



Gabrielle Civil is revealed as an artist perfectly poised to speak to how race, gender and sexuality enact embodied performativity. She writes and performs herself into history in ferociously intelligent and relentlessly personal ways. And I've never read such a perfect articulation of the turbulence of performing - the way that externalizing the possibility and conflicts of one's body leaves you open and vulnerable to the quagmire of interpretation, misunderstanding and projection. How the specificity of identity mixes with desire to confound, comfort or disrupt public space.
- MIGUEL GUTIERREZ, Performance Maker

TEACHING GUIDE

SWALLOW THE FISH

by Gabrielle Civil

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Recommended Classes:

- Creative Writing
- Creative Nonfiction & Memoir
- Performance Art / Performance Studies
- Feminist Literature
- Gender Studies / Women's Studies
- African-American Studies

Keywords:

Performance / Feminism / Black Women Artists / Political Art / Presence / Risk / Audience / Perspective / Point of View / Critical Race Analysis / Documentation / Race / Gender / Sexuality / Coming of Age / Process

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Swallow the Fish* is described as a "memoir in performance art." What is performance art? How does Civil's perspective on performance art manifest and transform through the periods in her life described in the text?
2. What is the role of place and time in the book? How is the text shaped by the socio-economic and political environments that Civil has lived through?
3. How does performance art serve as a medium of commentary?
4. How does the text explore race, gender, and sexuality? How does the text explore and address what it means to be a black woman in a society?
5. What is the significance of the physical body in the text? How does the text address objectification, sexualization, and the body as a medium for art?

6. In what ways does the text advocate for the right to define the self and the right for that definition to evolve through discovery?
7. How does Civil utilize perspective and points of view? Is there a clear delineation between performer and audience? Between author and reader? Between artist, medium, and consumer? Why or why not?
8. What literary genres does Civil utilize to tell the story of her life and her art? What is the significance and impact of switching between these genres? How do these genres interact with each other?
9. Describe the literary influences on *Swallow the Fish*. How does the text engage the literary "canon" in discussion? How does the text contribute to the conversation about and between black feminist authors?
10. What is the significance of memory in this book? How does the text explore the connections between the creation of narrative, the experience of the past, and performative retelling?
11. What is the relationship between the critical and the creative within the text? How does Civil deconstruct and defend her work?
12. How do performance art and literature inhabit and influence one another through this text?
13. How do Civil's personal and professional relationships affect her perspective on race, gender, sexuality, and art? Civil invests in certain individuals in her creative process. How do these individuals help (or hinder) her in developing her unique point of view?
14. How does sacrifice play a role in the text and in Civil's life? What is Civil's perspective on sacrifice and what does her art demand of her?
15. How does emotional vulnerability manifest itself in the text and Civil's performances? What value does vulnerability have to a performer and to an audience?
16. What role does motion play in Civil's art, both performative and literary? Is there value assigned to the pause? How does motion relate to time and memory in the text?

Possible Assignments:

- Make a list of "kinds of performing objects you've been." What do you notice?
- Recreate a section from one of Civil's performance texts. How does embodying this work impact your understanding of it?