

Citizen: An American Lyric Study Guide

Citizen: An American Lyric

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Plot Summary

Citizen: An American Lyric, by Claudia Rankine, is a work in progress (it's been updated many times now). The author writes in a free form, half poem, half prose format, which also includes pictures from current events, historical events, and historical civil rights emblems and paintings. Taken as a collective whole, the work exposes the inadequacies that still exist globally, and not just in the U.S., as well as offers a hope for the future.

Initially, the book begins with a young 12-year-old black girl who is attending a Catholic school. She is not given a name in the story, but the white girl that cheats off of her is named Mary Catherine. Sister Evelyn, her teacher, also gets a name. The black girl allows Mary Catherine to cheat off of her. Thinking that she will be nice to the black girl for allowing her to cheat, Mary Catherine tries to compliment her, but it comes out more as a racial slur. The black girl feels even worse about herself than before. She is also angry -very angry. She hates feeling invisible.

Another scenario, told in the first person, is offered to the reader. A successful African American woman has taken her seat by the window on the airplane, when a white woman with her child approaches the same row. They see that they are going to have to sit next to the black woman, and the mother, with a sigh offers to sit next to the black woman so that her daughter won't have to.

In another scenario, a woman joins another woman for lunch. They are strangers, but both have children that have just gotten into prestigious schools. The white mother is upset when she learns that the black mother's child got into the school that the white mother had wanted her child to get in to. The white mother blames affirmative action for not allowing her child to have a spot at the other school. The black mother wonders what the big deal is since the white child got into another Ivy League school that was just as good.

There is an angry black artist on YouTube named Youngman, whose videos tell young black artists that they need to embrace all of the rage and anger that they have from being black and project it into their work. The author suggests that the anger can be channeled like that to make positive change, but that Youngman doesn't go far enough with his ranting. It is called saleable anger. The author states that this type of anger only leads to alienation and loneliness, not solutions.

The author illustrates her point by sharing an event with Serena Williams in 2004 when Serena believed that the line referee had purposely called against her on several occasions simply because she was black. The author talks about how black Serena and her sister, Venus, must have felt against the backdrop of so much white in the tennis world. She quotes a Zora Neale Hurston saying about blackness. The rules that everyone else has to play by don't apply to you, the author suggests, especially if you are black.



A woman is standing in line at a drugstore front counter when a white man cuts in front of her and puts his things down to be checked out. The cashier alerts him to the fact that he's just cut in front of the woman. Shocked, he turns around and claims that he didn't see her standing there. The author uses this story to illustrate how some white people can't see black people unless they are a reflection of themselves.

A woman goes to a bar for a drink and to wait on her friend. While there, she sees a man drinking alone. He pulls out his phone and shows her a picture of his wife. He says that she is beautiful and the woman smiles. Her smile fades and she leaves without waiting for her friend, when the man follows up his comment about his beautiful wife with, 'She's black like you.'

The author includes an essay section where she examines perspective. How is she supposed to view all of the injustice in the world? Is she supposed to wear sunglasses, to remove the harsh glare of that reality? What if everyone just turned one shade of blue and were absorbed into the blue of the sky? Then would it matter? She talks about how Words, used as instruments of education, of protest, as a release, can open doors between intention and gesture.

Hurricane Katrina is examined by the author, shown to be more than a terrible natural disaster, but rather was a disaster of epic social and moral proportions. The water came and showed that no one cared, one man is shown to say. Those that were hardest hit were those that were too poor to leave, who lived too far out for the buses to reach them, and who were too black, the author suggests, for anyone to want to rescue them.

The Trayvon Martin case, James Craig Anderson case, Jena Six case, Mark Duggan case, are all offered as proof of continued racism, not only in the U.S., but globally. The author then quotes famous author James Baldwin, a civil rights activist and author. He suggests and the author continues an essay on the questions that go with the answers, and who will dare to ask the questions or develop the right questions to ask.

A white woman is standing on a bus. There's one seat left, but it would mean sitting next to a black man. She starts to stand the entire way, but then realizes that this is silly thinking and, overcoming her racism, she sits next to the man. A woman and her daughter come on board and begin asking if someone might give up their seat. The white woman decides that if they ask them to give up their seats, she will claim that she and the black man are family, traveling together, themselves. The author uses this to illustrate her belief that in the future, a realization that mankind are all one large family might be embraced. This is, she suggests, mankind's only, and best hope, for the future.



Chapters 1 and 2

Summary

Chapter 1

In Chapter One, the author tells the reader that the character is black by referring to her as “an almost white person.” The character, a 12-year-old girl who attends Catholic school, is quite intelligent (the girl seated behind her wants to copy her exams), but is also depicted as plain and quiet. The author and narrator of the book, describes circumstances that drive humiliation and hurt, as Sister Evelyn posts failing and superior grades for all to see, and takes no notice of the girl who speaks only when spoken to....as if invisible.

Other painful events are described: someone close uses the wrong name to communicate (as if all black people look alike and it is easy to confuse their identity/name), a friend shares that a person of color must be hired – this friend is upset because there are so many great writers that are not black, a unknown woman is upset because college minority requirements have prevented being able to attend school there. The character experiences sick feelings and physical illness in response to racially driven comments, behaviors, looks and actions; and most of the time nothing is said (her feeling are not expressed). Unable to stop the noticing, the character obsesses.

A recounting of different events experienced, racial in nature, are described: 1) A little girl is uncomfortable about sitting next to a black person on the airplane; 2) Black teenagers in Starbucks are boisterous, and a customer in line calls them niggers - everyone in the room pauses when the name-calling is questioned; and 3) A man knocks over a young black boy on a subway and is asked to apologize, as he apparently did not see him.

Chapter 2

This chapter introduces Hennessy Youngman, a self-defined artist on YouTube, who provides coaching for hopeful artists, and challenges them to develop/demonstrate rage. Youngman says to be a successful black artist you must show anger - and act white.

Serena William’s experience with bad officiating during the U.S. Women’s Open in 2004 and 2009 is described in detail in Chapter 2. After years of being subjected to bad calls, there is a lapse of resilience and following repeated and blatant unfair treatment, Serena loses her composure.

During the 2009 tournament, Serena shouts expletives at an official after calls are made in the opponent's favor. Some spectators label Serena’s behavior insane. The author focuses on Serena’s difficulty in moving past unfair events. Trusting that umpire calls will



be fair in the future is a challenge that affects Serena's judgment, and in 2011 when Serena is rightfully scolded for shouting and interfering with an opponents' concentration, Serena thinks the call is unfair. Serena's stamina, drive and love of the game continues and in 2012 Serena is the recipient of two gold medals at the Olympics. Serena is also named WTA Player of the Year. These events introduce the question "Is this really how it is in the 21st century?"

All of the incidents related in the montage of events, from Starbucks to the subway, demonstrate the theme of Alienation, or being overlooked as a segment of society, of being invisible. The author suggests that even though advances have been made in regards to civil rights, one doesn't have to look very far in certain parts of the country to still see it in full force.

Analysis

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 introduces the main character of the book, who is never identified by name. The book is a second-person narrative with the author an observer. The theme of chapter one is the Pain of Prejudice. The pain of not being remembered by a good friend, of not being valued, of not being "one of them", and of being alienated when a little girl does not want to sit near her. All of the situations shared are real. Events of this nature continue throughout the book, along with the question/internal conversation of how best to cope.

Additionally, there are symbols that are introduced in this chapter, such as a photograph of James Crow Street, which reminds the reader that it was not so long ago that racial segregation was a very real practice. The author suggests that while blatant segregation was ended, it is still practiced, today, in more subtle fashion. Also, the cover of the book shows a young African American man wearing a hoodie. This directly relates to the Trayvon Martin incident, where a young African American boy was gunned down due to prejudicial stereotyping.

Chapter 2

The erroneous calls made against Serena Williams are blatant and an example of obvious racial prejudice. The unfair treatment drives Serena's outburst in 2009, and this changes how Serena is perceived by the public going forward. Serena's anger and outbursts are contrasted against Hennessey Youngman's promotion of anger and rage.

This chapter revolves around the theme of Anger (rage). Youngman's rage is racial violence gained by watching videos of the Rodney King beating. Some spectators label Serena's outburst as insane; however, Serena's passion, strength, stamina, and resilience are the core of achieving the level of excellence that affords national and worldwide championship notoriety.



Youngman recommends notoriety through demonstration of anger driven by watching violence and racial aggression, not anger driven by passion and faltering personal achievement. The author warns that Youngman's approach may promote greater alienation and not notoriety. On the flip side, a quote from Franz Fanon, an Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist is presented that indicates that violence is a healthy emotion – it is cleansing, helps prevent inferior feelings and promotes confidence/self-respect. (The challenge of getting beyond being treated unfairly is mentioned again later in the book.)

This chapter includes a picture of Caroline Wozniacki, a white tennis professional, dressed to portray some of Serena's physical traits (large breasts and behind), represents the thought that one needs to be white to be successful. There is also a phrase from *The Alchemy of Race and Right*. The comparison of the cold and equality to a thin sheet of glass – the presence of a person who is not not perceived as equal into a place where unwanted, and feeling squeezed and as fragile as glass. This also acts as a vehicle for the theme of the Pain of Prejudice.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the obstacles that Serena Williams faced, and what the author uses these incidents as a vehicle for.

Discussion Question 2

Why might violence (anger) be a healthy emotion?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of the Pain of Prejudice.

Vocabulary

nestled, density, metaphor, associative, humiliation, larynx, adrenaline, slippage, vessel, implicitly



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 is about the realization that simply “being present”, engaging, and conversing is painful; the more alert one is, the more likely one is to notice racist language. The author shares advice on coping, the wise words from a friend and more thoughts from Judith Butler, a gender theorist and philosopher.

More examples of racism and stereotyping are described: 1) A friend offhandedly uses the phrase 'knappy-headed ho' as a greeting; 2) A co-worker uses another woman's name and then skillfully includes her as partly responsible for the mistake; 3) A well-educated woman says she didn't know black women could get cancer; and 3) A real estate woman is surprised and uncomfortable when showing a home.

A conversation is overheard and a fellow author admits to speaking differently in the presence of blacks, and again, it is clear that blacks are not one of “them”. Stopping in a manager's office to sign a form, the manager is shocked to see a black person. The manager is speechless when he realizes that his reaction to seeing a person of color was verbal.

Chapter 4

In this very short chapter, the author states that memory is a vessel for feelings, that Blacks are asked to forget history, to forget what they have experienced. The difficulty Serena Williams experienced is revisited and the question “Will Serena be able to put this incident aside?” appears as Serena repeatedly hits balls into the net. It is clear that she, at this point, has not been able to get past it.

Analysis

Chapter 3

The author shares that she attempts to control the processing of every word and the deep exploration of every conversation, stating that just getting along should not be an ambition. The main realization is that there is a need to manage one's level of consciousness and not be hypersensitive, as a black person, because it can get in the way of living.

In a personal interview with the author, the message communicated is how people – citizens – fail each other as people, as one collective species. The feeling is that there are two Americas; one for white and one for brown or black. The brown/black life is loss of life – they are asked to forget the past and be immune to racial slurs and



discrimination. The author suggests that sometimes racist language is not to denigrate and erase the person, but instead, to highlight the willingness to converse and be a part of what is going on...to be present.

Chapter 4

The author concludes that ruminating over past experiences can be great/not-so-great and that it is necessary to stop remembering, move on and let it go.

More wrongful events are shared in chapter four. Reminiscing and reliving memories can prevent people from moving forward. There is a strong statement about memory being what people are made of...what defines them, their actions, their thoughts, and their desires. The upset is that blacks are asked to clear their memory and forget the past. At the end of the chapter the conclusion is that everything that is remembered is not needed, so energy must be put into not remembering. The secret is to decide what is worth remembering, and what isn't. The theme of Memory, as well as the Pain of Prejudice is offered in this chapter, both in the revisiting of the Serena Williams incident, as well as the prose piece about what memory, essentially, is.

Addressing this theme of memory, the author offers a symbol in the way of sunglasses. She states that she had heard that one shouldn't wear sunglasses in the house. But, she extrapolates, sunglasses soothe the wearer's sight, makes it so a person doesn't have to see unpleasant things, such as a glare in their eyes. She equates this to those who know or suspect that there is prejudice happening, but since it isn't happening overtly, prefer to put on moral 'sunglasses' until they can forget about it.

Discussion Question 1

What does the author seem to be saying by using the symbolism of the sunglasses?

Discussion Question 2

What is the author stating about memory, what it's purpose is, and how it can be both a help and a hindrance?

Discussion Question 3

According to the author, how do people fail one another as citizens?

Vocabulary

nostalgia, external, umpire, remote, commentator, liquidated



Chapter 5

Summary

In this chapter the author speaks about words, and that they offer themselves up as a form of release if a person knows how to use them correctly. They operate like well oiled doors, opening and closing between intentions. Likewise, the author suggests that the past is a life sentence that is used like a blunt instrument, aimed squarely at tomorrow.

In this stream of consciousness chapter, the author also talks about the power and impotence of the word 'I'. I, used as a singular, as a plural, as an empowered, yet ineffective, changer of the world. Does that make the singular person sacred, like a Brahmin, the author asks?

The color Blue, surfaces in the form of blue skies, blue water, and blue light. All meant to illuminate and drown, to encourage, delineate, and in the end, maybe make a person disappear.

The stream of consciousness ends, and the author recalls walking into a drugstore. She is waiting in line and a man cuts in front of her and puts his things down on the counter. The cashier tells him that he's just cut the line. He turns to see the author behind him as if he is truly surprised to see her standing there, as if it is the first time he's seeing her. Later, the author goes to a bar and a man who is sipping on his drink takes out his phone and shows her a picture of his wife. His point in showing the picture to her is to point out that his wife is black.

Analysis

In this chapter, the author begins with a stream of consciousness style of writing, exploring the notion of a person as a single point of light, a factor that can make a difference, a ripple in the direction of humanity. She wonders if this is true or if it is a personal lie that everyone tells themselves so they can sleep at night. The symbolism of words, in particular the printed and spoken word, are introduced as being the true elements of change, because written words have no gender, no ethnicity. They simply are.

The color blue is woven throughout the chapter, indicating that the author sees blue as both a cold and suffocating color, but also a color that, if used in the correct hands, can also illuminate and empower. She likens the color blue to the ocean that envelopes everyone that walks into it, and that once under the water, there is no color and no race, so that all of that simply disappears.

The theme of Being Forgotten is introduced into this chapter in the scene where a man cuts in front of her at the drugstore, claiming that he truly just didn't see her standing there. She speaks to the belief that there are still places in the world, in particularly the



U.S., where people of color are still easier to overlook than to deal or interact with, and that some people have become so intolerant that their eyes and their minds simply don't see anyone else that isn't like them. On the opposite end of the spectrum, she offers the situation where she is at a bar and a man shows her a picture of his wife, for no other reason than to show her that his wife is black, as if this gains him some sort of special accolade. The author is affronted. Thus, the theme of the Pain of Prejudice is explored, once again.

Discussion Question 1

What do the scenes in the drugstore and at the bar indicate?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the color blue, and how the author uses it in this chapter.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Being Forgotten.

Vocabulary

redacted, intention, shiftiness, altered, outburst, disguise, encoding, unconscious, epistolary, furrowed,



Chapter 6

Summary

This section is an excerpt from a script for a situation video. It is primarily put together with various quotes from CNN shortly after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. The author states that the overwhelming look on the survivors' faces haunted her, as she could only watch from a distance, and view how the media depicted those left in the wake of the hurricane.

The author chronicles the devastating effect of the hurricane, both physically to New Orleans, and mentally, emotionally, spiritually, not only for those living in the area, but for those that had to watch from a distance via the television. The author states that what was left of the houses were mumbling structures coming apart.

The author offers some quotes from various survivors, all of them without attribution, saying that they were forgotten, that the buses couldn't come and get them. Many had to return home to find their loved ones dead, dismembered. Those that stayed in the arena said that it was flooded, hot, cramped, and there wasn't enough drinking water or food. One man says that the water came to teach all of them, to show all of them that no one would come for them, that no one cared.

The author continues to ask throughout the entire section: Did you SEE their faces?

The next section depicts the Trayvon Martin case. The author seems to suggest, through her use of Jim Crow, images of hanging, of lynching, of profiling, assumption of criminality, that the official and legal version is that racism and segregation are illegal, it has just become more subtle, more underground, easier to sweep under the rug or explain away....like in the Trayvon Martin case.

The next incident is the James Craig Anderson incident. The author suggests that because this was a hate crime, that the perpetrators (the predators), did not view James as a person, or even a black person, but rather, as a black object to be disposed of. The author repeats the words that were captured that evening on audio. Dedman, the man driving the truck, kept saying, "I ran that nigger over."

The Jena Six case is profiled next. The author agrees with the outcry that followed the verdict as the six black youths who were charged in the death of a white youth they beat to death was harsher than the verdicts handed down to white youths who had committed similar hate crimes.

Another incident is offered, this time focusing on racial profiling. From an interior perspective, the thoughts of an arrested black youth are offered. He just looks like 'the guy' that the police are looking for, but no matter how much the arrested individual states that he is not the guy, they don't care. They all look the same to the white cops.



Mark Duggan's story is explored, with a quote from James Baldwin about laying bare the questions hidden by the answers. The author suggests that the answers have always been there, but that the questions, knowing the questions, is the difficult part. The Rodney King case is quickly profiled in contrast to the Dugan story. The author mentions the similarities in the cases, and the differences in the media coverage.

Analysis

What becomes evident in the first few pages of this chapter is the theme of Being Forgotten coming through in a different way. In this chapter, the author states that people were forgotten prior to the hurricane hitting. It was forgotten that many of the people living in New Orleans were people without the means, mode, or opportunity to leave the area. Many couldn't even reach the shelters, and yet, the facts coming across the airwaves on the media reported that people refused to leave their homes. It wasn't that they didn't want to, the author suggests, but because they couldn't. It was assumed that everyone had a way. And they didn't.

This leads to the additional theme of the Pain of Prejudice. Since, the author suggests, many of those affected by Hurricane Katrina, were black, aid was slow, non-existent, or the survivors were depicted as derelict or criminal. The pain of that, to someone watching from the outside, such as the author, was palpable. She mentions houses being as mumbling structures, and this symbol is used to suggest that more than just houses are falling apart.

The theme of Anger emerges from this train of thought to culminate in the phrase: Did you SEE their faces? This theme of anger is that of righteous indignation that a species would be so callous as to turn its face from the very reality of human suffering. Katrina, in her opinion, shined a light on the disparity that still exists in the U.S. toward the poor and - particularly - to persons of color.

The author suggests that Hurricane Katrina is a symbol, for the overwhelming tide of racial unrest that still exists in the U.S. That, like a Hurricane, can never quite be prepared for, and quite frankly, like the city of New Orleans proved, are ill-equipped to deal with when it goes bad. The author seems to be almost suggesting that just like the Hurricane that everyone had warning about, that there are signs and warnings about racial unrest that are slowly building to a boiling point, that once it makes 'landfall' will have just as devastating an effect as a natural disaster.

The theme of Memory is introduced through the revisiting of the Trayvon Martin case. That there has never been a time when persons of color haven't been targeted because of their color because of assumed stereotypes. In this case, the stereotype cost Trayvon his life. The author urges people to remember, because in the remembering there is a refusal to allow it to happen again, and that when it does happened again, as it most surely will, that people will not sit still, but will rise up and say something about it. Point out the wrongness of it all.



The situation with Mark Dugan points to a larger, more global, issue. Racism isn't just an American problem. The theme of the Pain of Prejudice, is explored as the author shows that prejudice isn't an American invention, but a global one, one that is a shared experience by many throughout the world. The author transitions into the Rodney King beating, suggesting that Rodney King and Mark Dugan are the same story but two sides of a coin. She asks the question of why one death seems more tragic than another. Why one circumstances seems more gruesome than the other. Both men are dead at the hands of angry mob mentality. That's the reality.

Discussion Question 1

Through all of these offered cases, what is the overall message that the author is trying to project?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the mumbling house.

Discussion Question 3

What does the author suggest that Hurricane Katrina exposed to the world?

Vocabulary

novelist, intimacy, addressing, looters, rampage, displaced, simultaneity, blatant, inflammation, insidious, elude



Chapter 7

Summary

This chapter is about self awareness and identity. The question of 'Who are you?' is center to this chapter as the author explores what it is like to be black in the contemporary world, where the past, present, and future converge. All of the themes are offered in this chapter for one last examination, centering around one's awareness of body, of race, of language, and is interspersed with pictures, screenshots, drawings, and different paintings that all illustrate her intent to stir the heart, trouble the mind, and move decency to take action.

In a short scene, a white woman finds herself standing on a bus rather than sitting in the only seat vacant, which would place her next to a black man. She is ashamed of it, and the next time, she sits next to him and decides that the solution to her own issue is to consider the man, not as a race, but as a fellow human being, family.

One of the final images is of the painting called *The Slave Ship* by Turner. As a symbol, the boat represents the vessel in which slavery and the thought of slavery (the reality of slavery) is carried. So, too, are a number of things in the contemporary world acting as slaving ships, no less real, no less threatening. The notion of slaves being thrown overboard into the ocean, like so much discarded trash, is the image she leaves readers with. The thought being: moving on does not mean leaving behind.

Analysis

The theme of the Pain of Prejudice (racism) is once again a strong one, bringing together all of the chapters before it to make the final statement of what being a 'citizen' is. The author doesn't stop there, however, but urges the reader to stop and decide, to ask THE question: what sort of citizen are you, and what sort of citizen will you and your children become? If one reads this book on a very shallow level, then the reader comes away with another civil rights book aimed at vilifying one group against another, but this would do the book a grave injustice (ironically enough). The book is asking for the reader to open his or her eyes and to ask if this is how it should be, if this how, as a global citizen, what one wants it to be like. The book offers a hope, by the author, that it doesn't have to be like this. It is a choice.

Throughout the novel, whether in prose, poetry, or documentation, the author has suggested that the reader needs to stand up, speak out, be noticed, and not become blinded or desensitized to the continual evidence that is historically presented. To view every other human being, not as a color, or a dollar amount, or a gender, but as a member of the human race, as a family member. And, in this, the author suggests a hope that as a collective species mankind might rise above itself and be better.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of the Pain of Prejudice and Racism.

Discussion Question 2

What is the author's concluding thoughts about global racism?

Discussion Question 3

What is the author's purpose in including the scene of the woman on the bus?

Vocabulary

murmur, aftertaste, vigilance, unexpressive, internalize, handheld, irrelevant, destabilize, vista, dumbly, tottering



Characters

School Girl

This is the little girl in the first chapter who finds herself facing prejudice in her classroom. Her teacher overlooks her, as if she is invisible, and the girl next to her, a white girl, uses her to cheat off of. Everywhere she looks, everything associates the color 'white' with good and wholesome, and 'black' with hideous and defective. It makes her angry and sad.

Sister Evelyn

Sister Evelyn is the teacher at the School Girl's school. She never figures out that Mary Catherine is cheating off of the school girl. She doesn't seem to care about the School Girl's humiliation or the fact that Mary Catherine is cheating.

Airline Passenger

The airline passenger is seated on the plane by the window. A white woman with her child approach and discover that they are sitting next to the black woman. The mother frowns and sits next to the black woman so that her child won't have to be near the black woman. The black woman knows what has happened and is angry.

The Lunch Mother

In a restaurant two women have lunch together. The one mother starts talking to the African American mother. The white mother learns that the black mother's child has made it into an Ivy League school, the same one that the white mother wanted her child to get in to. However, her child had not gotten in to the school because of affirmative action. The black mother does not say anything, though she wonders why the woman is so upset since her child had gotten into another Ivy League school anyway.

Hennessy Youngman aka Jayson Musson

This artist is profiled in Chapter 2 in regards to his YouTube art tutorials, which address much more than simple art lessons. The author uses his platform to teach African American artists to embrace their inner anger and funnel it into their art.



Serena Williams

Serena Williams, a top U.S. tennis player, and also African American, continues to blow stereotypes out of the water with her continued success on the tennis circuit. The author uses an incident - when Williams accused a line judge of favoring the white player with his calls - to show that she is not immune to racism, even at her level of success.

Man at the Drugstore

There is a man that cuts in front of a black woman at the drugstore front counter. When the cashier alerts him to his rudeness, he turns and in shock says that he hadn't seen the black woman standing there.

James Craig Anderson

The author chronicles the case of James Craig Anderson who was targeted by several white young men and beaten to death.

Jena Six

The Jena Six were six black youths who targeted and beat to death a young white boy at their school. The punishment rendered in the verdict was more severe than would have been handed down were the roles and races reversed many argued.

Mark Duggan

The author uses the case of Mark Duggan as an example of how racism extends way beyond U.S. borders and is prevalent everywhere, even in England.

James Baldwin

James Baldwin was a noted and celebrated African American writer whose work focused on the unspoken subtleties of racism. The author quotes him many times throughout the book.

Woman on the Bus

The woman on the bus refuses at first to sit down on the only seat available on the bus because it would put her next to a black man. She overcomes her racism and sits next to him, realizing that she must see him as a fellow citizen of the world, of the human race, as family.



Symbols and Symbolism

Man in Drugstore

The man that doesn't see the woman at the front counter, represents the white masses that prefer to turn a blind eye to the plight of racism and of the colored person in society.

Sunglasses

The author says that she was told not to wear sunglasses inside. This is a symbol of only seeing what one wants to see, as sunglasses hide the harsh glare of the light or, in this case, the harsh glare of reality and truth when it comes to certain segments of the population.

Words

The author says that one of the only vessels that have made any major headway toward ending racism around the world have been the power of words, both written and spoken.

Serena Williams

Serena Williams represents the glass ceiling that women of color have to face; even when they have attained a great deal of success, they will still encounter prejudice and hate.

The Color Blue

The author uses the color blue to indicate a feeling of expansion, of being swallowed and made a part of something larger, where individuals don't matter as much as the collective whole.

Pickup Truck

In the James Craig incident, the young man driving the pickup truck used the truck as the instrument of his racism.

Mumbling Houses

In Chapter 6, the author chronicles the failure that was the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. She states that the houses mumbled, fell apart, became part of the contamination. In



essence, she's stating that the structures that hold up society, as it exists right now, continues to feed the problem, contaminating what might lead to a common bond of citizenship.

Hurricane Katrina

In Chapter 6, the Hurricane, is used as a symbol of the destructive force and nature of racism and prejudice. Just like the hurricane exposed the gross inadequacy of the country to handle the devastation, so, too, will racism continue to wreak havoc on the world.

Hoodies

In the Trayvon Martin incident, the author states that something as simple as a 'hoodie' became synonymous with criminal intent. Later, it morphed into a symbol of unity for the black community.

Turner's Slave Ship Painting

In Chapter 7, the author depicts a copy of Turner's Slave Ship painting, which shows the bodies of slaves being thrown overboard. The author uses this painting to symbolize how in places around the world, people are being thrown overboard from the human race, for no other reason than their skin color.

Settings

Drugstore

This is where the African American woman was rendered 'invisible' by the man that cut in front of her at the front counter.

Jena Highschool

This is where six black teens beat a white teen to death. It is also where, weeks prior, white students had displayed nooses from the big live oak tree in the front of the school. The entire school had been a hot zone for racial tension for many months.

The Bus

This is where a woman decided to overcome her own inherent racism and sit next to a black man on the bus.

England

In the Mark Duggan case, an extreme form of racism happened in England, but it could just as easily have been a story from the U.S.

Sporting Arenas

Sports are mentioned a few times in the book, most notably the tennis and soccer arenas. In both instances, though the athletes were phenomenal and playing at the top of their game, they still encountered extreme racism.



Themes and Motifs

Pain of Prejudice and Racism

The theme PAIN OF PREJUDICE is first introduced in Chapter 1 when a young black girl in Catholic school experiences the pain of not being noticed by Sister Evelyn. A white girl asks to cheat off the black girls tests and, intending to thank the little girl and offer a compliment, indicates the black girls' features are different than that of black people, saying she looks 'almost white'. The black girl wonders if that comment is supposed to be a compliment. Sister Evelyn never notices the white girl who is cheating.

Throughout the book the author describes events where prejudicial statements are made in the presence of blacks and among friends speaking freely. Each verse in the book is perceived to have a racial basis and conveys PAIN OF PREJUDICE and RACISM. A close friend is frustrated about being told to hire a person of color. The conversation is very painful to listen to because it is a clear example of the lack of attention that is paid to words spoken and how easy it is to speak with prejudice and not realize it.

The listener is very upset, realizing that the close friend is judging, but the listener never says a word to the friend, and later wonders if this close friend recognizes that their speech is discriminatory and unacceptable. The same type of bias is felt when a Real Estate professional is showing a house to two people; one black and one white. In this circumstance the bias is not verbal but during the viewing, when the Real Estate person presents the house to the white person and not the black person who is the buyer. Even though nothing is spoken out loud, the discomfort is obvious to both viewers, but neither one of them mention it to the Real Estate lady or explore why.

The narrator describes how difficult it is to hear phrases and see actions that feel unfriendly. In chapter three it is suggested that blacks may be hyper-sensitive because prejudice is so prevalent and frequent. Either way, the pain of being treated with prejudice can be all consuming, and the effort required to stop analyzing ordinary moments for racism is equally draining.

In chapters five, six and seven blatant examples of racism and violence are described. When a man in line at Starbucks calls the boisterous boys 'niggers' and a woman asks if the name-calling was necessary, the room is silent. No one stopped the white boy from killing the black boy with his truck; when the black boy is dead the white boy rejoices "I ran that nigger over." In America it is advertised that racism and prejudice are not allowed but it still exists. Something is wrong.



Anger

The theme of ANGER is prominent throughout the book. Two types of anger are discussed; real/authentic anger and saleable anger. Real anger is highlighted in the passages about Serena Williams and her outburst during the 2009 Women's U.S Open. Serena, having experienced bad calls in 2004, was driven by real anger and frustration.

Serena was in some ways, hypersensitive, with every call, look, or comment resurrecting a similar event from history. Receiving bad calls again in 2009, Serena was trapped between fighting history (her memory) and maintaining her resolve in the present moment. The body remembers, and even though the past events are past, those familiar moments connect to new moments, and the experience is relived (almost impossible to avoid).

The second type of anger is saleable anger. The narrator suggests that saleable anger is promoted to address a supposed weakness; black artist cannot be successful unless anger is demonstrated. Saleable anger is anger developed with the intention of being used for benefit, to sell or to gain notoriety. Part of the training recommended to develop saleable anger is to watch violent videos that are rooted in racism, e.g. the Rodney King beating. The purpose of saleable anger is to draw attention to oneself for the sake of attention.

The authors' message is to consider which anger is insane; the anger demonstrated by Serena Williams or anger for anger's sake, gained through violence and used for purpose of drawing attention to oneself.

Memory

MEMORY is what a person remembers and it provides the capability to adapt to situations and learn. The theme of memory is first introduced in Chapter 2 when Serena Williams is faced with the difficulty of forgetting the humiliation of bad officiating during worldwide tennis competitions.

Blacks are expected to forget memories – to clear their mind of the past – to set aside the unpleasant events and live in the present. If taken literally, that means that blacks are expected to ignore things that happen today which remind them of past (e.g. segregation, disrespect because of color, and other racist behavior). However, memories are life and feelings are memories, so to expect black people to live without remembering the past is akin to losing their heritage and the purpose for living.

The experiences shared in every chapter are a recollection from memory stored and categorized as worthy of keeping. While blatant segregation has ended, it is still practiced today. Near the end of chapter four, the perspective that everything remembered is not needed is shared, along with the concept that the challenge is remembering only what is of value.



Each moment is seen as similar to another experience, then categorized and stored. In chapter four a verse suggests wearing sunglasses to soothe the sight and soothe the person from seeing unpleasant things so vividly. The author instills this thought: Use memory wisely, toward making circumstances better and toward the betterment of all.

Escape

The theme of ESCAPING first appears in Chapter 1 when the character is disgusted with a friend who is racially biased and does not seem to notice their unfair words. There is an opportunity to point out the error but the character is too afraid...this has happened before. The circumstance is described as not habitable, and addressing the error will result in a headache. After this experience it takes the character focused meditation to wash away the experience.

At the end of chapter one the character is going to visit a therapist for trauma counseling. Because the entrance for patients is locked, the character goes to the front door and rings the door bell. The therapist appears shocked to see a person of color and screams loud warnings to get away and questioning why the person is there. The trauma therapist has successfully traumatized a patient – and all the patient can think of is escaping the circumstances, the embarrassment, the moment.

The sheer number of prejudicial events that occur in a day exhaust the character. The lack of careful conversation and rampant prejudice does not go unnoticed even when trying to ignore it. Realizing that not everything can be solved, the character reaches a point when a sigh no longer relieves the anxiety. All the information being taken in cannot be processed and filed. It is necessary to take a step back and find a safe place to rest ... an escape from the disappointment.

Being Forgotten

The theme of BEING FORGOTTEN appears in every chapter of the book. In the beginning, the young black girl attending Catholic school is not noticed by Sister Evelyn. The girl is in a classroom not long after the James Crow laws of segregation end (1975); prior to this education for blacks and whites was segregated. The young girl is estranged, does not feel welcome, and is clearly alienated. The story continues with a young white girl and parent getting on a plane and noticing that one of the two assigned seats is next to a black woman; the mother sits next to the black person after the young girl indicates that the seating is not what was expected.

The theme of BEING FORGOTTEN shows up again in Chapter 2 when a patient goes to the front door of a therapist's house for an appointment after trying the side door entrance which is locked. Having not met the patient before, the therapist is surprised to see a person of color at the door. The therapist screams loudly "Who are you?!" and "What are you doing here, go away!" The story continues with Serena Williams feeling alienated because some of the spectators do not believe blacks should be allowed to compete in professional tennis; it is a white person sport.



A Photo of Caroline Wozniacki, white girl tennis champion is included at the end of Chapter 2. Caroline has clothing stuffed in her top and her pants in an attempt to portray traits of Serena Williams; another clear message that some spectators do not want blacks in sports, and that they are not wanted in professional tennis. A clear example of Being Forgotten for Serena; withdrawal or separation of a person or person's affection from an object.

The narrator tells about a group of people who are overheard agreeing that black people are hard to understand, and another group simply admits to talking differently in their presence. The next moment a manager is shocked to see a black woman arrive in his office to pick up papers. The manager accidentally blurts out that seeing a black woman is a surprise. Again, the stereotyping of blacks gets in the way of a real conversation and friendship. The book continues with many examples of alienation that are still occurring in this 21st century, one of the most severe being the feeling of abandonment for the victims of Hurricane Katrina when left in un-livable conditions because a government organization decided it was too dangerous to rescue them.

Styles

Point of View

The Point of View of this novel is a mixed bag depending on the chapter, and sometimes shifting and changing within a chapter. Most notably moving from first person to third person. Occasionally, there are also intrusive second person sections, particularly when the author's purpose is to incite change or provoke an emotional response.

Language and Meaning

Since a great deal of this book is written as prose, poetry, and abstract excerpts from news accounts, the language and meaning often have multiple intentions. The reader is best served reading each section twice: first for the actual depiction of events, and secondly for the underlying metaphors, symbols, and message that the author is intending to portray.

For those not familiar with some of the civil rights cases, or hate crime cases, then additional background information will be helpful, otherwise those chapters (most notably Chapter 6) will be difficult to understand.

Structure

The structure is free form, stream of consciousness. There are short scenes of fiction, juxtaposed against real excerpts from CNN coverage of historical events. There are dialogues, poetry, prose, and abstract essays about all things prejudicial and unjust.



Quotes

When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows."

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote indicates the need for self-reflection as it is the one thing that will finally redeem mankind, and allow them to become good citizens.

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."

-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 3)

Importance: This illustrates the author's theme of Anger.

You begin to think, maybe erroneously, that this other kind of anger is really a type of knowledge: the type that both clarifies and disappoints. It responds to insult and attempted erasure simply by asserting presence, and the energy required to present, to react, to assert is accompanied by visceral disappointment: a disappointment in the sense that no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived."

-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 5)

Importance: This continues to expound on the theme of Anger, stating that there are ways in which anger can heal and be a driving force for good, and there are times when anger just feeds the problem it is railing against.

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.'"

-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 8)

Importance: The author is using the situation of the Williams' sisters and their career in tennis (a typically white sport) to illustrate the feeling of alienation and of being overlooked.

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. Your alertness, your openness, and your desire to engage actually demand your presence, your looking up, your talking back, and, as insane as it is, saying please."

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 19)

Importance: This quote indicates the symbolism of Words and their power to support and uplift, or to lower and lessen.



The world is wrong. You can't put the past behind you. It's buried in you; it's turned your flesh into its own cupboard."

-- Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 4)

Importance: This quote illuminates the theme of Memory, and how to simply bury something in one's mind and experiences does not get rid of it or deal with it.

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

-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 24)

Importance: The author suggests that one's personal history, and the history of one's race, are always there, forming one's opinion and perspective of the future.

Then each house was a mumbling structure, all that water, buildings peeling apart, the yellow foam, the contaminated drawl of mildew, mold."

-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 6)

Importance: The mumbling house symbolizes the nature of human rights that are falling down around everyone's ears in a collective contaminating mass. The author suggests that unless the inadequacies of the structure are confronted and made better, the entire species is doomed.

He said, I don't know what the water wanted. It wanted to show you no one would come."

-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 21)

Importance: This is a partial interview or account shared with CNN reporters after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. It left the entire area devastated and the decades of neglect and misappropriation of funds became glaringly evident, especially toward the poor and the minority population.

The days of our childhood together were steep steps into a collapsing mind."

-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 2)

Importance: This is in reference to the Trayvon Martin case. The author suggests that all children start out the same, with the same hopeful and optimistic natures, but soon, circumstance and knowledge change all of that.

Did you win? he asks. It wasn't a match, I say. It was a lesson.'

-- Narrator (chapter 7 paragraph 51)

Importance: In this quote, the author is referencing both the Serena Williams's incident, but also a personal one, where she went to park at the tennis club, and a white woman decided against parking next to her in the lot because she was black. The author tells her child that it underscored the fact to her that racism and the divide between white and black is still there and looming.



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."
-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 83)

Importance: The author is suggesting that this is how all mankind should view each other....as a family, all alike, and not focus on differences that, in the long run, only make us all suffer.