

CITIZEN

Community Reading Project 2015

Author: Claudia Rankine

Claudia Rankine is a Jamaican-American poet and playwright. She currently lives in California and is a chair member at the University of Southern California's English Department. She has written numerous works, including *Citizen*, which work as a series on the topic of institutionalized racism.

Citizen is largely a series of her own personal anecdotes of her experiences with racism throughout her lifetime.

Style and Form:

This book is unique, and challenging, because of three main factors: it is prose poetry, it is multimodal, and it is mostly written in the second person. Now, what does all that mean?

Prose poetry is just a fancy way of saying poetry that's not written in verse, but rather as prose with poetic qualities. Multimodality means that this book uses more than just the written text as a mode of communication—in this case photographs and other pieces of art are used (example to the right). And the second person means use of the pronoun "you." The second person does a lot of work:

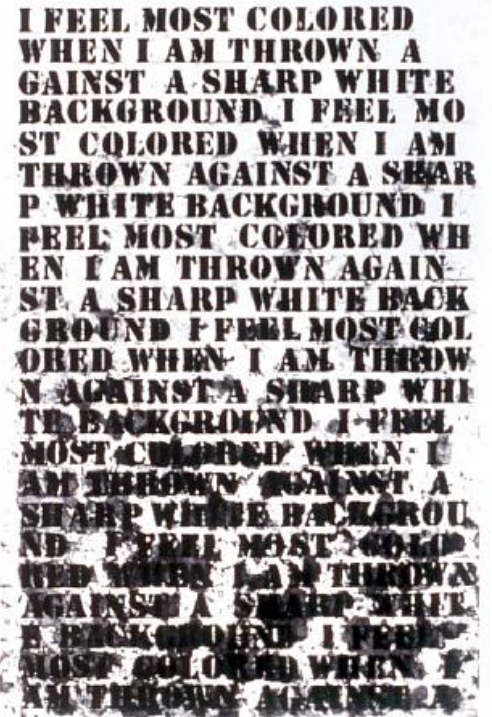
- This book can be read with a few different lenses because the "you" really isn't defined
- The "you" can be used to encapsulate all African American people, all minorities, or even all people facing oppression
- The "you" can make you examine the situation as if it is actually you, the reader, in the situation, inspiring empathy

Helpful Terminology:

-Institutionalized Racism: racism perpetrated by government entities such as schools, the courts or the military. Unlike the racism perpetrated by individuals, institutional racism has the power to negatively affect the bulk of people belonging to a racial group.

-White Privilege: any advantage, opportunity, benefit, head start, or general protection from negative societal mistreatment, which persons deemed white will typically enjoy, but which others will generally not enjoy (Tim Wise).

-Systems of Oppression:



Sections of the Book:

This book is divided into multiple parts. The parts are somewhat non-linear, meaning they could each stand alone independently:

- 1) A collection of anecdotes of Rankine's personal experiences with racism while growing up
- 2) A discussion of racism in society (breaking from the second person), mostly using tennis player Serena Williams as an example
- 3) A collection of anecdotes of the acts of racism she has encountered in her adult-life, mostly within the academic and professional world
- 4) "Scripts for Situational Videos"—an examination of historical events
 - Hurricane Katrina- August 29, 2005
 - Trayvon Martin- February 26, 2012
 - 17-year-old boy shot by George Zimmerman in Florida
 - John Craig Anderson- June 26, 2011
 - Victim of a hate crime in Jackson, Mississippi
 - Killed by 18-year-old Deryl Dedmon
 - Jena Six- December 4, 2006
 - Six black teenagers in Jena, Louisiana beat up a white teenager at school
 - Justin Barker, the victim, was injured but not killed
 - The six teenagers faced severe charges, which some argued were too extreme, and that the charges would have been more lenient if they had been white
 - The charges against the Jena Six led to a huge civil rights demonstration
 - Mark Duggan- August 4, 2011
 - Unarmed black man shot by police in Tottenham, England
 - Led to riots across England

Implications of the Book:

- This is a text that is meant to start a possibly uncomfortable discussion about uncomfortable truths
- Consider that racial issues address everyone
- This text is part of an ongoing discussion and a national dialogue
 - "I don't know how to end what doesn't have an ending." (159)
 - "It wasn't a match. It was a lesson." (159)

Sample Questions for Students:

- When you read the text, who did you think the "You" was referring to? How did it make you feel?
- Why do you think the book is called *Citizen*?
- Why did the author use prose poetry to engage with the topics of racism and oppression?
- What emotions do you see in the author's writing? Anger, frustration? Where do you see it?