

***Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine**
Reading Guide for GVSU's 2015-2016 Community Reading Project
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“To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy.”

-- Martin Heidegger

“Poetry belongs to everybody. Poetry is most alive in places like Ferguson and places of fear.”
–Sandra Cisneros (on the 2015 appointment of Juan Felipe Herrera to be the *vato loco* laureate of the United States)

Before Reading

- 1) Consider your views on poetry before opening this book. How do you feel about poetry generally? What experiences do you have reading poetry?
Writing poetry?
- 2) “Some people love poetry; some people are intimidated by it” (L.S. Klatt, Poet Laureate of Grand Rapids). Before reading this book, check out Klatt’s “Rules of Thumb for reading poetry” found on the last page of this guide.
How did these “Rules of Thumb” influence the way that you plan to approach this book?
- 3) “*Citizen* is one of the best books I’ve ever wanted to not read” (Jonathan Farmer, *Slate*). Discuss the value of engaging a topic that makes you uncomfortable. Read and discuss the other quotes on the back jacket cover.
What ground rules are necessary for the class as we engage this book in a respectful way?
- 4) Create a list of recent news stories featuring race and racism recalling as many details as possible about each case. Discuss how you feel when talking about these stories. When was the first time that you became aware of your race?

Before Reading Resources

GVSU's Community Reading Project (CRP) Website www.gvsu.edu/read

Claudia Rankine's Website <http://claudiarankine.com/>

“How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Discussing Race” by Jay Smooth

http://www.illdoctrine.com/2011/11/my_tedx_talk_how_i_stopped_wor.html

Artwork & Artists Featured in the book

<http://www.gvsu.edu/read/artwork-and-artists-featured-in-the-book-75.htm>

White Fragility

*<http://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-why-its-so-hard-to-talk-to-white-people-about-racism-twlm/> <http://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-and-the-rules-of-engagement-twlm/>

*<http://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-and-the-rules-of-engagement-twlm/>

Chapter I (1-19)

NOTE: Remember to read slowly, perhaps more than one time, and let the words “steep” into your consciousness. Find a passage in each chapter to read aloud, noting how this changes your perception.

- 1) Analyze the cover art of this book and the opening quote.
- 2) Which poem in Chapter I resonates with you the most? Why?
- 3) Why do you think that Rankine chooses to write in second person? How does hearing “you” feel? How would it feel if the poems were written in first person? Third person?
- 4) What does Rankine mean by the line, “They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure” (11)?
- 5) Analyze the microaggression: “self self” versus the “historical self” (14).
- 6) How does Rankine arrange the poems in this chapter? Can you find an order?
- 7) There will be images and prose mixed with the poetry in this book. What do you make of the images so far?
- 8) How does race/racism create invisibility and hyperinvisibility in the experiences that Rankine narrates?

Additional Resources for Chapter I

Stereotypes: “The Danger of a Single Story” by Adichie <https://youtu.be/D9lhs241zeg>

Microaggressions http://www.buzzfeed.com/hnigatu/racial-microaggressions-you-hear-on-a-daily-basis?utm_term=.apPywyAkQ&sub=2803971_2094743

“Maybe White People Really Don’t See Race” By Ijeoma Oluo

<https://scenariosusa.org/2015/07/maybe-white-people-really-dont-see-race-maybe-thats-the-problem/>

“The Language of Distress: Black Women’s Mental Health and Invisibility” by Guilaine Kinouani

<http://mediadiversified.org/2015/05/06/the-language-of-distress-black-womens-mental-health-and-invisibility/>

Kate Clark (Artist) <http://www.kateclark.com/>

Chapter II (23-36)

- 1) How does the experience of reading the poems and thinking about the experiences described in Chapter I prepare you for the analytical prose in Chapter II?
- 2) Discuss the Zora Neale Hurston quote, “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (25). How does this connect to the themes of invisibility and hyperinvisibility in Chapter I?
- 3) How does Rankine interpret the career of Serena Williams within the framework of “commodified anger” (23)? In other words, why is it “bad sportsmanship” to call out racism? What is Rankine arguing here about the difficulty of speaking up with racism or microaggressions occur? How does this connect to the experiences she describes in Chapter I, for example when her neighbor calls the police because Rankine’s friend is on the phone on the sidewalk?

- 4) What other images would you include at the end of this chapter from recent news events? State why you selected these images and how they connect to Rankine's analysis here.
- 5) As you continue to read, reflect on the overall structure of the book and the choices that Rankine makes to move between poetry and prose, infusing her thoughts with images.

Additional Resources for Chapter II

Vulnerable Bodies <http://nyti.ms/1Irs9Jd>

Policing of Black Bodies http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/serena-williams-policing-of-black-bodies_55a3bef4e4b0a47ac15ccc00

Pay Equity <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/10/serena-williams-and-the-fear-of-a-dominant-black-woman.html>

Chapter III, IV & V (41-79)

- 1) Why does Rankine repeat the questions, "What did you say?" and "What do you mean?" throughout the book? What different or multiple meanings do these questions carry?
- 2) Beyond mere ignorance, what is behind a statement like, "I didn't know black women could get cancer" (45)?
- 3) Discuss the role of language in its ability to generate the "hyperinvisibility" that Rankine discusses. Can you give additional examples of how language is used to "exploit" presence? (49)
- 4) Are you aware of the historical practices of discrimination against blacks in real estate? Reflect on race and segregation where you live.
- 5) To what extent are we able to "refuse to carry what doesn't belong to us" (55)? How are these accumulating spotlights of racism impacting you? How do they impact Rankine? White people traditionally have seen racism and racial injustice as "something that doesn't belong to us" even when it is perpetuated by white people. What would it mean for white people to reject the privilege of ignoring racism and instead take it up as precisely what it is: something that DOES belong to us?
- 6) How does the tennis match in Chapter IV mirror Rankine's own experiences?
- 7) "Everyone understood you to be suffering and still everyone thought you thought you were the sun—nevermind our unlikeness," (71). How does this connect to the pronoun "I" and to the use of first person or second person?
- 8) What do you make of the invitation to join Rankine "down here in nowhere"?
- 9) Discuss the artwork found on page 74 by Mel Chin (see link below).
- 10) Pick one stanza to read aloud in Chapter V.

Additional Resources for Chapters III, IV & V

Language and Invisibility

http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2014/10/claudia_rankine_s_citizen_an_american_lyric_reviewed.html

Real Estate

<http://www.npr.org/2015/05/14/406699264/historian-says-dont-sanitize-how-our-government-created-the-ghettos>

White Privilege

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AMY2Bvxuxc>

The 20 Most Racist Sports Statements of the Past 25 Years (Don Imus):

<http://www.complex.com/sports/2013/10/racist-sports-statements-25-years/>

Embodied Inequality

<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/03/how-racism-is-bad-for-our-bodies/273911/>

Mel Chin (Artist): <http://melchin.org/oeuvre/the-funk-wag-from-ato-z>

Chapter VI (82-135)

NOTE: Some of the situation videos linked in this section contain violent images.

- 1) This year marks the 10-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. How familiar are you with the events that unfolded after Hurricane Katrina in 2005? See last year's CRP book selection, *Five Days at Memorial* and its author's website to get an overview. <http://www.sherifink.net/>
- 2) Analyze Rankine's question, "Call out to them. I don't see them. Call out anyway. Did you see their faces?" (86) in connection with the artwork found on page 87. What might these lines mean in the context of Hurricane Katrina? What about in the larger context of the book? Who is the reader being asked to call out to? Whose faces are unseen? Why?
- 3) What do you remember about Trayvon Martin? View the collaboration between John Lucas and Claudia Rankine after reading, "In Memory of Trayvon Martin." Situation Five: <https://vimeo.com/129007034>
- 4) How does Rankine try to make sense of Dylan Dedmon's murder of James Craig Anderson? How do you make sense of the violent acts described in this chapter? Were you familiar with each of the hate crimes listed in this part of the book? Describe racial tensions and/or violence as a result of hate that you have witnessed or experienced first-hand.
- 5) View Claudia Rankine's reading of "Stop and Frisk" (104) for Situation Six: <https://vimeo.com/103780954>. There are many powerful lines to discuss in this poem. Choose one that resonates with you to discuss.

Chapter VI (82-135 Cont.)

NOTE: Some of the situation videos linked in this section contain violent images.

- 6) Discuss the images that separate each poem in this section of the book. How did the artwork impact your reading of the poems? Reflect on the quotes on page 115 describing the purpose of art.
- 7) Rankine situates the difference “voices” in this piece with their credited names to the right. How does this impact your reading of this poem? View Situation One connecting to “World Cup” - <https://vimeo.com/129006280>.
- 8) Reflect on how “Situation Seven” brings “Making Room” alive: <https://vimeo.com/103738835>. What does it mean for strangers to intentionally occupy public space together as a way of showing solidarity or rejecting fear and stereotypes? (#iwillridewithyou)
- 9) What is the impact of listing the individual stories in this chapter? Are you compelled to learn more about each person here? Or, does the importance reside in the pattern itself? What happens to the conversation when we hyperindividualize these narratives? What is gained and/lost when we focus on the pattern of another black or brown victim of racism, of police brutality?
- 10) Rankine quotes Bhabha on the bottom of p. 126: “The state of emergency is also always a state of emergence.” What might that mean? What emerges during an emergency? How might this perspective offer a new way of thinking about protests against police brutality and racial injustice in Ferguson, Baltimore, and other US cities over the past year?
- 11) Pages 134-135 are two of the most powerful in the book. The haiku is her response to the death of Michael Brown. Rankine thought that it would be the beginning of something and that she would keep going. But that hasn’t happened. Pause after reading these pages, taking in your thoughts and feelings. Just pay attention and notice what arises for you.

Additional Resources for Chapter VI

The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning by Claudia Rankine

<http://nyti.ms/1H9Bvsz>

Letter to My Son by Ta-Nehisi Coates

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>

In Memory Of by Katy Waldman

http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2015/01/07/claudia_rankine_s_citizen_new_printing_mourns_michael_brown_eric_garner.html

On the Violent Deaths of Black Men by Claudia Rankine

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/poetry/poet-claudia-rankine-on-the-violent-deaths-of-black-men/>

Chapter VII (139-end)

- 1) Pages 139-146 include many lines that call back to earlier moments in the book: drowning in the world, the injured body, wait with me, call you out, call out to you, etc. How do these lines resonate with you now as you are reaching the end of the book? What are you thinking and feeling as you read? How have your responses changed since you first read these lines earlier in the book?
- 2) Discuss the line “you are not sick, you are injured” on (143). What is the difference between a sickness and an injury?
- 3) “The worst injury is feeling you don’t belong so much to you” (146). This echoes the line on (76), “Whose are you?” Analyze how these questions connect to the artwork “Sleeping Heads” by Wangechi Mutu. See the artist’s website: <http://wangechimutu.com/>
- 4) Discuss the title of this book. What meaning does the word “citizen” hold for you? For Claudia Rankine?
- 5) What does Rankine mean when she says, “Come on. Let it go. Move on” (151)?
- 6) What kind of truce is she describing on 156? What similar truces do you make?
- 7) Discuss the closing of this book and the closing line, “It wasn’t a match. It was a lesson” (159).
- 8) Analyze the closing images. When Turner exhibited this picture at the Royal Academy in 1840 he paired it with the following extract from his unfinished and unpublished poem “Fallacies of Hope” (1812):

“Aloft all hands, strike the top-masts and belay;
Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds
Declare the Typhon’s coming.
Before it sweeps your decks, throw overboard
The dead and dying - ne’er heed their chains
Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!
Where is thy market now?”

After Reading

- 1) The reviewer for the New Yorker says “The book explores the kinds of injustice that thrive when the illusion of justice is perfected, and the emotional costs for the artist who cries foul.” What does that mean? What is the illusion of justice in the US? Why is it an illusion? What injustices does Rankine describe, how are they connected, and how does an illusion of injustice allow them to persist?
- 2) How do you feel after reading this book? Specifically, how did the arrangement of poetry, prose and image impact you?
- 3) What can white people do to support #BlackLivesMatter? Is there hope that our country can overcome racism? If so, how? If not, why not?

Assignment Ideas

- 1) Craft an original poem in response to a recent event involving race.
Find an image to pair with your original poem OR create a situation video from existing footage on the story, reading your poem aloud to the film.
- 2) Write your own book review of *Citizen*.
- 3) Create a situation video that includes your own reading of Rankine's work.

Additional Resources for After Reading

This is What White People can do to Support #BlackLivesMatter by Sally Kohn

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/08/06/this-is-what-white-people-can-do-to-support-blacklivesmatter/?postshare=4251438871753131>

Can America Handle the Truth on Race? By Eric Liu

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/18/opinion/liu-mlk-day-truth-and-reconciliation/>

American Racism in the "White Frame" by George Yancy and Joe Feagin

<http://nyti.ms/1HUEEcT>

The Case for Reparations by Ta-Nehisi Coates

<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

How to Tell People They Sound Racist by Jay Smooth

<http://www.illdoctrine.com/2008/07/how-to-tell-people-they-sound.html>

White Fragility

*<http://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-why-its-so-hard-to-talk-to-white-people-about-racism-twlm/> <http://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-and-the-rules-of-engagement-twlm/>

*<http://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-and-the-rules-of-engagement-twlm/>

This Poet Doesn't Care if You're Tired of Hearing About Race" by Zeba Blay

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/this-poet-doesnt-care-if-youre-tired-of-hearing-about-race_55c8b0cfe4b0f73b20b9df83?ncid=fbklnkushpimg00000047

"Black Poverty Differs from White Poverty" by Emily Badger

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonkblog/wp/2015/08/12/black-poverty-differs-from-white-poverty/>

Rules of Thumb for Reading Poetry

Some people love poetry; some people are intimidated by it. In order for the reading of poems to be more accessible, less intimidating, here are some rules of thumb to keep in mind.

- 1. A poem is like a teabag;** if you want the flavor you have to let it steep. That means we can take our time when we approach poetry. A good rule of thumb is to read a poem slowly, repeatedly, and meditatively.
- 2. Don't worry if not all poems inspire you.** Think of an art museum; you don't necessarily stop and linger with every piece but only with the ones that make a connection. At first, you may not be able to articulate why a particular painting or sculpture holds your attention; it is only after spending time with it that you begin to put into words what it is that attracts you. So when reading a collection of poetry, focus on those poems that resonate with you.
- 3. Poetry is different from prose** in that it does not necessarily deliver its message in a straightforward way and yet it is still expressive. By way of analogy, think of a symphony. When we listen to a symphony, we enjoy the music without necessarily knowing what it means. The same can be said of poetry. There are ways in which a poem speaks to us that are beyond the semantic sense, beyond what can be easily paraphrased. There may be, for example, a musical pattern to the poem that is more compelling than any interpretation, as in William Blake's "The Tyger." *Tyger, tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night; / What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?* By reading a poem like this out loud, we can better appreciate the rhythm and rhymes that we might miss when we read it silently to ourselves.
- 4. Poems often communicate through images.** Images, by evoking the senses, can make us feel things the poet wants us to feel. Often these can be quite complicated emotions. When Robert Burns says, "My love is like a red, red rose," this is a very appealing image, and its meaning may appear to be obvious. But when we ask ourselves in what way his love is like a red, red rose, we begin to recognize the richness of the metaphor. We could think of the rose being very red and vibrant, just as love has a certain vitality to it. We could also consider the rose to be delicate or fragile, that even though it is for the moment suffused with color and fragrance these may not be very long lasting; is Burns suggesting that there's a transience to love that is wonderful while one is in it but regrettably this love (all love) must fade? Burns may even be hinting that since roses have thorns love also can have a sharp edge to it that brings pain. So that in this simple image the poet may be conveying many meanings, wonderful meanings, at once.
- 5. Poetry is a performance where language plays.** Poets play with words, their resemblances, their nuances. Poets want us to celebrate, as they do, the relationship of one word to another, one sound to another, as in "One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish." This phrasing from Dr. Seuss reminds us that maneuvers in a poem are not only clever and entertaining, they're also very deliberate, so that we can enjoy the intelligence in the design of a poem, whether it be a child's rhyme like this one or a more mature poetic expression. When we ask ourselves why a poet arranges her words in a specific way or what purpose she has in choosing the language she uses in her poem, we are opening ourselves up to the universe she has created.