that “when a gap becomes a more extensive silence, it can often



be interpreted or intended as a ‘silent response’, which itself can perform a speech act in an indirect manner” (Nakane, 6). As seen in the epigraph in this chapter, silence is more than simply a brief pause or gap in a conversation to let others speak, according to Picard. He emphasizes the point that silence does not begin because language stops, but that when it stops, it makes silence clearer. However, some people believe that silence is rare in today’s society due to how the world has developed.

In *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise*, literary critic and professor Stuart Sim writes in his introduction that “we live in an increasingly noisy society in which silence is a threatened phenomenon” (1), and he suggests that “noise is an inescapable consequence of a 24-hour society” (170). The same subject is also taken up by others, like for example classical music artist Philippa Ibbotson who writes about it in *The Guardian*. She comments that “the volume knob on the world has been turned up full blast” (Ibbotson). I suggest that this, in turn, means that silence becomes almost unknown to most of us seeing as we rarely encounter it in our daily lives. This may also be why the effect of silence is so intense when we first face it. However, silence is dependent on sound in order for us to recognize it. This is partly what some of the well-known writer Susan Sontag’s ideas are about as well.

Sontag was known for her work with silence, among other things. In her essay “The Aesthetics of Silence”, she argues that silence “never ceases to imply its opposite and to depend on its presence: just as there can’t be ‘up’ without ‘down’ (...), so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence” (Sontag, 14). As we are used to being surrounded by noise like Sim and Ibbotson point out, encountering silence in certain situations can seem unfamiliar and uncomfortable, and it may force us to pause in order to reflect on whatever it is that silence is a reaction to. Ibbotson argues that “a silence is interesting for what comes afterwards” (Ibbotson), which I to some extent agree is true since silence may

trigger some sort of reaction following the situation where silence occurs. However, sometimes silence alone is the reaction to a situation, so I suggest that it is important to explore the silence in itself, and not simply look for what follows it.

Silence and silencing have been a part of African American history for a long time and in several ways. In *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, Shevaun E. Watson wants to argue that silence is an appreciated rhetorical art for African Americans, but asks how that is possible when “that very rhetoric is, in effect, erased (or not heard or understood) by those doing the documenting?” (Watson, 78). By this she means that black voices from the days of slavery are absent in white historical documents, and she explains this further by referring to Alex Bontemps who states in *The Punished Self* that “so deafening has the silence (and silencing) of black voices been to historians of slavery in America that it has virtually drowned out [blacks’ own] silence in extant sources” (qtd. in Watson, 78). Bontemps’ thoughts show how closely related silence and erasure are, and it resonates with parts of what Toni Morrison writes about in *Playing in the Dark*:

(...), in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate. (...). It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. (...). To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. (9-10)

As discussed above, noise is surrounding us in our society, and it is present without “trying”. When it comes to silence, however, it is the opposite. In his entry about silence, writer Chris P.

Miller argues that “if silence is an absence, then it must also demand its presence” (Miller), and this means that silence must “work harder” in order to be recognized than noise.

In some ways, this is what Rankine does in *Citizen*, as she via silence brings the absence Morrison writes about into presence. We see how according to Morrison, people believe that ignoring race is a “polite” gesture, which is similar to colorblind racism which was looked at in Chapter 1. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes that most white Americans today claim that “they don’t see color, just people; (...)” (13). Morrison argues that by enforcing the invisibility of race through silence, it leads to African Americans becoming shadowless, which I interpret as not being able to leave a mark in society and therefore becoming silent citizens.

There is a passage in *Citizen* which describes the presence of silence in a vivid way, and it relates to Miller’s thoughts which were looked at above. Rankine writes that “all living is listening for a throat to open – the length of its silence shaping lives. When he opened his mouth to speak, his speech was what was written in the silence, the length of the silence becoming a living” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 112). This quote indicates that what is *not being said* is perhaps more important than what is actually said out loud, and that is how it demands its presence. The line “His speech was what was written in the silence” reveals the power of silence, and it resonates with Sontag who writes, “silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue” (15). Silence has a language of its own, which is partly what Miller writes about as he describes silence in connection to a narrative and poetic space. He suggests that “silence indicates both the absence of language and the presence of a total, obliterating language” (Miller). Whenever present, silence can be forceful and dominant, but it also means that there is more to silence, which is expressed through a specific kind of language. I argue that Rankine displays a language like this to describe silence and to bring it to

presence in *Citizen*, which will be discussed next.

## **Silence in Citizen**

Rankine brings up silence in various ways in *Citizen*. Sometimes she mentions the term specifically, for instance when she writes about an encounter in a supermarket. There is a man in the cash register and he asks “You” whether her/his card will work, and “You” (silently) wonders if this is a routine or not seeing as the man behind the counter did not ask “You’s” female friend who bought some items just before. “She says nothing. You want her to say something – both as a witness and as a friend. She is not you; her silence says so. Because you are watching all this take place even as you participate in it, you say nothing as well” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 54). Here Rankine underlines the silence by adding that “She” and “You” say “nothing”. The silence comes off as a pressing matter in the situation, and it fits well with what Picard writes when he claims that “silence contains everything within itself. It is not waiting for anything; it is always wholly present in itself and it completely fills out the space in which it appears” (1). It does indeed fill up the space by being pressing, and it also makes you long for a response from the witness. The silence itself does not wait for anything, but it makes us as well as “You” wait for something.

In this situation, the perceived silence is like the one Nakane describes when she explains how a gap that turns into an extensive silence can gain its own discourse. I argue that this is the case for several of the “silences” we encounter in *Citizen*. This is seen in the same situation as above, for example, when Rankine writes that, “she is not you; her silence says so” (*Citizen*, 54), an explicit example of silence having its own language or function. The encounter also shows how “You” interprets his/her friend’s silence as disappointing because “You” wants her support, which is seen in “both as a witness and a friend”. Rankine conveys the feeling of loneliness in

this silence: “Come over here with me, your eyes say. Why on earth would she?” (*Citizen*, 54). Due to the lack of her friend’s support, “You” chooses to stay silent as well.

Another way Rankine demonstrates silence is in the layout of her book. According to Picard, “silence is not visible, and yet its existence is clearly apparent. It extends to the farthest distances, yet is so close to us that we can feel it as concretely as we feel our own bodies” (2). Even though silence as a phenomenon may be invisible, I still argue that silence can be shown and that Rankine does this in *Citizen*, by for instance leaving gaps after the situations on most of the pages. For example, half a page may be filled with text, and then the rest is left blank. In other places, there are just a few sentences at the beginning of a page, and then a new gap. There is also one place where she leaves two blank pages in the middle of a section, and not just before a new one, as seen on the pages 157 and 158. When she includes images or illustrations, she typically places them at the bottom of the page, leaving either a full gap above them if the rest of the page is blank, or a small gap if there is text at the top. An example of one of these gaps is seen on page 91 where the previously discussed lynching photo is located.

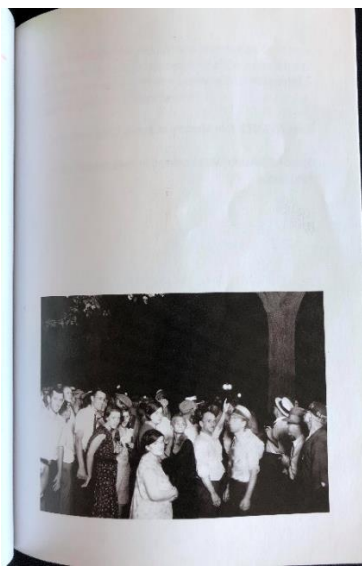


Figure 9: Hulton Archives. *Public Lynching*. From *Citizen*.

Half of the page is white, and then the photo is placed at the bottom of the page. Both the physical gap on the page as well the image itself leave a void of silence, and I suggest that this is another way of directly showing what silence looks like. I argue that Rankine creates these gaps and also removes the bodies to create silence. By doing this, silence does indeed become present to the reader. She brings it into the visual field and makes it concrete for the reader to see and experience it.

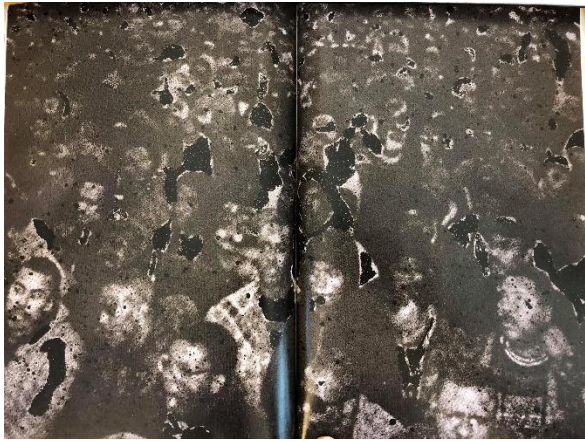
Making silence present to the reader partly coincides with Sontag's ideas when she describes how silence affects our way of looking at art. She argues that "art that is silent engenders a stare" (21), and she explains the difference between "looking" and "staring". Whereas "a look is voluntary; it is also mobile, rising and falling in intensity as its foci of interest is taken up and then exhausted" (21), Sontag points out that "a stare has, essentially, the character of a compulsion; it is steady, unmodulated, 'fixed'" (21). I suggest that Rankine, as a result of her portrayal of silence, evokes this type of stare among her readers. When applying the theory of the stare to the picture above, I argue that the altered photograph commands a stare from the reader rather than a look. This is due to the large role silence plays in the photo, both because of the removed bodies, but also because of the silent gap which precedes the image. I also argue that the original photo "only" invites a look, even though it displays a terrible sight, because nothing is missing from it, and therefore there is nothing that invites to a closer examination. This shows how silence is related to the images Rankine includes in *Citizen*, and I will look into these next.

The images and illustrations in *Citizen* are closely connected to silence, and function as another way of describing silence. Some of the images were looked at in greater detail in the second chapter while discussing erasure, but they may also be relevant within the subject of silence, as seen with the photo missing the lynched bodies. In an interview in *Bomb Magazine* by Laura Berlant, Rankine comments on her use of images, and she says that "They were placed in

the text where I thought silence was needed, but I wasn't interested in making the silence feel empty or effortless the way a blank page would" (Berlant). This resonates with Picard's ideas as he argues that "images are silent, but they speak in silence. They are a silent language. They are a station on the way from silence to language" (80). Even though I claim that gaps also leave more than just an empty silence, I agree that the pictures carry more meaning, and it resonates with silence's "form of speech" which Sontag writes about.

In the same interview with Berlant, Rankine brings up an incident from 2007 where a well-known radio host called Don Imus referred to the women's basketball team at Rutgers as "nappy-headed hoes", which he later got fired for saying. Rankine includes a picture of the team taken during this time on page 41 in *Citizen*, and in the interview, she comments on it by saying that they "(...) exude a disgust (...), though their mouths are all closed. *Please*, they all seem to be saying, without saying anything. Their feelings, as I am reading them, flood their decorum of silence, which is, in part, the subject of *Citizen*" (Berlant). I suggest that the sentence "they all seem to be saying, without saying anything" resembles the quote discussed early in this chapter: "his speech was what was written in the silence" (Rankine, *Citizen*, 112), and it continues to show how silence demands its presence in a particular way, and that it has a language of its own, which Rankine continuously attempts to describe.

Another image that connects with silence is "Untitled (speech/crowd) #2" by Glenn Ligon, which was looked at in the previous chapter when discussing erasure.



**Figure 8:** *Untitled (speech/crowd) #2*. Glenn Ligon.

As previously discussed, the image looks like it consists of several layers because there are small scratch marks on it, and underneath these scratches, a black gap reveals itself. In the past chapter, I argued that this black void is perhaps a way of demonstrating what erasure looks like, especially in connection with language and history. As seen, there have been attempts to either remove or edit certain terms in textbooks about slavery as well as state guidelines, and that processes like these can lead to gaps in our language. However, as stated above concerning the lynching photo, Rankine possibly describes the gaps to create a silence which can speak for itself. Picard suggests that: “history does not belong to man alone, but also to the invisible silence. Silence is always close to history” (72). It is important to remember the distinction between visibility and silence as I emphasized in the introduction to this chapter. Whereas (in)visibility is more connected to perception, silence is the trace of something that has been removed. Silence and history have a closer connection than (in)visibility and history, and the fact that silence is the trace of removed history resembles the palimpsests because something is left behind. Even though Rankine places gaps in almost the entire work, there are also some places where she leaves them out, like for instance in the second section.

As mentioned, the second section stands out as there are no gaps in that section, and it is



written in a more “traditional” way, meaning that she has filled up all the pages with text, and there are no gaps before the images. This section is more factual, and also contains fewer poetic fragments compared to the other ones. Instead, it seems like Rankine uses this section to tell the readers what they need to know about Serena Williams in order to understand other parts of the book. The difference between the sections is an indication that the gaps are there for a reason. I suggest that the recurring gaps are illustrating silence and that they contribute to the overwhelming presence of it in the book. They are forcing the reader to take a pause, leaving a short moment of silence after each situation that has just been processed, and it becomes a way of “demanding its presence” as Miller suggests.

There are also other “types” of silence that are not always expressed as the total absence of sound or as a gap turning into an extensive silence. Rankine uses words which I suggest are related to silence because of their connection to the production of sound and speech. For example, an important part of *Citizen* is “the sigh” which Rankine describes in various settings throughout the book. I suggest that it can be one way of expressing silence even though it is more something in between sound and silence. This relates to a matter that Alex Ross writes about in his article “The Composers of Quiet”, which might seem “off-topic” from silence in connection to race and Rankine. It is about a network of “experimental-minded composers who share an interest in slow music, quiet music, spare music, fragile music” (Ross) called Wandelweiser. Ross writes about one of the members of this network, Eva-Marie Houben, who says: “Music may exist ‘between’: between appearance and disappearance, between sound and silence, as something ‘nearly nothing’” (Ross). This resembles the sigh as it is something in between sound and silence in the same way. The sigh expresses something in the same way as the music does, even though it may come off as “nearly nothing”.

Ross includes some of the scores in the article and comments that they “hover in a space

between sound and silence”, which resembles the paradox of visibility except that here it becomes a paradox of sound: how can there be silence and sound at the same time? Though this piece is about music, its main points are still applicable to this chapter’s discussion as silence is not limited to either music or poetry. When describing the Wandelweiss music, Ross writes that “silence overtakes sound to the point where the work seems on the verge of vanishing” (Ross), and this is another point which connects it to Rankine. This goes under the discussion of how silence becomes the trace of something, like for example history, that has been attempted removed or something that is on the verge of vanishing. This is further discussed in “Silence as a trace”.

Returning to the sigh, there seems to be a connection between the sigh and enduring racist encounters in *Citizen*. Rankine first introduces the sigh on the first page of the fourth section, which only consists of eight situations, and most of these refer to the sigh in some way: “To live through the days sometimes you moan like deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets. (...); truth be told, you could no more control those sighs than that which brings the sighs about” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 59). The sigh can be seen as one way of demanding presence, as Miller writes about, and as Rankine points out in the quote above, “sighing upsets”. By saying this, I suggest that whenever someone tries to respond to racist behavior by breaking the silence, it is not well received by those who attempt to silence them. This resonates with the “getting along”-behavior which was discussed through Bonilla-Silva in Chapter 1.

Bonilla-Silva says that “most whites believe that if blacks and other minorities would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and complain less (particularly about racial discrimination), then Americans of all hues could ‘all get along’” (13). The phrase “complain less about racial discrimination” is perhaps another way of saying “keep quiet” whenever someone

faces racist behavior. The sighs can, therefore, be an image of a person trying to do just that, but who has to release some of the pressure. Even though the sighs start out as a different way of exposing silence, they eventually evolve into an absence of sound as well as a physical condition, as seen in the fourth situation when “the sighing ceases; the headaches remain” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 62). This can be seen as a result of the pressure to keep quiet.

Similar to the sigh, there are also other examples where Rankine connects silence with parts of the body in terms of the “getting along”-attitude. For example, she makes several references to “the mouth” and “the tongue”, and she specifically refers to “getting along”:

Everyday your mouth opens and receive the kiss the world offers, which seals you shut though you are feeling sick to your stomach about the beginning of the feeling that was born from understanding and now stumbles around in you – the go-along-to-get-along tongue pushing your tongue aside. Yes, and your mouth is full up and the feeling is still tottering. (Rankine, *Citizen*, 154)

In Chapter 2 about erasure, we saw how powerful an agent “the world” is in *Citizen* as it keeps trying to get African Americans to forget their past and move on. The world keeps its role as an agent when it comes to silence as well, as seen in the quote where the world does the silencing, by sealing shut the mouth concealed as a kiss. Furthermore, this silencing is seen as “You’s” tongue is pushed away by “the go-along-to-get-along tongue”. The tongue becomes a metaphor for silence and silencing, as seen when “You” lacks the possibility to respond to the silencing the world performs, and remains silent to get along. However, the last part of the quote indicates that the individual is tired of having to behave this way, and there are incidents in *Citizen* where this is brought up.

In an article in *The New York Times* about Serena Williams, Rankine writes that: “(...),

once recognized, black excellence is then supposed to perform with good manners and forgiveness in the face of any racist slights or attacks” (Rankine, “Meaning of Serena”). There are some places where I argue that Rankine directly encourages people to stop allowing this to happen. For example, parts of a quote from *Citizen*, which was discussed in Chapter 1 in connection to Bonilla-Silva, was “then the voice in your head silently tells you to take your foot off your throat because just getting along shouldn’t be an ambition” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 55). To “take your foot off your throat” strongly indicates that staying silent in situations facing racist behavior is common, as well that when someone tries to break the silence, it is seen as an act of defiance. However, there is a difference when it comes to the sense of agency here, and it relates to the short discussion about silence and silencing in the introduction of this chapter. The tongue that is pushed away is an example of silencing while the foot actually belongs to the person in the quote, seeing as it says, “take *your* foot off *your* throat”, and it is an example of self-imposed silence. Though different agents, the foot, the throat, and the tongue are examples of how Rankine connects silence with the body, and it fits well together with Picard’s idea, which was discussed earlier, that even though silence is invisible it is “so close to us that we can feel it as concretely as we feel our own bodies” (Picard, 2). Silence directly affects the body, and in the quote above concerning the kiss from the world, we see how it makes “You” feel sick to his/her stomach to not respond to it. However, there are people who choose to break the silence, which is the next subject of discussion.

## **Breaking the silence**

In Chapter 2, we looked at Serena Williams and the paradox of visibility. Rankine spends a lot of time on Williams in her book, and in the article mentioned above, she writes about “black

excellence” and comments on what makes Williams special. “Serena’s grace comes because she won’t be forced into stillness; she won’t accept those racist projections on to her body without speaking back; she won’t go gently into the white light of victory” (Rankine, “Meaning of Serena”). Williams is special because she dares to respond to racial slights instead of keeping quiet, which I interpret means that it is more common to be silent. In *Citizen*, this seems like the reality as well when Rankine writes: “occasionally it is interesting to think about the outburst if you would just cry out - To know what you’ll sound like is worth noting -” (*Citizen*, 69). As discussed previously concerning “the sigh”, silence in *Citizen* is often connected to situations where an individual tries to endure racist encounters. Even though Rankine writes that Williams usually responds to racist behavior, she also provides examples of situations where Williams chooses to stay silent. This is seen when Rankine writes about a tennis match that did not go Williams’ way, and that “more than one commentator would remark on her ability to hold it together (...)”, and how “she has grown up, another decides, as if responding to racism is childish (...)” (*Citizen*, 35). This connects to what Sontag writes about in her essay as she argues that “a person who becomes silent becomes opaque for the other; somebody’s silence opens up an array of possibilities for interpreting that silence, for imputing speech to it” (22). This is seen through the commentators’ different views on Williams’ silence as none of them are able to read her silence, so they all try to assign meaning to it instead.

In the article about Williams, Rankine writes that “for black people, there is an unspoken script that demands the humble absorption of racist assaults, no matter the scale, because whites need to believe that it’s no big deal” (Rankine, “Meaning of Serena”). This “unspoken script” is one of the types of silence that Rankine brings into presence in *Citizen*. It relates to what was looked at earlier when discussing how silence has a language of its own, as seen in the quote “his speech was what was written in the silence” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 112) as well as Miller’s ideas that

silence “indicates the presence of a total, obliterating language” (Miller). Racist slights or behavior can be seen as an obliterating form of language because it is used to try to degrade someone, and silence becomes the sign or result of this process. In many ways, this process of obliteration is closely related to the erased layers in a palimpsest, which we looked at in Chapter 2 about erasure, but at the same time, it is different because silence is not one of the erased layers, but a trace.

### **Silence as a trace**

Previously in the thesis, Wandelweiser was looked at in connection to the sigh. Ross suggests that “silence overtakes sound to the point where the work seems on the verge of vanishing” (Ross), which I claim is the way to connect it to Rankine because, in *Citizen*, silence becomes the trace of the process when something has been attempted removed, like for example history. Rankine demonstrates this process of vanishing in the script “Making a Room” from the sixth section, which was introduced in the Introduction to this thesis. One of the pages in the script contains a list which begins like this, “In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis / In Memory of Eric Garner / In Memory of John Crawford / In Memory of Michael Brown / (...)” (*Citizen*, 134) and it continues with a few more names until it simply says, “In Memory of” like the rest of the list is waiting for more names to be filled in. The font of the writing starts out all black, and it starts to gradually vanish as it becomes grey, and then the list reaches the bottom of the page you can no longer see “In Memory of”. Then there is a small gap on the next page before it says, “because white men can’t / police their imagination / black men are dying” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 135). This quote connects to the fantasy constructions looked at in Chapter 1 where Patricia J. Williams explains how many white people create fixed beliefs and constructions about African American

lives. One of the consequences of not being able to change these beliefs is that African American men and women are killed.

As stated in the Introduction, the development of the list can be found in a PDF on Graywolf Press' website where one can see how it started out with just one name, then two, then four, and how it now has eighteen names on it. On their website, they have also included a nineteenth name, which for some reason is not yet added to the PDF. The names on the list are of African Americans who are dead due to for instance police violence and shootings as well as the victims of the Charleston shooting in 2015. By including this list, Rankine finds a way of directly showing how silence can be represented in relation to how people's names and stories are vanishing. She attempts to keep their stories alive, but as the list shows, in the end, they disappear. What is left is then silence, which becomes the trace of what was once there.

In my own research, I started out at the top of the list, finding the names and reading parts of their story online. However, this took a lot of time, and eventually, I started to consider whether it was important that I read through them all, or if I should just skip the last names to speed up the process. Right there, I found myself contributing to the silencing that Rankine tries to show her readers. However, as I became aware of this, I understood that I had to finish the list, and in the end, perhaps that realization is a part of the purpose of the book, namely engaging the reader, which I will come back to in the main conclusion.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, silence and silencing in *Citizen* have been explored according to the ideas from different fields. I have analyzed in what ways Rankine portrays silence by finding the situations where it is present, but also how it is able to provide meaning. She uses visual tools to show the

presence of silence, like for instance the use of gaps, and also images. Throughout her work, she inserts both small and large gaps, which forces a break when reading it. Sometimes an image of some kind follows the gap and may provide meaning to it, or perhaps it tells of something else. As seen, Rankine herself has said that she inserted the images in places where she felt a meaningful silence was needed.

As established in the discussion above, silence has its own language, and this is for example illustrated in the quote which has been looked at previously: “his speech was what was written in the silence” (Rankine, *Citizen*, 112). This shows the power of silence, which I suggest is what separates it from (in)visibility and erasure. I return to what distinguishes the three tropes in the Conclusion.



## Conclusion

Tell me a story, he says, wrapping his arms around me. (Rankine, 159)

Take Charm's story, for instance. It's yours. Do with it what you will.

Tell it for friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now. (King, 29)

And yes, I want to interrupt to tell him her us you me I don't know how to end what doesn't have an ending. (Rankine, 159)

After Barack Obama was elected to become the President of the United States in 2008, many people believed that it marked a point in history where they could speak of "post-racial America". Back then, Shelby Steele from *The LA Times* asked: "Does his victory mean that America is now officially beyond racism?" (Steele). There were high hopes for this dream of a changed America, but as Lilly Workneh from *The Huffington Post* writes: "As it turned out, one man alone could not undo the countless systemic issues that have plagued a country built on slavery" (Workneh). It is precisely these issues Rankine brings out in the open in *Citizen*. She depicts a number of racist encounters and illustrates how they can happen anywhere at any time. However, not only does she bring up cases of racism, she also manages to *show* the reader what racism looks like today as it has changed in many ways since for example the Jim Crow era,

officially ending in 1965.

As I carefully examined *Citizen*, I realized that there were certain tropes that stood out as the most prevalent ones. In my earlier notes, I scribbled down elements like “being seen, being invisible, history is changed, erasure, silence, not responding” and more within this range of topics. As I researched *Citizen*, I experienced that several reviews and articles contained the terms I had located; however, I did not find any elaborations of the terms or analyses of *how* they were present in the work. Because of this, I chose to investigate these ideas closer, and they slowly developed into “invisibility/hypervisibility”, “erasure”, and “silence/silencing”, the main themes of the three chapters in the thesis.

Starting with “invisibility”, the situations where this was clearly pointed out to the reader struck me first, like for instance the encounter in the pharmacy where the woman was overlooked or when the boy was knocked over by a stranger. Eventually, I discovered how the opposite is also present in *Citizen*, namely “hypervisibility”. I became concerned with the paradox of invisibility, as I could not grasp how someone could be invisible at one moment, then hypervisible the next. By using Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of perception, I have attempted to investigate the invisible as the nonvisible parts of an individual. I suggested that what Rankine does in *Citizen*, is that she brings these nonvisible parts into the presence of the reader, which makes it more tangible and easier to interpret than when being invisible.

As seen in the discussion about hypervisibility, Gordon suggested that it was a form of invisibility because when someone is hypervisible, they are seen in a way that “crushes the self under the weight of a projected, alien self (...)” (98). This was mainly what my arguments were based on because I claimed that when an African American individual is hypervisible, he or she is seen as a part of a collective group sharing the personal characteristics with everyone in that group. These characteristics are often stereotypical traits about African Americans, and it

becomes nearly impossible to distinguish the individual's own qualities.

I also noticed how Rankine had included a well-known image in *Citizen*, which I had seen before; however, it was changed quite drastically. This was the picture from the lynching scene where the two bodies are missing, and I argued that it captures the essence of *Citizen*, as all the three tropes could have been discussed via that picture. These initial thoughts eventually evolved into the concept of erasure, and as I researched it, I also found examples of erasure in recent news articles. They showed for instance how the authors of textbooks for use in schools in Texas referred to slaves as “workers” in a chapter about immigration to the U.S. I suggested that this is an example of normalization of history, which is one version of erasure, another was seen in the photograph of “Jim Crow Rd”. This type of normalization strips history of important events and names that have contributed to racism in the U.S. today.

I argued that a complete erasure is extremely difficult because in most cases, there will be clues and memories which are left behind when something is attempted removed. This argument springs out of Dillon's point about the palimpsests, where original inscriptions ended up being preserved rather than removed, and the same point is applicable to the subject of erasure in *Citizen*. However, as seen in the photograph from the lynching scene, the bodies did not remain, which perhaps indicates that everything is in fact not always preserved in the exact same way as with the palimpsest. This tells us how damaging erasure is, and it also makes it natural to worry about the future, especially if we encounter more stories like the ones with the textbook examples and the state guidelines omitting important terms, as well as the attempt to normalize these same terms. If the world keeps on pushing to “let go” and “move forward”, what will be forgotten in this process?

Lastly, I became aware of silence and silencing, and their major roles in *Citizen*. The development of the idea of silence began as I was curious about how Rankine managed to make it

present to the reader when usually, silence is not thought of as a visual phenomenon. Several of the theories I used claimed that silence has a language of its own, like for instance Miller who argued that silence indicates “the presence of a total, obliterating language” (Miller). However, he also stated that silence must demand its presence. I have observed and also experienced silence in several ways in *Citizen* because Rankine has succeeded in making silence present in her text. Her use of gaps throughout the work forces pauses in the text, and she has also included images of various kinds that she herself has commented on, saying that she wanted to insert them where silence was needed (Berlant).

Related to the discussion of erasure, I argued that silence is possibly the trace of something which has been attempted removed, or which is on the verge of vanishing. I looked at parts of the script “Making Room”, which was already mentioned in the Introduction because one of the pages has been made into a PDF on the publisher’s website and is continually revised. I suggested that with this page, Rankine shows one way of representing silence in connection to names and stories that are about to disappear. When they do disappear, only a blank space is left, which becomes the trace or memory of what was once there.

The three tropes are undeniably closely related, and at some points, it may be difficult to see how they differ from each other, and why they need their own chapter. For example, silence and hypervisibility are connected seeing as the moment when someone chooses not to stay silent, namely to break the silence, they might end up hypervisible. This means that their individual qualities are overshadowed by the stereotypical qualities of an entire group. When they do break the silence, people might respond to this by calling them “crazy”, “insane” or “angry”, which is illustrated in the examples with Serena Williams. This is seen in the epigraph of the Introduction where it says: “Perhaps this is how racism feels no matter the context – randomly the rules everyone else gets to play by no longer apply to you, and to call this out by calling out ‘I swear to

God!’ is to be called insane, crass, crazy” (Rankine, 30). The moment these labels are set, the ones who have broken the silence have reinforced the stereotypes because racists see what they want to see, and to those who such views, it becomes a proof that “African Americans really are angry”

When it comes to how silence differs from (in)visibility and erasure, I argue that it has a more active part in *Citizen*. By that, I mean that it engages the reader more, for instance as the lynching photo requires a *stare*, and not just a *look*, as seen in the chapter about silence. This fits well with Sontag’s observation that silence is an element in a dialogue (15) because Rankine makes sure that silence and her readers enter into a dialogue together. Therefore, silence challenges the reader in a different way, as (in)visibility and erasure are more passive and usually simply observed. Silence demands more from the reader, which I suggest is one of the most important aims for *Citizen* as a whole.

Rankine’s work is made in a way that insists on a strong presence from the reader. She attempts to wake up the reader and makes us recognize parts of ourselves in the various encounters, either as the victim or even as the victimizer. One of the ways she does this was discussed in the Introduction, namely her particular use of pronouns. Most of the encounters are about “You”, which may confuse the readers, and forcing them to pay extra attention. Rankine also uses “we”, “he”, “she”, “I” etc., and sometimes she uses them all together. By doing this, I suggest that she lets the readers know that these racial encounters are a part of so many people’s daily lives that the pronoun is not of importance anymore.

Rankine points a flashlight to these daily encounters which would never be headlines in a newspaper. As seen in the second chapter, there are several people who have called out to the media, asking why they ignore certain cases involving African Americans, and who called it out in social media using the hashtag “erasure”. By doing this, she points out how ignorance and

racism are present in the U.S. today, and how damaging this combination is, and she tells us the stories of those who are not heard or seen. This coincides with the writer and activist Thomas King's perspective on stories in his *The Truth About Stories*, and while his ideas are related to a Native American and a Native Canadian narrative, they are applicable to this subject as well. As seen in the epigraph, King emphasizes that once you have heard a story, it is yours. This is what Rankine does; she tells the reader not just one story, but several stories, which then become the property of the readers, and they have to make a decision on what to do with them. Rankine gives them the choice whether to stay ignorant of the racial issue, or to change by taking responsibility for this ignorance, and to perhaps become the voice that can speak out on behalf of those suffering under racism.

This choice from Rankine is linked to one of the situations discussed in the chapter about silence, the one at the supermarket where the man in the cash register asks the customer, "You", whether the card will work. "You" looks to the friend who has already paid, and the text then says: "You want her to say something – both as a witness and a friend" (Rankine, *Citizen*, 54). In this situation, "You" is left with nothing but silence, and this is perhaps what Rankine wants to avoid by pushing people to react after reading about and experiencing these incidents. Towards the end of the book, Rankine writes, "Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on" (*Citizen*, 151). This resonates with what was discussed in the Introduction as well, where Morrison argued that by enforcing the invisibility of race through silence, it leads to African Americans becoming shadowless, and I suggested that this leads to them becoming silent citizens. This is the reality for many African Americans today, but it is also the part of what should be changed. However, is this change possible? As seen at the beginning of this Conclusion, many people hoped that Obama would be that change and that his election perhaps was the transformation into "post-racial America".

There are many other aspects of *Citizen* that could have been focused on in this thesis, for instance, the reference to animals is present both in the text and also in the images. Rankine describes a situation where a person, “You”, visits a therapist for the first time, and as “You” enters the yard, the therapist yells, “Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?” (18). “You’s” reaction is described, “It’s if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech” (18), and on the next page, Rankine includes a picture of some kind of animal with a human face. These types of references are also found in other places in *Citizen*. Another theme could be Rankine’s focus on class in relation to race, as Rankine indicates that several of the individuals in the encounters are wealthy and of some status.

*Citizen* is a complex work, bringing in art, text, photographs and video situations, and there are also some other recent works depicting racism in the U.S. that are making headlines these days. For example, on May 5<sup>th</sup> this year, Childish Gambino alias Donald Glover released the music video to the song “This is America”, and it was seen by millions of people in just a few days. The combination of the content of the video and the song lyrics immediately lead to massive reactions in social media and the news and lead to discussions trying to interpret the message. It also spread to Norway, and a news article from *NRK* breaks down some of the different elements, drawing on other sources like Twitter, BuzzFeed, and recent media headlines. For example, there is a scene where Gambino shoots a black male wearing a white hood in the head, and as he does this, he poses in a very distinct way. According to *NRK*, this pose is very similar to a famous caricature of Jim Crow from the 19<sup>th</sup> century (*NRK*). There are also references to for instance the mass shooting in Charleston in 2015, and it could be interesting to compare the video to *Citizen*, and specifically to Rankine’s video scripts, as they have not been taken into consideration in this thesis.

Workneh writes of how people realized that Obama was not enough to end the racial

issues in the U.S. because they stem from the fact that the country is built on slavery. The epigraph of the Introduction to this thesis includes Rankine's quote "the past is a life sentence", and this is perhaps parts of the core of *Citizen*. In the Introduction, I presented my thesis statement where I argued that the essence of *Citizen* is that Rankine uses the three underlying principles (in)visibility, erasure, and silence to show how racism has become a part of the structures of the U.S. society and that these structures seem to be permanent and impossible to change. The past haunts African Americans in several ways and has created a vicious circle which throughout the years has really "set" in society, as it has become a part of the structures and the system, making it more and more difficult to break out from. Therefore, the past is a life sentence for African American individuals because they are not allowed to break free from the chains of society.

The epigraph of the Conclusion reads, "And yes, I want to interrupt to tell him her us you me I don't know how to end what doesn't have an ending (Rankine, *Citizen*, 159). This resonates with the collage from the exhibition in Brazil I referred to in the Introduction. The collage contains images of a naked man, sketches of fighting animals, skulls, and also pieces of text where it says, "the permanence of structures" in Portuguese. In a way, Rankine tells the reader that she does not know how to end the permanence of these structures in society. However, what she *can* do is to show the shape these structures take, as an aesthetics of racism, showing the three underlying principles of (in)visibility, erasure, and silence in *Citizen*. The "In Memory of"-list mentioned above also fits into this permanence of structures, seeing as the reason that it has been made into a PDF implies that it has no end. By doing this, she makes the readers aware of the situation and the stories and gives them a choice on how to act. I choose to return to the epigraph by King for my concluding remarks, "But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (29).



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