

# TAINED WITNESS

WHY WE DOUBT

*What Women Say*

ABOUT THEIR LIVES

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LEIGH GILMORE

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## CONCLUSION

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### Testimonial Publics—#BlackLivesMatter and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*

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—

—CLAUDIA RANKINE, *CITIZEN: AN AMERICAN LYRIC*

**T**estimony is an increasingly central feature of contemporary life, as is the judgment that accompanies it and attaches, in specific ways, to the life stories of women. Anita Hill's testimony at Clarence Thomas's confirmation hearing, Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio* about genocide in Guatemala, and Nafissatou Diallo's claim that she was raped by Dominique Strauss-Kahn demonstrate the vulnerabilities of women witnesses in the courts and in the public square but also the importance of these same witnesses to expose the contexts and histories that construct and perpetuate vulnerability. Similarly, dissonant autobiographical literary accounts that are not confessional and do not seek sympathy, such as Kathryn Harrison's memoir and Jamaica Kincaid's autobiographical fiction, provide an important counterweight to the preponderance of neoliberal life narratives that promote norms of gendered authority, affect, and agency. They also indicate how life story is

mutating in the long memoir boom to include new forms and figures, as well as the political and market forces that shape permissible identities and voice, and render some lives “grievable”<sup>1</sup> and others as “salvage.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to the verbal record of testimonial discourse, women’s bodies are scrutinized as evidence of lying as much as truth. While either can be read in order to invoke doubt, both can and have also introduced new witnesses into testimonial networks where they force repressed histories and contexts into view.

New witnesses to the intersectional realities and poetics of race and gender in testimonial networks, specifically, highlight how witness accounts matter, how they unearth and make vivid the histories that animate contemporary life, how antiracist and feminist political and ethical commitments enter into scenes of judgment and shape them. Racism is inevitably incubated within concepts of personhood and agency from the very formation of law in the United States. The testimonial limitations imposed on people of color are traceable in the violence that greets their embodied presence prior to any opportunity to present a verbal account that would be heard. What does it mean to add #BlackLivesMatter to the testimonial network? How can it connect with the poetic discourse of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* in order to place the black body’s exposure to harm and its bearing of historical injury in the context of vivid protest? How do both also materialize the histories of testimony borne in human lives, in patterns of settlement and displacement, in the distribution of wealth away from the labor of those who were enslaved, and in the generational legacies that record this history? Can they reawaken the powerful feminist voices displaced within the memoir boom by neoliberal life narrative?

The journey from owned possession under chattel slavery to full citizenship describes the symbolic transition for African Americans in the United States from material possession to life. Designated as property that could be bought and sold, excluded from membership within the universalism of human life on which the nation was founded, and prevented by law from crossing a “perpetual and impassable barrier” between “the dominant race” and the “subordinate race of beings,” African American lives not only did not matter, they represented mere matter.<sup>3</sup>

This rupture is part of a now discredited legacy of legalized racism, but the afterlife of slavery lingers in an ongoing struggle about whose lives matter and how. In her autobiographical account of searching for genealogical traces of her family along the Atlantic slave route, Saidiya Hartman writes of the persistence of this legacy: “I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it. It is the ongoing crisis of citizenship.”<sup>4</sup> In the testimonial ecology of lives and matter, black witness has recently gained a vibrant political voice in the public square through the #BlackLivesMatter movement and its political and poetic kin. Their acts include protest, mourning, political organizing, and ethical action.

#### #BLACKLIVESMATTER: PUTTING ONE’S BODY ON THE LINE AND ONLINE

*Words work as release—well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture. A pulse in a neck, the shiftiness of the hands, an unconscious blink, the conversations you have with your eyes translate everything and nothing. 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.*

—CLAUDIA RANKINE, *CITIZEN: AN AMERICAN LYRIC*

From Tahrir Square to the Occupy movement and the digital images and videos documenting the flow of migrants across Europe, social media has become important to the evolving work of grassroots political movements. Social media as a testimonial space is developing so rapidly that it can be easy to forget how recently it and the technologies that make it possible appeared: Facebook in 2004, Twitter in 2006, the iPhone in 2007, and the launch by Apple of its app store in 2008. Yet even given the compressed time frame of news cycles and the brevity

of public attention, #BlackLivesMatter's use of social media may offer a density of testimonial reference and supply historical context missing from the headlines and, through links and hashtags, propel these references forward.

#BlackLivesMatter emerged in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin's killing on February 26, 2012. Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old African American high school student, was fatally shot by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer/vigilante, who stalked Martin as he walked to a convenience store in Sanford, Florida, to buy candy and a soda. When Zimmerman was not charged in the killing, a wave of protest was ignited nationwide, in part, through social activism online. An online petition calling for a full investigation and the criminal prosecution of Zimmerman garnered 2.2 million signatures in March 2012, and the name "Trayvon" was tweeted more than two million times in the thirty days following the shooting.<sup>5</sup> Debates about racial profiling and local "stand your ground laws" moved online, too, and sparked a national debate. When Zimmerman, who was subsequently charged and tried for Martin's killing, was acquitted of second-degree murder and manslaughter in July 2013, expressions of outrage circulated through #BlackLivesMatter and traditional news outlets.

An immediate observable difference between the two emerged. Media in the United States have a well-established propensity to report on "looting" and "rioting" when people of color are at the center of a news story.<sup>6</sup> For example, during the crisis that followed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, residents of New Orleans were without electricity and drinking water. When residents who were people of color took bottled water from convenience stores, some mainstream news outlets covered this life-saving activity as looting. Where news outlets associate broken store fronts and people of color with looting no matter the scale of this activity in recent protests in Ferguson and Baltimore, #BlackLivesMatter augments images of protest, including property damage, with images of police brutality to provide context and humanize communities of color. #BlackLivesMatter establishes both a documentary and a commemorative politics around bearing witness and grieving in public through their

integration into the everyday practices of social networks: they offset mug shots with childhood photos and selfies of victims of police abuse, they challenge the purposeful framing of events by photojournalists with an abundance of so-called amateur digital photographs of the same events but from different perspectives, and in the Trayvon Martin case, they posted video of his mother (Sybrina Fulton) who called for justice and calm. Through the feminist intersectional framing of #BlackLivesMatter's online witness, Trayvon Martin's mother was enabled to bear witness not only to her own loss but also to the legacy of African American children's vulnerability and the inability of mothers to protect them during slavery.

The Trayvon Martin case exposed the legacies of racial violence in the United States, including the lingering potency of Jim Crow laws, which instituted racial segregation in all aspects of life, and was reconfigured anew in the aftermath of civil rights legislation through the practice of unequal policing and the disproportionate incarceration of people of color. #BlackLivesMatter frames the killing of African American men through this historical context of racial violence. And it brings this framing online to a mass audience, confirming Laurie McNeill's observation that the Internet makes possible a collective scale of circulation that is simply "unimaginable" offline.<sup>7</sup> In other words, this use of social media by grassroots political groups connects what it means to put one's body on the line and online politically and ethically.

## INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST WITNESS

The founders of #BlackLivesMatter are feminist activists and community organizers of color. Cofounder Opal Tometi explains the movement's beginnings:

#BlackLivesMatter, a project started by three black women, two of whom are queer women and one who is a Nigerian-American, has opened up the political space for that new leadership, and as a result, a new movement to emerge. Black trans people, Black queer people,

Black immigrants, Black incarcerated people and formerly incarcerated people, Black millennials, Black women, low income Black people, and Black people with disabilities are at the front, exercising a new leadership that is bold, innovative, and radical.<sup>8</sup>

In “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” published online in the *Feminist Wire*, another cofounder, Alicia Garza, traces the movement’s eventful life from founding to online dissemination: “I created #BlackLivesMatter with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, two of my sisters, as a call to action for Black people after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was post-humously placed on trial for his own murder and the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed. It was a response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements.”<sup>9</sup> The #BlackLivesMatter origin story cites the failure of the law to hold George Zimmerman accountable for killing Trayvon Martin, rather than the killing itself, as catalyst, emphasizing the significance of political interpretation and critique in its founding. Garza continues: “BlackLivesMatter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.” The movement developed as “cultural workers, artists, designers and techies offered their labor and love to expand #BlackLivesMatter beyond a social media hashtag. Opal, Patrisse, and I created the infrastructure for this movement project—moving the hashtag from social media to the streets.”<sup>10</sup> Tometi, Garza, and Cullors, writing in the Huffington Post, explain: “When we founded #BlackLivesMatter in 2013, we wanted to create a political space within and amongst our communities for activism that could stand firmly on the shoulders of movements that have come before us, such as the civil rights movement, while innovating on its strategies, practices and approaches to finally centralize the leadership of those existing at the margins of our economy and our society.”<sup>11</sup>

Tying the evolution of #BlackLivesMatter primarily to its responses to a series of killings of African American men and boys by police officers,



as some articles have, obscures the feminist focus on black lives broadly.<sup>12</sup> By refusing a presentist framing of the event, #BlackLivesMatter is not, as its founders make clear, only about what happened but about how to frame it, how to bear witness to histories of the present, and how to look at images of death, grief, and protest as a form of ethical engagement. Alicia Garza clarifies that such an ethics requires going beyond contemporary models of politics and includes world making premised in the altered framing that comes from broad participation and shared leadership:

Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.<sup>13</sup>

As Daunesia Yancey, a #BlackLivesMatter organizer in Boston, underlines in response to the criticism that decentralized leadership represents a lack of leadership and political naiveté: “It’s absolutely wrong because we do know what we’re doing, and we’re very clear.”<sup>14</sup>

I dwell on the feminist historicization of #BlackLivesMatter activists to counter the notion that social media cannot adequately bear witness to the specters of historical violence that haunt the infliction of violence on black bodies. Because, in its feminist focus on the body, #BlackLivesMatter does precisely that: makes legible and shareable a past as well as a present. That is, all those videos made by people getting their phones out of their pockets in exceedingly stressful situations, taking up the position of witness as they record violent acts in which they otherwise cannot intervene, and then tapping their screens to send

evidence online are testifying to the iconic power of the mourned black body. When what is shared online carries the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, those digital images and videos help to embed feminist witness within testimonial networks.

#BlackLivesMatter was up and running when Michael Brown, an eighteen-year-old recent high school graduate, was shot and killed by white police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, after Wilson confronted Brown and a friend for jaywalking. #BlackLivesMatter was positioned not only to document and share unfolding events but to frame them and to organize protests. In contrast to the recycling of caricatures of young African American men as thugs, #BlackLivesMatter intervened in the national narrative as it was being created. As with its centering of Trayvon Martin's mother's commitment to seek justice for her son, #BlackLivesMatter countered the stereotypes of men of color, especially young men, as criminally dangerous and, instead, in the lightning fast online environment, slowed the rush to judgment about Michael Brown. Through a feminist intersectional framing, men, like Michael Brown, are portrayed as members of families, and the histories and contexts of their personal lives and their communities are combined with analyses of systemic racism.

#BlackLivesMatter's model of civic dissent, public protest, and ethical witnessing also shaped the dissemination of information about the killing of Tamir Rice, an African American twelve-year-old boy, on November 22, 2014, in Cleveland, Ohio, by two white officers; the fatal choking of Eric Garner, forty-three years old, on July 17, 2014, by white police officers in Staten Island, New York; and the killing of Freddie Gray, twenty-six years old, on April 12, 2015 in Baltimore, Maryland, who was dragged by police officers to a police van, handcuffed, and driven around so violently that he died. All these incidents began with the initiation of contact by police with people of color as part of a permissible pattern of harassment and escalated to fatal ends. The very ordinariness of this activity, the ways in which it is undertaken with impunity, in public and often in full view, also provides the opportunity to record and share it.

In the rapidly evolving online environment, #BlackLivesMatter fended off some potential cooptation represented by the shift to “All Lives Matter,” and added #SayHerName to address violence against cisgender and trans women of color. #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName project outward into the public square knowledge of the routine harassment and fear people of color experience daily. And they build feminist activism into the testimonial network. Here the black body resonates within a history of racial violence; its circulation becomes potent through repetition as the online testimonial network hosts a citational economy that creates value through repetition. This repetition registers the presence of women of color and consistently carries forward their intersectional politics as hashtags and links, which also make available pedagogical materials, guides to organizing, and other informational sites.

The example of #BlackLivesMatter helps us to see how social media can carry political and historical context about current events online and how it functions within a broader testimonial network of extrajudicial and judicial spaces of judgment, how it travels with a range of media to diverse audiences. Through practices of sharing and repetition, a feminist form of witness joins the testimonial network.

Judith Butler has argued that protest requires a sense of the public square. Drawn from Roman history, the public square represents the space of politics and “for politics to take place, the body must appear.”<sup>15</sup> In #BlackLivesMatter, bodies appear online in part because the public square has historically been off limits to black bodies and policed by violence. In the videos that recorded Michael Brown’s body as it lay face down in the street for four hours in the heat of an August day, the body was present and the public square took shape through the presence of technology. While we readily think of the power of bodies in protest as the massing of people in the ongoing, nightly protests in Ferguson and Baltimore, the significance of the dead body—witnessed and mourned, for whom justice is demanded—evokes histories of witnessing that stretch into the past and haunt the present. Here we confront the specters of African Americans lynched and whipped, raped and sold that

form both the historical context of current violence and also the testimonial context of previous instances of bearing witness to the mutilated body. Here we think of Emmett Till, who in 1955 was tortured and killed at the age of fourteen in Mississippi for reportedly flirting with/talking with a white woman. At his mother's insistence, the violated body of her young son was returned to Chicago and placed in an open casket. The public funeral was attended by tens of thousands, and images of his body were published in newspapers and magazines circulated to black audiences. The images raised a public outcry, rallied cross-racial support, and brought critical attention to civil rights in Mississippi. Thus the material witness evoked by Emmett Till's mother's decision about her son's body precedes and resonates with the online witnessing #BlackLivesMatter practices. We also note the potent voice of female dissent to intervene on behalf of the dead body of one's kin.

### BEARING WITNESS: SANDRA BLAND AND BREE NEWSOME

*What does a victorious or defeated black woman's body  
in historically white space look like?*

—CLAUDIA RANKINE, *CITIZEN: AN AMERICAN LYRIC*

On July 10, 2015, Sandra Bland, a twenty-eight-year-old African American woman, was on her way to take a new job at her alma mater in Texas. The selfie she took at the outset of her trip shows her smiling face in close up. The next images of Sandra Bland come from the dashboard camera on the police car that pulled her over. Review of the evidence suggests that the officer was approaching Bland's car very rapidly and she pulled over to get out of his way. The ostensible reason for the traffic stop was her failure to use her turn signal when she changed lanes. From there, the white officer, Brian Encinia, aggressively questions her about her attitude, tells her to put out her cigarette, threatens to "light her up"

as he aims a Taser at her face, hauls her from the car, throws her to the ground, knees in her back, and handcuffs her. The dashboard camera bears witness to Sandra Bland's continuous verbal challenge to the legality of the officer's actions as he assaults her.

Sandra Bland is taken to a jail and booked for resisting arrest. She is held in jail, and at the end of three days it is announced that she has hanged herself in her cell. None of this makes any sense to her friends or family. We know she protested her illegal and violent treatment and turned up dead in her cell. Her articulate witness and the live recording of a brutal encounter either renders her offstage suicide illegible as agentic act, as protest, or enables a framing of it as such. Her family has insisted on an investigation to determine what happened.

In the second case, following the mass killing on June 17, 2015, in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, of nine people by a young white racist man who posted photos of himself online with the Confederate flag and markers of apartheid South Africa, the old controversy about the Confederate flag flying over the South Carolina state house was reopened. Coalescing swiftly in the wake of the extraordinary testimony of forgiveness offered by members of the dead in a hearing to charge the killer, a new move to take down the flag quickly came together. But not quickly enough for Bree Newsome, an African American woman, who climbed to the top of the flagpole, removed the flag, climbed down, and presented herself for arrest. Her aim was perfectly clear: she announced it, she linked her civil disobedience to the murders in the church by reciting the twenty-seventh psalm: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" She took action and she bore witness.

Both women awaken specters of witnesses past who insist that the dead body deserves to be mourned and to have mourning and lamentation turn into just action. The black body as capable of voice, dissent, and agency and the vulnerable black body circulate online in digital images of Michael Brown's body, in video from dashboard and police body cameras, surveillance footage in jails, and the videos taken by citizens of violence. These citizen videos are often the only indicting evidence, as the strong presumption is the word of the

police officer as law and law enforcement consolidate into an obdurate force. #BlackLivesMatter has not only seeded the testimonial network with a feminist intersectional analysis but has also renewed attention to figures like Emmett Till's mother who already circulate there and become potent in new configurations of event and interpretation. As a testimonial form, #BlackLivesMatter represents a new witness as it foregrounds its feminist origins and investments, references the history of slavery, conjures ghosts, and evokes buried histories of dissent.

### CITIZEN

In 2015 Ta-Nehisi Coates published *Between the World and Me*,<sup>16</sup> an autobiographical essay written in the form of a letter to his son about the grinding violence directed at the vulnerable black body. As the site of injury and oppression, Coates places the black body in both human and historic scale: infinitely precious and impossible to protect, the black body represents a history of violence evident in all aspects of life for people of color in the United States. The previous year, Claudia Rankine published *Citizen: An American Lyric*, which shares with *Between the World and Me* a focus on narratives of the insecurity of human connection and the meaning of the body: how it can be read and misread in social spaces, the generalizations and anonymity imposed by racism, and the lasting harm of incidents of racism.<sup>17</sup> Rankine and Coates offer their autobiographical histories as illustrations at a cellular level of the whole ecology of racism. In this way, each person's history bears witness to the weight of history, to its capacity to order daily life, and in defiance of the commonsensical assertion that the past is past. Both employ a lyric "I," personal and hieratic, aggrieved and inconsolable, patient and terse, in narratives of contact that always carry the threat of undoing.

In *Citizen*, Rankine employs a lyric voice in brief narratives of intimacy denied by racism. Each vignette focuses on a microaggression, those incidents that interrupt daily life and reproduce the trauma of

racial histories of violence in everyday occurrences. Like Saidiya Hartman, who argues that “slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, . . . because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago,”<sup>18</sup> Rankine bears witness to an individual and a common life that is the “afterlife of slavery.”<sup>19</sup> A literary witness, like Jamaica Kincaid, with the poetic and testimonial voice that distinguished Rigoberta Menchú, Rankine etches shard-like scenes of hurt in a racialized domestic vernacular. The “I” of *Citizen* rides in cars with colleagues, listens to lectures, teaches and gives readings, hangs out with friends, and stands in line at Starbucks. In any and all of these places she is at home in the world . . . until cast into the role of the stranger by the dislocating sense of being thrown into racist relief. A white friend calls her by the name of the woman who cleans the friend’s house: is it because those are the only two women of color she knows? A colleague rants about being pressured to hire “a minority” when there are so many “qualified” applicants. Am I here? Rankine wonders. Who am I to you? The question haunts as intensely personal—she has access to these encounters through her work and social world—but it is the question of national belonging: is the stranger truly a citizen? The fragility of connection places the haunting presence of the past at the center of questions of citizenship.

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WITNESS: SELF-REPRESENTATION AND A FEMINIST “I”

Previous generations of women writers have evolved a feminist “I” as a voice of feminist theorizing, autobiographical narrative, and literary innovation: from Harriet Jacobs in the nineteenth century to Virginia Woolf’s “I” in *A Room of One’s Own*—“Call me Mary Beaton, Mary Seaton, or Mary Carmichael, it makes no difference”—in the early twentieth century to the generation of women writers whose autobiographical work placed a revelatory and intimate “I” as both participant in and witness to history. As inheritors and adapters alike of Walt Whitman’s

democratic and visionary “I,” called both to aesthetic expression and political critique, the writers I have argued initiated a long memoir boom that continues to host earlier forms and incubate new ones persist within a feminist literary tradition as historical witnesses to the evolving limits on testimony. Often, they lead the way in evading the mechanisms whereby women are discredited as witnesses—often by writing in literary forms that do not require legal standards of evidence.<sup>20</sup>

Yet when women wish to bear witness in public, the protective devices of literature are not at hand, and the full risks of being deemed crazy or criminal exist. Whether we can add feminist dissidence to testimonial networks depends in no small part on insisting on the inclusion of histories of harm—slavery, colonialism, and the current crisis in the mass incarceration of people of color—as the context for understanding contemporary testimonial acts as they arise in protest and in poetry, online and in the streets, and within the proliferating jurisdictions and platforms that constitute the public square. Feminist dissidence is always potentially present as a witness to contemporary history: it is embedded in the words, bodies, and acts of those who have gone before, in the imagined witness of literary characters, and in the postmemory that present generations embody. These histories, immaterial as they may have been rendered through active practices of forgetting and erasure, matter.