

Their Eyes Were Watching¹

I am sitting cross legged on a white bench.

The room is empty.

Except for the guard in the corner.

Except for me.

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

The piece is called *Citizen!*

“*Citizen!* was made while Joseph S. Lewis was a visiting artist at the University of Kansas in 1999.”²

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

“The image used here was taken from the rear window of a car as Lewis and friends sped away.”³

“Rather than a series of images, *Citizen! Resolves* as one enormous image peppered with symbols that appear somewhere elsewhere in his work.”⁴

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

¹Note on reading: read only left oriented, italicized text all the way through, then begin the piece again and read right and left oriented lines together as normal.

² Joseph S. Lewis, *Citizen!*, 1999, color monotype, collagraph, relief, Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

in Elizabethtown, Kentucky.”⁵

*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”⁶

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

“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 ‘Aikido hold,’
restraining her on the ground
for more than 4 minutes”⁷

*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”⁸

*The room is empty,
except for its disturbance,
the room is empty
except for me,
the room is empty.*

“Lewis continued earning
more than \$200,000

⁵ Subini Ancy Annamma, “Mapping Consequential Geographies in the Carceral State: Education Journey Mapping as a Qualitative Method With Girls of Color With Dis/Abilities.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (October 3, 2017): 20–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417728962>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Alejandra Reyes-Velarde and Sharon Zhen, “Former UCI Dean Maintained Majority of Salary after Sexual Misconduct.” *In the News*, The Daily Bruin, 2 Mar. 2017, dailybruin.com/2017/03/02/uc-irvine-dean-maintained-majority-of-salary-after-title-ix-violations/.

after Title IX investigations
found him responsible in 2014”⁹

*The only evidence of my being here is a bill,
a scraped together check,
a line in a ledger.*

“Activist Erica Garner has died,
after suffering brain damage
following a heart attack
triggered by an asthma attack”¹⁰

*The road to the room was grey and silent,
a liminal space unusually colorless.*

“Six Baltimore police officers
will face no federal charges
in the death of Freddie Gray,
the 25-year-old black man who died
of a severe spinal cord injury
while in custody,
riding in a police van”¹¹

*When I materialized here,
under surveillance, I became obscurity,
incompleting portraits and scenery
as I moved along the edges of empty.*

“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”¹²

*When I materialize,
it is 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

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Laurel Wamsley, “Erica Garner, Who Became An Activist After Her Father’s Death, Dies.” *NPR*, 30 Dec. 2017, www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/12/30/574514217/erica-garner-who-became-an-activist-after-her-fathers-death-dies.

¹¹ Rebecca R. Ruiz, “Baltimore Officers Will Face No Federal Charges in Death of Freddie Gray.” *The New York Times*, 12 Sept. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/us/freddie-gray-baltimore-police-federal-charges.html.

¹² Annamma, “Mapping Consequential Geographies,” 20–34.

but account for over one third of arrests that take place on school campuses.¹³

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

“On 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”¹⁴

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.¹⁵

“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.

“Homicide is the second-leading cause of death for Black girls and women ages fifteen to twenty-four”¹⁶

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

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

¹⁴ “Inmate is Stabbed to Death in Uprising at Leavenworth.” *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 1. Jul 07 1992. ProQuest. Web. 3 Mar. 2018.

¹⁵ Leticia Smith-Evans, et al, *Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls*. NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and National Women’s Law Center, 2014, *Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls*.

¹⁶ Centers 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”¹⁷

Here, I am Black woman queer ill poor non-conforming — alien.

Here I am Citizen!

“Lewis and friends sped away”¹⁸



Figure 1¹⁹

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸ Joseph S. Lewis, *Citizen!*, 1999, color monotype, collagraph, relief, Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Psalm 73²⁰

*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 students²¹

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 control²²

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.²³

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

*Therefore pride is their necklace;
they clothe themselves with violence.*

Shooting on Mass Street early Sunday leaves three dead, two in the hospital²⁴

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.

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.

²¹ Austin Garcia, “KU Health Report Shows Rise in Suicidal Thoughts, Stress in Students,” *The University Daily Kansan*, October 04, 2017.

²² Sarah Kliff, Dylan Scott, “Trump Just Officially Made It Easier for Employers to Stop Covering Birth Control,” *Vox*, October 06, 2017.

²³ Madeleine Aggeler, “Doctors are Redesigning the Speculum for the First Time in 150 Years So it Won’t Be As Uncomfortable,” *Bustle*, October 06, 2017.

²⁴ Shaun Goodwin, Emily Wellborn, “UPDATED: Shooting on Mass Street Early Sunday Leaves Three Dead, Two in the Hospital,” *The University Daily Kansan*, October 01, 2017.

*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 say²⁵

DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE DOMINIQUE
WHITE DOMINIQUE WHITE 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 Discrimination²⁶

IN THE UNITED STATES, THE AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY IS 78.74 YEARS OLD²⁷

FOR WHO, SORRY,

IN WHITE AMERICA THE AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY IS 78.74 YEARS OLD

FOR WHO, SORRY,

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 OLD²⁸

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 STEINFELD²⁹ AND AVA
LE'RAY BARRIN IS 17 YEARS OLD³⁰

SORRY, FOR WHO

²⁵Max Londberg, "Father Was Armed but Fleeing Before Being Shot Dead by Officers, Topeka Police Say," *The Kansas City Star*, September 29, 2017.

²⁶Charlie Savage, "In Shift, Justice Dept. Says Law Doesn't Bar Transgender Discrimination," *The New York Times*, October 05, 2017.

²⁷KD Kochanek, SL Murphy, JQ Xu, B. Tejada-Vera, "Deaths: Final data for 2014. National vital statistics reports," vol 65 no 4. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2016.

²⁸Addison Rose Vincent, "State of Emergency Continues for Trans Women of Color," *The Huffington Post*, August 13, 2015.

²⁹Max Londberg, "Gruesome Details of Transgender Teen's Ozarks Slaying Emerge as Four Are Charged," *The Kansas City Star*, September 26, 2017.

³⁰Samantha Allen, "Ava Le'Ray Barrin, 17, Is the Youngest Trans Murder Victim of 2017 (So Far)," *The Daily Beast*, June 29, 2017.

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 Countries³¹

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.*

Trump Hits Puerto Rico For 'Broken Infrastructure & Massive Debt'³²

SHE WEARS A SHIRT ON NATIONAL TV THAT READS "HELP US WE ARE DYING"³³

*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 Cuts³⁴

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 Renew³⁵

I STAY AWAKE UNTIL FIVE AM FINISHING A PAPER ON *DESSA ROSE*³⁶, A NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE, IN WHICH THE LIFE OF A PREGNANT AND ENSLAVED BLACK WOMAN, WHO LED AN

³¹Michael D. Shear, "New Order Indefinitely Bars Almost All Travel From Seven Countries," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2017.

³²Ed Mazza, "Trump Hits Puerto Rico for 'Broken Infrastructure & Massive Debt,'" *The Huffington Post*, September 25, 2017.

³³Jessica Chia, "Puerto Rico mayor Dons 'NASTY' T-shirt to Take on Trump," *New York Daily News*, October 05, 2017.

³⁴Thomas Kaplan, Alan Rappeport, "Senate Unveils Budget Blueprint Allowing \$1.5 Trillion in Tax Cuts," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2017.

³⁵Ariana Figueroa, "For DACA Teachers, Uncertainty Lingers on the Last Day to Renew," *National Public Radio*, October 05, 2017.

³⁶Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1986. Print.

UPRISING ON A SLAVE COFFLE IN EIGHTEEN TWENTY NINE, IS IMAGINED AS EXISTING PAST HER LAST MOMENT AT THE GALLOWES.

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 LIFE BLOOD 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,
and every morning brings new punishments.*

A Burst of Gunfire, a Pause, Then Carnage in Las Vegas That Would Not Stop³⁷

THE NEXT MORNING I WALK PAST A BUSH DECORATED WITH TWENTY USED SHELL CASINGS.³⁸ 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.

³⁷Ken Belson, Jennifer Medina, and Richard Pérez-Peña, "A Burst of Gunfire, a Pause, Then Carnage in Las Vegas That Would Not Stop," *The New York Times*, October 02, 2017.

³⁸Joanna Hlavacek, "Used Shell Casings Left Outside KU's Strong Hall in Apparent Statement; University Says No Threat Posed," *Lawrence Journal-World*, October 02, 2017.