“Memory is a tough place. You were there”:

Reading Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, a Living Archive
In her book *In the Wake*, Christina Sharpe urges her readers to acquaint themselves with the inertia of Black suffering that has come from the long history of racism in this country, especially concerned with the slave trade and slavery in America. Her book illustrates both acts of remembering and forgetting, notably implying that there are citizens who find it undoubtedly convenient and natural to do the latter. Those citizens are, of course, white people, who find that they have less at stake in these memories and said memories thus become unimportant and forgettable. This idea of white forgetting, better framed as white amnesia, is an inherited phenomenon that is based in complacence and comfortability in one’s own white privilege. It differs in a significant way from what is the burden of remembering for Black Americans. That burden exists because of, or even in, "the wake":

Put another way, living in the wake means living in and with terror in that in much of what passes for public discourse about terror we, Black people, become the carriers of terror, terror’s embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror’s multiple enactments; the ground of terror’s possibility globally (15).

So, for Sharpe, being in the wake for a Black person in America is a state of existence. Sharpe explains that the phrase "in the wake" can represent many concepts, from watching over the dead, to coming to consciousness, to the trail in the ocean behind a ship. She metaphorizes the third concept this way:
Racism, the engine that drives the ship of state’s national and imperial projects…
cuts through all of our lives and deaths inside and outside the nation, in the wake
of its purposeful flow (3).

Racism is the ship and its powerful wake continually trails behind it, victims always in its path.

In this passage we can see also the ideas of momentum and the force of an unnatural current
that prevents any attempt to escape. We can see, then, that there is a sense of inevitability or
stuck-ness at play, which is the important link to Claudia Rankine’s work with *Citizen* that I will
present in this paper. Sharpe notably introduces the crucial concept of “wake work” in her book,
saying,

> In the midst of so much death and the fact of Black life as proximate to death,
how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the
largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death? I want to suggest that
that might look something like wake work (17).

Wake work, then, is a labor of concentrating or turning one’s attention to the realities of the
“physical, social, and figurative death” that are omnipresent in Black American life.

Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* is a work that is self-described as lyric, a work that pulls
together experiences and memories of Black Americans, friends of Rankine, and Rankine
herself. Each of these experiences is written in the second person point of view, a facet of the
work that is instrumental to carrying out the role it gives all readers. It is my larger argument
that Rankine invites the white reader of *Citizen* to participate in what ends up being a form of
wake work. Significantly, Sharpe relates wake work to trauma and memory:

> Just as wake work troubles mourning, so too do the wake and wake work trouble
the ways most museums and memorials take up trauma and memory. That is, if
museums and memorials materialize a kind of reparation (repair) and enact their own pedagogies as they position visitors to have a particular experience or set of experiences about an event that is seen to be past, how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still (19).

First, it is important to address a glaring contradiction between Rankine and Sharpe’s treatments of the word “mourning”—evidently, Sharpe wants to “trouble” the idea of mourning, saying that the boundlessness of both mourning and ongoing Black American death is something to be grappled with: “even as we know that mourning an event might be interminable, how does one mourn the interminable event?” (Sharpe 19). She is pointing out that endless mourning of an endless event creates a type of perplexingly infinite state. It appears at first, then, that Sharpe and Rankine do not agree on the validity of the term, because Sharpe is actively challenging it as Rankine is using it in the title of her article—but because Rankine defines mourning as a “condition,” it appears that in reality Sharpe is adding to Rankine’s use of the term by pointing out that the “condition” is more than just that. It is a trap laid by the endless murder of Black Americans and the endless mourning that comes with it.

In her comments on Rankine’s *New York Times* op-ed piece, “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning,” Sharpe is criticizing the act of memorialization in this country, arguing that museums and memorials have taken it upon themselves to enact or reify a false sense of closure that does not and should not exist at all—and, they push those events into the past just by putting them into a memorial place, complacently implying that the “afterlives” that Sharpe mentions do not exist. Taking such an approach to past traumatic events has the
consequence of perpetuating the idea of white amnesia previously mentioned—the white
instinct to push events away and forget is being enacted in that very example. Although Rankine
is concerned with more intimate, smaller moments in time, as opposed to ones that would likely
end up in a museum, she uses *Citizen* to argue for memory as a stubborn, momentous entity that
does not simply reach closure or any type of resolution just because an event has come and gone.

Rankine, through *Citizen*, is participating in wake work the way Sharpe defines it as
“[troubling] the ways most museums take up trauma and memory.” This is possible because, as
mentioned, the substance of the book is a collection of past events; Rankine is exclusively using
the second person subject “you” as well as the present tense to be sure that every time *Citizen* is
opened and read, these traumatic events still exist and have not been erased. Rankine does wake
work through *Citizen* by immortalizing encounters. Not only that, she invites every reader to
also be a part of that space, to be in the wake.

To explain how Rankine achieves this, it is helpful to examine the association between
Rankine and wake work, which is made directly by Sharpe in her book. Just before her definition
of wake work, Sharpe alludes to Rankine’s op-ed. In the essay Rankine responds to the slaughter
of nine African Americans in a church in South Carolina in 2015, and reflects on the ongoing
death and maltreatment of Black Americans since the slave voyages to America. Her article takes
a similar tone to Sharpe’s book. Notably, Sharpe finds this particular passage from Rankine
important enough to quote it:
Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black (16).

The quote clearly provides inspiration because just after presenting Rankine’s words, Sharpe explains:

To be in the wake is to live in those no’s, to live in the no-space that the law is not bound to respect, to live in no citizenship, to live in the long time of Dred and Harriet Scott; and it is more than that. To be/in the wake is to occupy that time/pace/place/construction (being in the wake) in all of the meanings I referenced (16).

Just as Rankine emphasizes the ‘no”s that rule "living while black" so too Sharpe, following Rankine, argues that to be in the wake is to occupy those spaces of ‘no.’ Not surprisingly then, the idea of occupation is one that is central in Rankine’s language and work of Citizen, where readers are called to occupy that same space by becoming the “you” on each page and in each encounter. Significantly, however, in an interview with TriQuarterly, Rankine expands this same issue of occupation, attempting to address the question of white empathy that she mentioned in the same NY Times article. She explains that there "needs to exist between us the space to reframe the language in ways that allow both of us to stand, to be present inside whatever is being articulated” (Schwartz). I would argue that this idea lies behind her use of the second person in Citizen, which can be seen as an invitation to all readers to become a part of each situation that happens in the book. In other words, in order to occupy the
“time/space/construction” that Sharpe mentions, there needs to be a space for each reader “to be present inside whatever is being articulated.”

So, not only is *Citizen* participating in wake work by resisting the erasure of traumatic events, it is also an attempt to get as close as possible to that “mode of empathy” that Rankine thought impossible in her New York Times article. In this effort, Rankine invites white readers into a simulation. She takes on the task of imploring them to come away from comfort and enter a privilege-less place, also known as the wake. As reflected in that choice to use the second person, it is important to Rankine that there is full fluidity of positioning when her audience begins reading. In another interview in the pages of *Guernica*, she says, “I think that if we begin to feel like we have fixed positions relative to an ‘other,’ that’s when our communication stalls” (Schwartz). To avoid communication stalling, to facilitate wake work, Rankine creates that space where hopefully all readers can “be present inside whatever is being articulated,” since the “you” does not call anyone specific to become a part of the scene unfolding. That which she calls a fixed position is, for a moment, no longer fixed. Rankine hails fragile white readers. *You*, she says. Arriving onstage from the white audience, playing the parts Rankine has written, each white reader sooner or later discovers he is the villain of a national production, an agent of larger structural racism.
In her work on *Citizen*, critic Evie Shockley acknowledges this work that Rankine is doing. She writes, “With her 'lyric-You,' she achieves full-throated polyvocality—in the sense that Mae Henderson theorizes the term—that thrusts every reader into the position of speaker and the addressee simultaneously” (Ferguson et al. 6). Shockley fleshes out this argument using a passage from *Citizen*:

You are rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood of Santa Monica. This friend says, as you walk toward her, You are late, you nappy-headed ho. What did you say? you ask, though you have heard every word (41).

Shockley continues on to argue what she believes is the white experience of reading this passage:

In principle, a white reader must now either identify as a black you and, along with the speaker, refuse to “know what she [the friend] means” or reject the invitation of the lyric-You and remain white-identified (that is, identify with the “friend”) and be “perhaps physically” incapable of answering the speaker’s question: “What did you say?” Either identification brings this reader to recognize the “violent” nature of the language.

Shockley is correct in that there is fluidity involved in the language and presentation of *Citizen*, as discussed previously. The reader is no longer fixed as their own self but as whomever the “you” is on the page. However, what Shockley does not emphasize, and what I would like to contribute is the way that *Citizen* functions as a work of archive, not as a live production. For Shockley, the extent of the white reader’s experience is that they are brought to “recognize the

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“violent” nature of the language.” This is part of what the reader experiences, but it is my argument that these vignettes are not meant to be read as if they are only happening in real time; they are also being recorded in *Citizen* as they have been remembered, and it is important to treat them as such. They are ongoing, real memories. Rankine collected these memories from friends and acquaintances, and they are gathered here in the pages of the book. They have importance that is more emotionally and historically significant than just a collection of words that serve as an example of a microaggression for a white reader to learn from. Where Shockley treats them as educational poems, she should be treating them as full-fledged, living microcosms of Black American life. They are an example of what it means to live in the wake, to be under the thumb of remembering, and to have "unclaimed experiences," in the words of Cathy Caruth.

Caruth, in her seminal book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and the Possibility of History*, argues that the pain of an event is not felt as the event unfolds, but rather when intrusive flashbacks of the event occur. She writes, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). This is what she calls “belatedness,” the idea that trauma comes into play after the event as opposed to during its unfolding. The experience remains ‘unclaimed’ by its holder; instead, the experience claims them. In *Citizen*, Rankine is centered in on those everyday interactions, the harmful words and actions, that get trapped in the body until their release at untimely moments. *Citizen* is comprised almost entirely of untimely moments such as these,
moments where either this belatedness occurs or a memory is formed; *Citizen* is an archive of unclaimed experiences, unclaimed encounters, that have free reign in the memories of their holders and unleash trauma at the moments of their release.

*Citizen*, then, introduces white readers to a world where memory behaves in a physically tangible way. We see Rankine refer to this reference to embodied memory in the interview with Meara Sharma for *Guernica* magazine when she says:

> I wanted to come up with a strategy that would allow these moments to accumulate in the reader’s body in a way that they do accumulate in the body. And the idea that when one reacts, one is not reacting to any one of those moments. You’re reacting to the accumulation of the moments. I wanted the book, as much as the book could do this, to communicate that feeling (Sharma).

The result of this strategy is the successful architecture of a space, a portal even, where the moments in the book can “accumulate in the reader’s body.” The reader’s body becomes the body of the person in the situation because of their entrance into the simulation as the “you.” They are able to enter into the wake, into an alternate dimension of reading that is unique to *Citizen*. This dimension exists in *Citizen* because readers are not only taking in the words on the paper, not just internally digesting flat, lyrical vignettes or poetry, but find themselves in the face of a collision, in the splash zone of a chemical reaction between archived encounters and the present act of reading, and the result is an intimate simulation of belatedness, a formative brawl with unclaimed experience.
The most intimate encounter with unclaimed experience takes place on the very first page of *Citizen*. Rankine, who is not the lyric speaker but the curator of *Citizen*, immediately calls us to become the person on the page, and in this specific vignette the experience is especially formative. As Rankine says, “you are alone” (5). There is nobody else in the scene that the reader could possibly embody. This is Rankine’s way of assertively demanding the reader’s participation from the start. We have no choice but to become the person on the page. For the first page of the book, first instance of embodiment, this makes it easy for the reader to know what they are called to be doing.

When you are alone and too tired to even turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows. Usually you are nestled under blankets and the house is empty. Sometimes the moon is missing and beyond the windows the low, gray ceiling seems approachable. Its dark light dims in degrees depending on the density of the clouds and you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as a metaphor (5).

Not only the use of the second person but also the staging of an intimate, sensory place functions to embed each reader into the experience, even if unfamiliar. Additionally, it is important to note that certain details make the reader almost effortlessly aware that this experience does not just happen once; the habitual words “usually,” “sometimes,” “depending,” instantaneously reveal the history and the scope of the episode. By the end of the passage, the reader is aware that this moment they are now inhabiting happens frequently enough that they know the variations of the ceiling’s darkness depending on the density of the clouds—down to the degree.
The paragraph following is where the theme of memory in the book officially introduces itself. We realize that the experience occurring is a the surfacing of a memory. The reader thus learns that memory is a main agent or character, especially as experienced here provoked by arbitrary conditions or qualities: “You smell good” (5). More than an undercurrent, the sense of smell is a vehicle for the memory’s materialization. And again, the physicality and sensuality of “You smell good” helps to transport the reader even further into the speaker’s space. The realization of one’s own smell is what throws the memory into the speaker’s mind—the speaker does not call upon the memory. The past experience remains unclaimed to its holder; it has free range in their mind, so it comes to the surface unannounced as a flashback. It has become a classically toxic entity.

By the recognition of her own smell, the subject is involuntarily launched into the flashback, into an attempt to dissect traumatic core memories of school that happened when she was younger. We can see why smell becomes the trigger for the flashback: the girl in the memory “tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person” (5). In the memory, the girl in the speaker’s class tells her that she smells good before shamelessly delivering a point-blank microaggression. Now, years later, whenever the subject notices that she smells good, she is reminded of that experience when she was younger. The mechanisms of flashback begin to come together for the reader.

It is important to consider that the flashback ends without closure or resolution for the speaker; the speaker/reader does not ever reach a conclusion about the dynamics of her school
classroom: “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” (6). The options are nagging; “or…or…or…” meaning that pondering the event likely does not result in a productive end. As participants in the return to that childhood memory that Rankine has constructed, we should begin to consider that perhaps the reason flashbacks continue to occur is because of an ongoing need to try and redeem the constant lack of resolution or satisfaction in an experience. Our own frustration with the nagging or’s, our own desire as readers to make sense of Sister Evelyn’s questionable treatment of the speaker, makes us understand why the memory keeps intruding on the conscious mind. Ultimately, Rankine helps us understand why, on so many nights, there is still a reason why St. Philip and James School on White Plains Road intrusively returns. We are thus entering into the wake, starting with the surfacing of this first unclaimed experience. The initial surfacing does not mark the end of the conflict with the unclaimed experience, however. Readers are about to discover the reason unclaimed experience brings as much trauma as it does—and that reason is flashback.

We as readers are now called to enter deeper into the simulation. We are asked to reconsider the sensory trigger that leads to the accumulation of involuntary memory when the phrase “you smell good” returns.

You pull yourself to standing, soon enough the blouse is rinsed, it’s another week, the blouse is beneath your sweater, against your skin, and you smell good (8).
Just before this phrase are details of the experience that occurs over the course of the page. “The wrong words enter your day like a bad egg in your mouth and puke runs down your blouse, a dampness drawing your stomach toward your rib cage” (8). Something traumatic has occurred, although the speaker does not identify exactly what the encounter was. We know that her reaction to it was very visceral and humiliating: “Your own disgust at what you smell, what you feel, doesn’t bring you to your feet right away, because gathering energy has become its own task, needing its own argument” (8). She is dejected and exhausted by what has occurred. Then she recalls a recent commitment to a life “with no turn-off, no alternative routes” (8), which forces her into autopilot, forces her to regain control after an encounter that set a potential path of destruction in the remainder of her week. She does not reconcile with the event, but rather chooses to move in a forward direction. The conflict of the soiled blouse and humiliation finally seems to reach some type of culmination by the end of the page, and then the words “You smell good” reappear. Although the paragraph does not continue after this phrase, the reader is almost startled, knowing right away that this means the speaker is about to be thrown back into the earlier episode in school upon acknowledging her own smell. The unclaimed experience is returning to claim the subject, and now the reader. Because of the alternate dimension of participation that Rankine creates, readers see “You smell good” and have their own flashback to the earlier schoolroom scene. The sudden resurfacing of the phrase is meant to simulate for the reader the experience of having an intrusive flashback.
The unfortunate combination of inevitability and disappointment imbedded in the concept of intrusive memory is meant to feel frustrating, like fighting a losing battle. Lauren Berlant, by her argument in *Cruel Optimism*, would say that the speaker subscribes to the optimism of attained improvement in their life, only to consistently find oneself in a state of chronic pain due to the ongoing reminder of that improvement’s inaccessibility. Berlant says cruel optimism “exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). The concept involves regular disappointment upon realizing that this world is not one that can live up to certain expectations for what it should be—and often is for others. In these first scenarios, with “you smell good,” the reader experiences a type of cruel optimism that reminds the subject again and again that the world they are looking for does not exist. More specifically, in America, they are investing in a country that is not delivering that optimistic result, to say the least. In *Citizen*, Rankine shows how the content of certain memories plays a huge part in keeping that faux-promised world, or what Berlant calls “the good life,” out of reach. We saw this play out in the schoolroom scene; the speaker begins to believe they are moving on from the trauma, standing tall, feeling optimistic, and then the intrusive memory interrupts and reminds them all over again that there is no such thing as resolution because there is always another triggering event. There is an ongoing set of experiences "in the wake" and those are what keep the "good life" from opening.

Because of those ongoing experiences in the wake, the world remains an antagonist throughout *Citizen*. The world represents the power structure that upholds white privilege and
resists wake work. In *Citizen*, the reader becomes acquainted with a new idea of who "the world" really is, because they are invited by Rankine to enter into the wake and have a simulated experience in that world. In a later episode where the speaker grapples with the entity of memory, "the world" gains a voice: “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…” (61). In just these few lines, there are three main relationships at stake. First, the world and memory seem to exist in peace. Although the world does not recommend remembering, it seems to comfortably assume control over memory. Memory is ruled by the world. The world likes to forget, and has had practice at forgetting. We get the sense that the world has the *privilege* of forgetting—“the world’s had a lot of practice.” Second, the world and the subject are at odds, but only the subject knows they are at odds; the world is presumptuous in the eyes of the subject, and oblivious. The world may pretend they are on the speaker’s side, but the speaker finds again and again that the world is not on their side. The world simply fuels cruel optimisms. “Forget all that,” the imperative at hand, is the very dismissive and belittling act of forgetting that Christina Sharpe hints at in her book, and that continuously taunts the Black subject. Museums are a part of "the world," ironically saying “forget all that” under the guise of memorialization. In the third relationship in this passage, as is usual, the speaker and memory have a complicated arrangement. “You like to think memory goes far back although remembering was never recommended” —the world has taught them that forgetting is easy, teasing that they should not have to remember if they do not want to.
The white reader has an interesting experience reading this passage, one where we are playing the part of “you,” as Rankine intended, but we feel an uncomfortable connection still to the world in that forgetting for us is a familiar feeling, and an easy one. It helps to visualize the reader’s experience like this: on the page, the reader enters the into the scene, playing the part of “you” that provides the reader a portal into the scene. It thus becomes a simulation of an event. They enter into an immersive experience, a touch-feel exhibit. Standing in the speaker’s point-of-view, in the midst of the scene playing out, they begin to see a reflection of themselves playing a different role—an antagonist’s role. All this happens while they are playing the part of the speaker, experiencing traumatic flashbacks, coming to terms with the unyielding past and the space it takes up inside their body. Rankine is allowing readers to share an experience, facilitating movement away from the “fixed positions” she says are detrimental to communication.

In the portal, we are thus put at odds with ourselves, the person we are representing as “you,” and begin to recognize our own antagonistic role in accordance with The World. Having experienced the burden of intrusive memory and the flashbacks from “you smell good,” the reader’s relation with the world and its ideas of “forget all that” should become uncomfortable here. In Rankine’s simulation via the portal of the “you,” we are at odds with the world, but as our white selves, we realize we also identify with it.

A few moments later, we receive a response to the conflict at hand, which becomes a climax in Citizen as it relates to the burden of memory and its physical manifestation in the
speaker: “The world is wrong. You can’t put the past behind you. It’s 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…” (63). We have examined the function of intrusive memory, seeing the memories themselves, but ‘the past’ feels like a different entity here. It is a real and vast temporal space that has taken control over the speaker’s body, not a bounded event with a beginning, middle and end. Memories live in the past; the past is stubborn and does not discriminate between what should and should not be remembered, as we see with “not everything remembered is useful but it all comes from the world to be stored in you.” The speaker is not an active agent in these mechanisms. The scenario is not that “you choose useful memories to be stored inside,” it’s that “it all comes from the world to be stored in you.” We see this played out in the questions that follow—“Who did what to whom on which day? Who said that? She said what? What did he just do? Did she really just say that?...” (63). The exhaustive list of questions lives in the past, their answers are drawn from the past, and ultimately end up stored in the body inevitably like everything else remembered.

We can see that the past is a different villain than a memory, although closely related. Unclaimed experiences live inside the past, and the past (with all those experiences) lives inside the poem’s speaker whether they want it to or not. And, as we know, part of the speaker inevitably lives in the past because they live in the wake. They are thus completely at the mercy of the past. The reader, as “you,” feels the sense that their body is not under their own control.
They understand that they do not get jurisdiction over their flesh cupboard. It is as if the world, due to its jurisdiction over the past, has the only keys to it.

Almost more importantly, however, these passages in *Citizen* also bring in a new character, physical pain. It was subtly hinted at with the headaches the speaker mentions, identifying her state of being as “the sighing ceases, the headaches remain” (62). The initial reactions subside, small encounters and experiences pass, but the overall exhaustion from the accumulation of those moments remains—and becomes a physical entity (the headaches). But we see now that the body, and the physical pain, are things the world does not understand; the constant headache is what links the subject to the memories, letting the speaker know that they have no choice in the matter of remembering or forgetting. The very flesh becomes a vessel for memories, and there is a sense of feeling completely unable to control what enters and gets stored. Thus, there is no way to get rid of the headache. One’s own body, as the place where memory is stored, is at the mercy of the world. The chaos and carnage, the damage that the world and the past have done to the body, strike the reader as a very different context and atmosphere for their own idea of memory; instead of operating through a normative perspective where memory is assumed to be controllable and accepted, this example with migraines and flesh cupboards illustrates a perspective where a damaging memory is forced upon them. Plus, considering the palpable anger and frustration felt when the information from the world comes unfiltered to flood the speaker’s body, the white reader’s identification with the world changes
from the subtle discomfort in the passage and becomes a full-fledged inner conflict as they encounter their problematic selves in the simulation.

Readers again come face-to-face with physical exhaustion and chronic pain caused by memory when, once again alone with themselves as they were on the first page of *Citizen*, we read:

Memory is a tough place. You were there. If this is not the truth, it is also not a lie. There are benefits to being without nostalgia. Certainly nostalgia and being without nostalgia relieve the past...Sitting here, there are no memories to remember, just the ball going back and forth (64).

One of the most notable quotes in the book, the first line "memory is a tough place. You were there. If this is not the truth, it is also not a lie" closely embodies the idea of unclaimed experience. The line used to explain the "tough place" of memory points to the complexity of reliving a moment, the surrealness that the event happened to you and now it is happening again. It also points to the pain in having to relive that moment, struggling with the sense that the event already passed but still feels terrible—perhaps more than it did in the moment. The speaker is actively grappling with the idea of belatedness, but in this instance, unlike previous passages where the intrusive flashback is happening in the vignette, here a flashback is not happening—we are in a moment of seeming calm, watching a tennis match with the volume down low. We are present while the unclaimed experience is not. Instead, we are about to enter into a moment where a memory is formed, participating in the making of an unclaimed
experience. This scene is written from the point of view of the speaker watching a tennis match played by Serena Williams.

Some context is necessary to be able to understand the setting of this event. In the 2004 Women’s US Open Quarterfinal, Williams had been under the thumb of a corrupt tennis umpire named Alves who made five faulty calls against Williams (26). Williams did not react with anger, even after losing. She expressed her frustration and distaste for the referee, but was able to move on: “as the years go by, she seems to put Alves, and the lengthening list of other curious calls and oversights, against both her and her sister, behind her as they happen” (28). Williams, in this game where errors and bad calls always have the potential to become memories, provides a unique and clearly visible example of a Black American who will repeatedly endure unclaimed experiences. She is forced to put these encounters behind her at a very rapid pace, as the speaker says she does “as the years go by” (28). But, as we know, although they are ‘behind her,’ they are trapped in the past, which is trapped in the Black body. The speaker addresses the reality of the issue:

Yes, and the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight. The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness—all the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through, even as we are eternally stupid or everlastingly optimistic, so ready to be inside, among, a part of the games (28).

This passage comes as a boundary directly placed between the explanation of the 2004 US Open match and the 2009 US Open match five years later. In that match, the speaker tells us that
Williams is not playing well, loses the first set, and “smashes her racket on the court” (28). Then, at match point in the second set, “the judge employed by the US Open to watch Serena’s body, its every move, says Serena stepped on the line while serving” (28-29) 3. The television commentator calls it over-officiating, and Serena says, “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” (29). Now we can enter the experience of watching this scene in the 2009 US Open play out. Here is how the event takes place in *Citizen:*

You fumble around for the remote to cancel mute. The player says something and the formerly professional umpire looks down from her high chair as if regarding an unreasonable child, a small animal. The commentator wonders if the player will be able to put this incident aside. No one can get behind the feeling that caused a pause in the match, not even the player trying to put her feelings behind her, dumping ball after ball into the net. Though you can retire with an injury, you can’t walk away because you feel bad (65).

There is a lot to unpack here as the reader enters the portal into spectating this event as the “you” on the page. Most relevant to the issue of memory, we read: “the commentator wonders if the player will be able to put this incident aside” (65). For the attentive reader, considering the bouts with memories and traumatic encounters in previous pages, there is an obvious answer. No, she will not be able to put this incident aside. As long as the encounter happened, it lives not only in the past, it also lives in Williams’ body. Moreover, as we readers know, she has had

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3 Over officiating the body is a loaded concept for this scene that cannot go unrecognized. The policing of black bodies is directly played out in this description of the 2009 US Open, disguised as “reffing”—not only does Serena have to deal with a corrupt umpire repeatedly using her Black body as (inaccurate) evidence against her, she also has no jurisdiction over the way her body is judged and what the result will be.
incidents just like this ‘put aside’ for five years. They accumulate over time, they do not
disappear like the commentator hopes they will.

Then: “no one can get behind the feeling that caused a pause in the match, not even the
player trying to put her feelings behind her, dumping ball after ball into the net” (65). Here we
are dealing with both spectators and Williams, neither of whom can “get behind the feeling that
caused a pause in the match.” This means that nobody is understanding why the encounter
happened—although both parties, the spectators and the athlete, are feeling negative about the
event, their experiences with that negative feeling are very different. Williams is in active conflict
with her feelings. According to the speaker, she cannot get behind them, but still struggles to put
them behind her. The connotation of “can’t get behind them” is key to understanding this line.
Williams, as the idiomatic expression goes, ‘can’t get behind it.’ She cannot back what is
happening and will not position her body in support of what just occurred—her body being
overpoliced and scrutinized by a corrupt and racist umpire. Unfortunately, although she cannot
support what happened, she has no choice but to feel the way she feels in that moment—and
whatever feeling that is, it warrants her needing to force it behind her. It is now an unclaimed
experience.4

The spectators, on the other hand, cannot get behind the feeling that caused a pause in
the match because they simply do not understand. Not only are they incredulous, they are

4 I am not at liberty or in any place to identify what feeling this is. That is why this sentence seems vague.
critical. Just like Serena they cannot get behind it. They cannot support it, but not because it hurts them, or because it hurts Williams, but because it caused a pause in the match.

Strains of both *Unclaimed Experience* and *Cruel Optimism* can be seen clearly here. The body resisting erasure of “moments lived through” (29), as “we are eternally stupid or everlasting optimistic” (28). In the instance of Serena Williams, a superstar, an elite athlete, a beacon of confidence and refreshing ego, we are meant to see that no Black body is safe. We are meant to come to terms with the fact that Serena Williams lives in the wake.

Just after the commotion has passed, the reader finds themselves in a moment of intense communication. In the context of the previous pages, it is plausible that the speaker is communicating to Serena Williams through the screen in the beginning of the passage, encouraging forward movement, coaxing her away from the event that just occurred.

Feel good. Feel better. Move forward. Let it go. Come on. Come on. Come on. In due time the ball is going back and forth over the net. Now the sound can be turned back down. Your fingers cover your eyes, press them deep into their sockets—too much commotion for a head remembering to ache. Move on. Let it go. Come on (66).

It can also be read, however, that the speaker either speaks to themselves exclusively here, or transitions into speaking to themselves after having witnessed the violence against Serena Williams that just occurred. This moment of self-talk is when we witness the making of an unclaimed experience. We can see the direct aftermath of watching the event, the coding of a memory into the body. The language here is important because “move forward. Let it go” does

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5 I don’t identify whom the communication is with in this sentence because that is up for debate.
not imply that the event is erased—it remains "in the past," in line with the idea of putting one’s feelings behind oneself, and we know that this means it remains in the body. As readers, we are able to know that the event has not been erased—having just been a part of spectating the event, having just been the “you” fumbling around for the remote to cancel mute, we have already been there. So we can see how “feel good. Feel better. Move forward. Let it go” can bring us to the next page of the book, but it does not mean that the previous page has been erased from our memory. Just like in the earlier vignette discussed in this essay when the speaker is thrown back into the traumatic flashback by “you smell good,” a person can experience an encounter and walk away from that encounter, start a new day, put on a fresh blouse, but all memories—even from years ago—still exist in the body. That is the simulation of inevitable and unstoppable remembering that Citizen forces us to participate in and walk away with.

It is important to note that there is something deeply self-reflexive about the “head remembering to ache;” not only is it a symptom of a body that cannot forget, it is a violation of sorts in the very boundary between physical and mental, the kind of violation that is depicted when the world and the past subjugate the Black body to be the cupboard for storing memories. As readers in the simulation of the body with a “head remembering to ache,” the fusion between memory and the body is solidified.

The interactions that the speaker of the poem has with themselves in this portion of Citizen are a prime example of the reader being perfectly positioned to encounter themselves as the “you” of the scene. That self-coaching and begging is a very intimate, emotional encounter; it
is a moment with the body and mind that illustrates the lack of control that the self has over those two entities. While the privileged reader is connected with both the mind and the body and has more control over what enters and leaves (because we are largely our own agents of memory) “the world” and the past maintain an ongoing stronghold on the Black body. The result is that a stronger control over mechanisms of remembering and forgetting is not attainable.

A similar encounter with memory occurs early on in *Citizen* when the speaker actively grapples with the mechanism of memory:

When you arrive in your driveway and turn off the car, you remain behind the wheel another ten minutes. You fear the night is being locked in and coded on a cellular level and want time to function as a powerwash (11).

“The night” in this scene is a placeholder for a harsh memory, something unwelcome that is being stubbornly stored in the brain, taking up space. The speaker knows all too well that those memories are at risk of being locked in, maybe without the opportunity to ever escape—in other words, they cannot forget—the ten minutes is what they wish would “function as a power wash,” what they wish would be sufficient for forgetting to be able to occur. The speaker wants time to be a sharp, definitive agent for newness and cleanliness. Instead, they fear they will be stuck with the memory of what happened that night, old and unclean. The night will be “coded on a cellular level,” becoming part of their biology, not only as an intangible recollection but as a physical, detectable vestige.
Time, here, is almost personified, becoming a new agent in the dynamics between the body, memory, the past, and "the world." The problem with time in this passage is that it cannot be manipulated to serve any purpose other than to move forward. In this passage, as is consistent throughout *Citizen*, time and memory have a relationship that does not benefit the reader. As time moves forward, memories do not decrease, as would be expected of an entity like memory that is widely regarded as malleable and fleeting—in- stead, the memories are not power washed away—they are “coded on a cellular level,” ultimately staining the body. Time is a neutral player in the relationships at hand (the subject, "the world," memory, the body, the past), but how it functions for the speaker of this passage in *Citizen* reveals other realities at play.

It is also important to remember that what is at stake in remembering that night, as the speaker is sitting in the car, is that we know the experience can likely become a flashback such as the intrusive “you smell good” from previous pages. The sense of automatic coding at a cellular level despite efforts to stop it from happening—the memory of the night embedding itself in the body—reminds us that the unclaimed experience is prepared to emerge as a traumatic flashback. Ultimately, then, in the shared space of this passage, the white reader becomes more intimately accustomed to the relationship with memory that Rankine is illustrating. In a position of fearing a memory’s potential to be “coded on a cellular level,” we realize the feeling of fear is unfamiliar. We encounter the new concepts of fearing memory, yearning for forgetfulness—our routine amnesia is much more comfortable. Certainly when it comes to the history of this
country and the wake work that Christina Sharpe has highlighted, white people are much more accustomed to remembering painlessly and forgetting when it is convenient.

It is important to conclude with the acknowledgement that Citizen, although offering a space for many different people to become a part of the same production, is not a place where a white reader enters a Black body. Rankine prepares a place for white readers to come upon self-awareness and see themselves from a distance, but that does not mean the white reader understands or wholeheartedly empathizes with Black American life in the experience of reading this book. The truth is, the white reader will never know the true feeling of a life lived in the wake, and Rankine is aware of this. She simply invites us to come closer, to become acquainted with a mind and body unlike our own, to become aware of our own roles in the dynamics of the world. What sets Citizen apart is how exactly this is achieved; with just one word, one simple change, an isolated, taped-off event in the past becomes a memory that can be stepped into by anyone who opens Citizen.
Works Cited


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Works Consulted


