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The New Printing of *Citizen* Adds a Haunting Message About Police Brutality

By Katy Waldman

“I am crushed by the changes made in every new printing of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*,” bookseller Kenny Coble tweeted yesterday. And it’s true, with each new batch of the brutal poetry volume, which renders the black experience in America darkly crystalline, publishers Graywolf Press have massaged Rankine’s original text to better reflect the spate of race-tinged deaths around the country. *Citizen* came out in October 2014. In the first printing, according to a Graywolf publicist, Page 134 read:

November 23, 2012 / In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis

That was the date the black 17-year-old was gunned down in Jacksonville, Florida.

The next page, 135, was headed:

February 15, 2014 / The Justice System

That was the date the prosecution of Davis’ shooter, Michael Dunn, ended in a mistrial. (Dunn was later convicted, in October, of first-degree murder.)

But for the second printing, which went to press on Sept. 24, 2014, Rankine chose to add another name to Page 134’s written monument—that of Ferguson’s Michael Brown. The new edition read:

November 23, 2012 / In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis

August 9, 2014 / In Memory of Michael Brown

Now, the third printing, from Nov. 20, 2014, shows the most powerful change yet. The phrase “In Memory Of” repeats down the side of Page 134, with the names of victims arrayed to the right: Jordan Russell Davis, Eric Garner, John Crawford, and Michael Brown. Blank spaces next to the remaining “In Memories” suggest that more black men will eventually join the ranks of those already fallen.

Meanwhile, the facing page, 135, does away with the “Justice System” reference and reads:

because white men can’t
police their imagination
black men are dying

Citizen earned Rankine a nomination for the National Book Award in Poetry. As a collection, it is indeed “crushing,” like the prophetic weight of all that white space. Allowing the blankness to stay on

the page may be a way for the poet to “police [her] imagination”—and to hope, contrary to history, that the “white men” named in the verse might do the same.