Their Eyes Were Watching

I am sitting cross legged on a white bench.

“Citizen! was made while Joseph S. Lewis was a visiting artist at the University of Kansas in 1999.”

The room is empty.

“While photographing the United States Penitentiary in Leavenworth, a voice boomed over the PA system, ‘Citizen! Cease taking pictures.’”

Except for the guard in the corner.

“The image used here was taken from the rear window of a car as Lewis and friends sped away.”

Except for me.

“Rather than a series of images, Citizen! Resolves as one enormous image peppered with symbols that appear somewhere elsewhere in his work.”

There is a loudspeaker, barracks, a whip? a cane?, two vials, a gavel, a gun, an icy tree, a cross, a bottle, a fence.

“On January 11, 2016, Gynnya McMillen, a 16-year-old Black girl, died at Lincoln Village Regional Juvenile Detention Center in Elizabethtown, Kentucky.”

The guard paces or shuffles like a whisper, believing their deliberate steps noiseless, unremarkable.

“Though her death has been attributed to an irregular heartbeat, there remain many questions about the use of force she experienced at the facility”

Only I am the disturbance, under the hushes of surveillance.

1 Note on reading: only read left oriented (italicized) text all the way through, then begin the piece again and read right and left oriented lines together as normal.
2 Lewis, Joseph S. 1999, Citizen!, color monotype, collagraph, relief, Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
“What is known is that 10 minutes after arriving at the detention center, Gynnya refused to remove her sweatshirt and multiple staff responded, placing her in an ‘Akido hold,’ restraining her on the ground for more than 4 minutes”

7 Ibid.

**Skinless or only skin, bodiless or only body, like a ghost.**

“Joseph Lewis, an arts professor and former dean of the Claire Trevor School of the Arts had 26 allegations of sexual harassment made against him”


7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.


“Consequential geographies, the dynamic role that space plays in shaping justice and injustice, require examination because inequities and justice are fueled through the sociospatial dialect, ways social processes and space influence each other.”

“When I materialize, I materialize when I am taking notes on Citizen!, in the empty room, except for the guard.

According to the US Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, Black girls make up 16% of the student population but account for over one third of arrests that take place on school campuses.

Citizen!’s guns and gavels and broken trees stack to make columns that fill up my water line and I couldn’t remember whether or not ghosts were allowed to breath, or hum, or sing.

“One July 6, 1992 one inmate was stabbed to death Sunday night during an uprising by 300 prisoners at the maximum-security Federal prison in Leavenworth Kansas.”

The guard speaks.

Black girls are more likely to attend schools that have law enforcement present instead of adequate guidance or counseling services. These disparate rates of discipline and lack of human resources have significant influence on the function and gravity of the school/prison nexus.

“Why did you choose that one?” Citizen! they mean. “Citizen, why did you choose that one?” they mean. “Citizen, why did you choose here?” they mean. “Citizen, Cease Being Here!” they mean.

“Buticide is the second-leading cause of death for Black girls and women ages fifteen to twenty-four.”

Here, I am no longer sitting cross legged on a white bench in an empty room with the guard in the corner

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13 U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 23 Civil Rights Data Collection: Data Snapshot (School Discipline) March 21, 2014


16Centers for Disease Control, Leading Causes of Death by Age Group, African American Females—United States (Atlanta, GA: CDC, 2011).
“Followed in order by heart disease, cancer, and suicide”\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Here, I am Black woman queer ill poor non-conforming — alien.}

\textit{Here I am Citizen!}

\textit{Lewis and friends sped away}\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18}Lewis, Joseph S. 1999, \textit{Citizen!}, color monotype, collagraph, relief, Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid.
Psalm 73

For I envied the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

They have no struggles;
their bodies are healthy and strong.

KU health report shows rise in suicidal thoughts, stress in students

WHAT DOES SUICIDE LOOK LIKE AS A COLORED GIRL

They are free from common human burdens;
they are not plagued by human ills.

Trump just officially made it easier for employers to stop covering birth control

I READ TODAY THAT THE SPECULUM, INVENTED ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY SEVEN YEARS AGO BY JAMES MARION SIMS, THE “FATHER OF MODERN GYNECOLOGY,” WHO CONDUCTED HIS RESEARCH VIA VIOLENT EXPERIMENTS ON ENSLAVED WOMEN, ONE HUNDRED AND THREE YEARS BEFORE JOSEF MENGELE, THE NAZI’S “ANGELS OF DEATH,” BEGAN HIS REIGN, IS BEING REDESIGNED.

THEY PLUNDER MY WOMB FOR THEIR FUTURITY AND MY MOTHER DIES ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY SEVEN YEARS LATER.

20 Note on reading: Text in italics is from Psalm 73 of the New International Version of the Bible. Text in bold are news headlines from various sources, published within a ±10 day time span. Text in all capitalization is the poet’s words. This piece was written October 06, 2017.
23 Aggeler, Madeline. “Doctors are Redesigning the Speculum for the First Time in 150 Years So it Won’t Be As Uncomfortable.” Bustle, October 06, 2017.
Therefore pride is their necklace;  
they clothe themselves with violence.

**Shooting on Mass Street early Sunday leaves three dead, two in the hospital**

THERE THERE, I WAS, THERE THEY ARE NOT THERE, ANYMORE. THEY ARE LAUGHING AND DANCING AND BREATHING, NOT ANYMORE. I DRIVE PAST DAYS LATER ON MY WAY TO SOMEWHERE EVEN THOUGH I HAVE LEARNED THAT WE ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO MOURN ANYMORE. ARE THERE EVEN ANY MORE BODIES LEFT TO FALL.

*From their callous hearts comes iniquity;  
their evil imaginations have no limits.*

**Father was armed but fleeing before being shot dead by officers, Topeka police say**

DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE I DO NOT KNOW HOW MANY BULLETS BUT I DO KNOW YOU WERE TAKEN FROM FOUR CHILDREN FOUR BLACK CHILDREN DOMINIQUE’S FOUR BLACK CHILDREN

*They scoff, and speak with malice;  
with arrogance they threaten oppression.*

**In Shift, Justice Dept. Says Law Doesn’t Bar Transgender Discrimination**

IN THE UNITED STATES, THE AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY IS 78.74 YEARS OLD

FOR WHO, SORRY,

IN WHITE AMERICA THE AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY IS 78.74 YEARS OLD

FOR WHO, SORRY,

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IN WHITE CIS AMERICA THE AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY IS 78.74 YEARS OLD
I MEAN TO SAY

IN THE UNITED STATES THE AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY IS 35 YEARS OLD

SORRY,

FOR WHO

IN THE UNITED STATES THE AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY OF TRANS WOMEN OF COLOR IS 35 YEARS OLD

SORRY,

FOR WHO

IN THE UNITED STATES THE AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY FOR ALLY STEINFELD AND AVA LE’RAY BARRIN IS 17 YEARS OLD

SORRY,

FOR WHO

IN THE UNITED STATES, TRANSGENDER DISCRIMINATION BARS 43.74 YEARS OF LIFE

I’M SORRY,

FOR WHO

Their mouths lay claim to heaven,
and their tongues take possession of the earth.

New Order Indefinitely Bars Almost All Travel From Seven Countries

MY FATHER LEAVES A VOICEMAIL AND SAYS HE IS PROUD OF ME, HE ALWAYS TELLS ME THAT I MAKE HIM SO PROUD THAT HE WANTS TO DANCE AND SHOUT IN THE STREETS, THEN, ALWAYS, HE CHUCKLES, SADLY, AND SAYS THAT IF HE DID DANCE AND SHOUT IN THE STREETS, THEY WOULD CALL HIM A CRAZY BLACK MAN. AT HOME HE IS NOT A CRAZY BLACK MAN, AT HOME THEY DANCE AND SHOUT IN THE STREETS TOO

Therefore their people turn to them
and drink up waters in abundance.

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Trump Hits Puerto Rico For ‘Broken Infrastructure & Massive Debt’

SHE WEARS A SHIRT ON NATIONAL TV THAT READS “HELP US WE ARE DYING”

This is what the wicked are like—
always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.

Senate Unveils Budget Blueprint Allowing $1.5 Trillion in Tax Cuts

MY MAMA NEVER BUDGETED BECAUSE WE DIDN’T HAVE ANY MONEY TO
BUDGET TO BEGIN WITH. BUT ME AND MY SISTER ALWAYS HAD A MEAL AND
PENCILS FOR SCHOOL. MY MAMA’S BUDGET WAS LOVE AND MAGIC AND
BELIEVING THAT WE NEEDED FOOD AND STORIES

Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure
and have washed my hands in innocence.

For DACA Teachers, Uncertainty Lingers On The Last Day To Renew

I STAY AWAKE UNTIL FIVE AM FINISHING A PAPER ON DESSA ROSE, A NEO-
SLAVE NARRATIVE, IN WHICH THE LIFE OF A PREGNANT AND ENSLAVED BLACK
WOMAN, WHO LED AN UPRISING ON A SLAVE COFFLE IN EIGHTEEN TWENTY
NINE, IS IMAGINED AS EXISTING PAST HER LAST MOMENT AT THE GALLOWS.
IN SPANISH CLASS AT ELEVEN AM I HAVE TO REMIND MY PROFESSOR THAT
POEMS HAVE HISTORICAL CONTEXT AS SHE TRIES TO TELL ME THAT ONE OF
SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ’S POEMS IS NOT ABOUT COLONIAL OCCUPATION
OR WOMANHOOD OR EDUCATION OR ANYTHING THAT MADE HER LIFEBLOOD
STIR.

EVEN IF “DESSA ROSE’S” LIFE HAD NOT BEEN IMAGINED IN NINETEEN EIGHTY
SIX BY SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS, SHE WOULD STILL BE ALIVE TODAY,
BECAUSE I AM ALIVE TODAY AND WRITING THIS POEM.

All day long I have been afflicted,

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and every morning brings new punishments.

A Burst of Gunfire, a Pause, Then Carnage in Las Vegas That Would Not Stop

THE NEXT MORNING I WALK PAST A BUSH DECORATED WITH TWENTY USED SHELL CASINGS. I WALK PAST THIS BUSH AFTER A DOCTOR’S APPOINTMENT, ON MY WAY TO WORK, BEFORE A TEST, AFTER WHICH, I SKIP A CLASS, TO TAKE A NAP, BECAUSE I AM SICK. I AM TIRED. OF BEING SICK AND TIRED, NO, OF TRYING TO LOCATE MYSELF AT THE MOMENTS OF DEATH, NO, OF SCRAPING BLOOD FROM THE SIDEWALK WITH MY FINGERNAILS, NO, OF EATING BULLETS AND CEREAL FOR BREAKFAST, NO, OF DYING, I AM SICK AND TIRED OF BEING SICK AND TIRED OF DYING.

When I tried to understand all this,
it troubled me deeply

till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood their final destiny.

WHEN THEY KILL ME, MAKE MY BODY BEGET BODIES WAILING IN THE STREETS.
IF YOU MUST MOURN,
FILL A JAR WITH SOIL FROM WHERE MY BLOOD WAS SPILLED,
SUN OR MOON LIGHT FROM A MOMENT WHEN YOU FELT PEACE,
AND A POEM.
PASS THIS JAR BETWEEN HANDS AND SING A HYMN
(LIKE FREEDOM BY BEYONCÉ FEATURING KENDRICK LAMAR OR SWING LOW,
SWEET CHARIOT),
AND PLACE THE JAR AT HOME AMONG TREES.

AND THEN GO,
TELL STORIES WHILE YOU BURN
CANDLES AND BRAID
HAIR.

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