



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Citizen: An American Lyric by Claudia Rankine

- 1 What images or other associations come to mind with the word “citizen”?
- 2 *Citizen* narrates a series of interactions, or micro-aggressions, often using the pronoun “you,” to include the reader as a responsible party in the events as they unfold. 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?
- 3 Claudia Rankine uses *Citizen* to explore how and why language feels hurtful. On page 49, she provides a possible answer, given by philosopher Judith Butler, for why language can hurt. Consider the variety of expressions of hurt in *Citizen*. How do the book’s many speakers express hurt in language? How do the book’s visual components communicate hurt? Finally, how does the body express hurt, in *Citizen*, in response to the many slights of language that it endures?
- 4 Consider Xaviera Simmons’s artwork at the ICA, *The Favorable Outcome of Every Navigation* (see reverse). To what extent can the text serve as image? What images are evoked by this work? Can you find clues to help you identify the speaker in Simmons’s poetic work? How is Simmons’s artwork similar to different from the painting by Glenn Ligon in *Citizen* (pp. 52–53)?
- 5 Claudia Rankine has described the “Situation Scripts” in section VI of *Citizen* (pp. 82–136) as formed out of the tension between two questions: “Did you see that?” and “What does it mean?” How do these two questions frame your reading of the book? What other questions might the book embody? Provoke?
- 6 *Citizen* gathers a multitude of stories, images, and voices and places them in meaningful proximity to each other without explicitly linking them together. How do the gaps, or pauses, between elements in the book—say between an image and a segment of text—enhance *Citizen*’s message? How does the order of events in *Citizen* shape the reader’s experience?

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- 7 Select two of the visual artworks reproduced in *Citizen*, and consider what they add to the text. What questions or feelings do the artworks provoke? How would the text read without them? What do the book's visual components articulate or represent that language doesn't embody?
- 8 In an interview, the artist Kerry James Marshall asks, "Who needs to not think of you as a black artist in order for you to become a real artist?"¹ How do you understand Marshall's question?
- 9 How do the many spectators in *Citizen* (e.g. the reader, the narrator watching Serena Williams play tennis, TV viewers watching the 2006 World Cup or Hurricane Katrina) interact with the events they are witness to? What response can or should a spectator make to others' suffering?
- 10 Critic Lauren Berlant described *Citizen* in *BOMB Magazine* as "a kind of art gallery . . . each segment being like a long, painfully white hall we're walking down, punctuated by stunning images of black intensity and alterity." Try to describe for yourself, as best you can, the atmosphere that the book's gallery-like aesthetics create around the reading experience. What would change about *Citizen's* tone if the visual layout were different?
- 11 Look at John Outterbridge's *Deja Vu-Do* (1970–92) sculpture at the ICA (below). Consider how the artist's arrangement of found materials creates a new narrative. What kind of figure is this? How would the body be different if composed of new or different materials? How might this figure relate to Rankine's exploration of history and the body on page 142?
- 12 What other artworks at the ICA could be included in a discussion of *Citizen*?

¹ Art21 episode: "Being an Artist". Available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwcldfebtVs>



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XAVIERA SIMMONS. *The Favorable Outcome of Every Navigation*, 2014. Acrylic on wood. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery

On view in *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South* at the ICA.

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JOHN OUTERBRIDGE. *Deja Vu-Do*, 1970–92. Mixed Media. Collection Blake Byrne; Courtesy Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California