

Studio One

Volume 40

Article 2

2015

Until Race Intervenes: A Review of Citizen

Tierney Chlan

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/studio_one



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chlan, Tierney (2015) "Until Race Intervenes: A Review of Citizen," *Studio One*: Vol. 40.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/studio_one/vol40/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studio One by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Until Race Intervenes: A Review of *Citizen*

Claudia Rankine

Graywolf Press 2014

Number of pages 169

Cost \$20.00

Claudia Rankine, whose latest work, Citizen: An American Lyric, garnered numerous accolades over the past year, came to CSB/SJU as the 2015 recipient of the College of St. Benedict Literary Arts Institute's Sister Mariella Gable award. This award, named for an English professor who taught at CSB from 1928-1973 and inspired many students and authors, is given each year to a work of literature published by Graywolf Press. CSB/SJU welcomed Rankine to campus for class visits and a public reading in January 2015.

When Claudia Rankine visited my class, she asked us to try and remember the moment we first realized we had a race.

“You’re a human until race intervenes,” Rankine said.

As college students, we were no strangers to discussing race relations, a subject that is almost automatically paired with racism (though Rankine was sure to tell my class that race and racism do not equate to the same thing). But putting the question like that—when did you first realize you had a race?—changes things. Much like *Citizen* challenges our conception of race in America.

Citizen intentionally positions and repositions the reader through the use of the second person “you”. The “you” fluctuates between the collective you and the individual you, becoming the actor as well as the speaker. The voice is vivid and unflinching, though you want to flinch. The voice is the advocate, the witness, the victim. It is world-weary, it is innocent. Distancing and intimate. It refuses to conform to just one standpoint, and so it gives life to all varieties of experience. “You” forces readers to question, where exactly are they landing?

Citizen is a collection of everyday injustices black Americans face. Rankine collected these micro-aggressions from her own life, her friends’,

popular culture, and the evening news. The instances detailed by Rankine are specific —someone who cuts to the front of the line because he didn't see the black woman waiting there, public transit passengers unwilling to fill the empty seat next to a black man—but they speak to a universal experience:

You take in things you don't want all the time. The second you hear or see some ordinary moment, all its intended targets, all the meanings behind the retreating seconds, as far as you are able to see, come into focus. Hold up, did you just hear, did you just say, did you just see, did you just do that? Then the voice in your head silently tells you to take your foot off your throat because just getting along shouldn't be an ambition. (55)

Citizen's “you” cannot simply be a human because the reality of being black in America is inescapable. Race intervenes, causing a rupturing of sutures, a pulsing of blood, a gasp of air—a violent moment of awareness.

What the “you” accomplishes in words, the images accomplish as well. The photo of white people gathered around a lynching tree, an image Rankine said she has had in her head forever, is a prime example. It is a canonical image of racial hatred, but it was deliberately altered to create a new context and given new meaning in *Citizen*. The hanging black bodies were edited out. Rankine said, “Once you saw those bodies, you wouldn't see anything else,” and she wanted to “redirect the gaze from the trauma of lynching to white spectatorship.” Rankine forces readers, of any color, to consider their part in a system that allows racial injustice to remain. She exposes the ways in which race intrudes upon humanity.

Citizen has impact. The identity of “you” may be unsolidified, but you—you as reader—understand. You understand because Rankine's words are so potent that she does not need to explain every exhaustive detail. But more than that, you understand because it is all so familiar, the violent tension between black men and police blared through the TV, accidental racist language in a conversation with a friend—“this is how you are a citizen” (151). *Citizen* forces readers to consider life in light of race.

Rankine's work brings to life the immediacy of everyday racism, racism so often unconscious or unsaid, and asks its readers to carefully consider their experience of race—and their humanity.

-Tierney Chlan
College of St. Benedict '15