Citizen: An American Lyric

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CLAUDIA RANKINE

Claudia Rankine was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1963 and later moved to New York City with her family when she was seven years old. In New York, she went to Roman Catholic elementary and secondary schools, both of which were located in the Bronx. She later received a degree from Williams College in 1986 before going on to obtain a Master of Fine Arts in poetry from Columbia University in 1993. She published her first book of poetry, *Nothing in Nature Is Private*, in 1994, followed by her second book, *The End of the Alphabet*, in 1998. Three years later, she published a longer, book-length poem entitled *Plot*. Her first widely recognized work was the multimedia book *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, which was published in 2004 and in some ways served as a stylistic precursor to 2014's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award. *Citizen* also won Rankine the NAACP Image Award for poetry, the PEN Open Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award for poetry, among other prizes. She has served as a professor of literature and creative writing at Barnard College, the University of Georgia, the University of Houston, Pomona College, and Case Western Reserve University. She currently teaches at Yale University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Because *Citizen* is a response to many events throughout history, it would be difficult to provide a comprehensive list of all the historical references Rankine makes in the book. Having said that, Rankine takes special care to trace a line from the Jim Crow era to contemporary times, so it's worth knowing that Jim Crow laws enforced racial segregation in the United States from 1877 (the end of Reconstruction) to 1954, when the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown V. Board of Education* ruled that it was unconstitutional to segregate public schools—though widespread racial segregation didn't truly end until 10 years later, when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed. However, it's arguable that the racist attitude advanced by segregation is still alive in contemporary times, which is why Rankine connects the Jim Crow era to the present by reminding readers that bigotry is still very much a part of everyday life in the United States. To that end, she references quite a few important events that have taken place in the past 20 years, the most prominent of which is probably the 2011 killing of Trayvon Martin. A 17-year-old African American boy, Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a member of the neighborhood watch in his gated community in Sanford, Florida. Because Zimmerman's reasons for shooting Martin are hazy and seem to rest on an implicit bias against young African American males—and because he was completely cleared of all charges by a jury—this event led to uproar throughout the country, and Martin subsequently became an important cultural figure in the fight against hate crimes and racial profiling.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* is in conversation with her previous multi-genre book, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*. Both works examine the nature of identity and use a mixture of poetry, essays, and visual art to discuss race and racism in contemporary culture. Furthermore, it's worth mentioning some of the many books Rankine draws upon within the pages of *Citizen*. One, for instance, is James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, in which he considers the "precarious adjustment" black men often find themselves having to make in order to keep themselves from responding with unchecked anger to racism. Rankine applies this idea to her study of anger, placing it alongside quotes from *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon's book about the dehumanizing effect of colonization. She also references Ralph Ellison's seminal novel about race and identity, *Invisible Man*, as well as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. In terms of other contemporary writing that explores race and identity, *Citizen* shares certain stylistic and thematic interests with books like Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, Morgan Parker's *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*, and Danez Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Citizen: An American Lyric
- **When Published:** October 7, 2014
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Poetry, Multimedia Nonfiction, Nonfiction
- **Setting:** Given the fact that *Citizen* takes place in many different contexts and is often dislocated from a specific location, it's impossible to name the setting of the book, though it might be helpful to point out that it examines race in contemporary times.
- **Climax:** There is no one climax in *Citizen*.
- **Antagonist:** Racism, historical erasure, and ignorance.

EXTRA CREDIT

The Racial Imaginary Institute. In 2017, Claudia Rankine founded a collective called The Racial Imaginary Institute, which serves as a "cultural laboratory" where thinkers and artists can explore the concept of race and engage with the idea that, although race is nothing but a construct, it has a significant impact on real life.

Power Couple. In collaboration with her romantic partner, the filmmaker John Lucas, Rankine created a number of conceptual videos that explore race, history, and identity. These videos are called "situation videos," and their scripts are included in *Citizen*. They can be viewed online at Claudia Rankine's website.

PLOT SUMMARY

A mixed-media collection of vignettes, poems, photographs, and reproductions of various forms of visual art, *Citizen* floats in and out of a multiple topics and perspectives. It begins by introducing an unnamed black protagonist, whom Rankine refers to as "you." A child, this character is sitting in class one day when the white girl sitting behind her quietly asks her to lean over so she can copy her test answers. Even though it will be obvious that the girl behind her is cheating, the protagonist obliges by leaning over, wondering all the while why her teacher hasn't noticed. She determines that it's either because her teacher doesn't care about cheating or, worse, because she never truly saw the protagonist sitting there in the first place.

Continuing to detail the experiences of this unnamed protagonist, Rankine narrates an instance later in the young woman's life, when her friend frequently calls her by the name of her own housekeeper. The protagonist knows that her friend makes this mistake because the housekeeper is the only other black person in her life, but neither of them mention this. Eventually, the friend stops calling the protagonist by the wrong name, but the protagonist doesn't forget this. In keeping with this indication that it's difficult to move on from this entrenched kind of racism, Rankine includes a picture called "Jim Crow Rd." by the photographer Michael David Murphy. The picture is of a well-manicured suburban neighborhood with sizable houses in the background. In the foreground there stands a sign indicating that the neighborhood juts out off a street called Jim Crow Road—evidence that the country's racist past is still woven throughout the structures of everyday life.

Rankine stays with the unnamed protagonist, who in response to racist comments constantly asks herself things like, "What did he just say?" and "Did I hear what I think I heard?" The problem, she realizes, is that racism is hard to cope with because before people of color can process instances of bigotry, they have to experience them. There is, in other words, no way of avoiding the initial pain. This dilemma arises frequently for the protagonist, like when a colleague at the university where she teaches complains to her about the fact that his dean is forcing him to hire a person of color. Hearing this, the protagonist wonders why her friend feels comfortable saying this to her, but she doesn't object. Still, the interaction leaves her with a dull headache and wishing she didn't have to pretend that this sort of behavior is acceptable.

The protagonist experiences a slew of similar microaggressions. Some of them, though, aren't actually all that micro. For instance, when she and her partner go to a movie one night, they ask their friend—a black man—to pick up their child from school. On the drive back from the movie, the protagonist receives a call from her neighbor, who tells her that there's a sinister looking man walking back and forth in front of her house. He is, the neighbor says, talking to himself. The protagonist insists that the man is her friend, reminding the neighbor that he has even met this person, but the neighbor refuses to believe this, saying that he has already called the police. Unsurprisingly, the protagonist is right. By the time she and her partner get to their house, the police have already come and gone, and the neighbor has apologized to their friend, who was simply on the phone. Feeling awkward, the protagonist tells her friend that he should take his calls in the backyard next time. After a tense pause, he tells her that he can take his calls wherever he wants, and the protagonist is instantly embarrassed for telling him otherwise.

An even more pronouncedly racist moment occurs when the protagonist is in line at Starbucks and the white man standing in front of her calls a group of black teenagers the n-word. When she objects to his use of this word, he acts like it's not a big deal. When she tells him not to "get all KKK" on the teenagers, he says, "Now there you go," trying to make it seem like the protagonist is the one who has overstepped, not him.

Rankine transitions to an examination of how the protagonist and other people of color respond to a constant barrage of racism. The natural response to injustice is anger, but Rankine illustrates that this response isn't always viable for people of color, since letting frustration show often invites even more mistreatment. To demonstrate this, she turns to the career of the famous African American tennis player Serena Williams, pointing to the multiple injustices she has suffered at the hands of the predominantly white tennis community, which judges her unfairly because of her race. Recounting several of Williams's "outburst[s]" in response to this unfairness, Rankine shows that responding to racism with anger—which understandably arises in such situations—often only makes matters worse, as is the case for Williams when she's fined $82,500 for speaking out against a line judge who makes a blatantly biased call against her. Three years later, Serena Williams wins two gold medals at the 2012 Olympic Games, and when she celebrates by doing a three-second dance on the tennis court, commentators call her "immature and classless" for "Crip-Walking all over the most lily-white place in the world."

Rankine narrates another handful of uncomfortable instances

in which the unnamed protagonist is forced to quietly endure racism. At one point, she attends a reading by a humorist who implies that it's common for white people to laugh at racist jokes in private, adding that most people wouldn't laugh at this kind of joke if they were out in public where black people might overhear them. When he says this, the protagonist realizes that the humorist has effectively excluded her from the rest of the audience by exclusively addressing the white people in the crowd, focusing only on their perspective while failing to recognize (or care about) how racist his remark really is.

At another event, the protagonist listens to the philosopher Judith Butler speak about why language is capable of hurting people. Butler says that this is because simply existing makes people "addressable," opening them up to verbal attack by others. In this moment, the protagonist realizes that being black in a white-dominated world doesn't make her feel invisible, but "hypervisible." This, in turn, accords with the author Zora Neale Hurston's line that she feels "most colored" when she's "thrown against a sharp white background." These thoughts, however, don't ease the pain—the persistent **headache**—that the protagonist feels on a daily basis because of the racist way people treat her. Unable to let herself show anger, she suffers in private.

At this point, *Citizen* becomes more abstract and poetic, as Rankine writes scripts for "situation video[s]" she has made in collaboration with her partner, John Lucas, who is a visual artist. The first of these scripts is made up of quotes that the couple has taken from CNN coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the terrible aftermath of the disaster. In disjointed and figurative writing, Rankine creates a sense of desperation and inequity, depicting what it feels like to belong to one of the many black communities along the Gulf Coast—communities that national relief organizations all but ignored and ultimately failed to properly serve after the hurricane devastated the area and left many people homeless.

Rankine moves on to present "situation video[s]" commemorating the deaths of a number of black men who were killed because of the color of their skin, including Trayvon Martin and James Craig Anderson. She also writes about racist profiling in a script entitled "Stop-and-Frisk," providing a first-person account by an unidentified narrator who is pulled over for no reason and mistreated by the police, all because he is a black man who "fit[s] the description" of a criminal for whom the police are supposedly looking.

Returning to the unnamed protagonist, Rankine narrates a scene in which the protagonist is talking to a fellow artist at a party in England. Leaning against the wall, they discuss the riots that have broken out in London as a response to the unjustified police killing of a young black man named Mark Duggan. The artist speaking to the protagonist is white, and he asks her if she's going to write about Duggan. In response, the protagonist turns the question back around, asking why *he* doesn't write about it. This confounds and seemingly irks him, prompting the protagonist to wonder why he would think it'd be difficult to properly feel "the injustice wheeled at" a person of another race.

The next "situation video" that Rankine presents is about the 2006 soccer World Cup, when Zinedine Zidane headbutted Marco Materazzi, who verbally provoked him. Using frame-by-frame photographs that show the progression leading to the headbutt, Rankine quotes a number of writers and thinkers, including the philosopher Maurice Blanchot, Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, and James Baldwin. As the photographs show Zidane register what Materazzi has said, turn around, and approach him, Rankine provides excerpts from the previously mentioned thinkers, including Frantz Fanon's thoughts about the history of discrimination against Algerian people in France. She also calls upon the accounts lip readers gave of what Materazzi said to provoke Zidane, revealing that Materazzi called him a "Big Algerian shit," a "dirty terrorist," and the n-word.

In the final sections of the book, the second-person protagonist notices that nobody is willing to sit next to a certain black man on the train, so she takes the seat. Although the man doesn't turn to look at her, she feels connected to him, understanding that it's sometimes necessary to numb oneself to the many microaggressions and injustices hurled at black people. This consideration of numbness continues into the concluding section, entitled "July 13, 2013"—the day Trayvon Martin's killer was acquitted. Rankine continues to examine the protagonist's gravitation toward numbness before abruptly switching to first-person narration on the book's final page to recount an interaction she has while lying in bed with her partner. She tells him she was killing time in the parking lot by the local tennis courts that day when a woman parked in the spot facing her car but, upon seeing the protagonist sitting across from her, put her car in reverse and parked elsewhere. Instead of following the woman to ask why she did this, the protagonist took her tennis racket and went to the court. "Did you win?" her partner asks. "It wasn't a match," she replies. "It was a lesson."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Protagonist ("You") – Throughout *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine narrates scenes about an unnamed protagonist whose perspective she crafts using the second-person point of view, using "you" to refer to this unidentified character. At first, this narrative device seems to function in a rather conventionally poetic way, calling upon the common practice in contemporary poetry of addressing an anonymous "you" and, in doing so, inviting readers to inhabit this perspective. As the book

progresses, however, context makes it clear that this "you" is actually a specific protagonist who is—like Claudia Rankine herself—an African American woman who teaches at a university. From an early age, this protagonist often feels a sense of "invisibility" when she interacts with white people, many of whom fail to properly acknowledge her. Worse, many of the white people in her life make racist and insensitive comments directly to the protagonist's face, putting her in an uncomfortable position and ignoring that what they've said is problematic. When the protagonist tries to point these instances out, her conversation partners frequently accuse her of being too sensitive and generally ignore the fact that racism is still very much alive in contemporary times. This makes the protagonist extremely angry, but because she believes that showing this anger will only invite more racism, she tries to numb herself to the daily pain of facing racism—an attempt that she recognizes is futile and that gives her a persistent **headache**, though she doesn't come up with any other way of dealing with her own mistreatment.

The Speaker – The speaker is the voice that narrates the events that take place throughout *Citizen* or, more ambiguously, the voice that delivers poetic ruminations about selfhood, racial identity, and virtually everything else that comes up in the book. In some ways, the speaker could be seen as Claudia Rankine herself, especially since some sections of *Citizen* take the form of poetry that isn't necessarily directly tied to the protagonist's perspective. In other moments, though, the speaker morphs into an unidentifiable presence. At times, it seems like the speaker and the unnamed protagonist ("you") are one in the same. This, however, doesn't remain consistent, since there are moments in which the speaker appears to address the protagonist and converse with her. In this way, the speaker's fluid presence throughout the book accentuates Rankine's interest in the idea of identity construction and the ways in which perspective influences a person's sense of self.

Serena Williams – Serena Williams is a professional tennis player and a famous figure in both the tennis community and popular culture. Rankine references Williams's experience as one of the few people of color in the world of professional tennis, pointing to the many ways in which that white-majority community has treated her unfairly. In particular, Rankine focuses on the 2009 U.S. Open, when Williams cussed out a line judge for making an unfair call against her (a call that seems in retrospect to have stemmed from the overall tennis community's bias against her as a black woman). Because of this so-called "outburst," Williams was fined $82,500. At the Olympics several years later, Williams won two of the United States' three gold medals in tennis. When she did a very short dance to celebrate this victory, commentators and spectators alike largely criticized her, accusing her of being "crass." Rankine uses this to illustrate the extent to which people of color are often held to stricter, less forgiving standards than their white peers.

Judith Butler – Judith Butler is a philosopher and public intellectual whose work revolves around gender, politics, ethics, and queer theory. In *Citizen*, the protagonist attends a lecture given by Butler, where Butler explains that the reason language is capable of hurting people is that simply existing makes people "addressable," opening them up to whatever others might say to or about them. Hearing this marks an important moment for the protagonist, who suddenly realizes that—contrary to her previous belief—people of color aren't invisible when surrounded by white people, but "hypervisible." This idea corresponds not only with her thoughts about the professional tennis community's mistreatment of Serena Williams, but also about the author Zora Neale Hurston's phrase, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background."

Zora Neale Hurston – Zora Neale Hurston was an African American author most famous for her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Known mostly for her fiction, Hurston was also a respected filmmaker and anthropologist. What's more, she wrote a fair amount of nonfiction, including the essay "How It Feels To Be Colored Me," in which she observes, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." Rankine takes this idea and applies it to her examination of what it means to be "hypervisible" as a black person surrounded by white people.

Zinedine Zidane – Zinedine Zidane is a former professional soccer player. Born in Marseilles, France, he is of Algerian descent, his parents having moved to France before he was born. In the 2006 World Cup, he was ejected from the game in the final minutes of the match because he headbutted Marco Materazzi, a player who—according to lipreaders who have studied their tense exchange—called him a "Big Algerian Shit," a "dirty terrorist," and the n-word (it's worth noting that the exact translations of these phrases, which were not uttered in English, appear to vary in *Citizen* from what newspapers reported, though the general character of the insults remains the same either way). Rankine includes a frame-by-frame photographic progression of this moment, surrounding it with quotes from philosophers and writers about identity, the history of racism and discrimination, and anger.

Marco Materazzi – Marco Materazzi is a former professional soccer player. In the 2006 World Cup, Zinedine Zidane headbutted him after Materazzi verbally assaulted him. According to lipreaders who have studied the account, Materazzi hurled racist and anti-Muslim insults at Zidane, who is a Muslim man of Algerian descent. Rankine presents readers with a frame-by-frame photographic progression of this altercation and provides accompanying quotes from philosophers and writers about identity and the history of racism.

Trayvon Martin – Trayvon Martin was a black boy who was shot and killed in 2012 when he was only 17 years old. This took place in Sanford, Florida, where Martin was visiting family in a gated community. While walking back to the house of his father's fiancée, he encountered a member of the neighborhood watch who had already reported him to police. By the time the police arrived, this man had shot and killed Martin. In the aftermath of this event, Trayvon Martin became an important cultural figure in the debate surrounding contemporary racism and hate crimes, especially because his killer was eventually acquitted. Although Rankine doesn't enumerate the details of this story, she mourns Trayvon Martin's death in a section that she dedicates to his memory.

James Craig Anderson – James Craig Anderson was a middle-aged African American man who was killed in Jackson, Mississippi, in 2011 by a young white man who—along with his friends—robbed and beat Anderson before running him over with a truck. The murder was declared a hate crime. Rankine dedicates one of the sections of *Citizen* to the memory of Anderson.

Mark Duggan – Mark Duggan was a 29-year-old British black man who was murdered by the London police in 2011. His death led to riots throughout London and England as a whole. In *Citizen*, the protagonist talks to an artist she meets at a party about the riots. When the artist—a white man—asks her if she plans to write about Duggan, she asks him the same question, not understanding why he thinks he'd be unable to properly memorialize Duggan simply because Duggan was black and the artist is white.

Frantz Fanon – Frantz Fanon was a psychiatrist and philosopher from the French West Indies. An important figure in post-colonial studies, he wrote about the fraught and racist reception of Algerians in France in the aftermath of the Algerian War. Rankine quotes his work when considering the altercation that took place between Marco Materazzi and Zinedine Zidane during the 2006 soccer World Cup, when—according to lipreaders who studied the exchange—Materazzi made racist comments to Zidane about his Algerian heritage.

Frederick Douglass – Frederick Douglass was a former slave turned activist, abolitionist, orator, and writer. His famous autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, details his experience as a slave, his education, and his resolve to fight back against his oppressors. A famous quote from this book appears in *Citizen* to accompany the frame-by-frame photographic progression of Zinedine Zidane headbutting Marco Materazzi during the 2006 soccer World Cup.

Hennessy Youngman (Jayson Musson) – Hennessy Youngman is a fictional persona created by Jayson Musson, a young American man whose YouTube series "Art Thoughtz" serve as tutorials that teach viewers about contemporary art. Rankine references a video in which Youngman claims that the key to becoming successful as a black artist is to be angry. She uses this to further examine the idea of anger, juxtaposing this notion of "sellable anger" with the genuine rage people of color feel on a daily basis.

The Protagonist's Partner – The protagonist's romantic partner is a man whose race is never indicated in *Citizen*. However, he is possibly modeled off of the white visual artist John Lucas, who is Claudia Rankine's romantic partner in real life. A visual artist, he collaborated with Rankine on the multimedia "situation videos," the scripts of which appear in *Citizen* and focus on things like the killing of Trayvon Martin, James Craig Anderson, and Mark Duggan. As a character in the book, though, the protagonist's partner has conversations with the protagonist about her various encounters with racism and gets quite angry when he hears bigoted remarks.

Mary Catherine – Mary Catherine is a white girl in the protagonist's class when she's still in school. The protagonist refers to her as Mary Catherine because she can't remember if the girl's name is Mary or Catherine. After Mary Catherine asks the protagonist to let her cheat off her test, she says that the protagonist smells good and that her features are closer to those of a white person than those of a black person. Thinking this over, the protagonist wonders if Mary Catherine says this because she would feel better about cheating from an "almost white person" than from a black person.

Mariana Alves – Mariana Alves is a tennis umpire who made a number of unfair calls against Serena Williams in the 2004 U.S. Open. Exasperated by this injustice, Williams responded to one of these bad calls by waving her finger and saying, "No, no, no," though she was able to contain her anger.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Maurice Blanchot – Maurice Blanchot was a French writer and philosopher whose work Rankine quotes while discussing the altercation that took place between Marco Materazzi and Zinedine Zidane during the 2006 soccer World Cup.

James Baldwin – James Baldwin was an African American writer who wrote extensively about identity and race. Rankine quotes from his work several times throughout *Citizen*, calling upon his ideas most extensively when discussing the altercation that took place between Marco Materazzi and Zinedine Zidane during the 2006 soccer World Cup.

Ralph Ellison – Ralph Ellison was an African American author most famous for writing the novel *Invisible Man*, which Rankine quotes when considering the altercation that took place between Marco Materazzi and Zinedine Zidane during the 2006 soccer World Cup.

Sister Evelyn – Sister Evelyn is the protagonist's teacher, who doesn't notice when she lets Mary Catherine cheat off of her

test. This causes the protagonist to wonder if she is perhaps invisible to Sister Evelyn because she is black in a predominantly white space.

Caroline Wozniacki – Caroline Wozniacki is a former professional tennis player from Denmark. On a professional tennis court in 2012, she stuffed towels in her shirt and shorts and pretended to be Serena Williams.

Venus Williams – Venus Williams is Serena Williams's older sister. Like Serena, Venus is also a professional tennis player and one of the sport's few people of color.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

BIGOTRY, IMPLICIT BIAS, AND LEGITIMACY

In *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine's lyrical and multimedia examination of contemporary race relations, readers encounter a kind of racism that is deeply ingrained in everyday life. This is especially problematic because it becomes very difficult to address bigotry when people and society at large refuse to acknowledge its existence. Throughout the book, Rankine refers to the protagonist in the second-person tense ("you") so that readers effectively experience the book as this person (a black woman). This protagonist ("you") interacts with a number of white people who overlook their own implicit, unexamined biases, effectively giving themselves permission to say racist and insensitive things to the protagonist. In many of these cases, they do this because they think they can—in their conversations with the protagonist—transcend the normal boundaries of what is and is not acceptable. However, they only think this because, as white people, they haven't had to process the lifetime's worth of discrimination that many people of color have had to endure. Accordingly, the white people in the book convince themselves that they exist in a world in which racism no longer exists, failing to grasp not only that this is untrue, but also that their ignorance actually perpetuates racism and makes it harder to confront. Worse, when the protagonist summons the courage to point out that what her interlocutors have said is problematic, many of them simply accuse her of being too sensitive, thereby delegitimizing her very reasonable reaction. This, in turn, makes it even harder for her to challenge bigotry, ultimately suggesting that such implicit biases threaten to devalue otherwise legitimate responses to racism.

Throughout *Citizen*, Rankine calls attention to the ways in which people often discount their own racist behavior. One of the main problems the protagonist faces is that so many people in her daily life think they can transcend what it means to be racist. In other words, many of the white people in her life are unwilling to examine their own implicit biases, assuming that they exist in a world in which such biases don't cause harm. As a result, they think they're subverting or sidestepping racism when, in reality, they're perpetuating it. This is evident when the protagonist attends a reading at the university where she's a professor. When a student asks the visiting writer (who is a humorist) what makes a joke funny, he talks about context, proposing that most people would laugh with their friends at certain jokes that they might not laugh at "out in public where black people could hear what was said." Suddenly, the protagonist realizes that she has been implicitly excluded from the rest of the audience. By framing his answer like this, the writer forces the protagonist to grapple with the fact that he isn't addressing her, he's addressing the white people in the audience. Simply put, his response implies a white person's perspective. Furthermore, the writer has admitted to finding racist jokes funny—but he doesn't seem to mind admitting this, clearly believing that this is permissible. The fact that he adopts this mindset without any guilt indicates that he doesn't think he's being racist—a sign that bigotry is so firmly entrenched in society and everyday life that it somehow goes unexamined by the very people keeping it alive.

Of course, this kind of implicit racism doesn't go unexamined by *everybody*. People of color acutely feel the harmful effects of bigoted comments, which accumulate and sometimes turn into even more obvious instances of racism. This is apparent when the protagonist is waiting in line at Starbucks and she hears a white man standing next to her call a group of loud teenagers the n-word. Unwilling to let this slide, the protagonist objects by saying, "Hey, I am standing right here." In response, the man asks, "Why do you care?" This stuns the protagonist, and for good reason: this man has just used the most offensive word possible to refer to black people and now he's acting like he doesn't understand why this would upset the protagonist. In this way, the man condescends to her, delegitimizing her right to be angry. Gathering herself, the protagonist defends the teenagers, saying, "They are just being kids. Come on, no need to get all KKK on them." Hearing this, the man replies, "Now there you go," acting as if the protagonist is the one who has made the conversation about race. In this moment, the man exposes his own racism by using the n-word and then he immediately criticizes the protagonist for being too sensitive when she responds accordingly. In turn, readers see that even transparently racist people are capable of finding ways to convince themselves that they're not racist. Moreover, it becomes painfully clear how hard it is to challenge bigotry when the very people setting forth this kind of prejudice actively deny the implications of their behavior.

On the whole, *Citizen* showcases the emotional impact that

facing constant racism—and the kind of manipulation that often accompanies it—can have on a person. Because racists are often so quick to belittle or delegitimize the way their behavior affects people of color, Rankine intimates that there is sometimes very little people can do to effectively push back against bigotry in the moment they experience it. To endure so many aggressions (small, subtle, or otherwise), she implies, it is sometimes necessary to numb oneself to the world. Unfortunately, though, this creates a certain negative experience in and of itself, since the very lack of feeling can be painful—after all, numbness only reminds people that they felt the need to numb themselves in the first place. In this way, *Citizen* is a study of what it's like to live with the constant pain of racism in a world that largely refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of that pain or, for that matter, the racism that caused it.

IDENTITY AND SENSE OF SELF

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* explores the very complicated manner in which race and racism affect identity construction. The book invites readers to consider how people conceive of their own identities and, more specifically, what this process looks like for black people cultivating a sense of self in the context of America's fraught racial dynamics. In this vein, Rankine is interested in the idea of invisibility and its influence on one's self-conception. At first, the protagonist believes that racists often fail to truly see black people—whether this means literally overlooking their presence, or, more metaphorically, refusing to acknowledge their worth. However, as *Citizen* progresses, the protagonist adopts the philosopher Judith Butler's idea that humans are susceptible to hurtful language because the mere act of "being" makes them "addressable," meaning that simply existing renders people vulnerable to whatever others might say about them. With this in mind, the protagonist refigures her idea of how racism impacts identity, realizing that the problem she faces isn't invisibility in the presence of racists, but "hypervisib[ility]"—essentially, standing out starkly as a person of color in a majority-white environment. Calling upon the author Zora Neale Hurston's assertion that she feels "most colored when [she's] thrown against a sharp white background," Rankine implies that the outside world is capable of significantly altering the way people approach and view their own identities and cultural positioning.

Before considering the concept of "hypervisib[ility]," Rankine establishes what it feels like to experience what seems—at first—like cultural invisibility. From an early age, the book's protagonist comes to realize that the people around her frequently treat her as if she's not really there. When, for instance, a white girl (Mary Catherine) in the protagonist's class convinces her to lean to one side so she can copy her answers on a test, the protagonist wonders why their teacher, Sister Evelyn, doesn't notice. Thinking about this, she wonders if Sister Evelyn possibly "never actually saw [the protagonist] sitting there" in the first place, feeling as if she's invisible to her very own instructor. Later, as an adult, the protagonist is on a train when a white man walks into a young black boy and he doesn't even notice, despite the fact that he knocked the boy to the ground. Witnessing this, the protagonist wishes that the man would turn around and help the boy up, but she soon thinks that this would never happen because the boy is invisible to the man, who "has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself." According to this idea, people like this white man only acknowledge individuals who look like them and in whom they recognize themselves. In turn, it becomes clear that the protagonist has already grasped the notion that the external world is somehow related to a person's sense of self, intuiting that there is a relationship between a person's race, the way they navigate the world, and how they conceive of themselves.

Of course, the difference between the white man who knocks over the black boy and the protagonist herself is that the man allows his sense of self to influence the way he interacts with the world, whereas the protagonist's interactions with the world are what influence her sense of self. Put another way, the white man experiences a certain level of privilege because being part of the racial majority in the U.S. means he never has to second-guess his own cultural positioning. But this isn't necessarily the same way the outside world brings itself to bear on black people, who often feel diminished by racist societal structures. And yet, this feeling of diminishment doesn't mean that black people are "invisible"—in fact, the protagonist eventually comes to believe that black people are *especially* visible, since the color of their skin opens them up to all kinds of mistreatment and injustice. To that end, the protagonist comes to feel "hypervisible," a notion that aligns with Rankine's thoughts about Venus and Serena Williams, the famous professional **tennis** players who are among the sport's only people of color. Watching the way the tennis community mistreats the Williams sisters leads Rankine to further consider the experience of being black in a "historically white space." Thinking this way, she turns to a line written by the author Zora Neale Hurston: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." This idea suggests that "historically white space[s]" have the power to reorient the way black people feel about their own identities. By being "hypervisible," it seems, people of color suddenly find themselves scrutinizing who they are from the external, foreign, and often critical perspective of their white peers.

Interestingly enough, this kind of thinking changes the protagonist's feeling of invisibility in "white space[s]," but it *doesn't* change the overall idea that identity is profoundly influenced by the surrounding circumstances. In this regard, a person's sense of self is dependent upon context, and this is

why it's so problematic that racism continues to flourish in the world at large—after all, if a person's sense of self is formed in relation to the relevant social environment, then the conditions of that environment will bring themselves to bear on that person's entire self-conception. This, Rankine intimates, is why racism poses such a threat to black peoples' identities, since it's capable of distorting the way they see themselves.

ANGER AND EMOTIONAL PROCESSING

In *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine enumerates the emotional difficulties of processing racism. In particular, she considers the effect anger has on an individual, illustrating the frustrating conundrum many people of color experience when they encounter small instances of bigotry (often called microaggressions) and are expected to simply let these things go. The general expectation, Rankine upholds, is that people of color must simply "move on" from their anger, letting racist remarks slide in the name of getting along with the rest of society. Because of this, she implies, many black people have found ways of processing their anger on their own, not letting themselves show their fury in public. However, Rankine identifies a problem with this coping mechanism, pointing out that even if a person is capable of processing racism, there's no avoiding the fact that each moment must be experienced before it can be processed. This means that even if people of color find effective ways of dealing with racism, they're still forced to endure the pain of the initial moment when somebody says or does something offensive. Bearing this in mind, the protagonist wonders what it would be like to embrace anger instead of keeping it at bay, wanting to know what the "outburst" would be like. However, she unfortunately knows all too well that, in the end, the "outburst" only invites more racism, prejudice, and criticism. Therefore, this examination of coping with racism demonstrates just how unfair it is that people of color are treated so poorly but not given license to express their anger without putting themselves in danger of receiving even more mistreatment.

Rankine begins by illuminating just how emotionally fatiguing it is to face constant racism and prejudice. In the protagonist's daily life, she encounters microaggression after microaggression, and though she is familiar with what it feels like for somebody to say something unkind or discriminatory, it doesn't necessarily become easier for her to process such exchanges. This is because before each instance of racism can be "categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced" first. Time and again, the protagonist finds herself having to consider some new offense, asking, "What did he just say?" or "Did I hear what I think I heard?" This, in turn, illustrates why it's so difficult to cope with bigotry, which never ceases to hurt because any defense mechanism to protect a person from offense can only kick in *after* the initial transgression has already taken place. In this sense, then, it's all but impossible to fully insulate oneself from the pain of racism, even if a person develops otherwise effective ways of dealing with the emotional fallout of such instances.

Because there is seemingly no avoiding the pain that accompanies racist remarks or actions, Rankine turns her attention to the anger that inevitably arises in response to this kind of mistreatment. "Occasionally it is interesting to think about the outburst if you would just cry out—" she writes, cutting herself off. That she doesn't let herself finish this line suggests that allowing oneself to actually enact this sort of anger is more difficult than it might seem. And yet, many people of color *have* demonstrated what it would look like to show anger in the face of racist mistreatment. For instance, when a line judge made a blatantly unfair call against Serena Williams (a black woman who's one of the world's best **tennis** players) in the 2009 U.S. Open, Williams yelled at the judge, cursing her out. Rankine acknowledges that this "outburst" was offensive, but she can't help but respect Williams for "reacting immediately" to injustice, for "existing in the moment, [and] for fighting crazily against" such blatant mistreatment at the hands of the professional tennis community and its obvious bias against her as a black woman in a predominantly-white sport. This, it seems, is what it might be like to finally let anger show. What's important to understand, though, is that Rankine doesn't think Serena Williams's anger is uncommon. Rather, it is the fact that Williams *acts* on this anger that is so remarkable, since Rankine knows that so many people of color keep themselves from showing such emotion.

However, Rankine maintains that enraged "outburst[s]" often backfire. This is because racists—and society at large—tend to weaponize these instances of genuine anger, using them against black people instead of taking pause to reflect upon what originally caused such an outpouring of raw emotion. For instance, after Serena Williams yelled at the line judge at the 2009 U.S. Open, she was fined $82,500. Rankine considers the implications of this punishment, suggesting that this is a perfect encapsulation of how racism functions: "randomly the rules everyone else gets to play by no longer apply to you, and to call this out by calling out 'I swear to God!' is to be called insane, crass, crazy," she writes. Spotlighting this dynamic, she cues readers into the aggravating fact that the most reasonable response to racism—namely, anger—is frequently deemed *un*reasonable, thereby exacerbating the situation and making it even harder to cope with bigotry. Accordingly, readers see how few options are available to people of color when it comes to effectively processing the difficult emotions that arise in the face of racism—an unfortunate reality that makes it even harder to bear the already deeply troubling bigotry, mistreatment, and injustice they face.

HISTORY AND ERASURE

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* provides a nuanced look at the many ways in which humanity's racist history brings itself to bear on the present. Considering what she calls the "social death of history," Rankine suggests that contemporary culture has largely adopted an ahistorical perspective, one that fails to recognize the lasting effects of bigotry. This ahistorical perspective ignores that the present is directly linked to past injustices, as they inform the way people of color are treated in contemporary times. In addition, Rankine also considers how society's eagerness to disregard history influences people of color on a personal level, forcing them to endure a "daily diminishment," one that develops over time and "blossoms out of history." While society at large erases the past, then, people of color are left to grapple with an entire history of racism that thoroughly impacts their own lives. By directing attention to this fraught dynamic, Rankine condemns ahistorical attitudes about race, indicating that this kind of ignorance exacerbates the discrimination and injustice that black people still face today.

Early in *Citizen*, Rankine reminds readers of the inarguable fact that places like the United States have been built upon a history of racism and injustice. On the second page, she presents "Jim Crow Rd.," a photograph by the artist Michael David Murphy. The picture is of a seemingly upper-middle class suburban neighborhood with clean driveways and tidy white houses in the background. In the foreground, though, a sign indicates that an adjacent street is called Jim Crow Road, in reference to the racist Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation in the U.S. Calling attention to this picture, Rankine accentuates the troubling fact that the vestiges of the United States' racist history still exist in the present—indeed, the country's dark past is woven throughout the very structures of daily life. "Jim Crow Rd." reminds viewers not only of the nation's racist policies in the aftermath of slavery (policies that extended well into the 20th century), but also that contemporary America isn't cut off or insulated from its problematic history. To the contrary, evidence of that history crops up wherever a person might look. And yet, the juxtaposition between this street sign's reminder and the affluent, peaceful neighborhood in which it exists speaks to something even more unsettling—namely, that society tends to overlook or even approve of the most glaring reminders that racism and bigotry are still very much alive in contemporary times.

The United States' racist history affects how people behave in the present, and this manifests in many unfortunate ways. To demonstrate this, Rankine considers a number of cultural events in which black people have either been murdered or completely forgotten about by those in power. For instance, she references the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old black boy who was fatally shot in a gated community by a member of the neighborhood watch. Similarly, Rankine also references the death of James Craig Anderson, an African American man killed in a hate crime in Mississippi. In addition, she revisits the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when many predominantly black communities were left to their own devices by national relief organizations. Turning to these recent instances of violence, injustice, and mistreatment, Rankine shows readers that it's illogical and irresponsible to think racism is a thing of the past. To that end, she invites readers to reflect upon the notion that letting street signs like "Jim Crow Rd." go unquestioned might cultivate a certain tolerance for racism. By choosing to see such things as nothing but relics from the past, society simultaneously ignores and assures the continuation of bigotry.

One of the most important implications that Rankine makes by focusing on the "social death of history" is that this kind of forgetfulness—this society-wide unwillingness to recall the recent past—benefits racist white people while hurting black people. By turning away from the horrors of history, white people in positions of power seemingly erase any cultural guilt they might have surrounding white people's historic persecution of black people. What's more, this willful ignorance makes it harder for black people to advocate for themselves while experiencing discrimination, since it's difficult to argue that contemporary injustices belong to a broader pattern of oppression when society refuses to recognize that pattern in the first place. This is perhaps most glaringly obvious in Rankine's discussion of the famous African American **tennis** player Serena Williams and the racist treatment she has received at the hands of the professional tennis community's umpires and commentators. When umpires have made unfair calls against her in the past, commentators have said racially charged things about her various responses. Worse, the entire tennis community has refused to acknowledge that their reception of Williams is impacted by the sport's historical whiteness impacts their reception of Williams, acting as if their racist criticisms of Williams are completely divorced from a tradition of bigotry. Unable to successfully point out these injustices, then, Williams is forced to endure a sense of "daily diminishment." "Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history," Rankine writes, underscoring how infuriating it is to find oneself unable to challenge contemporary society's willful ignorance—an ignorance that denies the fact that racism "blossoms out of history" and that it flourishes in the present precisely because of that denial.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

HEADACHES

The headaches that the protagonist experiences in *Citizen* represent how painful and taxing it is to face racism on a daily basis. Recognizing that showing anger often leads to adverse effects (an unfortunate fact made evident by the mistreatment Serena Williams receives after her "outburst" at the 2009 tennis US Open), the protagonist tries to get through life without expressing her rage, but this constant state of holding everything back gives her headaches. The headaches, therefore, are physical manifestations of her emotional suffering—the suffering that comes from living in a world that is relentlessly hostile to people of color. In order to deal with this pain, the protagonist tries to go numb, and she slowly starts to get used to her headaches. This is not to say, however, that the headaches go away. Rather, she becomes accustomed to a persistent ache, one that is always there and that has the kind of staying power that perfectly illustrates how impossible it can feel to try to escape bigotry.

TENNIS

Because professional tennis helps Rankine exemplify how injustice often plays itself out, the sport comes to represent the unfair standards to which society holds people of color. The protagonist tracks Serena Williams's career, at first finding herself surprised that Williams is able to withhold her anger. Over time, though, Williams becomes less and less able or willing to conceal her frustration when umpires and the general tennis community treat her unfairly. When she finally puts this anger on full display during the 2009 US Open, the protagonist is awed by the storied athlete's ability to respond with genuine emotion to injustice and racism. And yet, the protagonist also notes that this anger only makes Williams's life harder, since people say disparaging things about her in the aftermath of her "outburst" (not to mention the fact that she is fined $82,500). Several years later, though, Williams wins two gold medals at the Olympics and does a three-second celebratory dance—a dance for which the entire tennis community criticizes her, calling her "classless" for "Crip-Walking all over the most lily-white place in the world." This attitude blatantly uncovers the racial biases against Williams, but the tennis world doesn't stop to consider this. Simply put, then, there is effectively nothing Williams can do to avoid criticism and mistreatment. If she gets angry at her own mistreatment, her behavior is deemed inappropriate, but her happiness elicits the same response. By spotlighting this infuriating dynamic, Rankine uses the tennis community's biases and rigidity to embody the lose-lose atmosphere in which people of color often find themselves, revealing that society's power structures are stacked against black people—a dismal reality that makes it extremely difficult to overcome racism and prejudice.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Graywolf edition of *Citizen: An American Lyric* published in 2014.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ You never really speak except for the time she makes her request and later when she tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person. You assume she thinks she is thanking you for letting her cheat and feels better cheating from an almost white person.

Related Characters: Mary Catherine, The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, a white girl named Mary or Catherine (the protagonist can't remember which, so she calls her by both names) asks the protagonist lean to one side during class so she can copy answers off her test. The protagonist agrees to do this even though Mary Catherine has otherwise never paid any kind of attention to her. After she cheats, though, Mary Catherine tells the protagonist that she smells good and that she has "features more like a white person." This is an important moment in *Citizen* not only because it alerts readers to the fact that the protagonist is a person of color, but also because it illustrates that she has been dealing with racism ever since grade school (and likely even before that). Most notably, Mary Catherine's obvious bias against black people is veiled as something else, dressed up as a compliment. All the same, it's obvious to the protagonist that this is Mary Catherine's way of making herself feel better about cheating off of somebody she would otherwise think of as unintelligent. In turn, it becomes clear that even supposedly subtle or casual forms of racism are still quite destructive.

❝ Sister Evelyn never figures out your arrangement perhaps because you never turn around to copy Mary Catherine's answers. 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.

Related Characters: Mary Catherine, Sister Evelyn, The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

After the protagonist lets Mary Catherine cheat off of her, she wonders why Sister Evelyn doesn't catch them. Thinking this way, she implies that Sister Evelyn would only punish the two girls if their positions were reversed and the protagonist was the one copying Mary Catherine's answers. This speaks to the environment in which the protagonist lives, portraying her circumstances as biased against people of color. Indeed, the protagonist couldn't get away with the same behavior that Mary Catherine indulges, an uncomfortable fact that underlines just how much privilege white people have in everyday society and, conversely, how little leeway people of color have in the same regard. What's even worse than this thought, though, is the protagonist's suspicion that Sister Evelyn hasn't even noticed her sitting in the classroom at all. Under this interpretation, the protagonist feels invisible, as if her own teacher doesn't care enough to truly notice her even when she's breaking the rules. In turn, there arises a question about how black people are perceived in majority-white spaces—a question that Rankine will revisit throughout *Citizen*.

> After it happened I was at a loss for words. Haven't you said this yourself? 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. Eventually she stopped doing this, though she never acknowledged her slippage. And you never called her on it (why not?) and yet, you don't forget.

Related Characters: The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, the protagonist recalls the fact that one of her friends used to accidentally call her by the name of her housekeeper. The only reason she does this, the protagonist knows, is that her housekeeper is the only other black woman in her life. Whenever her friend calls her by the wrong name, then, the protagonist finds herself "at a loss for words." Interestingly enough, this passage indicates that the protagonist has said, "After it happened I was at a loss for words" *to* this friend, suggesting that she has opened up to this friend about uncomfortable racist encounters—encounters like the kind *they* used to have at the beginning of their friendship. Since then, apparently, the protagonist and the friend have found a way to move beyond this unfortunate "slippage." However, "move beyond" might be the wrong way of putting it, since the protagonist herself has never forgotten that her friend used to call her by her housekeeper's name. In turn, it becomes clear that even supposedly small-scale moments of racism or insensitivity stay with people of color, weighing on them even as they commit themselves to moving forward in the name of amity.

> Each moment is like this—before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced, it has to be seen. What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? The moment stinks.

Related Characters: The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, the protagonist thinks about how hard it is to process racism and mistreatment. She constantly finds herself asking questions like, "What did he just say?" and "Did I hear what I think I heard?" This illustrates the unsettling uncertainty that arises in the aftermath of insensitive, bigoted comments. And while it is hard enough to handle such questions, the protagonist feels that the *most* difficult part about dealing with racism isn't necessarily the fallout, but the fact that it's impossible to avoid the pain of the initial moment when somebody says or does something problematic. To that end, it becomes clear that every racist instance has to be "experienced" before it can be "categorized" and "dismissed." In other words, even if people have ways of effectively processing and coping with racism, they still have to go through the actual moment in which somebody wrongs them. With this in mind, the protagonist begins to feel that, no matter what she does, there is no fully successful way of enduring bigotry.

Feeling somewhat responsible for the actions of your neighbor, you clumsily tell your friend that the next time he wants to talk on the phone he should just go in the backyard. He looks at you a long minute before saying he can speak on the phone wherever he wants. Yes, of course, you say. Yes, of course.

Related Characters: The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears after the protagonist comes home from a date with her partner to discover that her neighbor has called the police on her friend, who was babysitting for her. The police have already left and the neighbor has apologized to her friend, but the protagonist tries to further mitigate the situation by talking to her friend about how he could avoid such an uncomfortable situation in the future. She does this because she feels "somewhat responsible" for what has happened, which is why she wants to help her friend make sure that her racist neighbor never calls the police on him again. In her confusion, though, what she doesn't realize is that telling her friend to speak on the phone in the backyard isn't an actual solution to the problem, since the problem isn't that he spoke on the phone in the driveway—it's that her neighbor is racist and assumed that he posed a threat to the neighborhood. By telling her friend to take his phone calls in the backyard, then, the protagonist unwittingly legitimizes her neighbor's racist thought process, ultimately acting like it made sense for him to call the police. Recognizing this, her friend tells her that he can talk on the phone wherever he wants, and she suddenly realizes the mistake she has made by trying to curtail his rights to accommodate her neighbor's implicit biases.

When the stranger asks, Why do you care? you just stand there staring at him. He has just referred to the boisterous teenagers in Starbucks as niggers. Hey, I am standing right here, you responded, not necessarily expecting him to turn to you.

He is holding the lidded paper cup in one hand and a small paper bag in the other. They are just being kids. Come on, no need to get all KKK on them, you say.

Now there you go, he responds.

Related Characters: The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, the protagonist interacts with a racist man who has just used the n-word in reference to a group of teenagers. Normally, the protagonist tends to keep her anger and dismay to herself when she encounters racism, but she refuses to stay silent in this moment. This, of course, is because what the man has said isn't a subtle or veiled example of implicit bias or prejudice: it is a clear an inarguable display of bigotry. After all, he has used the single most offensive and historically fraught word in the English language with which to address black people. Accordingly, most people would assume that he would at least recognize why the protagonist would be upset, but he doesn't even lend acknowledge the legitimacy of her anger. Instead, he callously asks why she cares, and when she points out that he's going out of his way to be racist, he says, "Now there you go," effectively trying to make it seem like the *protagonist* is the one who is out of line here. In this sense, he attempts to frame her objection as unreasonable even though it's so glaringly obvious that he is in the wrong. In doing so, he tries to delegitimize her response, making it even more difficult for her to address his racism.

Yes, and you want it to stop, you want the child pushed to the ground to be seen, to be helped to his feet, to be brushed off by the person that did not see him, has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself.

The beautiful thing is that a group of men began to stand behind me like a fleet of bodyguards, she says, like newly found uncles and brothers.

Related Characters: The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, a friend of the protagonist tells her about something that happened to her on the subway. While riding the train, she watched as a white man knocked over a young black boy and didn't stop to help him up. In fact, the man didn't even acknowledge that he had sent the boy to

the ground. Hearing this, the protagonist thinks about how badly she wishes that the man had helped up the young boy, wishing that she lived in a world in which people like this man finally recognized the problematic way that they move through life. Unfortunately, though, she knows that this man not only failed to see the boy, but also fails to see *anyone* who "is not a reflection of himself." This suggests that many white people don't truly recognize people of color because they're unwilling to engage with anyone who seems different than them. In turn, the protagonist's own sense of invisibility heightens, even as her friend finishes her story with a somewhat happy ending, explaining that a group of other men stood with her as she told the man to apologize to the boy—a turn of events that could potentially give the protagonist hope in the idea of unification in the face of racism.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Youngman's suggestions are meant to expose expectations for blackness as well as to underscore the difficulty inherent in any attempt by black artists to metabolize real rage. 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.

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 struggles 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.

Related Characters: Hennessy Youngman (Jayson Musson), The Protagonist ("You"), The Speaker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in *Citizen*, Rankine (or perhaps the book's speaker, protagonist, or whomever readers would like to attribute the narrative voice to) turns her attention to Hennessy Youngman, a man with a YouTube channel who has created a series called *Art Thoughtz*, wherein he considers various aspects of the contemporary art world and teaches—often in a tongue-in-cheek manner—viewers how to understand or inhabit certain artistic mindsets. In the video Rankine references, Youngman argues that, in order to become a successful black artist, black people have to adopt what he calls an "angry nigger exterior." Rankine points out that this suggestion is "meant to expose expectations for blackness," effectively making it clear that Youngman is intentionally using problematic ideas to call attention to the uncomfortable assumptions and preconceived ideas the art world already has about what it means to be black. Furthermore, Rankine upholds that Youngman's ideas about anger serve as a commentary on how hard it is for black artists to convey an actual, genuine sense of "rage," since black anger in the arts has been "commodified" and essentially stripped of its authenticity.

What Youngman's analysis leaves out, Rankine believes, is that even those artists who have profited from the commodification of black anger have inevitably felt *real* anger. Indeed, their "sellable anger" comes from a place of true outrage, since the experience of facing racism on a daily basis creates a seemingly endless battle against "dehumanization." By suggesting that this kind of raw, unadorned anger leads to nothing but loneliness, Rankine highlights how depleting it is to experience bigotry, which is capable of exhausting people even if they have found outlets through which to express their rage.

❝ What does a victorious or defeated black woman's body in a historically white space look like? 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."

Related Characters: Zora Neale Hurston, The Protagonist ("You"), Venus Williams, Serena Williams

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears when the protagonist considers the unfair treatment that Serena and Venus Williams have experienced while participating in the predominantly white world of professional tennis. As some of the only women of color in the entire sport, they have had to navigate their careers while existing in a "historically white space." Serena Williams, for her part, has had a number of unfair calls made against her, many of which were informed by the umpires' implicit bias against her as a black woman. In this context,

she has had to acquiesce to this treatment or risk criticism and punishment (both of which she has received as a result of standing up for herself). This is why the protagonist thinks about the author Zora Neale Hurston's line about feeling "most colored" when "thrown against a sharp white background," ultimately sensing that Serena Williams's surrounding environment most likely factors into the way she (Williams) sees her own cultural positioning. This, in turn, implies that the external world can often bring itself to bear on a person's sense of self—an important idea to keep in mind as *Citizen* progresses, since the protagonist struggles to come to terms with the way her experiences impact the way she perceives her identity as a person of color.

> And though you felt outrage for Serena after that 2004 US Open, as the years go by, she seems to put Alves, and a lengthening list of other curious calls and oversights, against both her and her sister, behind her as they happen.
>
> Yes, and the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight. The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness—all the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through, even as we are eternally stupid or everlastingly optimistic, so ready to be inside, among, a part of the games.

Related Characters: Venus Williams, Mariana Alves, Serena Williams, The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

After watching Serena Williams keep her composure in response to blatantly unfair calls by the tennis umpire Mariana Alves, the protagonist tracks the many injustices that both Serena and her sister Venus experience in the world of professional tennis. No matter what happens, it seems, the sisters put their own mistreatment behind them, focusing only on moving forward. Although this is an admirable thing, the protagonist recognizes that the Williams sisters' ability to move on doesn't mean they aren't still feeling the pain that comes from experiencing racism. To that end, she comes to see the body as something that holds on to injustice, storing each instance up because it's impossible to simply forget about this kind of mistreatment. This aligns with the previous idea that there is no fully effective way of processing or coping with the emotional trauma of racism because no matter what people do to make themselves feel better, they still have to experience the initial moment in which somebody wrongs them. Because of this, even the most "unflappable resilience" can't make up for the fact that people of color constantly encounter mistreatment. This, in turn, is an important idea to track, since it sheds light on Serena Williams's eventual display of anger at the 2009 U.S. Open.

> And as Serena turns to the lineswoman and says, "I swear to God I'm fucking going to take this fucking ball and shove it down your fucking throat, you hear that? I swear to God!" 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.

Related Characters: Serena Williams, The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

This is an account of Serena Williams's experience at the 2009 U.S. Open, when a line judge claims that she stepped over the line while serving. The judge makes this call at a critical moment, effectively causing Williams to lose on a technicality. Unable or unwilling to contain her anger, Williams turns to the judge and yells at her. This is an important moment, since the protagonist herself knows what it's like to endure injustice on a daily basis—now, though, she gets to see what it might look like to actually speak out against unfairness, watching as Williams finally acts on all of her pent-up, accumulated anger. Seeing this, the protagonist is well aware that Williams's behavior will not end well for her, but she still appreciates the tennis pro's sudden willingness to respond accordingly to the unnerving experience of being "thrown against a sharp white background"—a line that quotes Zora Neale Hurston's assertion that she feels "most colored" when "thrown against a sharp white background." "Existing in the moment," the protagonist implies, is a courageous thing to do, at least when a person is surrounded by implicit bias and unfounded criticism based on the color of her skin. With this in mind, Williams's response to injustice is gratifying to the

protagonist, who has often wished she could react to racism in the same way.

❝ Perhaps this is how racism feels no matter the context—randomly the rules everyone else gets to play by no longer apply to you, and to call this out by calling out "I swear to God!" is to be called insane, crass, crazy. Bad sportsmanship.

Related Characters: Serena Williams, The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Still considering Serena Williams's angry response to an unfair call a line judge makes against her at the 2009 U.S. Open, the protagonist thinks about what it's like to encounter racism, realizing that Williams's experience in the world of professional tennis is quite similar to the kind of everyday bigotry and mistreatment the protagonist herself has to deal with. The only difference, it seems, is that Serena Williams's situation is amplified not only because the U.S. Open is widely televised, but because she is one of the only people of color in the professional tennis community. Despite this, the protagonist recognizes the similarities between her and Williams's situations, realizing that—regardless of the "context"—racism often refigures the "rules" of life to make things harder for people of color. To that end, people of color find themselves having to contend with higher standards than everyone else, since the "rules everyone else gets to play by" seemingly only apply to white people. To make matters worse, pointing out this injustice by getting frustrated only attracts negative attention, as evidenced by the fact that Williams is deemed "insane, crass, [and] crazy" when she shows her anger. As a result, the most logical response to injustice—namely, anger—is no longer a viable option, effectively depriving black people of one of the only coping mechanisms available in the face of racism.

❝ For Serena, the daily diminishment is a low flame, a constant drip. Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you. To understand is to see Serena as hemmed in as any other black body thrown against our American background.

Related Characters: Serena Williams, The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the protagonist draws attention to Serena Williams's lived experience, encouraging readers to reflect upon the athlete's life beyond the world of tennis and media attention. Like other people of color, she undoubtedly encounters racism and injustice on a regular basis, and this is only exacerbated by the fact that she also faces mistreatment in the public sphere as a professional athlete. This, the protagonist upholds, is a "daily diminishment" that endures like a "low flame" or a "constant drip"—images that speak to the seemingly undying nature of such problems. Williams's reality is one in which insults, assumptions, and any kind of mistreatment accumulates throughout her life and "blossoms out of history." By watching her lose her temper at the 2009 U.S. Open, the protagonist recognizes that her own daily frustrations also build up and will perhaps bring themselves to bear on the present at some point in her life. In turn, readers see the ways in which personal history influences the present, ultimately coming to understand that it's all but impossible to leave racism behind in the past.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Not long ago you are in a room where someone asks the philosopher Judith Butler what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this.

For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person. After considering Butler's remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present.

Related Characters: The Protagonist ("You"), Judith Butler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Listening to the well-known thinker Judith Butler talk about language making people "addressable," the protagonist reconsiders her cultural positioning in the world. Butler upholds that the mere act of existing "exposes" people to others in an unavoidable way. Simply by "being," people are vulnerable to whatever others might say to them. The extent to which they let this affect their emotions depends upon how "addressable" they are as they move through the world. This, the protagonist realizes, is why it is often so emotionally difficult to be a person of color in a world primarily structured around whiteness (at least insofar as systemic forms of racism have ensured that white people hold a disproportionate amount of power in contemporary society). To that end, the protagonist reassesses her previous belief that she is invisible to white people, thinking instead that she is actually "hypervisible." In other words, she is especially "addressable" when she's in majority-white contexts, which is why the daily barrage of racism and mistreatment she experiences is so emotionally destructive.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Feel good. Feel better. Move forward. Let it go. Come on. Come on. Come on. In due time the ball is going back and forth over the net. Now the sound can be turned back down. Your fingers cover your eyes, press them deep into their sockets—too much commotion, too much for a head remembering to ache. Move on. Let it go. Come on.

Related Characters: The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

As the protagonist tries to navigate the unending emotional pressures that come along with facing racism on a daily basis, she grapples with the idea that responding passively to mistreatment is the only option available to her. Society and the world at large seems to tell people of color to "move forward" and "let it go" whenever they're struggling with pain caused by bigotry. As has already been made clear, though, this is an insufficient coping mechanism because it doesn't spare the protagonist from having to experience racism as it happens to her in real time, meaning that even if she *were* capable of "mov[ing] forward" and forgetting about her mistreatment after the fact, she would still be painfully aware that she'll soon encounter the same problem. This, in turn, means that she can never truly move on, and it is this bleak reality that gives her a headache. Of course, the headache itself is perhaps more metaphorical than literal, ultimately representing all of the pain the protagonist has had to learn to live with.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ 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—

Related Characters: Serena Williams, The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

In this section the protagonist considers what, exactly, it would be like if she finally let herself act on her anger and dismay. Day after day, she tries to hide the frustrations that arise in response to the racism and mistreatment she's forced to endure. And though she occasionally points out when somebody has said something problematic (like when she tells the man in Starbucks not to "get all KKK"), she usually withholds such thoughts because she knows that they might be weaponized against her. This, of course, is what happened to Serena Williams when she yelled at the umpire and was subsequently deemed "insane" by the tennis community. Still, though, the protagonist can't help but wonder what her "outburst" would be like if she let herself go. However, it's worth noting that she apparently can't even *imagine* what she might say, ultimately failing to come up with even just a hypothetical "outburst"—after all, the sentence is cut off with an em dash before the protagonist thinks of something she might "cry out." In turn, readers see that she's so accustomed to burying this sort of emotion that the mere idea of "cry[ing] out" has become unimaginable.

❝ The past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow.

Drag that first person out of the social death of history, then we're kin.

Related Characters: The Protagonist ("You"), The Speaker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is drawn from one of the more poetic, abstract sections of *Citizen*, in which the unidentified speaker addresses the protagonist and considers the nature of time and history. Poetic figuration aside, the main takeaway from this moment is the attention the speaker calls to the ways in which the past brings itself to bear on the present and, for that matter, the future. "The past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow," she upholds. The idea that the past is a "life sentence" helps readers see that the events of history will never go away—in the same way that a prisoner is forced to live out a life sentence, people have no choice but to exist in a world that has been irreversibly shaped by history. In keeping with this, the past is also "a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow," meaning that difficulties that arose long ago are still capable of harming the future. This is why the speaker wants to "drag that first person out of the social death of history," effectively arguing that people in the present should learn to identify with the past; rather than simply seeing the tragic events of history as having befallen *other* people, the speaker believes people ought to see *themselves* as the ones who must deal with these troubling events. After all, this truly is the case, since things like racism and injustice have made their way into the present. Accordingly, it's foolish for people to believe that they are insulated from such things because they live in contemporary times.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, she said, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.

You simply get chills every time you see these poor individuals, so many of these people almost all of them that we see, are so poor, someone else said, and they are so black.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

These two paragraphs are quotes Rankine took from CNN coverage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when national relief organizations left many predominantly black communities to fend for themselves in dangerous conditions for a long time. In the first paragraph, an unidentified speaker on CNN callously suggests that the many people who have been displaced from their homes and put in a large arena to wait for more substantial forms of relief have actually *benefitted* from the harrowing events of Hurricane Katrina. According to this speaker, some of these displaced people are lucky to have the opportunity to sleep in an arena because they are "underprivileged anyway"—a patronizing and insensitive thing to say, one that seemingly attempts to take away any kind of urgency when it comes to finding a better way of helping these disenfranchised communities. This attitude continues in the second paragraph, in which another CNN speaker fixates on the fact that the people who have been influenced the most by Hurricane Katrina are impoverished. And while this is an accurate observation, the speaker goes on to say that the people in this situation are also "so black," as if the exact color of their skin—the extent to which they are dark-skinned—matters. In this moment, Rankine demonstrates the ways in which the media often latches onto the wrong element when discussing race, focusing not on the injustice that national relief organizations have failed to adequately aid these underserved communities, but on the way the people in these communities look.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Trayvon Martin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears in what Rankine calls a script for a "situation video" about Trayvon Martin. Highly figurative, this particular section seems to assume the voice of Martin himself as he speaks from beyond the grave, commenting on the cruel history of racism in the United States that led to

his murder at the hands of a neighborhood watchman. By calling attention to "the years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, [and] profiling," Martin traces a direct line from the obvious instances of racism that took place in the past to the contemporary manifestations of this kind of behavior. Indeed, he connects slavery to Jim Crow segregation before linking both to more recent forms of bigotry like racial profiling—which, incidentally, is what led to his own death. In this way, readers see that racism "blossoms" out of history, as has already been suggested in *Citizen* and its examination of how injustice "accumulate[s]" over time instead of simply vanishing into the past.

❝ Boys will be boys being boys feeling their capacity heaving butting heads righting their wrongs in the violence of aggravated adolescence charging forward in their way experiencing the position of positioning which is a position for only one kind of boy face it know it for the other boy for the other boys the fists the feet criminalized already are weapons already exploding the landscape and then the litigious hitting back is life imprisoned.

Related Characters: The Speaker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

These words appear in a script for a "situation video" named after the Jena Six, a group of African American teenagers who were arrested and charged after beating a white boy at a party. This beating took place after a group of white boys at the Jena Six's high school hung nooses from a tree in the schoolyard. They did this because the tree was known as a meeting spot for white students, but earlier that day a black student and his friends decided to sit underneath it. That night, the white students hung nooses from the branches of the tree, and this is what fueled the Jena Six's violence.

In this passage, the speaker tries to contextualize the behavior of both the black and white boys by saying, "Boys will be boys." Calling upon this cliché that many people use to dismiss otherwise unacceptable behavior, the speaker invites readers to closely scrutinize the situation. Of course, it is a complicated story because, although the Jena Six were wrong to use violence, the white boys were also wrong to hang nooses from the tree, since doing so was a blatantly racist act. To add to this, both groups of boys are mere teenagers who are struggling to figure out their "position[s]" in the world—and yet, this is really only a problem for the Jena Six, since it is significantly harder for young black men to make sense of their cultural positioning than it is for young white men. After all, the world is stacked against black people in so many ways, and there are depressingly few options available to people of color who want to find productive ways of responding to racism. Needless to say, Jena Six's violence was a clearly unproductive way of responding to racism, but this is precisely the problem: there are seemingly no alternatives other than simply trying to numb oneself to injustice like the protagonist does. By focusing on the Jena Six, then, Rankine laments not just their decision to resort to violence, but also the dismal conditions that led them to this response in the first place.

❝ Will you write about Duggan? the man wants to know. Why don't you? you ask. Me? he asks, looking slightly irritated.

How difficult is it for one body to feel the injustice wheeled at another? Are the tensions, the recognitions, the disappointments, and the failures that exploded in the riots too foreign?

Related Characters: Mark Duggan, The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place between the protagonist and a man she meets at a party in London. The city has recently been swept up in riots in the aftermath of the police killing of a black man named Mark Duggan. As the protagonist and this man—who seems, by implication, to be white—talk about the riots and the overall injustice of the murder, he asks if she plans to write about Duggan. In response, she turns the question back around on him. The fact that this apparently surprises and even "irritate[s]" him implies that he is unwilling to take on the burden of processing this cultural trauma. It also suggests that he doesn't see it as his responsibility to unpack the nuances of this situation—and yet, here he is, speaking at length about it with the protagonist, who until this moment has valued his thoughts about Duggan's killing.

This says something important about the ways in which people conceive of their own cultural identity and how,

exactly, that identity can interact with the rest of the world. In this moment, the protagonist's new friend uses his identity as a white man to excuse himself from engaging in any meaningful kind of conversation about racism, leaving it to people of color to shoulder the emotional burden of processing the many tragedies that befall the black community. This outlook is flawed because it fails to recognize that any human should be able to empathize with somebody who has been unjustly killed, regardless of the color of their skin. And though it's true that white people must avoid dominating conversations about racism and should be careful to avoid leaning on their limited knowledge of what it's like to be discriminated against, the book emphasizes that simply removing oneself as a white person from meaningful discussions of racism is also quite unhelpful and problematic.

❝ You imagine if the man spoke to you he would say, it's okay, I'm okay, you don't need to sit here. You don't need to sit and you sit and look past him into the darkness the train is moving through. A tunnel.

All the while the darkness allows you to look at him. Does he feel you looking at him? You suspect so. What does suspicion mean? What does suspicion do?

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?

Related Characters: The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the protagonist has just boarded a train and has discovered that the other passengers are unwilling to sit next to a certain man, beside whom there is the only empty seat. The implication in the context of *Citizen* is that this man is black and that the other passengers are white—a dynamic that is very clearly based on implicit biases and negative assumptions about black people and, perhaps more specifically, black men. Upset by this, the protagonist makes a point of sitting next to the man, but he doesn't look at her when she does. For this reason, she begins to imagine that he doesn't want her pity, thinking about how he would probably tell her—if he were to say anything—that she doesn't need to sit next to him. As she thinks this, she looks at him and wonders if he can sense her gaze—a thought that leads her to a brief exploration of "suspicion," since she suspects that he can tell she's looking at him.

This brief meditation on the topic of suspicion is interesting, since the protagonist tacitly acknowledges that one of the reasons she's looking at the man might actually not have to do with pity or solidarity—rather, it might be an indication that she is secretly suspicious of the man and wants to keep an eye on him, thereby perpetuating the very same unfair mindset she was trying to challenge by sitting next to him in the first place. With this uncomfortable thought in mind, then, the protagonist is forced to explore the idea that she herself has internalized the harmful prejudices and stereotypes about black people that so negatively impact her life. Accordingly, she wonders if she sat next to the man for his sake or to prove to herself that she isn't actually afraid of him.

❝ From across the aisle tracks room harbor world a woman asks a man in the rows ahead if he would mind switching seats She wishes to sit with her daughter or son. You hear but you don't hear. You can't see.

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.

Related Characters: The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the protagonist sits next to a man whom everyone else on the train has avoided. As she interrogates the various reasons that she chose to do this, she hears a woman ask somebody else to switch seats so she can sit with her child. This voice seems to come from far away, as if the woman isn't just across the aisle, but possibly on the other side of some train tracks or on the other end of a room, a harbor, or an entire world—an idea that underscores just how separated the protagonist feels from this (presumably) white woman, who is so comfortable with the idea that she deserves to sit down that she has no problem asking others to accommodate her and her child.

The man sitting next to the protagonist, in contrast, can't sit wherever he wants without attracting all kinds of negative attention. If he were to ask somebody else to move to accommodate his own needs, it's unlikely they would

respond, at least based on his fellow passengers' previous determination to ignore and avoid him at all costs. It is perhaps because of this dynamic that he turns to the protagonist when he hears the woman ask somebody else to move, recognizing that she is the one person on the train who would be willing to accommodate him. This, in turn, binds them together, which is why they make a nonverbal connection and tacitly agree that they would not move if asked.

Chapter 7 Quotes

Come on, get back in the car. Your partner wants to face off with a mouth and who knows what handheld objects the other vehicle carries.

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.

Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on.

Related Characters: The Protagonist's Partner , Trayvon Martin, The Protagonist ("You")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

This encounter takes place on July 13, 2013, when the man who killed Trayvon Martin is acquitted by a jury and cleared of all charges. Overhearing a man in a neighboring car say something problematic while listening to a radio broadcast about Trayvon Martin, the protagonist's partner jumps out of their own car. It's worth noting that the race of the protagonist's partner is never stated in *Citizen*. If the protagonist is in any way modeled off of Rankine herself, though, it's possible that her partner is white, since this is the case in real life. Regardless of whether or not whiteness is what makes him confident enough to show his rage in this moment, though, the protagonist knows that anger will only put her in danger, which is why she tells her partner to get back into the car. After all, she knows that "the justice system has [...] plans" for black people who show their anger. For this reason, the protagonist feels unsafe showing outrage in public. In keeping with this, she comes to realize that society expects people of color to "move on" from racist encounters without pushing back—this, tragically, is what it means in contemporary times to be a "citizen," despite how wrong this is.

Yesterday, I begin, I was waiting in the car for time to pass. A woman pulled in and started to park her car facing mine. Our eyes met and what passed passed as quickly as the look away. She backed up and parked on the other side of the lot. I could have followed her to worry my question but I had to go, I was expected on court, I grabbed my racket.

[...]

Did you win? he asks.

It wasn't a match, I say. It was a lesson.

Related Characters: The Protagonist's Partner , The Protagonist ("You"), The Speaker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

This is the final passage of *Citizen*, and it features an abrupt switch in point of view. Whereas in other portions of the book, this kind of story would most likely focus on the second-person protagonist ("you"), the speaker seems to inhabit the protagonist's perspective, using a first-person perspective to narrate the story. This suggests not only that there is a certain overlap between the speaker and the protagonist, but that both characters (if they can be called that) are beginning to feel more agency over their own identity (or identities). Indeed, there is a sense of self-possession that emerges when the speaker suddenly uses "I," perhaps because she is slowly finding ways to keep the racist external world from completely interfering with her sense of self.

In keeping with this, she responds to racism in the tennis parking lot in a productive way. She doesn't chase down the woman who changed parking spots and unleash her anger, but she also doesn't see the experience as devastating. Instead, she goes on with her day, and though it's problematic to argue that people ought to simply "move on" and "let go" of the pain that accompanies racism, it's also the unfortunate case that life might seem impossible if people don't find ways to cope with such mistreatment. With this in mind, the speaker doesn't discount the experience in the parking lot altogether, but instead implies that she has decided to see it as a "lesson." By framing the encounter as something she can learn from, then, she allows herself to move on without acting like what happened wasn't a big

deal. In turn, readers see that if there is a productive way to process racism without standing up to it in the moment, it probably resembles something like this forward-looking approach.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The unnamed protagonist (called "you") lies against her pillows. She's alone and too fatigued to even look at her cellphone or computer, so she stares out the window and notices that the moon is nowhere to be found. Zoning out, she falls into memory. Recalling her childhood, she remembers an experience in her classroom at school, where she sits in front of a white girl named either Mary or Catherine. The protagonist and this girl—whom she now calls Mary Catherine—rarely speak, but Mary Catherine asks her to lean to one side so she can copy the answers off her test. Hesitantly, the protagonist obliges. Later, Mary Catherine tells her she smells good, adding that she almost looks white. The protagonist senses that Mary Catherine says this because she prefers the idea of cheating off of an "almost white person" over cheating off of a black person.

Very little emerges about the protagonist at the beginning of Citizen. *The overall lack of concrete information about her is characteristic of the entire book, which is often ambiguous, abstract, and poetic. However, what becomes clear in this moment is that this second-person protagonist is black, since Mary Catherine goes out of her way to suggest that she seems* almost *white. Moreover, it's important to note that the protagonist is exposed to racism at an early age, and it is clear that she will have to contend with this kind of bigotry for her entire life. Furthermore, it's worth paying attention to the fact that Mary Catherine exposes her own racism in a subtle and casual—but undeniably damaging—way, making it clear to the protagonist that she has negative assumptions about black people while hiding this message in a compliment, thereby making it incredibly difficult for the protagonist to push back against this racism.*

The protagonist wonders why her teacher, Sister Evelyn, doesn't notice that she's letting Mary Catherine cheat off her test, since it's obvious that she's leaning to one side. Thinking this way, she considers the possibility that Sister Evelyn doesn't care about cheating or, more likely, that Sister Evelyn has never truly noticed the protagonist sitting there at all.

Even at this early point in her life, the protagonist feels invisible when she's in predominantly white spaces. Although she's afraid of getting caught by Sister Evelyn, she is also bothered by the fact that Sister Evelyn doesn't even notice what she's doing, since this underlines the extent to which her own teacher has failed to not only care about her, but even acknowledge her presence. This draws attention to the idea of visibility (or invisibility) and how other people's implicit biases can impact a person's sense of self—a theme that will resurface throughout Citizen *as the protagonist encounters these situations time after time.*

A photograph appears beneath the description of the protagonist's feeling of invisibility in the classroom. The picture is called "Jim Crow Rd." and is by the artist Michael David Murphy. It depicts a relatively affluent suburban neighborhood with clean driveways, well-cut grass, and decently sized white houses. In the foreground of the picture, though, a sign indicates that the adjacent street is called Jim Crow Road.

Citizen *is comprised of multiple different artforms, including essayistic vignettes, poems, photographs, and other renderings of visual art. "Jim Crow Rd." is the first photograph to appear in the book, and it serves an important role: to show readers just how thoroughly the United States' painfully racist history has worked its way into the present. Although the picture is of a calm and beautiful neighborhood, there's no denying that this neighborhood exists next to a road named after the Jim Crow era, the profoundly racist and unjust period (1877-1964) during which African Americans were persecuted by segregationist laws—laws that still bring themselves to bear on the present, despite the fact that Jim Crow policies are no longer officially in place. By presenting readers with this picture, Rankine foregrounds the rest of the book with a bleak reminder that it is irresponsible and naïve to act like racism is a long-gone thing of the past.*

The protagonist considers how many times in her life she has had to ask herself if she really just heard what she thinks she heard and, for that matter, how many times she has struggled to find the words to respond to a racist insult that has been casually launched at her. This reminds her that one of her friends frequently used to call her by the name of a black housekeeper. The protagonist understood that this was because the housekeeper was the only other black person her friend knew, but neither she nor her friend ever acknowledged this. Eventually, the friend stopped making this mistake, and they've still never spoken about it. All the same, the protagonist has not and will not forget about it, as much as she'd like to.

As a person of color, the protagonist finds herself having to constantly field racism in what might otherwise seem like unexpected circumstances. Indeed, this means having to contend with ignorance and mistreatment while spending time with people she considers friends. In turn, these experiences undoubtedly change her ability to feel close to people she'd otherwise have no problem connecting with. What's more, although she chooses not to say anything about her friend's problematic mistake, that doesn't mean that she has forgotten about it—a reminder that this kind of mistreatment has a lasting impact, lingering long after it has taken place.

Thinking about the way it feels to process racist comments, the protagonist remembers a conversation she once had with a friend about sentences that begin—implicitly or otherwise—with the words "yes, and" instead of "yes, but." The two friends agreed that a "yes, and" attitude embodies the fact that there is no way of avoiding or running from what life throws at a person. No matter what happens, the protagonist believes, one is forced to simply move on.

The conversation the protagonist has with her friend about embodying a "yes, and" attitude toward life is worth noting because it underscores the fact that the only way to respond to anything in life is by moving forward. Although some people might think that it's possible to completely reject anything they don't like and turn away from these things, the protagonist believes that people are forced to soldier through even the most undesirable circumstances. This outlook is most likely informed by her experience as a person of color who has faced many forms of mistreatment and has been forced to move on. Whereas a white person who has never encountered discrimination might think it's possible to create one's own reality, the protagonist sees this as a privileged and naïve perspective.

In keeping with the idea that there's no way of avoiding or running away from what life offers up, the protagonist considers the fact that there are only so many ways to process or cope with the hurtful things people often say. To that end, people of color who have managed to find ways of dismissing racist comments still have to experience the initial pain of hearing those comments, since something can only be processed once it has already happened.

In this portion of Citizen, *the protagonist highlights a dilemma inherent to the process of coping with racism. Although it's possible to develop coping mechanisms to help oneself deal with the effects of bigotry, the protagonist is all too aware that these techniques won't necessarily spare a person of color from feeling the initial impact of a racist remark. According to this perspective, then, there's effectively no way to escape racism and the seemingly unavoidable pain that comes along with it.*

Driving in the car one day with a colleague at the university where she teaches, the protagonist listens as he complains that his dean is forcing him to hire a person of color. This upsets him, he tells the protagonist, because there are "so many great writers out there." Hearing this, the protagonist wonders why her colleague feels comfortable saying this to her, baffled that he would ever think this is an appropriate thing to say. She wishes that something would happen to put an abrupt end to this exchange, but nothing does, and she begins to resent that she has to pretend like what her colleague has said is okay. This effort, she notes, gives her a **headache** and deeply frustrates her, though she doesn't say anything about this to her colleague.

Once again, the protagonist finds herself in a situation in which somebody who is supposedly a friendly acquaintance has said something racist and hurtful. And though experiencing blatant and intentional racism would obviously be even more upsetting, it's worth considering that this kind of entrenched, unacknowledged racism is perhaps harder to address. After all, the protagonist's colleague hasn't even stopped to think about the fact that he has said something problematic, meaning that the protagonist would most likely have to explain this to him if she were to speak up. In this way, she is the one who would have to expend emotional energy in order to address his *ignorance and shortcomings. Needless to say, this is deeply unfair, which is why she decides to not say anything, though this response is perhaps just as emotionally draining.*

When the protagonist gets home after dropping off her colleague, she stays in the car and stares at her garage door. Sitting like this, she remembers that a friend told her about a medical phenomenon known as "John Henryism," a condition that arises when people experience great amounts of stress because of the racism they face on a regular basis. With this in mind, the protagonist hopes that sitting in her driveway and trying to calm down will help her avoid developing John Henryism.

The existence of John Henryism is a testament to just how much facing discrimination can refigure a person's life. Encountering ignorance and bigotry seemingly everywhere she goes, the protagonist begins to worry that her physical health will begin to suffer. This, in turn, illustrates how destructive it can be to face the nearly impossible task of coping with racism.

On a visit to another university, the protagonist eats lunch with a woman she doesn't know who works there. This woman tells the protagonist that they went to the same school and that her father and grandfather were also graduates of the same institution. Her son, however, didn't get in—a fact the woman blames on "affirmative action or minority something." Unsure if she's expected to apologize for this, the protagonist tries to change the subject by asking what school the woman's son ended up attending. The woman names an elite college but is still visibly annoyed that her son didn't get into the school she, her father, and her grandfather attended. For all intents and purposes, this exchange ends the lunch, though the protagonist and the woman have just received their food.

Again, the protagonist is put in the uncomfortable position of responding to a problematic comment, this time trying to figure out what to say in response to this woman's disparaging attitude toward affirmative action. Of course, the woman is unwilling to consider the possibility that her son was rejected by her alma mater because he wasn't good enough to go there. Instead, she blames his rejection on a policy intended to uplift people from disenfranchised communities, effectively pinning her son's failure on people of color. Worse, saying this makes the protagonist feel like she—as a person of color—is expected to apologize. In this way, readers once again see the ways in which other people's racism unfairly saddles the protagonist with undue amounts of emotional labor.

One of the protagonist's friends makes the argument that there is a distinction between the "historical self" and the "self self." What she means is that friends like the protagonist and herself interface with each other because of their shared interests and well-matched ways of moving through the world. But sometimes, she argues, their "historical selves" emerge and set them apart because of their cultural identities as a black woman and a white woman. Suddenly, the protagonist feels as if a rift has been opened between them, and she wonders if she has heard her friend correctly. All at once, she no longer feels connected to this woman, who is apparently extremely cognizant of the way their races make them different from one another.

In this conversation, the protagonist's friend attempts to articulate the ways in which history has impacted both her and the protagonist's cultural positionings. She tries to acknowledge the overall effect of history on the present, but in doing so, all she manages to make clear is that she's hyper-aware of the protagonist's race. As a result, the protagonist feels suddenly jarred out of their otherwise close dynamic and unable to feel a sense of kinship with her friend, who is apparently so preoccupied by the supposed differences in their cultural identities.

The protagonist and her romantic partner go to a movie together, asking their friend to pick up their child from school. On the way back from the movie, the protagonist receives a call from her neighbor, who tells her that there is a suspicious black man "casing" the neighborhood. This man, the neighbor says, is walking back and forth in front of the protagonist's house and talking to himself in a "disturbed" manner. The protagonist says that it must be her friend, whom the neighbor has met, but the neighbor refuses to believe this, saying that he has called the police. The protagonist's partner then calls their friend and asks if there's a man outside, and the friend says that *he* is outside. In the background of the phone call, sirens begin to blare.

That the protagonist's neighbor assumes her friend is a "disturbed" man who's "casing" the neighborhood spotlights the unexamined assumptions he has about black people. Instead of level-headedly seeing this man for the person he is, the neighbor quickly decides that he's a criminal. This assumption is made even worse by the fact that the neighbor has met this man before, proving that his implicit biases have usurped his ability to truly see him as a person rather than as an inaccurate, negative, and unfair stereotype.

When the protagonist and her partner return to their home, the police have already left. Their neighbor is talking to their friend, apologizing for calling the police. The protagonist feels awkward, as if she is partially responsible for what has happened. Turning to her friend, she suggests that he should go in the backyard the next time he needs to take a phone call outside. Eyeing her for a moment, the friend says that he can talk on the phone wherever he wants. Embarrassed, the protagonist agrees, saying, "Yes, of course."

The protagonist's feeling of guilt is obviously unfounded, since she had nothing to do with what happened between her neighbor and her friend. All the same, though, her guilt once more highlights the emotional strain that racism causes her. What's more, though, she seems to respond to this by internalizing her neighbor's point of view and telling her friend to speak on the phone in the backyard. She most likely suggests this because she herself is constantly trying to think of ways to cope with and avoid racist situations. However, her friend helps her see that acquiescing to her neighbor's racism is no way of responding to such a situation, reminding her that he has a right to do what he wants.

Standing in line one day at a Starbucks, the protagonist hears the white man in front of her call a loud group of teenagers by the n-word. "Hey, I am standing right here," she says. Turning around, he asks her why she cares, so she points out that the teenagers are just kids being kids, adding that there's no need to "get all KKK on them." In response, the man says, "Now there you go." The protagonist can hardly believe that this is his response. "There I go?" she asks.

In this scene, the protagonist encounters a much more blatant form of racism than the kind she experiences on a daily basis. All the same, though, the man who calls the teenagers the n-word refuses to acknowledge his own racism, acting as if it's not problematic that he has just used the most offensive and racist word possible to refer to black people. Needless to say, the n-word is closely associated with bigotry and an entire history of injustice, including American slavery and the Jim Crow era. And yet, the man tries to act as if the protagonist *is the one who has racialized the conversation by objecting to his hateful language. By doing this, he makes it even harder for her to stand up against racism, since it's difficult to address bigotry when people are unwilling to acknowledge its existence in the first place.*

In another scene, one of the protagonist's friends tells her a story about seeing a white man run into a young black boy on a train, knocking him to the floor. Instead of stopping to help him up, the man walks away, so the protagonist's friend catches up to him and tells him to apologize. Hearing this, the protagonist is overwhelmed by the infuriating fact that the man not only failed to acknowledge the boy, but also that he has most likely never been able to see *anybody* who isn't "a reflection of himself." The only good part about this friend's story, the protagonist realizes, is the way it ends: a number of men approach and stand behind her as she tells the white man to apologize, giving her their silent support as they face him.

Again, the idea of invisibility surfaces. This time, the protagonist considers the idea that this white man only ever sees people who are like him, effectively ignoring black people because he only relates to other white people. This kind of ignorance makes it even harder than it already is for people to push back against racism, since individuals like this man are apparently completely unaware of the impact their own behavior has on others. In these moments, then, it's especially meaningful when people of color stand together, giving each other the support necessary to call attention to injustice.

One day, the protagonist goes to an appointment with a new therapist. She has spoken to this therapist on the phone, but they have never met. Upon arriving at the therapist's home office, she rings the doorbell. When the therapist finally comes to the door, she takes one look at the protagonist and screams at her to get off her property, asking what she's doing there. Astonished, the protagonist explains that she has an appointment. After a moment of consideration, the therapist realizes that the protagonist is her new client, and she begins to apologize profusely.

Yet again, the protagonist is forced to grapple with the fact that many white people don't see her for who she is, instead focusing solely on the color of her skin. More to the point, people like the therapist fixate not just on the protagonist's race, but on their own bigoted assumptions about black people. This is why the therapist screams at the protagonist—not because the protagonist actually poses a threat (obviously), but because the therapist has the preconceived (and deeply racist) idea that black people represent danger. Needless to say, this exchange has irrevocably ruined any chances of developing a productive therapeutic relationship, since the protagonist won't be able to simply ignore the fact that her therapist has such negative assumptions about black people.

CHAPTER 2

A man named Jayson Musson publishes videos on YouTube under the name Hennessy Youngman. These videos belong to a series he calls *Art Thoughtz*, in which he talks about contemporary art and teaches viewers about various topics in the art world. In one such video, he attempts to answer how a person might become a "successful black artist," ironically setting forth the idea that the anger many black people feel as a response to racism is marketable. With this in mind, he suggests that black artists should adopt what he calls "an angry nigger exterior," advising prospective black artists to watch footage of Rodney King's beating while they work.

Citizen is a book that explores how people of color process the anger they feel in response to racism and injustice. In this section, Rankine turns to Hennessy Youngman to consider the implications of this sort of anger. Youngman's suggestion is delivered in a tongue-in-cheek manner, effectively acknowledging that the art world has commodified black anger and made it oddly marketable. And though it might be true that art is capable of expressing complex emotions like outrage, it's clear that the popularity of this kind of artistic expression most likely fails to properly consider the origins of race-related anger, meaning that the art world's acknowledgement of how hard it is to cope with racism is superficial on the whole.

Hennessy Youngman's ironic suggestions about black anger are intended to address the racist assumptions people have about black people, but they also speak to the fact that it is difficult for African American artists to reproduce genuine anger in their art. This is because "commodified anger" is first and foremost a performance, not a representation of the everyday pain and rage that arises in the face of constant racism and mistreatment. Aware of this dynamic, the protagonist wonders if her anger could ever be useful for anything, or if it will always leave her feeling depleted and worse off than before. After all, what Youngman doesn't acknowledge is that racists often use black peoples' anger against them, pointing to their rage to argue that they're unstable or unadjusted to the world.

Youngman's video spotlights the ways in which the art world has turned black anger into little more than a performance. In keeping with this, the protagonist is especially cognizant that even Youngman's analysis fails to capture the emotional toll that racism takes on people of color, since Youngman is focused first and foremost on the commodification of anger, not the day in, day out psychological struggle of facing bigotry. This, in turn, leads the protagonist to consider anger in a broader sense, alerting readers to the unfortunate fact that even though anger is a reasonable response to racism, it often backfires. Accordingly, it becomes clear that there are very few—if any—productive ways of coping with the rage that accompanies racism.

While watching the 2009 tennis U.S. Open, the protagonist finds herself thinking that Serena Williams has lost her mind, since the tennis star becomes enraged at the various judges making calls against her. As the protagonists watches this play out, she has the sense that all of the injustice and mistreatment Williams has had to put up with throughout her career has finally reached a boiling point. She is, the protagonist realizes, unable to conceal her rage any longer. Watching Williams grow angrier and angrier in the predominantly white context of the professional tennis community, the protagonist recalls a line by the author Zora Neale Hurston: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background."

The protagonist's initial reaction to Serena Williams's anger aligns with her previous acknowledgement that outrage often works against people of color—even if their anger is justified in the first place. As she continues to watch the tennis match, though, the protagonist finds herself capable of empathizing with Williams, since she herself knows what it's like to encounter injustice and, more importantly, how hard it is sometimes to hide her anger. This dynamic is further exacerbated by the fact that Williams is in a predominantly white context, where people clearly have unexamined biases against her as a black woman. By turning to Hurston's quote about feeling "most colored" when "thrown against a sharp white background," the protagonist articulates not only how Serena Williams must feel at the U.S. Open, but also that the way the outside world perceives a person of color can actually bring itself to bear on how that person sees herself.

In 2004, the tennis umpire Mariana Alves made a number of unfair calls against Serena Williams on the last day of the U.S. Open. It was glaringly obvious to everyone that the serves Alves was claiming were out of the box were quite clearly *inside* of the box. And yet, Alves continued to uphold that, point after point, Williams's serves were no good. At a certain point, Williams—exasperated—waved her finger back and forth at Alves in response to yet another bad call, saying "No, no, no." Still, to the surprise of the match's commentator's, she was able to resist showing any more anger than this simple gesture.

This account of Serena Williams's experience at the 2004 U.S. Open serves as background information for her later show of rage at the 2009 U.S. Open. In 2004, she manages to maintain her composure, even if she's fuming inside because of the unfair calls Alves makes against her. This, of course, is similar to how the protagonist constantly feels angry but keeps herself from acting on her rage, knowing that it will most likely only be used against her in ways that could exacerbate the very situation that upset her in the first place. Once again, then, readers see how society effectively delegitimizes black people's right to be angry, making it even harder to cope with racism and injustice.

Along with many other viewers, the protagonist is certain as she watches the 2004 U.S. Open that Mariana Alves is making bad calls against Serena Williams because she can't see past the fact that Williams is black. Williams ends up losing the match, which goes down in history as the match that prompted the professional tennis community to install a "line-calling technology" to ensure that every serve can be replayed. In the moment, though, all Williams can do is admit that she feels "cheated" in the aftermath of her unfair defeat. Watching this, the protagonist is incensed, and as time passes, she's impressed that Serena Williams and her sister Venus are both able to move on from a number of similarly unfair calls—calls clearly based on the tennis community's implicit bias against them.

By having the protagonist recall Serena Williams's mistreatment at the 2004 U.S. Open, Rankine shows readers that Williams's anger in 2009 has not come out of nowhere. In fact, it has been building for quite some time, but she has always kept it hidden from the public. That she eventually shows her outrage in 2009 therefore suggests that these kinds of situations accumulate until they reach a tipping point, rendering it all but impossible to respond to mistreatment with a passive, forward-looking attitude.

At the U.S. Open in 2009, Serena Williams doesn't play well during a semifinal match, and when she loses the first set, she smashes her racket against the ground. Everyone watching is taken aback, and the umpire gives her a formal warning. Then, at the very end of the second set, the line judge claims that Williams stepped over the line while serving (something known as a "foot fault"). Williams can't believe that the umpire has made this call, and when the sportscasters watch replays, they agree that there was no foot fault. However, the line judge sticks to her original call, even though most officiators wouldn't even make this kind of a technical call at such an important moment, since it means that Williams will lose on a technicality.

As if it isn't bad enough that Serena Williams has to face the normal pressures of playing a professional sport in a high-stakes context like the U.S. Open, she also has to contend with the umpire's obvious bias against her. Considering that she has already been dealing with this kind of unfairness for years and years, it's not all that surprising that she finally lets her anger show—after all, it has been building since 2004 (or most likely even before that, since she is one of the only women of color in the majority-white world of professional tennis).

The protagonist doubts that the line judge would have made this call against Serena Williams's white opponent. Unable to contain her anger, Williams turns to the judge and says, "I swear to God I'm fucking going to take this fucking ball and shove it down your fucking throat, you hear that? I swear to God!" The protagonist acknowledges that this is an offensive "outburst," but she also admires that Williams has responded instantly to the experience of "being thrown against a sharp white background." Rather than holding herself back, Williams reacts to injustice in real time.

It makes sense that the protagonist admires Serena Williams for reacting immediately to injustice, since the protagonist often finds herself acquiescing to racism even though she's extremely angry. Although she recognizes that anger often works against people of color, in this moment she appreciates William's genuine outpouring of emotion and the bravery it must take for her to finally let people know how she really feels.

Serena Williams's "outburst" has been building up for years, but this doesn't stop people in the tennis community from criticizing her for overreacting. Instead of acknowledging her anger, people call her "insane." Worse, she is fined $82,500. It is possible, of course, that part of this penalty has to do with the context in which Serena Williams displays her anger, since the event is televised, meaning that her swears have been widely broadcasted. However, the protagonist senses that this situation has very little to do with context and everything to do with racism. Although Williams's anger makes sense, the predominantly white tennis community has decided that the rules that apply to everyone else do not apply to her, and that to react with anger to this injustice is to prove oneself "insane, crass, [and] crazy."

The way people respond to Serena Williams's very legitimate response to injustice accentuates just how unwilling society at large is to recognize racism. Instead of seeing Williams's anger and stopping to think about the circumstances that upset her so much, the majority of the tennis community immediately condemns her and calls her "insane" or "crass." In doing so, they ignore the racist implications of her mistreatment while simultaneously depriving her of the right to react to this mistreatment. As a result, they effectively make it impossible for her to emotionally process injustice.

At the 2011 U.S. Open two years later, Serena Williams is playing poorly in an important match. Everyone expected her to win this match, especially since it takes place on the 10-year anniversary of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers. By winning, it seems, Serena Williams will be seen as a celebrated patriot and will finally be accepted by everyone in the tennis community. However, she isn't doing well. When she finally hits a good ball that her opponent will certainly be unable to return, she yells "Come on!" in celebration. In response, the umpire declares that Williams interfered with her opponent by yelling. Turning to the umpire, Williams asks if she's is trying to "screw her again."

Serena Williams is once more at the center of the tennis world's attention, apparently having moved on from what happened at the 2009 U.S. Open. This, it seems, is what people of color are constantly forced to do: put their anger behind them and go on without dwelling on the past. However, this is obviously an incredibly difficult—and perhaps impossible—thing to do, and Williams's question to the umpire about if she's trying to "screw her again" indicates that the injustice of the past isn't truly behind her at all.

The umpire in question isn't the same person as the line judge who made the bad call against Serena Williams in 2009, but the protagonist understands that Williams is recalling the many times she has been mistreated in the past. For her, "daily diminishment is a low flame, a constant drip." Having to live with this reality, she eventually finds herself unable or unwilling to hide her anger, so she tells the umpire to not even look at her, saying, "Don't look my way."

The protagonist correctly identifies that a large part of Serena Williams's anger in this moment has to do with all of the injustice and biases and bigotry she has had to face in the past. For this reason, it's even harder for her to hide her anger when the umpire makes a bad call against her—after all, the racism she has experienced throughout her life has manifested itself as a "daily diminishment," one that constantly affects her. In turn, it's unsurprising that she yells at the umpire, who has only added to the "low flame" of her anger.

Just one year later, Serena Williams wins two gold medals at the 2012 Olympic Games. To celebrate her final win, she does a small dance that lasts all but three seconds. This dance upends the entire tennis community, as commentators and media personalities criticize her for "Crip-Walking all over the most lily-white place in the world." According to these people, her celebration is unacceptable and inappropriate—or, to use their word, "classless."

The way the tennis community and the media react to Serena Williams's brief celebratory dance is in direct alignment with the way they responded to her anger in 2009. No matter what she does, it seems, she cannot show emotion without attracting all kinds of racially inflected criticism. Once more, then, readers see just how much society interferes with the ways in which people of color process emotion—an unfortunate fact that demonstrates just how hard it is to escape or ignore the many insensitive and problematic perspectives that have made their way into contemporary times.

Later in 2012, a white tennis player named Caroline Wozniacki imitates Serena Williams on the tennis court by putting towels in her shorts and shirt, accentuating her body's curves in an apparent attempt to match Williams's frame. She does this as a joke, thinking it's "all in good fun." Media outlets question whether or not people should be offended or "outrage[d]" by this racist display. As this plays out, the protagonist senses that this obviously racist joke is an embodiment of how the white tennis community sees Serena Williams. By imitating Williams in a blatantly racist way, the protagonist realizes, Wozniacki has managed to represent the way people in the sport see Williams while "leaving [her] 'angry nigger exterior' behind."

Caroline Wozniacki's behavior is racist. However, the tennis community and the media largely refuse to admit this, instead trying to frame her unkind and problematic imitation of Williams as nothing but a joke. This is similar to the way that the racist man in line at Starbucks acted like he didn't understand why the protagonist was upset by his use of the n-word. In both cases, it becomes extremely difficult to address racism because the very people acting in bigoted ways refuse to recognize the problems inherent to their own behavior. This, in turn, delegitimizes a person of color's right to be angry, thereby shutting down the only reasonable response to such blatant mistreatment.

CHAPTER 3

The protagonist is late while meeting a friend one day. When the protagonist finally arrives and approaches, her friend says, "You are late, you nappy-headed ho." The protagonist hears this perfectly but can't help but ask, "What did you say?" They have never spoken this way together, and the friend is unable to repeat herself. The protagonist then wonders if her friend was trying to "code-switch" as a way of embodying a stereotypical notion of the way black people talk to each other. Or, she thinks, perhaps her friend wants to talk about the radio announcer who referred several years earlier to members of a certain women's basketball team as "nappy headed hoes," though this seems unlikely. On the whole, she has no idea why her friend has spoken this way. This exchange makes both women deeply uncomfortable, and they find themselves incapable of overcoming the moment.

It isn't exactly clear whether or not the protagonist's friend is a black woman, though the thought that she was trying to "code-switch" suggests that she might be, since code-switching is generally something people do with one another if they both belong to a certain community or cultural background. Regardless, though, what the protagonist's friend says disturbs her because it calls upon racist language, forcing her once again to face racism in her everyday life. This, of course, is not something she wants to do, especially when she's simply trying to have a nice time with her friend. In this way, readers see just how inescapable racism can seem, since it apparently comes at the protagonist from all angles, including from her friends.

The protagonist continues to encounter racism and ignorance. A coworker calls her by the name of another black colleague, later apologizing in an email by saying she's sorry about "our mistake." In another instance, the protagonist speaks with a man on the phone and then, when she sees him in person, he blurts out that he didn't know she was black. Instantly, he says he didn't mean to say this, but she can tell he means that he didn't intend to say it *out loud*. On another occasion, a highly educated woman tells the protagonist that she didn't know black women could get cancer. In yet another conversation, a friend tells the protagonist that he saw a picture of her online, adding that she looks angry because she isn't smiling. In turn, the protagonist realizes that the picture makes him uncomfortable and that he wants her to "account for that."

Again, the protagonist cannot escape racism in her daily life. This is emotionally exhausting, since she constantly has to consider the fact that society at large has deeply problematic biases against black people. What's worse, though, is that many of her white acquaintances want her to "account" for their own discomfort when it comes to her cultural positioning, hoping that she will be able to relieve them of whatever qualms they have about either her race, their relationship with her, or perhaps the country's terrible history of racism. Indeed, this is possibly why white people frequently speak to her as if they can transcend racism, since they hope she—as a black person—will allow them to stop thinking about such matters. In doing so, they only give themselves permission to say racist things. And all the while, they leave it to the protagonist to do the emotional heavy lifting that comes along with such conversations, expecting her to process their problematic comments and move on without a problem.

While attending a reading at the university where she teaches one day, the protagonist listens to a visiting humorist answer questions. When one of the audience members asks what makes something funny, the humorist explains that comedy is all about context. This doesn't surprise the protagonist, but what he says next does, since he goes on to say that most people would laugh with their friends in private at certain jokes that they might not laugh at "out in public where black people could hear." Considering this, the protagonist realizes that the humorist groups her into the "others out in public" category of this equation. According to this logic, then, she is not among "friends" even at her own university.

The humorist addresses the audience as if everyone there is white, speaking in a way that implies a white perspective. Consequently, the protagonist realizes that he hasn't even bothered to account for the fact that he has excluded her (and any other people of color who might be in the audience) from his considerations. Furthermore, the humorist apparently has no qualms admitting that he finds racist jokes funny. This attitude suggests that he thinks he can transcend racism entirely, perhaps thinking it's no longer problematic to laugh at racist jokes because racism is a thing of the past. And yet, racism isn't *a thing of the past—it is very much still alive in contemporary times, in large part because of attitudes like his.*

The protagonist attends a lecture by the philosopher and public intellectual Judith Butler. When a person in the audience asks Butler why language is capable of hurting people, she answers by saying that the simple act of existing makes people "addressable." People, she argues, are only as emotionally vulnerable as they are "addressable"—the more "addressable" they are, the more susceptible they are to being hurt by others through language. Thinking about this, the protagonist realizes that, although she has always thought racist language effectively attempts to "erase" black people, the truth is that being black in predominantly white contexts renders one "hypervisible." This, in turn, makes people of color especially "addressable."

The idea that black people are "hypervisible" in predominantly white contexts aligns with Zora Neale Hurston's assertion that she feels "most colored" when "thrown against a sharp white background." In keeping with this, the protagonist shifts how she thinks of her own cultural positioning, coming to see her own existence in majority-white spaces not as one of invisibility, but one of "hypervisib[ility]"—a notion that accords with the fact that she is constantly encountering racism as she moves through her daily life.

A friend of the protagonist tells her one day that she should learn how to keep the racism of the outside world from affecting her so thoroughly. This friend explains that she often finds herself calling people out for saying something ignorant, hurtful, or problematic, ultimately signaling to them that she's unwilling to accept such behavior. Reflecting upon her own coping mechanisms, the protagonist thinks about how she often internalizes hurtful and toxic encounters. Rather than keeping herself from commenting on this, she acknowledges that she should strive do more than simply "get[] along" with people, though she still doesn't always challenge this kind of racism.

The protagonist's hesitancy to call people out for being racist indicates that such things are often easier said than done. What's more, she is all too aware of the unfortunate fact that taking a stand against injustice sometimes only invites even more mistreatment, which is what happened to Serena Williams at the 2009 U.S. Open. With this in mind, then, she continues to respond passively to racism and bigotry, though she acknowledges that this isn't a productive way of coping with mistreatment either.

CHAPTER 4

The protagonist copes with the trials and tribulations of everyday life, sometimes moaning aloud like deer or sighing. Whenever she sighs, the world tells her to stop, but she only sighs again. When she moans, though, the world laughs. Thinking about this, she wonders if she could ever control her sighs, realizing that they're out of her control because the very things that elicit the sighs in the first place are also beyond her control.

At times, Citizen *is an incredibly abstract and poetic book. Because of this, it is often necessary to engage with it on a metaphorical level, refraining from trying too hard to interpret every last detail in a literal sense. Having said that, the sigh the protagonist considers in this section is quite obviously representative of her struggle to cope with the troubling emotions that arise in response to racism and mistreatment. That the world tells her to stop sighing is yet another manifestation of the ways in which society refuses to acknowledge how hard it is to face bigotry on a daily basis, since many people are unwilling to admit the continued existence of racism in the first place. For this reason, the protagonist feels as if her sighs are beyond her own control, since they are involuntary responses to these unfavorable conditions—which are themselves out of her control.*

The protagonist considers the nature of memory, thinking about how it's often not helpful to remember painful experiences. In fact, the world at large tends prefer to forget about past hardships. As individuals, though, it's sometimes hard to forget about pain, since emotions are often what make up a person's identity. For that reason, the protagonist's various painful memories—which go unnoticed by the outside world—give her **headaches**. Over time, she stops sighing, but the headaches persist. However, they turn into a certain kind of "numbness" as she glazes over and tries to disconnect herself from her feelings, watching tennis matches with the volume off to distract herself.

The protagonist's headaches are symbolic of how hard it is to emotionally process the racism she experiences on a daily basis. Unwilling to let herself show outrage like Serena Williams, she holds on to her emotions, and this seems to have a destructive impact on her wellbeing, as evidenced by the fact that she gets severe headaches. The only way to treat this discomfort, then, is for her to go numb, though this is obviously not a great coping technique, since it effectively requires her to shut her feelings off completely.

Despite the fact that the world at large thinks it's possible to forget about past hardships and pain, the protagonist knows this is impossible. It is, she argues, simply not an option to ignore the past because it is "buried" inside of people. Still, she continues to try to distract herself from such thoughts by watching tennis with the television muted. When she sees an argument developing between Serena Williams and an umpire, though, she scrambles to turn on the sound. As the protagonist listens to the exchange, a sports commentator wonders aloud if Serena Williams will be capable of moving on from this issue in order to focus on the game. This is a tactic that is all too familiar for the protagonist, who knows that black people are often told, "Move on. Let it go. Come on."

Once more, the protagonist considers just how hard it is to emotionally process injustice. As the protagonist opts to numb herself to the world, Serena Williams lets her anger show. Unsurprisingly, this grabs the protagonist's attention, since Williams is effectively doing what she can't bring herself to do: act upon her rage. Unfortunately, though, she sees that Williams's anger only invites criticism and patronizing suggestions to "move on."

CHAPTER 5

An unidentified speaker who isn't necessarily tied to the protagonist's point of view notes that it's possible to use language to cope with the pent-up emotions that come along with racism and mistreatment. However, the speaker isn't sure what it would be like to actually let oneself truly express such feelings. In line with this, the protagonist herself wonders what her "outburst" would be like if she would "just cry out—"; however, she doesn't finish her sentence. Instead, she keeps her feelings to herself.

Throughout Citizen, *there sometimes emerges a distinction between the protagonist and whoever is actually saying the words that appear on the page (the speaker). In other words, the unidentified speaker isn't always closely associated with the protagonist, though sometimes the two figures seem to blend into one another. Because of this, it's never entirely clear what point of view is at work in the pages of the book. This is an important dynamic to track, especially since the difference between the speaker and the protagonist becomes more and more pronounced as the book progresses, ultimately inviting readers to consider the idea of identity construction and the ways in which a person's sense of self (which includes perspective, subjectivity, and the way one conceives of their own cultural positioning) changes in relation to the surrounding context. In this moment, the speaker and the protagonist seem closely related, as the protagonist thinks about anger in the same way that the speaker does, wondering what her "outburst" would be like if she let herself fully express her emotions. And yet, she can't even imagine what her "outburst" would sound like, a sign that she is so used to concealing her anger that she no longer knows how it might manifest itself if she gave it voice.*

Thinking about identity and subjectivity, the speaker suggests that the pronoun "I" is sometimes "supposed to hold what is not there until it is." At this point in the book, the speaker uses a first-person perspective to describe a conversation she's had with the protagonist (referred to as "you") about the power of using the word "I." The speaker suggests that the protagonist has "tried rhyme, tried truth, tried epistolary untruth, tried and tried." No matter what the protagonist has tried, though, everyone around her always knows she is "suffering." Continuing to consider identity, the speaker suggests that "the past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow." Going on, she urges the protagonist to "drag that first person out of the social death of history."

There is a lot going on in this section of Citizen. *First and foremost, readers should note the strange way that the words on the page have pulled away from the protagonist's point of view, as the speaker delineates herself from the protagonist by not only addressing her, but also by referring to herself (the speaker) as "I." This is made even more complicated by the fact that the speaker ponders the use of the word "I," asserting that it is often used to "hold what is not there until it is." This further destabilizes any understanding of who, exactly, is speaking while also implying that the use of "I" in this moment is little more than a placeholder, as if the speaker is trying to inhabit an identity over which she doesn't actually feel any ownership. This calls attention to the slippery process of identity formation, indicating that inhabiting a certain persona or perspective is perhaps not as straightforward as it might seem—especially when the speaker (or, for that matter, the protagonist) exists in a world that simultaneously dismisses the effects of racism while also focusing on her race and making unfounded assumptions based on her skin color. When the speaker says that the protagonist has "tried rhyme, tried truth, tried epistolary untruth," she effectively comments on the book itself and the process of writing it, thereby implying that* Citizen *is a compilation of poetry, autobiography, and fiction that serves as the protagonist's (or, in this case, Claudia Rankine's) attempt to process not only the injustices of the past, but also how society's willful ignorance of these injustices (the "social death of history") negatively impacts her sense of self and her cultural positioning.*

Switching tracks, the narrative returns to its previous habit of describing events in the protagonist's life, turning to an encounter she has in a drugstore. When she is about to walk up to the cashier, a man cuts her in line. When the cashier points this out to the man, he apologizes profusely, insisting that he didn't see the protagonist. The protagonist tries to give him an excuse by suggesting that he must be in a hurry, but he replies by insisting that he really didn't see her.

As abstract and philosophical as Citizen *can get, it also frequently grounds readers by focusing on a small, everyday scene. Following the speaker's heady ruminations about identity, cultural positioning, and history, a simple interaction takes place at a drugstore. This interaction between the protagonist and the man who cuts her in line serves as a simple illustration of some of the more complex ideas the speaker expresses, demonstrating the extent to which society at large threatens to interfere with the protagonist's sense of self by effectively insisting that her position in the world is inconsequential and easily overlookable.*

CHAPTER 6

In a script for a "situation video," readers are presented by a number of quotes from CNN coverage of Hurricane Katrina and how people feel as they wait for help from national relief organizations. These organizations take an extremely long time to come to certain communities, leaving people wading through water. Under the strain of water, houses begin to lean and separate from themselves. Meanwhile, one speaker on CNN talks about the people who have been hit by this travesty, asking, "Have you seen their faces?" Another cobbled-together quote points out that the aftermath of this disaster reveals the significant disparities between rich people and poor people or between white people and black people. When somebody asks where FEMA or the other relief organizations are, another person answers by saying that she heard that the people who are supposed to help want to stay away.

It isn't particularly clear what, exactly, a "situation video" is, though readers will perhaps have a better sense if they visit Claudia Rankine's website, where there are a number of conceptual videos accompanied by the text in this section. More importantly, though, it's worth considering Rankine's interest in Hurricane Katrina, since the fact that relief organizations effectively left black communities to fend for themselves is a perfect illustration of the ways in which racial prejudice and implicit bias has worked its way into contemporary times, bringing themselves to bear on life or death situations.

In a quote from the CNN coverage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a speaker says that he and his community members have been forgotten. Another person comments on the situation by talking about getting chills while looking at the people who have been influenced by the hurricane, emphasizing that they are extremely poor and "so black." \

A noteworthy paradox emerges in this moment, as the black people affected by Hurricane Katrina become "hypervisible" but are also forgotten about. Indeed, the person who makes a point of noting that the people impacted by the hurricane are "so black" renders them "hypervisible," focusing first and foremost on the color of their skin. And yet, the African American people dealing with the fallout of Hurricane Katrina still feel overlooked by society on the whole, having been left to fend for themselves. In this way, it becomes clear that visibility doesn't necessarily lead to beneficial kinds of recognition. Rather, it often leads to little more than patronizing tokenization.

In a script for yet another "situation video"—this one entitled "In Memory of Trayvon Martin"—an unidentified speaker talks about how he and his brothers are "notorious." Some of his brothers, he says, haven't been to prison, but some have. He then notes that his brothers say his name on his birthday, adding, "They will never forget that we are named." Later, he says that his brothers' hearts are broken and that if he "knew another way to be," he would call them and say, "My brother, dear brother, my dearest brothers, dear heart—." Considering the sweep of history, the speaker then turns his attention to slavery and the era of segregation and Jim Crow laws that came after it, suggesting that these pieces of the past "accumulate" in his and his brothers' lives.

It's unclear who is speaking during this section, though it seems possible that the voice belongs to Trayvon Martin, a black teenager from Florida who was shot and killed by a member of a gated community's neighborhood watch in 2012. Martin became an iconic figure in the aftermath of his death, which led to an outpouring of rage regarding hate crimes, racial profiling, and violence against the African American community. In this section, then, his (probable) voice emerges as one of unification, as he speaks about his "brothers." Moreover, his observations about slavery and the Jim Crow era highlight the fact that contemporary racism has its roots in the United States' history, which has easily made its way into the present.

The unnamed speaker of the "situation video" entitled "In Memory of Trayvon Martin" says that if he called his brothers, he would say farewell to them before actually saying goodbye. Going on, he suggests that he says goodbye to his brothers before they can even hang up the phone, saying, "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." Following this script, there is a photograph called "Public Lynching," which depicts a group of white people dressed in 1930s clothing. They are crowded around a tree. One man with a severe face looks at the camera and points up toward the tree branches, where there is only darkness.

This section dips into figuration and abstraction, but readers might intuit that the speaker (who is most likely Trayvon Martin himself) is referring to the fact that the incident that unfolded between Trayvon Martin and the neighborhood watchman who killed him was picked up in the background of several telephone calls that neighbors placed to the police. These snippets were recorded and used during the trial of the man who killed Martin. Consequently, these recordings document the last moments of Trayvon Martin's life, meaning that they are "the call[s] of good-byes." The picture included at the end of this "situation script" is also worth paying attention to, since it's a famous photograph of a public lynching that took place in Indiana during the Jim Crow Era. What's notable, though, is that this specific version of the picture has been altered. In the original picture, two black men hang from the tree. In this version, though, their bodies have been removed, and there is only darkness above. This speaks to the unfortunate erasure that often takes place in American society, as many people refuse to acknowledge the ways in which the country's history of racism and violence has made its way into contemporary times.


In yet another script for a "situation video"—this one called "In Memory of James Craig Anderson"—a speaker considers the trajectory of a particular pickup truck, suggesting that this truck is "a condition of darkness in motion." This, the speaker says, means that the truck constructs a "dark subject," but then another unidentified voice asks if the original speaker means to say a "black subject." The first speaker then says, "No, a black object." Next, the speaker describes the truck as it runs this "black object" into the ground, crushing its internal organs. Citing a recorded piece of audio, the speaker repeats an out-of-context line in which somebody says, "I ran that nigger over."

Again, readers encounter another abstract and poetic section. There is, however, a simple event underpinning all of this figuration: the 2011 death of James Craig Anderson, a middle-aged black man who was intentionally run over by a young white man driving a pickup truck. This white man is the person whose voice appears in the snippet of audio the speaker references—a condemning piece of evidence. Once again, then, readers are faced with evidence of the overwhelming fact that racist violence is still very much a part of contemporary life.

Another script for a "situation video"—this one entitled "Jena Six"—appears, presenting readers with an account of an unidentified character walking into a school yard and sitting beneath a tree. The narrative then shifts to a group of boys approaching the tree that evening (after the other boy has left) and hanging a noose from its branches. As they tie the noose, they think that this experience is how they will "learn the ropes." Next, the focus shifts to a high school party, where several boys beat another boy, smashing a beer bottle and throwing his body against a concrete floor as he bleeds out of his ears. The unidentified speaker then suggests that "boys will be boys," especially as they try to figure out "the position of positioning," which everyone knows is only a problem for "one kind of boy."

This "situation video" references the Jena Six, a group of six African American high school students who were arrested in 2006 for severely beating a white boy at a party. This altercation was connected to an incident that took place at their school, when a black student and his friends decided to sit underneath a tree, under which only white students usually sat. That evening, a group of white boys strung up nooses on the tree. When the unidentified speaker says that "boys will be boys," she echoes a phrase people often use to excuse otherwise unacceptable behavior. In this context, though, the boys who make up the Jena Six are in the process of figuring out how they fit into their surrounding circumstances, and though the white boy they hurt is presumably also trying to come to terms with his cultural positioning, the speaker indicates that the struggle to orient oneself in society is significantly more difficult for black boys attempting to make sense of their place in a racist world. And though this doesn't necessarily excuse the Jena Six for resorting to violence, readers will perhaps sense that they are in the process of learning that outrage (and, indeed, violence) isn't a productive way of responding to bigotry and injustice.

A new script for a "situation video"—this one called "Stop-and-Frisk"—appears. In this script, an unidentified speaker (who appears to be a lawyer) tells a story about driving home from a client's house one night, knowing he'll be pulled over by the police. He can just feel that this is going to happen. And sure enough, it does, an officer asking him to get out of the car and telling him to lie on the ground. The officer claims that this man fits the description of a criminal on the run, and though the narrator is not this person, he is quite accustomed to being the person who "fit[s] the description." In the end, he is charged for speeding even though the officer originally said he *wasn't* speeding. He is then fingerprinted and asked to strip, at which point the police tell him to dress and walk home.

Stop-and-frisk policing is a method of law enforcement that is prone to racial profiling, since it allows officers to stop civilians and search them for weapons or other illegal possessions without adequately justifying why. Stop-and-frisk is a notoriously racist policy, one that has led to stereotyping and many unfair interactions between police officers and people of color. In this "situation video," a lawyer who has done nothing wrong is not only treated like a criminal, but dehumanized and humiliated by the police officers who force him to strip naked before letting him go. All the while, he knows he's experiencing this simply because he fits a "description" of another black man, meaning that the authorities are subjecting him to this mistreatment for no other reason than the color of his skin.

In a section called "In Memory of Mark Duggan," the book's protagonist ("you") is at a party in London. Leaning against the wall, she talks to a novelist about the riots that have erupted nearby, taking note of the fact that this man seems to care deeply about what's happening. The riots that have broken out are in response to the murder of Mark Duggan, a black man who was a father, husband, and "suspected drug dealer." He was killed by law enforcement officers belonging to a unit dealing with gun-related crimes in predominantly black communities. As people start rioting and looting in the aftermath of this shooting, the government—and, in turn, the media—upholds that the breakout is nothing but "opportunism." As the media continues to report on the riots, it becomes clear that many viewers have stopped thinking about why the outrage began in the first place.

When the media frames the rioting and looting that takes place after Mark Duggan's murder as "opportunism," it becomes clear that the situation's narrative has been distorted. Rather than paying attention to the injustice of Duggan's murder, many disparage London's black community. In this way, they delegitimize the very reasonable anger that people feel in response to a needless tragedy, making it even harder to cope with an already difficult situation.

The novelist at the party asks the protagonist if she is going to write about Mark Duggan. Instead of answering this question, she asks him the same thing. "Me?" he replies. As he says this, he looks somewhat agitated or annoyed, prompting the protagonist to wonder how hard it really is for a person of one race to empathize with a person of another race in such moments. Thinking this way, she wonders if the injustices that led to the riots are truly that hard for a white person to comprehend.

Although the protagonist has found a white person who shares her anger about how black people are treated in contemporary society, she realizes that the empathy he feels is somewhat compromised. Rather than relating to the tragedy of Mark Duggan's death on a human level, he seems to approach it in the abstract, as if he can't fully understand the anger that the protagonist herself feels. This, in turn, causes the protagonist to question why someone would ever feel disconnected from this kind of tragedy, since any human should be able to understand this sorrow and anger.

In a script for a "situation video" about the 2006 soccer World Cup, a number of quotes appear by writers and thinkers like Maurice Blanchot, Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, and James Baldwin. Spliced together in this fashion, the quotes are paired with a frame-by-frame photographic progression of the moment during the 2006 World Cup when the French player Zinedine Zidane headbutted the Italian player Marco Materazzi. At first, the images depict Zidane jogging away from Materazzi. Beneath the initial strip of pictures, there is a quote by Zidane himself, who says that every day he thinks about where he's from and is proud to be the person he is. Beneath this quote there is an account of what Materazzi said to provoke Zidane. According to professional lip readers, Materazzi called Zidane a "Big Algerian shit," a "dirty terrorist," and the n-word.

France and Europe has a long history of racism against Algerian people. Calling upon this painful dynamic, Materazzi reduces Zidane to his ethnicity, flinging racist and bigoted words at him. This interaction might seem surprising in the context of the 2006 World Cup, but it's unfortunately not all that astonishing, since anti-Muslim sentiments are still quite prominent in contemporary times and were perhaps especially pronounced in the 2000s, when there was so much international concentration on terrorism, which many people unfairly associated with all Muslims. Once again, then, readers see how foolish it is to think that bigotry is a thing of the past.

After the lipreaders' account of what Materazzi said to provoke Zidane, there is a quote from Frantz Fanon about how Algerian people frequently find themselves the "target of criticism for their European comrades." Moreover, Fanon suggests that many Algerians have assumed that they can "answer the blows received without any serious problem of conscience." At this point, another photographic progression appears, this time depicting the moment that Zidane hears what Materazzi has said and begins to turn around. Below this, James Baldwin suggests in a short passage that every black man knows what it's like to want to "smash any white face" in an act of "vengeance." At the same time, Baldwin upholds that each black man also knows that he must make an "adjustment" in response to this urge or, at the very least, must *try* to make this kind of "adjustment."

The quotes Rankine draws from Fanon and Baldwin speak to how people who have been impacted by bigotry respond to such offenses. Fanon, for his part, considers the mistreatment Algerians face in Europe, whereas Baldwin focuses on racism against black people. Both, however, acknowledge the impulse to fight back against racism, framing this emotional process as immediate and practically overwhelming. But Baldwin goes on to suggest that it is often necessary to make an "adjustment" to this kind of emotional response. This aligns with the notion that anger sometimes only invites more racism and mistreatment. Baldwin seems cognizant of this dynamic, which is why he upholds that black people must at least try to find ways to keep themselves from "smash[ing]" the white people who treat them so poorly. Of course, the fact that he says it is necessary to try *to make this "adjustment" implies that it will not always be possible to do so, as emotion can overtake people. That Zidane is about to headbutt Materazzi is a perfect illustration of this.*

In the frame-by-frame photographic progression, Zidane approaches Materazzi. The words Materazzi said to him repeat multiple times, as quotes continue to circulate. A passage by Frantz Fanon considers what it's like for an Algerian man to cope with his anger in the face of discrimination. Just before Zidane's head collides with Materazzi's chest, a famous quote by Frederick Douglass appears: "But at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight." As Materazzi is knocked off his feet and falls to the ground, another excerpt from James Baldwin concludes the sequence, as the author writes: "The rebuttal assumes an original form."

It's worth remembering that the protagonist has wondered in the past what her "outburst" would look like if she allowed herself to show her anger. Like Serena Williams's actions at the 2009 U.S. Open, Zinedine Zidane's decision to headbutt Materazzi is an example of what it looks like to allow oneself to respond to injustice in real time—or, as Frederick Douglass might put it, what it might look like when somebody finally "resolve[s] to fight."

A new script begins, this time for a so-called "Public Fiction" called "Making Room." In this section, the protagonist ("you") boards a train and notices that a woman standing near her has decided not to sit in the train car's only open seat. This, the protagonist sees, is because the woman doesn't want to sit next to the man in the neighboring seat—a fact that upsets the protagonist, who makes a show of taking the seat. As she sits, the man doesn't look in her direction, instead staring out the window into the darkness. Still, she senses that he's very aware that she has just taken the seat, since she supposes that he's so used to thinking about the empty seat beside him that he barely needs to pay any attention to it anymore.

Returning to the protagonist, readers are once more invited to consider the everyday manifestations of racism that people of color constantly experience. This time, the protagonist focuses not on her own mistreatment, but on the glaring assumptions her fellow passengers have made about the man sitting next to the empty seat. Although it's never stated that this man is African American, the protagonist's empathy suggests that the main reason nobody is sitting next to him is because he is a black man—and, of course, because they have preconceived and unfair ideas about what this means.

A new seat opens up on the train and the woman who avoided the seat next to the man in question now sits down, prompting the protagonist to look to see if the man has noticed—he is still looking out the window. The protagonist senses that the empty space beside him follows him wherever he goes. She then begins to wonder whether her decision to sit next to him has actually benefitted him or if she's doing it for herself. However, this thought dissipates when a nearby passenger asks somebody else to move so she and her child can sit together. Upon hearing this, the man turns to look at the protagonist, and as they gaze at each other, the protagonist knows they have tacitly decided not to move if somebody asks them to, silently agreeing to say they're traveling as a family.

The protagonist sits next to the man on the train out of a sense of empathy, but she soon worries that this is a self-serving gesture. After all, perhaps the man doesn't need her reassurance that he is worth sitting next to—maybe he, unlike her, is able to discount what racist people think of him. However, her decision to sit next to him turns into something meaningful when he turns to look at her, making it clear that he sees her kindness as an act of solidarity, not one of pity. Communicating nonverbally, he and the protagonist then feel supported by one another despite the unaccommodating atmosphere of their immediate environment, which is full of people who are clearly biased against black people.

CHAPTER 7

The speaker ponders the nature of existence and selfhood. She contemplates what it's like to have a constant "**ache**," one that is seemingly impossible to banish. This feeling exists alongside and in combination with a person's identity. With this in mind, the speaker thinks about the ways in which the self can be divided, thinking about the various "histories of you and you" and how the different sides of selfhood can make it difficult to fully inhabit or understand a singular, cohesive identity.

Once more, the unidentified speaker steps away from the protagonist in order to reflect upon the nature of selfhood and identity. In this capacity, she determines that the pain people feel as a result of racism becomes incorporated into their identities, leaving them to search for ways to cope with this trauma while struggling with the fact that such challenges often factor so heavily into identity construction. This, in turn, interferes with a person's ability to feel in full possession of their own sense of self, thereby demonstrating why the long history of racism in the United States and the world at large is so destructive to how black people conceive of themselves even in the contemporary era.

In a section entitled "July 13, 2013," the protagonist thinks about numbness. One of her friends has written about how humming numbs him to certain things, and this reminds her of the way she often sighs. She realizes that her sigh has become quieter than it used to be. This, she thinks, is because she is getting older and is getting used to the "**ache**" she constantly feels. That morning, she is driving with her partner when they hear a man in a neighboring car (perhaps at a stoplight) say something racist while listening to a radio broadcast about Trayvon Martin. The protagonist's partner jumps out of the car, wanting to yell at the man, but the protagonist tells him to stop. She ushers him back into the car, sensing that his actions could put her in danger.

July 13, 2013, was the day that Trayvon Martin's killer was acquitted, as a jury ultimately found him not guilty on all counts. This decision incited uproar throughout the United States, as illustrated by the way the protagonist's partner loses his temper when he hears somebody say something racist in response to a radio piece about Trayvon Martin. Knowing that anger often leads to more harm than good, the protagonist urges him to calm down, having committed herself to going numb—a state of being that has apparently become second-nature to her. This, it seems, is what constant racism does to a person, exposing them to so much pain, anger, and stress that there's little else for them to do but try to insulate themselves from their own feelings.

The speaker narrates a conversation she has with her partner. In the conversation, she tells him that she was waiting in her car in a parking lot near some tennis courts earlier that day when a woman drove up and parked in the space across from her own spot. When the woman made eye contact with the speaker, though, she immediately reversed out of the spot and went to park elsewhere. At first, the speaker considered following her to ask why she did this, but she didn't because it was time for her to get out of the car and go to the tennis court with her racket. Hearing this, her partner asks if she won. "It wasn't a match," she answers. "It was a lesson."

In this moment, the speaker appears to have fully taken the place of the second-person protagonist. Readers can't help but get the sense that in previous sections this kind of exchange would have been narrated in the second-person, putting the protagonist ("you") at the center of the action. Here, though, the speaker assumes this position herself, shifting into the first-person in a move that embodies a certain inhabitation of personal agency; instead of feeling at odds with herself because of the way the external world impacts her sense of self, she now fully owns her own cultural positioning, choosing to see adversity not as a debilitating challenge, but as a "lesson." In turn, she exhibits a resolve to keep racism and mistreatment from having so much power over her internal world, deciding to learn from her negative experiences instead of letting them defeat her, even if her initial response is to numb herself to this kind of pain.

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