



IN-DEPTH  
STUDY  
GUIDE

# CITIZEN: AN AMERICAN LYRIC

CLAUDIA RANKINE

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## PLOT OVERVIEW

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Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* is a genre-bending meditation on race, racism, and citizenship in twenty-first century America. Published in 2014, *Citizen* combines prose, poetry, and visual images to paint a provocative portrait of the African-American experience. Essays, poetry, and artwork are all employed by Rankine to shine a light on everyday racist encounters in the so-called "post-racial" United States.

To understand the importance of the many cultural references in *Citizen*, it is crucial to place the book in a historical context, particularly in lieu of certain major events of the twenty-first century prior to the book's publication. With Barack Obama's selection in 2008 (and re-election in 2012), some argued that America had entered into a "post-racial" era, meaning that the ills and repercussions of slavery were no longer a concern. Yet, racism persisted, and persists. Many of the major milestone events of the last twenty years are covered in *Citizen*. They include the killing of Trayvon Martin, the case surrounding Jena Six, and the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, among others.

*Citizen* encourages the reader to think critically about race, and in doing so it exposes the pervasiveness of systemic racism. Some of these racist encounters are 'minor' offenses and seemingly-innocent mistakes, while others are intentional offensives in the schoolyard, at the grocery store, at home, on the soccer field, on the tennis court, on TV, and online. Racism, even in supposedly "post-racial" America, is everywhere, all the time. Rankine aims to show how, taken collectively, stresses upon African-Americans due to systemic racism can inhibit ability to function. Rankine also explores the idea of how language (our "addressability," in Rankine's words) is connected to our feeling of community and belonging and, therefore, to our citizenship.

Form (and formlessness) is crucial to the meaning of *Citizen*. The book is comprised of seven chapters, with each chapter relying on different verbal forms, ranging from essay to prose to poetry, and interspersed with visual imagery and artwork. Without a table of contents to serve as a roadmap, the reader is prompted to dive into the material without guidance. The reader is immersed, disoriented, and must find their own way through the text.

The opening chapter outlines racial microaggressions experienced by "you," while Chapter Two discusses the YouTube character Hennessy Youngman's ruminations

on black artists, as well as the racial incidents affecting celebrated tennis star Serena Williams. Chapter Three digs deeper into the poisonous power of systemic racism and the insidious threat of racist language. In the fourth chapter, Rankine writes on the nature of language and memory. Chapter Five is a complex poem on self-identity, interspersed with more incidents of microaggressions. Chapter Six is a series of scripts for "situation videos" created in collaboration with John Lucas. Most of the videos focus on major events of racially-charged trauma, including Hurricane Katrina, the shooting of Trayvon Martin, the shooting of James Craig Anderson, the Jena Six, and the 2011 race riots in the U.K. spurred by the death of Mark Duggan. The final chapter ends with a complex meditation on race, the body, and language.

Claudia Rankine is an essayist, poet, playwright and the editor of several anthologies; she is currently the Frederick Iseman Professor of Poetry at Yale University. *Citizen* is the winner of numerous awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize in Poetry, and the PEN Open Book Award. *Citizen* holds the distinction of being the only poetry book to be a *New York Times* bestseller in the nonfiction category.

The tone in *Citizen* is one of detached objectivity, punctuated with moments of intense emotion: fury, weariness, and revulsion. *Citizen* confronts America's sullied history with race as it attempts to eradicate the fable of a "post-racial" society.

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND ANALYSES

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### Chapters 1-2

#### Chapter 1 Summary

Written from the second-person perspective, *Citizen* opens with a quiet moment of “you” lying in bed at night, looking out the window, recalling memories from “your” past. At this point, the narrator's identity begins to take shape. The narrator recalls their experience in Catholic school when they were twelve years old: “You are twelve attending Sts. Philip and James School on White Plains Road and the girl sitting in the seat behind you asks you to lean to the right during exams so she can copy what you have written” (5). The narratorial “you,” then, is a young black girl at Catholic school who has an encounter with a white girl. The white girl cheats from the black girl’s schoolwork. “You” recall these two little girls, thinking with muted sadness about how the little white girl cheated without punishment.

Moving away from the explicit memory of the two girls, the narrative moves to the “you” experiencing a bodily feeling: “Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs” (7). The reader determines that the “you” is taking an inventory of their bodily sensations after experiencing a racist encounter. The narrator recalls an incident in which her white friend refers to her by the wrong name: “Haven’t you said this to a close friend who early in your friendship, when distracted would call you by the name of her black housekeeper? You assumed you two were the only black people in her life” (7). The offensiveness of this moment is amplified by the fact that the white woman was a close friend: “Do you feel hurt because it’s the ‘all black people look the same’ moment, or because you are being confused with another after being so close to this other” (7).

The next stanza continues to describe this bodily feeling. Inhabiting the body of the narrator, the reader is confronted with the “unsettled feeling” when “the wrong words enter your day like a bad egg in your mouth and puke runs down your blouse, a dampness drawing your stomach in toward your rib cage” (8). The “wrong words,” we can assume, are racist insults.

The final vignette is a scene in which the narrator visits a new therapist, who conducts her practice from her home. The narrator and the therapist have only ever spoken on the phone at this point, and so the therapist does not know that the narrator is black: “At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press

firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells at the top of her lungs, “Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?” (18). The chapter concludes with the therapist apologizing at her overreaction: “I am so sorry, so, so sorry” (18).

## Chapter 2 Summary

In Chapter Two, the narrative shifts from poetry to prose, taking on the tone and style of an academic essay. The subject of the essay is Hennessy Youngman, a.k.a. the YouTube vlogger Jayson Musson, whose series “Art Thoughtz” educates viewers on contemporary art issues. *Citizen* focuses on one particular video of Youngman’s, in which Youngman “addresses how to become a successful black artist, wryly suggesting black people’s anger is marketable” (23).

Releasing one’s anger in this way, the narrator notes, is not a genuine feeling:

The commodified anger his video advocates rests lightly on the surface for spectacle’s sake. It can be engaged or played like the race card and is tied solely to the performance of blackness and not to the emotional state of particular individuals in particular situations (23).

The narrator ruminates on “sellable anger,” noting that selling your fury comes at a price:

On the bridge between this sellable anger and ‘the artist’ resides, at times, an actual anger. Youngman in his video doesn’t address this type of anger: the anger built up through experience and the quotidian struggle against dehumanization every brown or black person lives simply because of skin color. This other kind of anger in time can prevent, rather than sponsor, the production of anything except loneliness(24).

The essay concludes on a more personal note: “You begin to think, maybe erroneously, that this other kind of anger is really a type of knowledge: the type that both clarifies and disappoints” (24).

This idea of “insanity” bridges the gap between the Youngman essay and the essay on tennis player Serena Williams that follows. Focusing on the incident at the 2009 Women’s U.S. Open semifinal, the essay hones in on the moment when Serena becomes visibly enraged after a ref makes an unfair call: “Serena in HD

before your eyes becomes overcome by a rage you recognize and have been taught to hold at a distance for your own good”(25). The narrator, on seeing Serena’s anger displayed on the screen, thinks that this “explosive” behavior:

suggests that all injustice she has played through all the years of her illustrious career flashes before her and she decides finally to respond to all of it with a string of invectives. Nothing, not even the repetition of negations (‘no, no, no’) she employed in a similar situation years before as a younger player at the 2004 U.S. Open, prepares you for this(25).

As a black woman athlete in a predominantly-white sport, Serena has suffered from racialized slights, insults, and unfairness for the duration of her career. The narrator recognizes that Serena’s outburst is the direct result of years of mistreatment: “Oh my God, she’s gone crazy, you say to no one” (25).

Returning to Youngman’s suggestions on how to be a successful black artist, the narrator concludes by interpreting Caroline Wozniacki’s deplorable actions through that prism: “Be ambiguous, be white” (36). Wozniacki, we learn, is a Danish tennis player that ridiculed Serena Williams by padding her own bra and backside with pillows to mock Serena’s voluptuous figure. Again, Youngman’s advice to “be white” increases in relevance: “Wozniacki, it becomes clear, has finally enacted what was desired by many of Serena’s detractors, consciously or unconsciously, the moment the Compton girl first stepped on the court [...] At last, in this real, and unreal, moment, we have Wozniacki’s image of smiling blond goodness posing as the best female tennis player of all time” (36).

## Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The opening chapters of *Citizen* establish its format and tone. While Chapter One is written in a style akin to poetry, Chapter Two is written mostly in prose, as a series of essays.

Another unique feature of *Citizen* is the perspective: it is written, for the most part, in the second-person point-of-view, with the narrator taking on the role of “you.” This style of writing adds a sense of both urgency and intimacy to the text. Referring to the protagonist as “you,” Rankine puts the reader in the shoes of a victim of racial prejudice, regardless of the reader’s identity. Like racism itself, the form of this book is not just one thing.

The theme of everyday racism (also called “microaggressions”) are introduced in this section. In a “post-racial” society, racist ideology has not necessarily been eradicated, in Rankine’s opinion; it has taken on a different, more covert form: “He tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there [...] Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me?” (10). This comment, said by the narrator’s friend, is a microaggression because it does not acknowledge the narrator’s identity as a black author and also because it does not include people of color in the person’s concept of “great writers.”

Time functions in an interesting, disorienting way in *Citizen*. Rankine slows down time so that we experience a racist moment as it moves through the body, with the reader’s attention drawn to the heart, the tongue, the lungs: “Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs” (7). At the same time, we are shuttled back and forth between otherwise divergent moments of time, showing that these microaggressions have and continue to exist.

Pop culture artifacts of all kinds feature prominently in making *Citizen*’s argument, helping every reader see the multi-dimensional pervasiveness of racism. For example, in Chapter Two, Rankine draws from sports, literature, and art to characterize the black experience:

Serena and her big sister Venus Williams brought to mind Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.’ This appropriated line, stencil on canvas by Glenn Ligon, who used plastic letter stencils, smudging oil sticks, and graphite to transform the words into abstractions, seemed to be ad copy for some aspect of life for all black bodies(25).

Text, film, and visual elements interplay with one another to create a unique, multi-faceted commentary on race.

## Chapters 3-4

### Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter Three is a series of ordinary moments from mundane settings—the grocery store, the office, etc.—that highlight the pervasive and subtle power of racial discrimination. These moments are presented in microscopic closeness.

Throughout Chapter Three, the narratorial “you” is in specific times and places. In the first moment, “you” are late for a date with a friend in California: “You are rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood of Santa Monica” (41). After being just a little late, the friend refers to you as a “nappy-headed ho” (41). The protagonist “you” guesses as to why the friend might have referred to her in this way, which she finds upsetting:

Maybe the content of her statement is irrelevant and she only means to signal the stereotype of ‘black people time’ by employing what she perceives to be ‘black people language.’ Maybe she is jealous of whoever kept you and wants to suggest you are nothing or everything to her. Maybe she wants to have a belated conversation about Don Imus and the women’s basketball team he insulted with this language (42).

The ordinary moments include: A white co-worker confusing the names of the only two black women who work in the office; a white woman exclaiming that “I didn’t know black women could get cancer” (45); a friend asking why a black woman always “looks so angry” (46); a co-worker asking a black colleague why black professors are “always on sabbatical,” despite the fact that everyone has the same sabbatical schedule (47); a real estate woman who, showing the exact opposite, awkwardly announces how comfortable she is around black people (51); the white cashier who questions if the black person’s credit card will work (54).

The final stanza of this chapter concludes with the narrator rejecting having to take in so much information at once: “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). Though racialized moments like these are commonplace, each one is freighted with layers of significance.

## Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter Four is a series of brief prose-poem paragraphs focusing on feeling. Moving away from pop cultural references and towards more academically-oriented ruminations on racism, this brief section focuses on the bodily sensation—often painful—associated with the black experience in America.

Rankine uses sighing as an entry point into the pain of existence: “To live through the days sometimes you moan like deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets” (59).

The protagonist can't help but be upset at existence, as it's futile to resist this feeling, and it's also futile to think that this upset will be met with anything but irritation by "the world." It is an impossible and uncomfortable position. The next passage continues the discussion on sighing and breath: "The sigh is the pathway to breath; it allows breathing. That's just self-preservation" (60).

The continuing thread in the next passage is "the world" responding to the narrator; this time, it's the world telling the narrator something about memory: "You like to think memory goes far back though remembering was never recommended. Forget all that, the world says" (61). Returning to the body and bodily functions, the narrator states:

To your mind, feelings are what create a person, something unwilling, something wild vandalizing whatever the skull holds. Those sensations form a someone. The headaches begin then. Don't wear sunglasses in the house, the world says, though they soothe, soothe sight, soothe you (61).

This is preceded by another brief prose-poem paragraph on "the world": "The world is wrong. You can't put the past behind you. It's buried in you. It's turned your flesh into its own cupboard. Not everything remembered is useful but it all comes from the world to be stored in you. Who did what to whom on which day?"(63).

### Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Taken together, Chapters Three and Four function as a kind of call and response: Chapter Three outlines the offenses, Chapter Four details the feeling brought on by those offenses.

One of the most jarring elements—and a feature of "post-racial" America—is that racism is still present, but not always overtly so. In Chapter Three, particularly, the narrator describes the hurt over racial biases inflicted by not racist enemies but by her own friends and colleagues. For example, when the narrator is referred to by one of her friends, in a joking manner, as a "nappy-headed ho" (42), even though the friend in question is black, the narrator is taken aback by this racialized reference: "This person has never before referred to you like this in your presence never before code-switched in this manner. What did you say?" (41) The protagonist—who we may believe is Rankine herself—is deeply upset.

Rankine shows language as a tool for self-creation and, as such, a weapon of self-destruction in a racist context. Again, with the “nappy-headed ho” incident, this language causes a schism in the friendship: “For all your previous understandings, suddenly incoherence feels violent. You both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, you watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture” (42).

On Page 49, Rankine discusses philosopher Judith Butler’s idea that language can be hurtful because it makes us “addressable”: “Our very being exposes us to the address of another [...] We suffer from the condition of being addressable” (49). Building upon Butler’s notion, the narrator realizes that “language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present” (49).

Another linguistic theme explored in this section is the theme of misunderstanding. Throughout, the narrator repeats an exclamation of confusion: “What did you say?” (43). When the narrator hears a racist remark, the narrator cannot help but feel disbelief over what she is hearing. The implication is that, in “post-racial” America, that kind of language—and the ideology it symbolizes—should already be eliminated from common parlance.

## Chapters 5-6

### Chapter 5 Summary

The structure of the previous chapters—that is, essay and prose-poetry—loosens in Chapter Five, which is written in a more free-flowing manner. Images, words, scenes, and feelings all meld together here, giving the writing a dream-like quality.

Chapter Five opens with a meditation on the power of language: “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” (69). Language has a direct effect on the body. It can inflict bodily harm, which has special meaning for victims of racial slurs: “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” (69). Additionally, there is an inevitability to the body, no matter what: “And despite everything the body remains” (69).

After the next break, the narrative is snapped into a particular time and place: a flashlight enters a darkened room and shines its “blue light” on the body. It is unclear whether the light is real or imagined: “You hold everything black. You give yourself back until nothing’s left but the dissolving blues of metaphor” (70).

Echoing previous chapters, the narrative shows more fragmented scenes of everyday racism: Being ignored (rendered invisible) in line at a drugstore (77); a man at the bar of a restaurant, sexualizing the narrator’s blackness (78). This section concludes with a scene from the narrator’s home: “You lean against the sink, a glass of red wine in your hand and then another, thinking in the morning you will go to the gym having slept and slept beyond all residuals of yesterdays” (79). The narrator does go the gym, and in that mundane scene, we are confronted again with the inescapability of the body: “Yes, and you do go to the gym and run in place, an entire hour running, just you and/your body running off each undesired desired encounter” (79).

## Chapter 6 Summary

Chapter Six is broken up into eight subsections, and each subsection draws upon a “situation video.” A “situation video” refers to an actual video that Rankine created in collaboration with documentary filmmaker John Lucas. (Each “situation video” can be viewed on [the author’s website](#).) The “situation videos” are a kind of visual poetry; they collect footage from historical events like Hurricane Katrina or the World Cup, and edit them together in short, curated clips that explore scenes of racism. The subsections are as follows:

Hurricane Katrina, August 29, 2005. In this subsection, quotes were collected from CNN during coverage of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The question “Have you seen their faces?” is asked, we assume by a news anchor, but here it is charged with racist meaning. This phrase is repeated throughout the chapter. Other quotes from the Katrina coverage are offered and, taken out of context, a new meaning emerges. Words that seemed commonplace during the coverage are shone in their true horror: “It’s awful, she said, to go back home to find your own dead child. It’s really sad” (84). Interspersed among the CNN quotes, Rankine adds her own narrative: “He said, I don’t know what the water wanted. It wanted to show you no one would come” (85). There is no protagonist, and no clear trajectory of action.

In Memory of Trayvon Martin, February 26, 2012. Though named after Trayvon Martin, this section does not delve into the details of that tragedy. Instead, it is a larger rumination on solidarity borne from racism, centered around the narrator's "brothers." Here, "brothers" may refer to blood relatives, or a larger type of family:

My brothers are notorious. They have not been to prison. They have been imprisoned. The prison is not a place you enter. It is no place. My brothers are notorious. They do regular things, like wait. On my birthday they say my name. They will never forget that we are named. What is that memory? (89).

In Memory of James Craig Anderson, June 26, 2011. James Craig Anderson was the victim of a hate crime in Jackson, Mississippi when 18-year-old Deryl Dedmon fatally ran over Anderson with a pickup truck. This section opens with a scene of someone watching a pickup truck on screen: "In the next frame the pickup truck is in motion. Its motion activates its darkness. The pickup truck is a condition of darkness in motion" (93). The narrator engages in an imagined conversation with Dedmon, asking questions that emphasize the loathsome nature of his crime: "The pickup is human in this predictable way. Do you recognize yourself, Dedmon?" (94). The section concludes with the narrator feeling angry over this senseless murder, and then having to let that anger go, not because they are over it, but because they must let this all-consuming anger go in order to get on with their life.

Jena Six, December 4, 2006. Aggravated by racist treatment at school, the Jena Six were six black teenagers in Jena, Louisiana convicted in the 2006 beating of Justin Barker, a white high school student. This section goes back in time, before anyone knew this would be a historic event. The narration follows the teenagers as the moments prior to the beating of Justin Barker unfold.

Stop-and-Frisk. This section puts the narratorial "you" in the position of a black person who is wrongfully stopped by the police as part of a "stop-and-frisk" procedure. The narrator is angered over this false accusation but expresses a feeling of resignation at the unjust system: "And still you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description" (109).

In Memory of Mark Duggan, August 4, 2011. The Hackney riots occurred in the U.K. in 2011:

The riots began at the end of the summer of 2011 when Mark Duggan, a black man, a husband, father, and a suspected drug dealer, was shot dead by officers from Scotland Yard's Operation Trident (a special operations unit addressing gun crime in black communities) [...] Whatever the reason for the riots, images of the looters' continued rampage eventually displaced the fact that an unarmed man was shot to death(117).

This section is set in a time after the riots have occurred. It focuses on a conversation between the narrator (a writer of color) and a white English novelist. The novelist is "slightly irritated" when the narrator suggests he might write something about the Hackney riots, implying that it is the work of black writers to write about "black things." In this section, both microaggression (the incident with the novelist) and macroaggression (the death of Mark Duggan) are highlighted.

World Cup, October 10, 2006. This section explores a scene during which French soccer star Zinedine Zidane head-butts Italian defender Marco Materazzi after Materazzi verbally provokes Zidane with a racial slur at the FIFA World Cup final in 2006.

Making Room, July 29-August 18, 2014. This section returns to the prose-poem form and examines another instance of everyday racism. The narrator (again, the second person "you") is aboard a moving train. The narrator sees that, on the train, there is a black man with an unoccupied seat directly next to him, despite it being a crowded train with every other seat taken. The inference is that the rest of the train is scared, hesitant, or otherwise unwilling to sit near him. The narrator, understanding this, makes a conscious choice to sit next to the man as an act of solidarity: "The soft gray-green of your cotton coat touches the sleeve of him. You are shoulder to shoulder though standing you could feel shadowed. You sit to repair whom who? You erase that thought. And it might be too late for that" (132).

ChapterSix concludes with a list of twenty-three names listed one after another. These names are of victims of recent racial violence: "In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis/In Memory of Eric Garner/In Memory of John Crawford" (134). The text gradually fades to white, with "in memory of" bleeding into the white of the page and disappearing.

## Chapters 5-6 Analysis

Rankine intensifies her exploration of experimental form in Chapters Five and Six. In the previous chapters, essay and prose-poetry are the main styles of writing; however, in these chapters, the language loosens. Traditional sentence structure is discarded, capitalization is used irregularly, and line breaks become more prevalent. Playing with form in this way, language and the importance of words are imbued with an enhanced layer of significance. Even beyond language, Rankine makes other authorial choices that demonstrate her commitment to a multidisciplinary form: On pages 112 and 113, there is a watermark that states “LONGFORM BIRTH CERTIFICATE.” On the pages 120 through 129, there is a watermark of “BLACK-BLANC-BEUR.” “Blanc” is French for white and “beur” is French for “Arab.” Additionally, each of the subsections in Chapter Six are texts based on film.

The condition of blackness is a condition of detachment. In order to exist, Rankine explains that African-Americans must hold their own pain at an objective distance: “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” (69). In a way, it is a form of self-alienation.

Continuing on this theme, this section examines language in its relation to identity. That is, Rankine explores how we use language to construct our identity and, in the case of blackness, how others use racist language to obliterate that self. Rankine’s narrator expresses a feeling of one’s self at risk of falling apart: “Sometimes ‘I’ is supposed to hold what is not there until it is. Then *what is* comes apart the closer you are to it” (71). Like language, the self becomes symbolic: “This makes the first person a symbol for something./The pronoun barely holding the person together” (71). The body becomes a kind of text—another layer to Rankine’s commitment to multidisciplinary work.

The motif of the color blue is brought to the fore in this section. We see a blue light on page 70, a blue ceiling on page 75, a blue sky on page 90. These are just three among many other verbal references to the color blue. Then, on pages 102 and 103, a piece of art entitled “Blue Black Boy,” by Carrie May Weems, is reprinted, bringing another dimension to the cohesion of this motif. The piece of art is framed with three copies of the same picture of a young African-American boy. Though the picture is the same, the caption underneath each picture is different: From left to right, the first picture is captioned “blue,” the next is “black,” and the final one is

“boy.” The repetition of the color blue points to the arbitrariness inherent in racism; much like the color black, blue’s significance changes depending on context.

## Chapter 7

### Chapter 7 Summary

The final chapter of *Citizen* is written, like the majority of the text, in the second-person “you” perspective. However, in this chapter the identity of the narrator is ambiguous and shifts throughout the chapter.

Rankine explores disassociation from the self in this section. Though many of Rankine’s prose poems occupy only the top half of the page, as a block paragraph, Chapter Seven’s words flow across the entire page. The text floats down the page, as the narrator describes a feeling of serene detachment from their own existence: “Some years there exists a wanting to escape—/you, floating above your certain ache—/still the ache coexists./Call that the immanent you—/You are you even before you/grow into understand you/are not anyone, worthless,/not worth you” (139). The floating, the feelings of worthlessness, the listlessness—this is Rankine’s characterization of the inner emotional Rankine perceives as common to the African-American experience.

Chapter Seven also concerns feelings of invisibility and worthlessness in the black community. It begins with the suggestion that black people are rendered as less-than-human immediately from childhood: “You are you even before you/grow into understanding you/are not anyone, worthless” (139). It goes on to detail the profound challenge of living with the knowledge that society views African-Americans as less than.

The proceeding scene is an anecdote concerning a black person and their white friend at a restaurant. The scene focuses on white privilege. Directly after, there is another scene about a man watching his child play with other children at a block party.

Suddenly, the narrative snaps back into a physical act, the act of “sitting around” and so the “you” becomes more grounded:

Soon you are sitting around, publicly listening, when you hear this—what happens to you doesn’t belong to you, only half concerns you. He is speaking of

the legionnaires in Claire Denis's film *Beau Travail* and you are pulled back into the body of you receiving the nothing gaze(141).

The “you” then dissolves once more: “When you lay your body in the body/entered as if skin and bone were public places,/when you lay your body in the body/entered as if you're the ground you walk on,/you know no memory should live/in these memories/becoming the body of you” (144).With this dissolution of self, Rankine emphasizes that the loss of control of one's own body is part of the experience of blackness.

The final section is dated July 13, 2013, which is the day that it was announced that a jury found the killer of Trayvon Martin, George Zimmerman, not guilty. The poem puts the reader in the experience of hearing that news, and the text that follows is an account of the narrator struggling with intense feelings after the announcement. The book concludes with a final vignette showing an incident of racial microaggression (this one in the parking lot of a fitness center), and the reader is left with a feeling of unease about what it will take to end systemic racism.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

The majority of *Citizen* is written from the second-person point of view, so when narrator's pronouns shift in the final chapter, the effect is dramatic. Suddenly, the protagonist changes from “you” to an amalgamation of pronouns:

I they he she we you turn/only to discover/the encounter/to be alien to this place./Wait./The patience is in the living./Time opens out to you./The opening, between you and you, occupied,/zone for an encounter,/given the histories of you and you—/And always, who is this you? (140).

As the “you” is repeated, it becomes less clear who is speaking and who is being spoken to. Finally, the narrator loses all bodily form and dissolves into sound: “Overheard in the moonlight./Overcome in the moonlight” (141). In having the narrator go from the intensely personal second-person “you” to nothing at all, Rankine emphasizes the point that blackness renders individuals invisible and hypervisible, everyone and no one, at the same time.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

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### **Claudia Rankine**

Claudia Rankine, author of *Citizen: An American Lyric*, was born in Kingston, Jamaica. She earned an undergraduate degree at Williams College and her MFA at Columbia University. It is ambiguous how much of *Citizen* is autobiographical, but it has been speculated that many sections are first-hand experiences of Rankine. The narrative does, at times, take place in spaces Rankine inhabits, particularly those scenes set in academia.

### **“You” and “I”**

Written primarily in the second-person point of view, the pronoun “you” is the main narratorial force in *Citizen*. Depending on the chapter, however, the identity of that “you” shifts in regard to its particulars of identity. For example, in many of the vignettes, the “you” is not always black and the “she” or “he” is not always white. Rankine muddies the personas and pronouns, forcing the reader to engage with these identities a little more intimately while at the same time asking the reader to question what does it mean to be “black” and what does it mean to be “white”?

This technique reaches its apex at the conclusion of *Citizen*, in which the pronouns meld together: “I they he she we you turn/only to discover/the encounter/to be alien to this place” (140). This technique, particularly at the end, also reinforces a sense of anonymous solidarity among those who have experienced an identity of blackness in America.

### **Historical Figures**

Victims of racial violence in recent history, as well as key figures in the civil rights movement, are mentioned throughout the text: Trayvon Martin, the Jena Six, and Mark Duggan, among many others. Adding to the timely and tragic nature of this book, many of these victims are from the last twenty years, firmly rooting this text as a parable for the twenty-first century.

### **Pop Culture Figures**

YouTube personality Hennessy Youngman, tennis star Serena Williams, French filmmaker Chris Marker, author James Baldwin—each of these figures, and more,

are discussed throughout the text. From all areas of pop culture, Rankine uses these individuals for making an argument about race and racism, both in America and past its borders.

## THEMES

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### Microaggressions

Throughout the book, instances of everyday, mundane racism—also known as “microaggressions”—are experienced by the narrator and other persons of color. One of the major themes of *Citizen* is exposing everyday racism and connecting these microaggressions to larger systems of historical racism.

“Microaggression” is a term that refers to the casual degradation of a marginalized group. Microaggressions can occur via an offhand remark, a glance, or a gesture. In a world where more explicit forms of discrimination have been made illegal, racist ideology is carried out via small moments.

Oftentimes, the narrator discusses these microaggressions in a level, detached tone and, in doing so, Rankine creates an intentionally-disorienting experience, one that mirrors the experience of racial microaggressions her subjects encounter. Race is referenced at times and purposely omitted within the text at others, which makes the reader work to determine who is inflicting the infraction and why.

### The Lie of “Post-Racial” America

The concept of “post-racial America” is the idea that the United States has overcome racial prejudice, and that the days of discrimination and racialized violence that have long plagued the country have been resolved. Throughout the text, Rankine consistently wants to dissuade the reader of the notion that “post-racial America” is even close to becoming a reality.

Indeed, many of Rankine’s scenes of everyday racism take place among cultured, well-educated people, the very individuals who are expected to uphold modern, liberal notions of racial harmony. These microaggressions take place at private school, on the way to therapy, and in the cabin of a plane, among other settings. These are the accomplished professionals and scholars whose lives are often spent in predominately-white circles, and often presumed to be free of the strictures of race. But Rankine wants us to know that no American citizen is ever really free of race and racism. The potential to say a racist thing or think a racist thought resides in all of us, like an unearthed mine from a forgotten war.

The shifting identity of the second-person narrator —“you”—also points to the lie of “post-racial America.” In order for the reader to orient themselves in the narrative, the reader must determine who is (or if they are, as the second-person “you”) a person of color, in order to make sense of the narrative. That universality is a fiction shows how there exists lingering racism in the United States, despite being centuries beyond the eradication of slavery and existing in the time of Barack Obama, America’s first black president.

## **Citizenship**

As the title of this book suggests, Rankine wants the reader to consider Americanness and what it means to be a citizen of the United States. Blackness, as Rankine emphasizes throughout the book, is an inhibitor to being a full-fledged citizen, even in twenty-first-century America. While so many would have you believe that in America’s “post-racial” society, every individual is equal, to be African-American is to have a complicated relationship to one’s sense of belonging in America.

Rankine investigates the ways in which racism affects daily American social and cultural life, which causes certain citizens—namely, African-Americans and other people of color— to be rendered politically invisible. The book complicates our notion of citizenship as merely a legal designation. As Rankine shows, we must expand that definition to include a larger understanding of belonging and community, one built out of empathy, responsibility, and a commitment to equality. Rankine writes: “Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on” (151). This is the current state of citizenship for African-Americans: accepting racism and having to “let it go” in order to feel included.

## SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

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### Formless/New Forms of Poetry

Rankine expands the definition of “poetry” by including essays, prose, and artwork in the book. Pushing the boundaries of form in this way, Rankine disorients the reader, and this disorientation puts the reader (particularly non-black readers) in a position to understand aspects of systemic racism perpetrated against blacks. Rankine encourages the reader to re-think everything they know about themselves, so that—again, especially with white readers—they can think how they participate in (and potentially benefit from) the racist power structures in the United States.

The book is divided into seven sections with no index or table of contents. Without titles to separate and orient them, Rankine’s words function as free-floating poetic fragments. Echoing human memory, scenes are sometimes presented in high-definition focus, while at other moments, they are blurred beyond recognition; the reader does not know where they are in space and time, or even who is speaking. Cumulatively, the experience of reading *Citizen* is distinctly a visual experience: Images of artwork aside, Rankine’s words paint a portrait comparable to a film. Perhaps not coincidentally, much of *Citizen* (particularly Chapter Six) was co-written with John Lucas, a documentary filmmaker.

*Citizen* rejects traditional word-based poetry. The book combines essay, images and visual stills of artworks, frequent quotation from artists and thinkers (for example, Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, and Claire Denis), scripts for films, and transcripts from television. Rankine’s writing is a collage of multimedia. Much of the meaning and momentum of *Citizen* is derived from disparate elements being viewed on the whole: Rankine’s words reverberate against the artwork and vice versa.

### Visibility and Invisibility

Throughout *Citizen*, the black experience involves being rendered both hypervisible and invisible at the same time. References to visibility are made at multiple places in the text. For example, on page 43, the narrator’s friend (a white woman) mistakes the narrator for the only other black woman in the white woman’s life: “Apparently your own invisibility is the real problem causing her confusion. This

is how the apparatus she propels you into begins to multiply its meaning. What did you say?”

## The Color Blue

The motif of the color blue can be seen throughout the book, but it is especially apparent in Chapters Five and Six. From a blue light on page 70 to a blue sky on page 90, the color keeps cropping up in references throughout these sections. Thinking about color has an obvious connection to race. For Rankine’s purposes, the insistence that the reader keep color in mind, particularly blue, reinforces the idea that we are not the colorblind ideal of a post-racial society.

Blue also evokes connections to visual art: On pages 102 and 103, Rankine reproduces a piece of art entitled “Blue Black Boy” by Carrie May Weems, which adds an element of overall cohesion to this motif.

Finally, the motif of blue conjures visions of the ocean, which Rankine uses to evoke slave ships to reinforce the ever-present legacy of slavery in the United States. The narrator states that, for African-Americans, losing control of one’s emotions risks letting the entire weight of ancient tragedy to weigh upon that individual: “No, it’s a strange beach; each body is a strange beach, and if you let in excess emotion you will recall the Atlantic Ocean breaking on our heads” (73).

## IMPORTANT QUOTES

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1. “Sister Evelyn must think these two girls think a lot alike or she cares less about cheating and more about humiliation or she never actually saw you sitting there.” (Chapter 1, Page 5)

*Whatever the reason, racism is ultimately the explanation as to why Sister Evelyn allowed this cheating to occur. This quote lends itself to the at-once invisibility and hypervisibility the “you” of Citizen experiences/is made to experience.*

2. “What did you say? Instantaneously your attachment seems fragile, tenuous, subject to any transgression of your historical self. And though your joined personal histories are supposed to save you from misunderstandings, they usually cause you to understand all too well what is meant.” (Chapter 1, Page 14)

*Rankine describes the inner struggle between every Americans’ “historical self” and their “self self.” That is, given America’s history of slavery and racial injustice, every person has a connection to— either profiting from or being hindered by—this past. This concept is important to understanding many of the larger themes of the book.*

3. “For years you attribute to Serena Williams a kind of resilience appropriate only for those who exist in celluloid. Neither her father nor her mother nor her sister nor Jehovah her God nor NIKE camp could shield her ultimately from people who felt her black body didn’t belong on their court, in their world. From the start many made it clear Serena would have done better struggling to survive in the two-dimensionality of a Millet painting, rather than on their tennis court—better to put all that strength to work in their fantasy of her working the land, rather than be caught up in the turbulence of our ancient dramas, like a ship fighting a storm in a Turner seascape.” (Chapter 2, Page 26)

*Rankine references painting and the visual arts again, thereby driving home the importance of visual elements to this text and to life at large. This section brings up the idea of black bodies existing in a two-dimensional space.*

4. “Though no one was saying anything explicitly about Serena’s black body, you are not the only viewer who thought it was getting in the way of Alves’s sight line.” (Chapter 2, Page 27)

*The unique second-person narration of Citizen imbues the reader with knowledge and experience that they do not necessarily have. It is an intimate experience. For example, in this passage, the reader watches the tennis match as an informed viewer, as someone who thinks about things like “sight lines,” in the way the umpire—who has the potential to greatly affect the match—must consider “sight lines.”*

5. “As offensive as her outburst is, it is difficult not to applaud her for reacting immediately to being thrown against a sharp white background. It is difficult not to applaud her for existing in the moment, for fighting crazily against the so-called wrongness of her body’s positioning at the service line.” (Chapter 2, Page 29)

*“Thrown against a sharp white background”—this is echoed throughout the text, and also in the painting, which in and of itself, is a reference to a work of literature. The multidisciplinary nature of Rankine’s work in Citizen is particularly evident in this chapter.*

6. “In any case, it is difficult not to think that if Serena lost context by abandoning all rules of civility, it could be because her body, trapped in a racial imaginary, trapped in disbelief—code for being black in America—is being governed not by the tennis match she is participating in but by a collapsed relationship that had promised to play by the rules.” (Chapter 2, Page 30)
7. “Watching this newly contained Serena, you begin to wonder if she finally has given up wanting better from her peers or if she too has come across Hennessy’s *Art Thoughtz* and is channeling his assertion that the less that is communicated the better. Be ambiguous.” (Chapter 2, Page 35)

*Rankine blends pop culture references throughout the book; the references talk and interact with one another, and inform each other. Here, the YouTuber personality Hennessy Youngman is used to look at Serena Williams. Further, ambiguity—a hallmark of postmodern literature—is explicitly referenced here.*

8. “The sole action is to turn on tennis matches without the sound. Yes, and though watching tennis isn’t a cure for feeling, it is a clean displacement of effort, will, and disappointment.” (Chapter 4, Page 62)

*For the narrator, the activity of watching televised tennis is a way of tuning out—from work life, from systemic racism, from everything. The reader, however, knows that this space is not protected from the evils of racism, as illustrated through what Serena Williams is forced to endure.*

9. “Appetite won’t attach you to anything no matter how depleted you feel.” (Chapter 5, Page 79)

*Blackness, as explored in Citizen, involves the paradox of being rendered hypervisible and invisible at the same time. Black bodies are everywhere and nowhere. Here, bodily function (hunger) does not ground the narrator to reality.*

10. “Those years of and before me and my brothers, the years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs, boy, hey boy, each a felony, accumulate into the hours inside our lives where we are all caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its roots our limbs, a throat sliced through and when we open our mouth to speak blossoms, o blossoms, no place coming out, brother, dear brother, that kind of blue. The sky is the silence of brothers all the days leading up to my call [...]” (Chapter 6, Page 90)

*One can make the case that the entire, collective history of African Americans is encapsulated in this paragraph. The notion of the shared history of violence meted out against blacks by whites is shown here in the imagery of a body that has been lynched; it’s telling that Rankine does not feel the need to include the actual word ‘lynching’; instead, we are offered word choices that humanize, in turn showing the dehumanization of the act.*

11. “I say good-bye before anyone can hang up, don’t hang up. Wait with me. Wait with me though the waiting might be the call of good-byes [...]” (Chapter 6, Page 90)

*Another element of the black experience, as Rankine points out here, is a constant feeling of loss. In this passage, the narrator is involved in a*

*continuous act of saying good-bye, illustrating that violence carried out against blacks in America seems ceaseless and endless.*

12. “Boys will be boys being boys feeling their capacity heaving butting heads righting their wrongs in the violence of aggravated adolescence charging forward...” (Chapter Six, Page 101)

*In the subsection on the Jena Six, Rankine uses a run-on sentence to capture the breathless feeling of being young; she uses that same breathless ease to describe the ease with which young black men are imprisoned.*

13. “Grief comes out of relationships to subjects over time and not to any subject in theory, you tell the English sky, to give him an out. The distance between you and him is thrown into relief: bodies moving through the same life differently” (Chapter 6, Page 117)

*The narrator tries to give a white man the benefit of the doubt, attempting to understand why the white man does not feel the same grief as the narrator (a woman of color) about the Hackney race riots in 2011. However, “the distance” between these two individuals, no matter what, is made evident in this exchange.*

14. “Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word” Chapter 6, Page 122)

*This is a reference to an Italian soccer player using the n-word, hurling it at another player on the French team, during the 2006 World Cup. The incredible power of language is especially poignant in this example in that it leads to a physical response which in turn changes the outcome of the match, and, in turn, a small bit of history.*

15. “This is because, in order save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted to hear the meaning behind the words./We hear, then we remember./The state of emergency is also always a state of emergence.” (Chapter 6, Page 126)

*A racial slur is not just words. The “meaning behind the words” invokes an entire history of racial injustice. Here, the narrator focuses on embracing that*

*history in order to bring about change, noting that an “emergency” can also lead to “emergence,” as the two words are the same until their final letter.*

16. “You sit next to the man on the train, bus, in the plane, waiting room, anywhere he could be forsaken. You put your body there in proximity to, adjacent to, alongside, within.” (Chapter 6, Page 131)

*Solidarity among African-Americans takes on a frantic urgency in the way Rankine lists the prepositional phrases (“proximity to,” “adjacent to,”) in this line.*

17. “It’s then the man next to you turns to you. And as if from inside your own head you agree that if anyone asks you to move, you’ll tell them we are traveling as a family [...]” (Chapter 6, Page 133)

*The man on the train is not related to the narrator, but in the larger sense, the narrator is; the narrator, as a black woman, is in a kind of solidarity with other African-Americans, due to the common ground from trials of everyday racism and the legacy of slavery.*

18. “because white men can’t/police their imagination/black people are dying” (Chapter 6, Page 135)

*This statement is particularly profound in its placement immediately after the list of deceased victims of racial violence. Further, making “police” into a verb here shows law enforcement officers as less public servants for all and more actualizations of baseless fear among whites of/towards blacks.*

19. “And still a world begins its furious erasure—/Who do you think you are, saying I to me?/You nothing./You nobody./You.” (Chapter 7, Page 142)

*Themes of erasure and the paradox of existing when so many want you obliterated, both unstated features of racism, are themes throughout the book.*

20. “Don’t say I if it means so little/holds the little forming no one.” (Chapter 7, Page 143)

*There is no one particular idea of self—the conception of “I”—in the narrator of Citizen, who is oftentimes assumed to be a person of color. This lack of*

*self is Rankine pointing to the fact that, with systemic racism, blackness is on par with an erosion of self.*

21. “I they he she we you were too concluded yesterday to know whatever was done could also be done, was also done, was never done—/The worst injury is feeling you don’t belong so much/to you—” (Chapter 7, Page 146)

*The disorienting (and painful) feeling of not having ownership over one’s self, which is a common experience for any disenfranchised person, is emphasized here. The litany of pronouns again emphasizes hypervisibility and invisibility, and the notion of “they” as pointedly racist has been well-documented by many authors and filmmakers.*

22. “Trayvon Martin’s name sounds from the car radio a dozen times each half hour. You pull your love back into the seat because though no one seems to be chasing you, the justice system has other plans” (Chapter 7, Page 151)

*The narrative of Citizen either exists at a precise historical moment or in an abstraction outside the normal confines of time. Here, the scene is set at an exact moment in history: it is the summer of 2013, and the narrator learns that the Trayvon Martin’s assailant, George Zimmerman, has been found not guilty by a jury of his peers in Sanford, Florida.*

23. “Despite the air-conditioning you pull the button back and the window slides down into its door-sleeve. A breeze touches your cheek. As something should” (Chapter 7, Page 151)

*In this intimate moment, the narrator learns the troubling news that George Zimmerman, the killer of Trayvon Martin, was found not guilty. At that moment, the narrator is in need of comfort, which is nowhere to be found except in “the breeze.”*

24. “Though a share of all remembering, a measure of all memory, is breath and to breathe you have to create a truce—/a truce with the patience of a stethoscope” (Chapter 7, Page 156)

*Simply to exist (“to breathe”) as a black person in America is to participate in a tradition of racism borne from slavery. The narrator/Rankine contends that for blacks to simply exist in a way where sanity in the face of constant racism can be achieved, it means making peace with the consistent*

*microaggressions shown by whites. Here, these microaggressions are symbolized by the stethoscope, a device designed to search out irregularities and make sure the insides of a person (which are separate from external differences) are sound.*

25. "It wasn't a match, I say. It was a lesson." (Chapter 7, Page 159)

*The final words of the book return to the tennis motif in Citizen. The line refers to a racist encounter experienced by the narrator with a white woman at the gym: The encounter was not a "match" because racism is not a contest that the narrator can win. The racist encounter was a lesson about how the bigotry flourishes in America today.*

## ESSAY TOPICS

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1. Consider the multimedia, multidisciplinary nature of *Citizen*. Discuss the interplay of words, visual elements, and the overall structure (or lack thereof) of the book. Why did Rankine make this decision? What would be lost if the artwork, for example, were to be removed from the book?
2. The majority of *Citizen* is written in the second-person point of view, which places the reader squarely at the center of the narrative as “you.” Consider the impact that the second-person voice has in relation to the reader’s racial identity. How might a reader identifying as white receive the text differently from readers identifying as non-white?
3. Consider the artwork that illustrates *Citizen*. Select one visual element and examine it in the context of the book as a whole. In what ways does this particular piece of art affect and/or symbolize the narrative? Discuss the piece’s placement in the text overall, and also how it interplays with the immediately adjacent text.
4. Return to the discussion of Serena Williams in Chapter Two, thinking about the “two dimensional” rendering of her. Discuss this concept.
5. According to Rankine, there are numerous paradoxes embedded in the black experience, including invisibility/hypervisibility, and historical self/present self. Are there other paradoxes you can think of?
6. Discuss the concept of “post-racial America”—and the rejection of this concept—in *Citizen*. Knowing Rankine’s thoughts on the legacy of slavery, is it ever possible for American society to be “post-racial”?
7. The epigraph to *Citizen* is the following quote by French filmmaker Chris Marker: “If they don’t see happiness in the picture, at least they’ll see the black.” Where are there moments (if any) of happiness in *Citizen*? Discuss the relevance of this quotation to the text as a whole.
8. Examples of racial microaggressions are offered throughout the book. Review each of these microaggressions and explain how subtle instances of racism reinforce larger, historical systems of racism.

9. A watermark is a faint marking, often used on official documents, to indicate authenticity. Watermarks appear twice in *Citizen*: first in the section that makes reference to President Obama, on page 112, and, second, in the discussion of the World Cup, beginning on page 120. What purpose do the watermarks serve in these sections? Discuss their effect as an experimental technique in the context of their respective chapters, as well as in the book in its entirety.
  
10. The final line of *Citizen* is a tennis reference: “It wasn’t a match, I say. It was a lesson” (159). What does this line mean, considering the rest of the scene? Looking at the work as a whole and explain how tennis functions as a multi-faceted motif throughout the book.