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Until Race Intervenes: A Review of Citizen

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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 Ran­
kine 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 aware­
ness.

What the “you” accomplishes in words, the images accomplish as
well. The photo of white people gathered around a lynching tree, an im­
age 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, ac­
cidental 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
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