

92Y
Young Leaders Series

SAMPLE STUDY GUIDE FOR CLASSROOM TEACHERS

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Sample Study Guide

About the Guide:

This Guide is intended for use by high-school English teachers whose students are participating in 92Y's Young Leaders Series, a curriculum-based, event subscription series for schools across the country. The Series connects students in grades 3-12 with leading figures in a range of humanities areas who appear on 92Y's virtual stage as part of our public programming. This Guide provides information and educational resources on Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* and her presentation of the book at the 92nd Street Y in December 2015. The Guide includes: biographical information on Ms. Rankine, a synopsis of the book, discussion questions for classrooms, multidisciplinary options, sample activities, a sample lesson

Student Learning Snapshot:

Students will be able to...

- Identify and analyze themes and ideas in a text;
- Analyze how a text's structure contributes to its meaning and aesthetic impact; and
- Write narratives in response to a text, author, theme or personal experience.



Photo Credit: Nancy Crampton

plan, and Common Core and NYSED learning standards addressed. Students enrolled in the Fall 2020 Young Leaders Series will have the opportunity to participate in a virtual meeting with Ms. Rankine, and to ask her questions about her life and work.

Title of Work: *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Graywolf Press, 2014)

Author: Claudia Rankine

92Y Event: Claudia Rankine reads from and discusses *Citizen* (Dec 8, 2015)

<https://www.92y.org/archives/claudia-rankine-reads-from-citizen>¹

¹ The video recording includes the projection of a photograph of a public lynching from August 30, 1930. The image is projected at 18:52 of the recording. Ms. Rankine discusses the image and its alteration and inclusion in *Citizen*.

About the Author:

Claudia Rankine is an award-winning poet, essayist and playwright whose work explores the blending of genres, the subjects of race and the imagination, and the subjective experience of systematic racism and racial aggressions.² Her volumes, which resist neat categorization, investigate the “many kinds of boundaries: the unsettled territory between poetry and prose, between the word and the visual image, between what it’s like to be a subject and the ways we’re defined from outside by skin color, economics, and global corporate culture.”³

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1963, Rankine moved with her family to New York when she was 7. A voracious reader from an early age, Ms. Rankine earned a literature degree at Williams and went on to get an M.F.A. in poetry from Columbia. “She wanted to write poetry, she said, though pursuing it was a leap of faith for someone who grew up with the notion of needing a steady job.”⁴ Ms. Rankine began to find her voice in her second and third books, “The End of the Alphabet” (1998) and “Plot” (2001), which looked “at the dynamic of words within words, the multiplicity of meanings within words.”⁵ But it was with her fourth collection, “Don’t Let Me Be Lonely,” in 2004, that she found her experimental, hybrid style—a book that, like *Citizen*, also carries the subtitle “An American Lyric” and integrates visual elements.⁶

Rankine is a Frederick Iseman Professor of Poetry at Yale University, MacArthur Genius grant winner (2016), and a 2017 Guggenheim Fellow. In 2017, she founded the Racial Imaginary Institute, “a moving collaboration with other collectives, spaces, artists, and organizations towards art exhibitions, readings, dialogues, lectures, performances, and screenings that engage the subject of race.”⁷ Her forthcoming volume, *Just Us: An American Conversation*, will be published by Graywolf Press in September 2020, completing her groundbreaking trilogy that began with *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen*.

Selected Bibliography:

Just Us: An American Conversation (Forthcoming, Graywolf 2020)

Citizen: An American Lyric (Graywolf Press, 2014)

Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric (Graywolf Press, 2004)

PLOT (Grove Press, 2001)

The End of the Alphabet (Grove Press, 1998)

Nothing in Nature is Private (Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 1995)

2 “Citizen: An American Lyric (2018)” *LibGuides: Eckerd Summer Reading Guides: Citizen: An American Lyric* (2018), libguides.eckerd.edu/c.php?g=676452&p=5884867. Accessed 26 July 2020.

3 “Claudia Rankine.” Poets.org, poets.org/poet/claudia-rankine. Accessed 26 July 2020.

4 Lee, Felicia. “Claudia Rankine on ‘Citizen’ and Racial Politics.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/29/books/claudia-rankine-on-citizen-and-racial-politics.html>. Accessed 26 July 2020.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 “About the Institute.” *The Racial Imaginary Institute*, theracialimaginary.org/about. Accessed 26 July 2020.

About the Book:

Her fifth volume of poetry, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* is a book-length poem on race and the imagination. "Like Rankine's last book, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), which shares its subtitle, *Citizen* is part documentary, part lyric procedural, submitting to its painstaking frame-by-frame analysis of everything from J. M. W. Turner's painting 'The Slave Ship' to Zinedine Zidane's head-butt during the 2006 World Cup final!"⁸

The book documents antiblack racial aggression through a "relentless catalog of second-person intimate and public encounters," and was the winner of numerous awards and honors, including the Forward Prize, the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry (it was also a finalist in the criticism category, making it the first book in the award's history to be a double nominee), the NAACP Image Award, the PEN Open Book Award, and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award.⁹ *Citizen* also holds the distinction of being the only poetry book to be a *New York Times* bestseller in the nonfiction category.

The experience of "being inside" the book, with its kaleidoscopic range and borderless crossing through time, might be compared to the feeling of inhabiting a Chris Marker film—an artist whom Rankine has cited as "a huge influence for me in terms of formal approaches to telling stories that don't necessarily have resolved narratives!"¹⁰ A line from Marker's 1983 documentary film *Sans soleil* serves as the book's epigraph: "If they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black". *Citizen* blends many genres—poetry, prose and image—as if to say that it requires all our modes and vehicles for communication to get our hands around the book's subjects, its realities, and to wring truth from them. Among her primary subjects is the body, the black body—"the body has memory, the physical carriage hauls more than its weight"—and what the body must carry as it goes through the world and becomes the threshold across which each aggression joins the last and "passes into consciousness!"¹¹

In her 2015 presentation on *Citizen* at the 92nd Street Y, Ms. Rankine discusses the process by which she gathered the stories of second-person encounters with antiblack racial aggression that open the book: "*Citizen* begins with a series of stories, prose poems, that came from calling up friends and saying to them, 'Can you tell me a story where you were interacting with a friend, a colleague, or doing some ordinary thing and suddenly you were reduced to your race? Or another way of thinking about it: suddenly racism entered and derailed the encounter, the interaction.'" This derailing of everyday experience, and its accumulation over time, is central to the book. What does this derailing do to the mind, to the body, to the imagination?

8 Chiasson, Dan. "Claudia Rankine's 'Citizen: An American Lyric'" *The New Yorker*, 9 July 2019, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/27/color-codes.

9 Schwartz, Claire. "An Interview with Claudia Rankine." *TriQuarterly*, 2016, www.triquarterly.org/issues/issue-150/interview-claudia-rankine.

10 Ibid.

11 Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 1st ed., Graywolf Press, 2014, p. 28.

Discussion Questions:

After video of 92Y event has been viewed:

- Which vignettes stand out to you? Why?
- Which visual art pieces stand out to you? Why?
- Why does Rankine include visual art alongside her vignettes?
- Why does Rankine focus on personal examples of racism as opposed to structural examples of racism?
- Why does Rankine include the experiences of friends and celebrities instead of just her own experiences?
- What is the effect of hearing all of these vignettes in one reading?
- What is the tone of Rankine's reading?
- Who is the intended audience for the reading? How do you know?
- Rankine shares that she is thinking about "the ways in which we address the injuries our society imposes on other people in the society." What are some ways that we can address the injuries of our society?

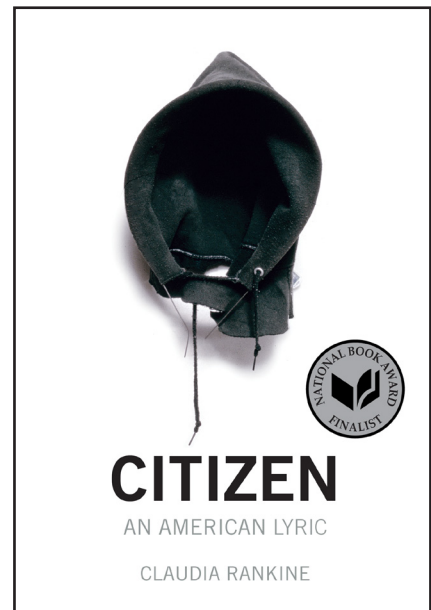
Multidisciplinary Options:

Discuss: After looking closely at this image, how would you describe it? How does it make you feel? Why do you think the artist chose to display a hood without a person? Who do you imagine wearing this hood? Why do you think Claudia Rankine selected this image for the cover of *Citizen*? In her 92Y reading, Rankine shares that Hammons created the image in response to the police beating of Rodney King, but that many people associate the piece with the killing of Trayvon Martin. Why do you think this is the case?

Rankine states that Hammons is interested in "objects inside Black culture that begin to mean more than the thing itself." What are some objects from your environment or culture that symbolize a larger idea, feeling or association? Choose one of these objects and draw it in a way that represents your feelings about the object or what it symbolizes.

Adaptation for remote instruction: If remote, students can take a few minutes to walk around their home or neighborhood and take a photograph with their phones, using specific angles or filters to convey their feelings about the object.

Share the images, discussing their significance and your artistic choices.



Sample Activities/Experiences:

- Write a vignette based on Excerpt 1 from Citizen (see page 9 of this Guide), using an association game to explore the theme of assumption. Listen to Ms. Rankine's reading of this excerpt from the 92Y event before writing your vignette. Sample lesson provided below.
- Create group mixed-media collages about the various meanings and experiences related to the word citizen.
- In response to Excerpt 2 (see page 10 of this Guide), write a letter to a stranger whom you witnessed being treated unfairly, describing what happened to the stranger and what could have been done differently.
- Using a sheet of drawing paper, create a double-sided flag. On one side of the paper, use words and images to portray how you believe the world perceives you. On the other side, use words and images to portray how you perceive yourself.
- Write a found poem by selecting and underlining words from Excerpt 1 or Excerpt 2. Discuss the new meanings that emerge.

Writing Beyond Assumptions

Sample Lesson Plan

Introduction:

Creative Writing and word association games can be used to explore the theme of assumption.

Student Learning Outcomes:

Students will be able to:

- Write a vignette based on the theme of assumption.
- Read, discuss and analyze information and experiences based on this lesson.

Materials

- Copies of Excerpt 1 (See page 9 of this Guide.)
- Notebook or paper for association game and writing exercise.
- Pens or pencils

Progression:

Listen to and read along with Ms. Rankine's reading of Excerpt 1 from *Citizen*. Briefly discuss the vignette, focusing on the role of memory, association, stereotypes and assumptions. Select three or four words from the vignette and write each word on separate sheets of paper. Words like *empty*, *moon*, *door*, or *habit* can be used. Divide the class into groups of three or four, giving each group a sheet of paper with the selected word face down. Give each group one minute to turn over their sheets and write down all of the words that come to mind when they think of their given word. Each group member should participate, writing down their words simultaneously. After a minute, each group should share their given word and a few of their associated words. Discuss how our associations can be similar or different based on our unique or shared experiences. Note that while some associations can be beneficial, others can create or be rooted in stereotypes, misconceptions and assumptions. Ask students to write a vignette about a time when an assumption was made about them, or when they made an assumption about someone else. Students should use at least three of their group's associated words in their vignette.

Adaptation for Remote Learning: Utilize the breakout room feature in Zoom or Google Meet to divide your class into groups of three or four students. Have students type into the Chat the words they have selected from Excerpt 1 of *Citizen*. While in their breakout rooms, assign each group a selection of words that the whole groups of students shared via the Chat feature. Then give each group one minute to write down all of the words that come to mind as they read the words that you assigned to them. After a minute, have the breakout groups return to the main room and share their given word and a few of their associated words. Follow the progression above from this point on.

Extensions:

- Host an in-class or virtual open mic where students share their vignettes.
- Each group should write an exquisite corpse poem, using a line from Excerpt 1 and few of their associated words.

Vocabulary: vignette, word association, assumption, exquisite corpse

Assessment (aesthetic valuing):

DESCRIBE: In your vignette, describe a memory of an assumption made with as much detail as possible.

DISCUSS: Discuss Excerpt 1 from *Citizen* and the effects of associations, stereotypes and assumptions.

ANALYZE: Think about why certain words are associated. Think about why certain assumptions were made about you, or why you made certain assumptions about others. What kind of dynamic do assumptions create?

CONNECT: How do assumptions influence events and decisions in your neighborhood or in the larger world?

EXCERPT 1 ¹²

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. Usually you are nestled under blankets and the house is empty. Sometimes the moon is missing and beyond the windows the low, gray ceiling seems approachable. Its dark light dims in degrees depending on the density of clouds and you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor.

The route is often associative. You smell good. You are twelve attending Sts. Philip and James School on White Plains Road and the girl sitting in the seat behind asks you to lean to the right during exams so she can copy what you have written. Sister Evelyn is in the habit of taping the 100s and the failing grades to the coat closet doors. The girl is Catholic with waist-length brown hair. You can't remember her name: Mary? Catherine?

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.

EXCERPT 2¹³

July 29–August 18, 2014 / Making Room
Script for Public Fiction at Hammer Museum

On the train the woman standing makes you understand there are no seats available. And, in fact, there is one. Is the woman getting off at the next stop? No, she would rather stand all the way to Union Station.

The space next to the man is the pause in a conversation you are suddenly rushing to fill. You step quickly over the woman's fear, a fear she shares. You let her have it.

The man doesn't acknowledge you as you sit down because the man knows more about the unoccupied seat than you do. For him, you imagine, it is more like breath than wonder; he has had to think about it so much you wouldn't call it thought.

When another passenger leaves his seat and the standing woman sits, you glance over at the man. He is gazing out the window into what looks like darkness.

You sit next to the man on the train, bus, in the plane, waiting room, anywhere he could be forsaken. You put your body there in proximity to, adjacent to, alongside, within.

You don't speak unless you are spoken to and your body speaks to the space you fill and you keep trying to fill it except the space belongs to the body of the man next to you, not to you.

Where he goes the space follows him. If the man left his seat before Union Station you would simply be a person in a seat on the train. You would cease to struggle against the unoccupied seat when where why the space won't lose its meaning.

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? You erase that thought. And it might be too late for that.

It might forever be too late or too early. The train moves too fast for your eyes to adjust to anything beyond the man, the window, the tiled tunnel, its slick darkness. Occasionally, a white light flickers by like a displaced sound.

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.

Learning Standards Addressed:

Common Core English Language Arts Standards • Grades 9-10:

- **Reading: Literature:**

- Key Ideas and Details**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 - Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text.

- Craft and Structure**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4 - Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

- **Writing:**

- Text Types and Purposes:**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D - Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Common Core English Language Arts Standards • Grades 11-12

- **Reading: Literature:**

- Key Ideas and Details**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2 - Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text.

- Craft and Structure**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4 - Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5 - Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

- **Writing:**

- Text Types and Purposes:**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3 - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

NYSED • 9-12 Next Generation ELA Standards

9-12 Reading Standards (Literary and Informational Text):

Key Ideas and Details:

9-10R2: Determine one or more themes or central ideas in a text and analyze its development, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; objectively and accurately summarize a text.

11-12R2: Determine two or more themes or central ideas in a text and analyze their development, including how they emerge and are shaped and refined by specific details; objectively and accurately summarize a complex text.

Craft and Structure:

9-10R4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings. Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning, tone, and mood.

11-12R4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings. Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning, tone, and mood, including words with multiple meanings.

9-10R5: In literary texts, consider how varied aspects of structure create meaning and affect the reader.

11-12R5: In literary texts, analyze how varied aspects of structure create meaning and affect the reader.

9-12 Writing Standards

Text Types and Purposes:

9-10W4: Create a poem, story, play, artwork, or other response to a text, author, theme or personal experience; demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a variety of techniques and genres.

11-12W4: Create a poem, story, play, artwork, or other response to a text, author, theme or personal experience; demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a variety of techniques and genres.

WHST4: Write responses to texts and to events (past and present), ideas, and theories that include personal, cultural, and thematic connections.

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The Young Leaders Series is produced by the Center for Arts Learning & Leadership of the 92nd Street Y, a nonprofit cultural and community center located in New York City. For 146 years, 92nd Street Y has brought people together through groundbreaking programs in the performing and visual arts, literature and culture, adult and children's education, talks on a wide range of topics, health and fitness, and Jewish life. To learn more about the 92nd Street Y and the Young Leaders Series, visit 92Y.org/YoungLeaders.