

**This Is (Not) What I Expected:  
Difference and Dignity through Literature & the Arts**

Dr. Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor (Language & Literacy Education)

Claudia Rankine, in her noted book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, testifies to her experience as a Black woman in the United States and the universal experience of being seen and unseen through different perceptions and experiences. Who feels seen and unseen, when, where and by whom? What does it mean to bring expectations to every encounter and what can the arts and literature do to mitigate the hurt and reflect possibility?

These are some of the deliberations I have had with a planning team of diverse scholars on campus that include faculty who identify as indigenous, African-American, Southern, Northern, White, Jewish, and Queer, among other diversities of identity and perception. All of us influenced by great writing, we bring to campus new perceptions through diverse literature and art-making. This research project will investigate the process and impact of our literature-based campus and community events.

Rankine's book serves as a source of healing or what I refer to as literary & artistic micro-validation: the ways in which books of fiction, literary non-fiction, poetry, and visual art can provide small, often intended images and words that nurture feelings of inclusion and validation for diverse experiences and perspectives.

The central research question guiding this project is: What does micro-validation through literature and the arts look like in practice and how is it experienced by differently raced subjectivities? Sub-questions ask about the impact of engagement in creative and conscious activities including the literary, visual, and performing arts. What is the impact of this work? Finally, we ask an empirical question for how social science and arts-based methods can be used to increase understanding and disseminate research in impactful and public ways: How might the arts be used in the empirical process to document and represent research findings? What impact does trans/scription have on bidirectional practices that encourage discoveries to be shared between the "researcher," the "researched," and the larger public?