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Dear Claudia

Sydney Wells
Butler University

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Dear Claudia

Sydney Wells

Dear Claudia,

Before I recount my experience while reading your book, I want to preface this letter with an expression of my gratitude. In many ways, I was content with the knowledge that I had gained regarding the black experience in America. Over the past few years of continuing the civil rights movement, I had listened to many stories and I learned about much of the racism that is still a prominent feature of our country. To be completely honest, I had grown tired of hearing the pain and trauma associated with these stories and I was lessening the extent at which I searched for that information. After reading *Citizen*, I realized that in the years that I had made a conscious effort to learn more about the racism plaguing the nation, I had never once been able to place myself into the shoes of a black person. Your collection opened my eyes once more to the privilege that I hold when I was able to distance yourself from racism because it never directly affected me. *Citizen* is one of the most frustrating and uncomfortable pieces of literature that I have had to face, but for that I feel that I have come out from it finally being able to get a glimpse of how the world is different for people of color when compared to my life as a white person. I was unable to distance myself from the words written on the page, it was upfront and unapologetically so.

I read the majority of *Citizen* in my dorm room, which seems fitting considering what the dorm room symbolizes. A dorm room is simultaneously the pinnacle of exploring new horizons and the embodiment of your prior experiences. The room that is the manifestation of your past and future self-combining to create who you are in the present. I think my environment had an impact on how I read your book, I was able to have thoughtful reflections when they were required and I could see how the experiences that I was being faced with within the collection were going to make me an overall better person. A person who is more able to empathize with the situations that black and brown people find themselves in in a country that does not make space for them. A person that when armed with more knowledge utilizes it to inform others within their community and uplift the voices of the people who have been silenced so that they are more widely heard.

The cover of the collection calls attention towards police brutality in the instance of Trayvon Martin and it creates an association with the premise of the collection and the racial tensions that have been escalating over the past few years. What I find truly disturbing is the idea that I was unable to tell when the collection came out, if it had been this past summer with the deaths

of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, or if had come out a few years prior when the conversations were just gaining traction. Personally, the cover is something that is so symbolic of our country's current climate. The top of the hoodie being ripped off with the strings dangling, seems to represent a noose of sorts. This imagery preserves the idea that black people have been villainized and brutalized for generations in our country, but the "progress" we seem to be making is just in the ways in which black people are killed. Instead of mobs performing lynching, police continue to carelessly murder black people under the guise of them posing an immediate threat to their safety. What's worse is that the mobs of people who are watching these incidents are just as apathetic towards the deaths of black and brown people as they were decades ago. The image on the front cover serves as that reminder that being a citizen entails caring about your fellow citizens no matter the color of their skin.

Within *Citizen*, you have managed to create a bubble in which every person who reads your poems lives through your footsteps, existing in every word that you put on the page. The third section of the collection was one of the most apparent of this method of writing and it was for that reason the most eye-opening for me to read about. The scenarios utilized in the third section made it clear that there is a Catch-22 when you are black, and more specifically a black woman. The way that you describe your experiences of being blamed for your lack of presence in a workplace while simultaneously facing discrimination in a workplace where you are unable to establish *your* presence is agonizing. The burden that having to create a personality to satisfy your white peers takes on a person, especially when they are also expected to have a personality that reflects their individuality, is emotionally taxing through its description, let alone its real world application.

Your narration and presence within the poems is a valuable piece of the collection. As someone who has never experienced racial discrimination, your presence within the poem was one of the most grounding and beneficial aspects of *Citizen*. With your guidance in each scenario placing us into the conflicting mindset that often results from those situations, it enhances my ability to witness things through that new lens. The third section was one of the hardest in the collection to digest simply because of its perceived normalcy, and it subsequently felt like the one that I felt like I learned the most from. The constant use of questions throughout the third section solidifies that realistic feeling that radiates throughout the poems. By questioning the people within the scenarios, it strengthens the audience's connection to the poems and as a result causes them to also question why people act that way. It was the questions you asked that truly shifted my perspective towards how not only others act around black people, but also how my previous actions might have had an impact on the black people that I know.

The visuals included throughout the collection were continual reminders that the issue of racism stems from the sense of sight. With each picture I sought to understand its purpose, but a picture does not need a purpose like people do not need reasons to simply exist. *Black Angel* by Mel Chin was my personal favorite inclusion in the collection. The overwhelming darkness in the picture that makes it difficult to discern some of the picture's features is seemingly a recognition that you must make an effort to see the beauty and the meaning within it, which is something I believe is a root problem within our society. It seems to send a message that when we take the time to truly understand people we are able to appreciate their existence and the beauty that comes from the small details inside of them.

In one of your interviews, you said that the purpose of titling the collection, *Citizen*, was to represent how, "[i]f you're a white person, there's one way of being a citizen in our country; and if you're a brown or a black body, there's another way of being a citizen and that way is very close to death (npr.org)." This dichotomy is portrayed throughout *Citizen*, in such a way where it becomes obvious that the experiences being recounted are part of a different United States than the one that I live in. The expectation to live up to the standards that white people hold over marginalized groups to avoid falling into predetermined archetypes, while also being expected to be an individual that does not rely on the acceptance of white people is a draining reality that I never understood. I would like to conclude by simply saying thank you. Your words share a wisdom that I will carry with me forever and for that I am grateful that you shared them with me.