

# Citizen Read



**CITIZEN**

AN AMERICAN LYRIC

CLAUDIA RANKINE

# Facilitation Guide

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“Can things move forward even between two people? If you have two people in the room, who claim they want to have the talk, they want to try and make things work, how do they do that? That’s a real question, not an intellectual exercise for me.” - *Claudia Rankine*

Welcome to the **Citizen Read** Facilitation Guide. This guide is a tool for facilitators to conduct discussions on Claudia Rankine’s book *Citizen: An American Lyric* with groups participating in **Citizen Read**. Co-presented American Repertory Theater and ArtsEmerson, **Citizen Read** is a dynamic series of events activating public dialogue on race and identity in America. This project is being implemented in association with the world premiere of Rankine’s play, *The White Card*.

Designed with adaptability in mind, this Facilitation Guide is intended to be malleable rather than prescriptive, while remaining grounded in the goals of the project. Facilitators are invited to use this curriculum as a resource for designing a conversation that is most appropriate for their group.

As voices emerge, the curriculum may transform and take new shape. Please share experiences, thoughts, and ideas with our team by emailing us at [citizenreadproject@gmail.com](mailto:citizenreadproject@gmail.com).

Share your **Citizen Read** experience via social media using hashtag #CitizenRead and tag us @americanrep and @artsemerson.

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## Project Context & Introduction

### **About *Citizen***

Claudia Rankine's 2014 *New York Times* best-selling book of prose poetry *Citizen: An American Lyric* has made an impact across the country and around the world. Tracking the progression from microaggressions to overt acts of violence committed against black bodies, *Citizen* reveals the insidious ways in which racism manifests in everyday situations. Readers engage with poetry that probes microaggressions experienced by people of color in interpersonal communications, visual imagery, and the media. Rankine invites readers to consider their experiences and participation in these often-invisible interactions, as well as the relationship between those interactions and the unjust prevalence of violence against black people in America.

### **About *The White Card***

At a dinner party thrown by an influential Manhattan couple for an up-and-coming artist, questions arise about what—and who—is actually on display in *The White Card*. Building from Rankine's work in *Citizen*, this world-premiere play poses the question, "Can American society progress if whiteness stays invisible?" *The White Card* is commissioned by ArtsEmerson, Boston, MA, in association with American Repertory Theater, Cambridge, MA, and The Broad Stage, Santa Monica, CA.

### **About Citizen Read**

**Citizen Read** utilizes Rankine's powerful texts and images as inspiration for nuanced reflection on race and identity. Through personal scholarship and facilitated conversation, participants explore how Rankine's poetry and artwork resonates in them. Though this active reflection and conversation may be complex and difficult, the project aspires to harness the power of embracing discomfort and challenge in order to grow.

The issues addressed in Claudia Rankine's work are broad, deep, and difficult to capture and process in a brief conversation. The project goals, essential questions, and participant goals are included, in addition to the suggested facilitator preparation and discussion questions, for facilitators to carefully craft a conversation most suitable for their group.

The overarching goals of the **Citizen Read** project are to...

- Activate inner reflection and community conversation on race and identity in America through Claudia Rankine's profound writing.
- Engage individuals from Boston, Cambridge, and beyond in meaningful reflection, scholarship, and conversation that provide pathways for a better understanding of ourselves, our community, and our world.
- Collectively demonstrate a commitment to creating a world where racial justice and equity are valued and exist for all.

Through the activities of **Citizen Read**, the project will investigate the following essential questions:

- How can we challenge ourselves to stay in the room with discomfort we may experience around questions of race and identity?
- How can we rise above assumption and stereotypes?

- How can we balance being present to our own thoughts and feelings while listening openly to the experiences of others?
- How can we intentionally make connections outside of our personal identities and experiences?
- How can we uplift and validate diverse voices and experiences?
- How can we recognize and interrogate systems of power and privilege and how those systems were built for some and not all?

By participating in **Citizen Read**, participants will...

- Establish personal goals for their participation.
- Reflect on and investigate personal perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs on race and identity (of themselves and others).
- Actively listen, converse, and be open to others from similar and different identities, viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences.
- Share authentic feelings and experiences with others.
- Consider systems of power and privilege.
- Consider whiteness and white invisibility, the concept that whiteness—not white people—is rendered invisible because it is seen as a baseline to which others are seen in relationship (for more see discussion question #6 on page 7).
- Work through and sit with possible discomfort.
- Identify personal mechanisms for self-care through out project activities.
- Track and pose questions that arise throughout the process.
- Continue the conversation beyond the facilitated discussion/project activities.

## Facilitator Preparation

1. Read *Citizen: An American Lyric* and Self-Reflect
2. Prepare for Discussion
3. Strategies for Discussion
4. Next Steps

### *Step 1: Read Citizen: An American Lyric and Self-Reflect*

Prior to hosting a facilitated conversation, facilitators will read *Citizen: An American Lyric* and reflect on their experiences with the book. We suggest that facilitators and members of the reading group consider and write responses to the following questions as a starting point:

- What resonated with you?
- What are your lasting thoughts and questions?
- What messages or images are important in this book? Why are they important?
- What outstanding questions are you left with after reading this book?
- What might be personally challenging for you in your facilitation of this conversation?
- What might be challenging about facilitating a conversation inspired by this book for the members of your group?
- Consider white invisibility and how white privilege and white dominance manifests in your own life (for more see discussion question #6 on page 7).

### *Step. 2: Prepare for Discussion*

Facilitators should consider employing the following strategies before the discussion begins to create a welcoming space and encourage a productive conversation.

- **Prepare a comfortable conversation space.**
  - Consider eliminating physical barriers such as tables.
  - Consider resources your group might need, such as water, refreshments, tissues, and restroom access.
  - Prior to the conversation, make a personal connection to participants, sharing information with them about the event; encourage all to bring their copy of the book and writing tools such as pen/pencils and notebooks.
- **Personally welcome everyone who attends.** For groups that are unknown to each other, consider using name tags.
- **Share the purposes and goals of Citizen Read and your discussion.** Consider sharing the project goals on pages 4-5 in this guide. Consider asking participants to identify personal goals for the discussion/project. Sharing these goals is up to the discretion of the facilitator and also the comfort of the participants.
- **Create a group agreement, if desired.** Agreeing on a list of 3-5 guidelines could help the group foster a welcoming and comfortable space for all. For example: 'one person speaks at a time' encourages participants to listen actively and resist the urge to interrupt. Refer back to the agreement during conversation to encourage accountability.

### *Step 3: Strategies for Discussion*

The following are tips and strategies to use when your group has assembled for discussion. Different groups will require different strategies, and this list is only a starting point.

- **Encourage participants to ‘Step Up, Step Back.’** This is a strategy that invites participants who tend to listen more to speak up, and encourages participants who tend to speak often to listen without interrupting and allow others time and space to share thoughts and ideas, without apologizing. This strategy may be included in a group agreement.
- **Respect the abilities and limitations in the room.** Facilitators should foster an environment where participants feel comfortable to share without feeling forced. It is up to participants to determine how much or how little they choose to share, especially regarding personal matters.
- **Consider various dynamics to foster conversation**, such as personal reflection, pair share (two individuals discuss a question together), small group, and whole group; choose the appropriate dynamic to suit the conversation or question.
- **Embrace discomfort in the room.** Try not to feed an impulse to make things feel better or more comfortable for participants. Embracing discomfort can lead to growth in participants’ personal reflections and discoveries.
- **Stay tuned in to the energy in the room.** Know when to take a break, when to move on, and when you need to help or probe. Know when to close the conversation and allow participants space to take in information and reflect upon it.
- **For specific questions to use in discussion, see pages 8-9.**

### *Step 4: The Next Steps*

At the end of your group discussion, as part of your final activity with the group, we ask you and all group participants to reflect upon your individual and collective experience: What questions do you have for yourself, others, and your community? Please write your questions on the provided index card and return in the stamped envelope included in your welcome packet. These cards will be shared with Claudia Rankine to inspire her **Citizen Read** Public Dialogue.

**Public Dialogue:** Communication regarding reservations for the **Citizen Read** Public Dialogue with Claudia Rankine on March 4, 2018 at 5:30 p.m. at the Emerson Cutler Majestic Theatre will be sent to **Citizen Read** participants via email in February. This event will be free and open to **Citizen Read** participants only. It will also be live streamed via HowlRound TV.

**The White Card:** **Citizen Read** participants planning to attend a performance of **The White Card** are responsible for purchasing their own tickets. There are a limited number of tickets reserved for the **Citizen Read** designated performances on March 20, 21, 22 at 7:30 pm in the Emerson Paramount Center, Robert J. Orchard Stage. All Citizen Read group leaders will receive information regarding purchasing tickets for these performances via email in January.

## **Citizen Read Discussion Questions**

When crafting a discussion for your group, consider the following questions and excerpts. Select questions are taken directly from the Graywolf Press discussion guide.

1. What feelings and emotions did the book elicit in you as you read? What caused you to experience those feelings? Do believe others who may be different from you share the same sentiments?

Rankine is often asked why is she not more angry, why is there not more rage in *Citizen*? This is her response: “We are not talking about surprise interactions, most of us (people of color) have negotiated these interactions all our lives and we're not walking around enraged. Rage is projection of the white imagination of what I should be doing...black people have had to negotiate around aggressions to have the lives they want to have. We're not really angry with individuals, we're angry with the system.”<sup>1</sup>

2. *Citizen* narrates many instances of microaggressions—individual acts of racism that collectively form the crushing experience of racism in America. Is racism a singular action, or is it a series of acts? What is the difference between the singular action and the accumulation of them? <sup>2</sup>
3. Rankine addresses “you” throughout the book. Where do you recognize yourself in the encounters described in *Citizen*, if at all? What perspectives or angles of experience were you surprised to inhabit, and why? <sup>3</sup>
4. What associations does the image on the cover of book bring up for you? Is it surprising that the work of art it depicts, *In the Hood* by David Hammons, was first exhibited in 1993? How does *In the Hood* relate to the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012? What does this seemingly disjointed timeframe say about the deadly effects of racism in America? <sup>4</sup>
5. Knowing the daunting and unjust prevalence of violence against black people in America, how do we, individually and collectively, expand our focus to consider *both* violence against black people and every day aggressions experienced by people of color?

*Citizen* is written purposely to begin with the smaller, everyday aggressions so that the reader can prepare for and better tolerate the larger aggressions that come at the end of the book. Readers should not be surprised by the violent aggressions because they have been in collusion with the methodology and erasure of black people through the aggregation of microaggressions. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. P. Carl in discussion with Claudia Rankine (author), November 2017-January 2018.

<sup>2</sup> “Citizen in the Classroom, Citizen in the World.” Graywolf Press, 2015.

<https://www.graywolfpress.org/resources/citizen-classroom-citizen-world>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. P. Carl in discussion with Claudia Rankine (author), November 2017-January 2018.



6. How does *Citizen* portray and address the privileged position of white Americans? How does Rankine also show the effects of a racist system *on* those white Americans? <sup>6</sup>

A major objective in Claudia Rankine's work is exposing white invisibility, the idea that we don't see whiteness as a race, but that we see other races in relationship to whiteness. For example, in the theater we might create a cast list that asks for two black actors, but will simply call for two actors without any qualifiers when we mean white. Rankine sees 'whiteness' as "an orientation towards the privileging of one race over another and creating an ideology that benefits one race over the other." <sup>7</sup>

7. Revisit one or both of the excerpts below from *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Read aloud, if you like, and look closely. Then consider the questions: **Part A.** How do we reconcile our histories, our personal lived experiences, and our current beliefs toward racial justice and equity? How do we live in the world with the things we know, the things we have lived, and still move forward? **Part B.** Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the move forward? Is there a "way out" of our shared history and the stigmas attached to it? If there is no way out, what do we do next?

Excerpt 1:

A friend argues that Americans battle between the "historical self" and the "self self." By this she means you mostly interact as friends with mutual interest and, for the most part, compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American positioning. Then you are standing face to face in seconds that wipe the affable smiles right off your mouths. What did you say? Instantaneously your attachment seems fragile, tenuous, subject to any transgression of your historical self. And though your joined personal histories are supposed to save you from misunderstandings, they usually cause you to understand all too well what is meant. <sup>8</sup>

Excerpt 2:

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. Not everything remembered is useful but it all comes from the world to be stored in you. Who did what to whom on which day? Who said that? She said what? What did he just do? Did she really just say that? He said what? What did she do? Did I hear what I think heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? Do you remember when you sighed? <sup>9</sup>

**Closing Activity:** At the end of your discussion consider: What questions do you have for yourself, for others, and for your community? Record your questions and thoughts on the index cards provided. (For more information see "Next Steps" on page 7.)

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<sup>6</sup> "Citizen in the Classroom, Citizen in the World." *Graywolf Press*, 2015.  
<https://www.graywolfpress.org/resources/citizen-classroom-citizen-world>

<sup>7</sup> Dr. P. Carl in discussion with Claudia Rankine (author), November 2017-January 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 63.

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Dr. P. Carl in discussion with Claudia Rankine (author), November 2017-January 2018.

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