

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: Textual Trauma Within *Beloved* and *Citizen*

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## Introduction

“The child must be punished for her lack of silky dresses, her broad sinful nose, that dark Negroey blanket she wears. Layers of her must disappear... I am not dirty I am Black. I am not dirty I am Black. I am not Black, I am dirty... You have convinced me that I am what’s wrong in this world.”

-Patricia Smith All Purpose Product

Writers have pushed back against the idea that African Americans are what is wrong in this country. Patricia Smith’s spoken word poem illustrates how society has normalized black inferiority which has perpetuated racist ideology against the black person in an attempt to diminish their self-worth. Many writers, such as Langston Hughes and James Baldwin have pushed back against racist ideology through literature that delves into the Black experience. These writings reflect the experiences of the Black person through a racial lens which illustrates the impacts, traumas and intrusions that racism has on the everyday lives of Black individuals. By tackling such topics in these writings, literature is able to encompass a wide range of racial issues faced by Black Americans. Hence, literature is one way that African Americans have been noted to push back against racist ideology. Nonetheless, America’s foundation was built upon the forced labor and mistreatment of African Americans. As America progresses, it does so with notable disregard for how racism has historically marginalized Black Americans and continues to do so today.

This paper will explore Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved* and Claudia Rankine’s 2014 book-length poem *Citizen* to examine the parallelism between trauma within African American Literature and American history as these texts highlight the experiences that many African Americans have endured in slavery and post-slavery America. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is

inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner, a woman who escaped slavery with her children from Kentucky to Ohio. *Beloved* illustrates the challenges and residual trauma stemming from enslavement as it tells the story of a woman adapting to life as a free mother raising a child while trying to come to terms with internal as well as external struggles that are a direct result of slavery. Secondly, Claudia Rankine's book *Citizen* is a book-length poem that illustrates modern-day race relations in post-slavery America through different fictional as well as non-fictional scenarios.

From the 17th century onward, Africans were kidnapped and forced into slavery in the Americas. The enslaved were "exploited to work as indentured servants and labor in the production of crops such as tobacco and cotton" (*Slavery in America*). The free labor provided by these unsafe and laborious working conditions stimulated the national economy providing no incentives to their workers.

By employing a variety of harmful tactics, slave owners attempted to ensure the dependence of slaves. Enslaved people were not permitted to read, write, or speak their native languages. By doing so, slave masters hoped to lessen the threat of rebellious slaves as they would have neither the skills nor ambition to leave slavery. Although this was the case, these tactics often fell short as some enslaved people would ultimately try to flee enslavement. In many cases, slave owners would capture the enslaved and would beat, rape and kill them publicly to make an example out of them, deterring others from doing the same. By the 19th century, tensions between the North and South continued to grow which fueled the Civil War (*Slavery in America*).

After the Union won the Civil War and freed millions of enslaved Africans from indentured servitude, they continued to be subject to the institutions in place within society. Jim

Crow's separate but equal reinforced racial practices on African Americans ensuring that they would not be provided fundamental rights, such as adequate education, like their white counterparts. Thus, the residual effects of slavery continued to stain America's history. Even in modern-day society, there are still constant attempts to ensure the erasure of America's tragic history. As a result, ignorance has followed these attempts. A lack of education regarding systematic racism has resulted in an uneducated mass that disregards the trauma imposed by slavery. Although racial tensions have lessened as the country has progressed, they will never be nonexistent. Furthermore, African Americans tend to have to navigate through a society that will not acknowledge the trauma it has subjected some of its people to.

Given that millions of African Americans have experienced racism for centuries, the long-lasting impacts of these injustices are inevitable. A further consequence of systematic racism is the generational transmission of trauma, as the experiences African Americans have had throughout history have been passed down from generation to generation. This trauma can have adverse effects on one's mental health straining social relationships in the process. Like genes, the psychological effects of trauma can be inherited. This occurrence is also known as generational trauma. According to child and adolescent psychologist Gayani DeSilvia, "trauma affects genetic processes, leading to traumatic reactivity being heightened in populations who experience a great deal of trauma" (*Healthline*). These traumas continue to be inherited as racial tensions in America continue to fuel racist ideologies as well as racial disparities towards African Americans. Generational trauma, more specifically the trauma which has been caused as a direct effect of slavery, can also result in what is known as Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, or PTSS.

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is a term that is coined by author and researcher Joy DeGruy to illustrate the multigenerational trauma that has been experienced by African

Americans (Hinton). The concept of PTSS is illustrated in her 2005 theoretical work *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*. PTSS can be defined as the “multigenerational trauma and injustices experienced from the dawn of slavery to the recent deaths of Black citizens at the hands of the police” (Hinton). Trauma and Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome will be used as a way to illustrate trauma and its impact on African Americans. The traumatic events that African Americans have faced throughout history have affected many African Americans similar to that of PTSD. Many individuals that suffer from PTSS, as well as PTSD, suffer from symptoms such as the avoidance of specific places, people, and events as well as triggers that have oftentimes resulted in depression and self-deprecating attitudes (Hinton). Methods of coping with traumatic events have only recently become mainstream. In the past, many individuals that have suffered from trauma lacked the resources and coping mechanisms we possess today. Due to this, PTSS will be used as a method to demonstrate how racialized events have impacted Black Americans in a manner similar to that of PTSD. PTSS will be used rather than the term PTSD, as this essay will specifically discuss the impact that traumatic events have had on African Americans. Though I will use the term PTSS to illustrate the impact of these traumas, I wish to emphasize the limitations of this term. PTSS can be a problematic term seeing that the impacts of PTSS can fuel racist ideology and stereotypes. Traumatic events can cause one to become easily irritated and angered when in certain places around certain people. Thus, this can fuel stereotypes that regard the Black person as angry and unmotivated. Accordingly, the term PTSS will be used to demonstrate the impact of racialized events on African Americans as well as how these impacts have been attributed directly to slavery.

Textual Trauma can be defined as an emotional response to traumatic events that authors deliberately place within texts for a specific effect. The term textual trauma was used by Marisa

Parham in her article “Saying “yes”: Textual traumas in Octavia Butlers *Kindred*” as she highlights the “whitewashing [that is] necessary to making history commercially viable, and commodifiable, in the present” (Parham 2). She uses the textual trauma prevalent within *Kindred* to “broaden conceptualizations of historical trauma” (Parham 1). By utilizing traumas related to slavery within texts, the reader can better understand the perspectives of characters as well as how past events have impacted their present. Furthermore, the use of textual trauma makes the reader experience what others have experienced throughout history. For example, when reading the book *Beloved*, the reader can better empathize with the events that have shaped the experiences of many Black Americans during slavery although one has not experienced these traumas firsthand.

Characters can display the emotions as well as the general beliefs of a specific timeframe to illustrate the impact that specific events have had on a specific set of individuals. Literature has played a significant role in American history as it has allowed the viewpoints, cultural and structural makeup of society as well as characters’ innermost thoughts to be displayed to the reader. Whether fiction or non-fiction, the general beliefs and emotions of people during a specific time frame can be revealed through the actions of characters as textual trauma gives the reader the ability to conceptualize how certain events have impacted individuals throughout history. For this reason alone, textual trauma should be taken seriously as it is used within texts to illustrate the historical trauma that African Americans were and continue to be subject to through the use of real figures and their experiences. By incorporating textual trauma within text, both *Beloved* and *Citizen* illustrate the trauma that African Americans have faced throughout history. Both texts help the reader understand and perhaps feel the impacts of slavery and

ongoing racism in America. Because of this, this essay will analyze the textual trauma within these texts to reveal the impact racial events have had on African Americans thought history.

### ***Beloved: An Introduction***

Sethe tries to repress the memories of her past, including the memories of her baby Beloved. Her attempts to repress these memories tend to fall short as Beloved continues to surface as different forms of herself prompting Sethe to remember events of her past.

Motherhood and generational trauma play a significant role within the text as Sethe is unable to fully gain her freedom and claim her freed self because she associates her children with traumatic events of the past. Hence, her children serve as a reminder of the lack of control she has had over her body and life as well as the impact of her decisions on her family.

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is based on the true story of an enslaved woman named Margaret Garner, who, in her attempt to free her daughter from slavery, committed infanticide. Throughout *Beloved*, Sethe is trying to claim her freed self while recovering from the emotional and physical trauma brought upon her by slavery. Similarly, to Margret Garner, Sethe tries to kill her children so they will not be forced to return to the brutal institution of slavery. Sethe was partially successful in her attempt to permanently free her children as she was only able to kill one, Beloved. Sethe's actions have resulted in generational trauma as her three other children have endured psychological trauma from the events that occurred at the house at 124 Bluestone Road. Beloved haunts Sethe throughout the novel, reminding her of the traumatic events of her past, such as the traumas she experienced at the Sweet Home Plantation and when she attempted to escape slavery. While coming to terms with the events of her past, Sethe's traumatic memories continue to resurface in a way in which Sethe finds it difficult to claim her freed self.

The impact that slavery had on other characters within the text is also revealed through first-person perspectives. Through their limited omniscient perspectives, Morrison reveals the various ways in which slavery has shaped these characters and impacted their experiences as a

Black person in the process. Within *Beloved*, the desire for happiness is restricted by the trauma that stunts the development of one's freed self. At various points in the book, these characters repress memories of their past in an attempt to reclaim their happiness, but these attempts tend to fall short as the past continues to impact the present of these characters. For example, as a freedwoman, Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs attempted to reclaim herself through the practice of self-love. Her attempts to reinvent herself fail as the trauma associated with the death of the infant Beloved overcomes her. Consequently, she regresses, as she is no longer able to cope with the traumas caused by slavery. Similar to that of Baby Suggs, trauma is rooted in every character from Sethe's partner, Paul D, to members of her community like Stamp Paid and Ella, and her child Denver. It is for this reason that trauma is a focal point in *Beloved* as Morrison uses the concept of textual trauma to illustrate the severity of these traumas as well as the consequences they have for those who were directly impacted by slavery.

### Rememory: The Revival of Trauma

Rememory is inevitable as repressed events are bound to resurface. The concept of rememory is significant within *Beloved* as it illustrates the traumatic memories of slavery that Sethe possesses. Morrison reveals the definition of rememory when Sethe warns Denver to never go back to Sweet Home: “Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm- every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there- you who never was there- if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you” (Morrison 44). Thus, rememory is, the process one undergoes when remembering events they have forcefully tried to forget. It is also possible for someone who has not experienced events firsthand to remember through the reactions and recollection of events from others. This is apparent as Denver was too young to remember Sweet Home Plantation but knows the traumas that the place holds because of her mother’s stories and scars from her life as an enslaved woman.

Although Sethe and Denver are no longer at Sweet Home, if they revisit, the history of Sweet Home will still serve as a reminder of the trauma and suffering those who resided on the plantation underwent. Motherhood and the lack of control within *Beloved* illustrates this concept as they are traumatic reminders of the past that continue to resurface despite endless attempts to erase these memories. Storytelling is also an integral part of *Beloved* as it is where we see the different memories from each character resurface. In the article “Revisions, Rememories and Exorcisms: Toni Morrison and the Slave Narrative”, Cynthia Hamilton shows how storytelling is the way that “characters define themselves by and explaining their experience” (Hamilton 2). However, storytelling is not without its limitations. By distancing themselves from their traumas, the characters disassociate themselves from their experiences. For example, Baby Suggs uses the

Ohio river as a way to detach herself from her experiences as an enslaved woman as the river acts as a physical divider between slavery in the south and freedom in the north (Hamilton 2). While characters like Stamp Paid and Paul D try to dissociate themselves from their traumas, these events still have an impact on their past and present. The same can be said for Sethe.

Sethe is constantly reminded of repressed memories that she has tried to disassociate herself from. Despite her desire to leave her past behind and start anew, she is haunted by the events of her past. Sethe is now a free woman, which means that she is no longer subject to slavery; however, she remains subject to the traumatic memories and lingering emotional scars of slavery as she tries to establish a new life inside the House at 124 Bluestone Road. As Sethe remembers events of the past, her secrets and repressed memories continue to resurface until her past cannot be separated from her present.

Sethe recalls the struggles to regain claim over her body as “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (Morrison 112). Throughout the book, Toni Morrison uses a series of symbols, repetition, language, and perspective to illustrate the difficulties one may have when trying to find their freed self after slavery. Sethe’s quest to find her “freed self” allows the topics of rememory and trauma to be addressed while also illustrating the generational trauma slavery has had on the children of its victims. Morrison establishes the connection between slavery and identity, demonstrating how slavery has affected the enslaved and how it continues to impact following generations, altering both their identities and experiences in the process. As we have seen in the quotation above, Sethe is warning Denver to never go back to Sweet Home. This is one of the first stories that Sethe tells Denver that begins to construct her identity. Sethe continues to talk about Sweet Home and Schoolteacher when she abruptly stops: “Denver knew that her mother was through with it- for now anyway. The single

slow blink of her eyes; the bottom lip sliding slowly to cover the top; and then a nostril sigh, like the snuff of a candle flame-signs that Sethe had reached the point beyond which she would not go” (Morrison 45). Sethe stops recalling the story as she does not want to recall the traumatic fate of Sixo, one of the enslaved men at Sweet Home plantation. This not only reveals the trauma that Sethe still possesses from slavery, but the concept of generational trauma as Denver is able to see firsthand the direct impact of slavery through her mother’s emotions and reactions towards the past. Although Denver is not experiencing these experiences firsthand, she is inevitably subjected to the emotional toll of slavery through her mother’s reactions to these events. This can also be seen in section two when Sethe is cooking at her job. She feels ashamed because she steals food from her workplace. Her actions remind her of what happened to Sixo when he stole a shoat:

“Did you steal that shoat?... ‘You stole that shoat, didn’t you?’ ‘No. Sir,’ said Sixo, but he had the decency to keep his eyes on the meat.’ ... Schoolteacher smiled ‘did you kill it?’ ‘Yes, sir I killed it.’ ‘Did you butcher it?’ Yes, sir... ‘Well, then. Did you eat it?’ ‘Yes, sir. I sure did.’ ‘And you telling me that’s not stealing?’ ‘No, Sir. It ain’t.’ ... ‘Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work’” (Morrison 224).

Sixo’s rebellion is not taken lightly as “Schoolteacher beat him anyways to show him that definitions belong to the definers- not the defined” (Morrison 225). After remembering this story, more memories of Sweet Home resurface. Sethe then returns home and tells Beloved a story about a time when she came across Schoolteacher telling his nephews to categorize which human and animal characteristics the enslaved people at Sweet Home had. Beloved was the only person Sethe has ever told this story to. Because of this, Morrison illustrates how this interaction has

continued to impact Sethe as she decided against telling anyone, internalizing this experience and choosing to repress it. Schoolteacher reinforces the concept of black subservience towards the enslaved. Hence, through the recollection of these events, Morrison reveals Sethe's traumatic past in a way that enables the reader to comprehend how traumatic events, such as the ones the enslaved experienced, have contributed to trauma while further reinforcing racialized conceptions of the Black person. Furthermore, Morrison uses storytelling as a way to show how the past will continue to impact one's present as slavery has and continues to impact those who were subjected to it as well as the generations that follow.

### **Milk: The Lack of Control of the Body**

The use of milk within *Beloved* illustrates the lack of control Sethe had over her body while at Sweet Home Plantation. In this way, the possession of breast milk reveals the process Sethe underwent to reclaim her body. She acknowledges that her body is rightfully hers as she uses her milk to regain authority over herself: “Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else -- and the one time I did it was took from me.” (236) The repetition of the words “mine” and “milk” throughout the text represent Sethe’s attempt to reclaim herself as well as her body. Sethe displays ownership over her children to reconnect to her role as a mother since she did not have any control over her own life or body while at Sweet Home plantation. Breast milk is symbolic of Sethe's identity as a mother not only during slavery but also after emancipation. Although Sethe’s new life at 124 gives her a newfound sense of freedom, the lingering effects of slavery continue to protrude on her everyday life. Because of this, in *Beloved*, milk reveals the deep-rooted history of trauma stemming from the dehumanization of the Black female body. As she steps into her identity as a freedwoman, Sethe redefines her circumstances in an attempt to reclaim something that was stolen from her. Morrison’s use of the reclaiming of breast milk illustrates one of the many maternal rights that were stripped away from thousands of enslaved women contributing to the trauma as well as dehumanization of these individuals. Moreover, Sethe’s relationship with her milk is indicative of the traumatic process that many free women underwent as they tried to reclaim themselves and recover from slavery.

It can be difficult to reassert complete ownership over oneself when not given the opportunity to do so in the past. Because of this, Sethe struggles to claim her freed self because she still has not claimed ownership over her own body. When Paul D asks about the scars on

Sethe's back, she tells him about Schoolteacher's nephews stealing her breast milk while she was pregnant with Denver. When she told Mrs. Garner about what schoolteachers' nephews had done, Schoolteacher finds out and gets a boy to whip her. Even though Schoolteacher's nephews violated her body, Sethe is the one punished as she is regarded as property rather than a human being. Through the use of milk, we are able to visualize the real traumas surrounding Black motherhood during the 19th century. As opposed to being able to provide for their own children, enslaved women were often used as wet nurses for white babies. In Emily West and R. J. Knight's Article "Mother's Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South", they describe wet nursing as the "point at which the exploitation of enslaved women as workers and as reproducers literally intersected" (West 1). Wet nursing was a job that only women could do, which served as a form of labor that exploited the black body in the process. Through this labor, Black women were deprived of the milk needed to provide adequate care to their newborn babies, thus Sethe's inability to provide for her children not only represents the physical but mental scars she harbors from this violation. Morrison illustrates how the past continues to impact Sethe's present as she still has guilt for not being able to provide for her children. The guilt of not having enough milk is symbolic of motherhood as the milk that was taken from her also removed her only power as an enslaved woman: providing food for her children.

Although trauma is significant within *Beloved*, it is important to acknowledge that trauma does not define Sethe's experience. Sethe's triumphs through this trauma should be acknowledged as the great lengths she went to for her children exemplify her power as a mother. In Reginald Watson's article "The Power of "Milk" and Motherhood", he describes how the traditional role of manhood and womanhood was deconstructed and reconstructed within

*Beloved*. The concept of motherhood within *Beloved* was impacted by the oppression and abuse she was subjected to at Sweet Home. Because of this, she did not feel as though she provided for her children as a mother should. Although this is the case, through Morrison's use of milk throughout *Beloved*, we see how the concept of motherhood is deconstructed and reconstructed at various points within the book. When slave catchers come to 124 to take Sethe back home, Sethe kills Beloved so that she will not be subjected to a life in which she is enslaved. As this is being revealed to the reader the concept of milk resurfaces: "So Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister" (Morrison 179). It is at this point in the text that the role of motherhood is reconstructed as Sethe holds the greatest powers: life-giving and life-taking. Because of this, it is apparent that "even when the images of 'milk' are sourced, the power of motherhood can still reshape and reconstruct not only itself but also the people and events that surround it" (Watson 156). This is apparent throughout the book as the deconstruction of the role of motherhood results in its reformation, illustrating the power of the Black mother and her strength and will to survive for her children.

The context in which the word mine is used throughout the text represents ownership. Not only ownership of life, but also ownership over children. Sethe equates ownership of her children with love. She is unable to make a distinction between ownership of children and the love of children because she was never allowed the freedom to take care of her children as a mother since she was treated as a body in a system that viewed her merely as property to be owned. Because of this, Sethe's ownership over her children and inability to claim her freed self ultimately impacts her children as they are unable to claim their freed selves because of the traumas their mother has endured.

Although she is unable to claim her “freed self” it must be noted that this inability is not Sethe’s fault but rather the institution of slavery that has had a traumatic impact on her sense of self. When Schoolteacher came to take Sethe and her children back to Sweet Home, Sethe’s decision to kill Beloved caused a domino effect that consequently resulted in the lives of her living children being permanently shifted. Sethe’s trauma has now resulted in generational trauma that has prohibited her children from formulating their own sense of identity. This being the case, these traumatic events resulted in Howard and Bugler leaving the house at 124 and Denver never truly forming her own identity outside of the one she has formulated from within the walls of 124. Morrison’s use of Sethe’s decisions impacting her children seems to challenge the ideal of freedom suggesting that although one might be free, true freedom is hard to obtain when the impacts of slavery are so great. The decisions that Sethe made in order to free her children also illustrate the costs of Motherhood.

It is evident years later that motherhood has great physical and emotional costs when Paul D suggests having a child with Sethe, and she is horrified by the idea because she would “[need] to be good enough, alert enough, that caring- again. Having to stay alive just that much longer” (Morrison 155). Sethe’s will to live appears to be partially motivated by her concern for her children, as she believes that she must survive for them. It is also evident that her desire to prevent her children from becoming enslaved is great, which further illustrates the strength and the great lengths to which a mother would go to protect her children. While Sethe would do anything for her children, it comes at a cost.

According to Paul D., Sethe's method of achieving true freedom for her children is immoral. He cannot comprehend the reasoning behind Sethe’s decision to kill Beloved. Because of this, he asserts: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (Morrison 194). By stating this, Paul D is

suggesting that Sethe's decisions are reckless and inhumane. Apart from Paul D's assertion that he believes Sethe's decision was inhumane and animal-like, his statement, in a way, reveals the inhumanity of the institution of slavery. Sethe's decision to kill Beloved was motivated by her love for her children. After experiencing first-hand the devastating effects of slavery, it is clear that Sethe believed that death would be a less severe sentence than being subjected to the institution of slavery. Although this is the case, Paul D disagrees with her decision stating that her love is "too thick" when he finds out that she has killed Beloved. Because of this, Sethe's ownership over her children plays a role in her relationship with Paul D as her actions as a mother are regarded as unnecessary. Through the relationship with Sethe and Paul D, Morrison illustrates how slavery shapes the realities of the black mother.

### **The Sermon: The practice of Self-love**

Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, is a valuable character within *Beloved* as she signifies the struggles of reclaiming oneself while dealing with the traumas imposed by slavery. Within *Beloved*, Baby Suggs is a freedwoman as her son, Halle, was able to purchase her freedom. As a freedwoman, Baby Suggs migrated to Ohio where she resides within the house of 124. Within her community, Baby Suggs becomes a preacher to her people, teaching the practice of self-love. Through her sermons, Baby Suggs wishes to help people discover their self-worth as they embark on their journeys to find their freed selves.

Morrison uses Baby Suggs to illustrate how slavery's impact continues to obtrude on the lives of those who attempt to reclaim themselves. Although this is the case, Baby Suggs' sermons are of great importance as they illustrate how African Americans have attempted to combat these intrusions through the practice of self-love:

Here...in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop, off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them (Morrison 103)

This is part of the sermon Baby Suggs gave in *Beloved*. In this section, Morrison is exploring the idea of self-love seeing that it is of great importance that traumatic events do not define one's perception of themselves. This being the case, the sermon emphasizes the importance of love for the Black body. Seeing that the Black body is only seen as a tool by slave masters, through the sermon, Baby Suggs is helping her community reclaim their bodies by acknowledging their

beauty. She asserts that slave masters do not love the Black body, as she hopes to convey this message to her people; love and the claim of one's freest truest self comes from within.

Like Baby Suggs, many Black individuals have had to work hard to reclaim their bodies, self-worth and existence. This section in *Beloved* illustrates how African Americans have combatted trauma regarding self-image by reaffirming the beauty of their existence. The trauma prevalent within this section of *Beloved* has remained valid throughout history and remains valid as scholars like Kelly Brown Douglas have shown that the Black body has been oversexualized and deemed unattractive for decades but is praised and deemed socially acceptable when white Americans display identical features to that of the Black person. Kelly Brown Douglas tackles these issues in her text as she assesses the impact that racism and the hypersexualization of the black body have had on self-esteem. She asserts that:

Gender caused Black women to be uniquely humiliated and violated. They were considered other than 'females' and hence available for White male rape and debauchery... such humiliation continues for Black women, as they are still viewed as outside the norm of American female beauty and are treated as Jezebels. Black women are entrapped by a history that has devalued who they are as Black women. They continue to wear the scars of a White cultural humiliation that debases their womanhood. They harbor the pain of someone else's devaluation of their color, hair, hips, noses, and basically the way they move, live, and have their being. (Douglas 73)

Understanding how white society has persisted in devaluing the black body, Morrison reveals the impact slavery has had on self-worth through Baby Suggs' sermon. We can see how white society continues to devalue the black body, consequently affecting one's perception of themselves in the process. Through Baby Suggs, Morrison challenges these notions as she

acknowledges the role white Americans have had in building these stereotypes. Morrison utilizes her knowledge of whites' role in discounting black people's self-worth to demonstrate how slavery not only negatively impacted their physical being but also mental wellbeing since individuals still harbor such ingrained notions of self-worth. Morrison confronts these notions as Baby Suggs recollects the injustices slave owners have inflicted on her people: "Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead." (Morrison 104). After confirming that it is whites who inflict these injustices on Blacks, she asserts:

No, they don't love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. (Morrison 101)

Baby Suggs affirms in her sermon that love must come from within, as society has utilized stereotypes to reinforce black subservience. By stating, "hear me," Baby Suggs emphasizes the seriousness of her statement. Her intention is to convey to her people that they are the victims and do not deserve the treatment they have received. It is, for this reason, she asserts that one should love themselves. They must love the bodies that they are in because if they do not do so, then no one will. Baby Suggs acknowledges this, enabling her people to gain full freedom by allowing them to acknowledge that slavery was not meant to be their destiny.

In addition to being a preacher, teaching her community how to love themselves, Baby Suggs practiced generosity by providing for her community. This being the case, she provided the community with an abundance of food at a community gathering. However, her intentions were misconstrued as her generosity was seen by the community as boastful. This led to the shunning of Baby Suggs by her community. Because of this, when Schoolteacher came to Ohio to take Sethe and her children back to Sweet Home, the community did not warn her of Schoolteacher's arrival. This resulted in Sethe killing baby Beloved to save her from a life subjected to slavery. The death of Beloved as well as the actions of the community destroyed the new life Baby Suggs had built as her preaching came to an end and she became a recluse confined to the desolate walls of 124.

### **The House at 124 Bluestone Road: A symbol of ownership**

The House at 124 Bluestone Road is not only the house in which Sethe and Denver live but also a symbol of the four children that Sethe had, including her dead child Beloved. All of the conflicts within *Beloved* center around the House. The first line of each section 124 begins with a sentence that describes the mood of the house. These words illustrate the general emotions or stages of grief Beloved goes through throughout the text as she does not understand her mother's actions. Additionally, these words illustrate the stages of strife and acceptance the house undergoes. Beloved's haunting acts as a personification of the house, as it appears as if the house is feeling these emotions.

124 signifies ownership and the processes which each character in the house undergoes to claim ownership. Although Mr. Bodwin owns the house at 124, it seems to be a place that Sethe has ownership of in *Beloved*. Within this house, Sethe has a family that is hers and a life that is her own. Most of the conflicts that have taken place throughout the text have happened on the grounds of 124. Because of this, 124 becomes a place that reminds Sethe of the past: "Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If the house burns down, it's gone, but the place --the picture of it--stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world." (Morrison 43) Similar to Sweet Home, the events that have taken place in *Beloved* continue to remind Sethe of something that she can never forget: slavery. The house at 124 holds memories of her new life away from Sweet Home, the place where Beloved was killed, and the place where Sethe's children left. Because of this, 124 is, in fact, a memory, even perhaps a rememory, of the struggles Sethe faced trying to adapt to life as a freedwoman. The house is not only a free place but a reminder of the struggles Sethe had to endure to get to this place. Although the Ohio River is a physical divider between enslavement and freedom, the

house of 124 represents the travel of emotions with Sethe to free land. The context in which Sethe uses the word “rememory” serves as an important reminder of the consequential effect slavery has on her identity. Although Sethe is technically free, her rememory serves as a constant reminder of the undeniable traumatic effects of slavery—even in this ‘safe’ house in a free state, years after emancipation. Although slavery directly impacted Sethe, its traumatic effects have been passed down to her children and those who reside in the house with her. These traumatic effects resurface within the house in the form of seclusion and exclusion thus acting as another form of slavery. Morrison’s use of the house of 124 as a way to highlight the parts of slavery one cannot run from brings light to the irrefutable effects of slavery that oftentimes go unnoticed.

The novel begins with the following statement: “124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s venom” (Morrison 3). Beloved has taken on a ghostly appearance. In this state, Beloved causes trouble in a way that seems almost as if the house is doing it. As Beloved is not in her physical form, her torment has the effect of personifying the house as if it is filled with spite. Despite Beloved's destruction, Sethe soon acknowledges that this is a reality she cannot escape after talking to Baby Suggs:

"We could move,' she suggested to her mother-in-law once. [Baby Suggs replies] ‘Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband’s spirit was to come back in here? Or yours? Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left... Be thankful, why don’t you?’”(Morrison 6).

As a result of the traumatic experiences of slavery, the occupants of the house have accepted its current state as a reality that cannot be changed. In saying "Be Thankful", Baby Suggs is accepting her current circumstance as it is better than her past. Using the personification of 124, Morrison illustrates how black individuals are impacted by these traumas. Despite the injustices

they are still subjected to, they accept the freedoms they have been granted. The lack of peace experienced by those who have endured slavery is evident by the fact that even if they escape, these institutions continue to marginalize them and subject them to unspeakable trauma. Thus, although Ohio is a divider between slavery and freedom, the traumas inflicted by these injustices know no boundaries.

In section 2, 124 is described as loud. When Paul D arrived at the house at 124, he fell in love with Sethe, moved in, and then moved out, after Stamp Paid tells him about Sethe's attempt to kill her children. Stamp Paid is an important character within *Beloved* as he is a member of the community who works on the underground railroad and is welcome into all homes within the community. Because of this, Stamp Paid "Having wrestled with the question of whether or not to tell a man about his woman, and having convinced himself that he should, then began to worry about Sethe. Had he stopped the one shot she had of the happiness a good man could bring her?" (Morrison 199). It is evident from the description at the beginning of the chapter that there is unrest within the household as Sethe's secrets are revealed. Her life is altered once again as the memories and events of her past continue to surface after she finds happiness. After finding out the way that Beloved dies, Paul D has left Sethe and she is, once again, left alone. The loudness of 124 not only impacts those who reside within 124 but also those who reside in the community as this house serves as a reminder of the death of baby Beloved. In this section, through the recollection of events from Stamp Paid's perspective, we can see how the house symbolizes freedom as well as restraint. After the death of Beloved, Stamp Paid no longer feels comfortable going into 124: "Stamp Paid raised his fist to knock on the door he had never knocked on (because it was always open to or for him) and could not do it" (Morrison 203). Stamp Paid's

hesitancy reveals the way that the House serves as a barrier after the death of Beloved. The once welcoming home is now a cold reminder of the detrimental impacts of slavery.

In Section three, the house is now quiet as Sethe has now been consumed by the past, letting go of all her ambitions to be with Beloved. Everything Beloved wants, she gets. Sethe soon became consumed by the past: “[she] pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. That she would trade places any day. Give up her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of Beloved’s tears” (Morrison 284). The house of 124 was now full of guilt. 124 is now a place where Sethe has lost herself and is only focused on resolving the past. Seeing that this was no good for Sethe, Denver comes across a woman named Ella who is willing to help Sethe. Upon Ella hearing Sethe’s story, "it infuriated her and gave her another opportunity to measure what could very well be the devil himself against ‘the lowest yet’. There was also something very personal in her fury. Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. This is here and now"(Morrison 302). This is the first time in the book that we see a character that is willing to assist Sethe. Ella is a friend of Sethe’s who was locked away in a room for over a year by a father and son who abused her. She was Sethe’s friend until the killing of Beloved. Although she did not agree with Sethe killing her daughter, due to her traumatic past, Ella understands that one's past should not continue to intrude on their present. In this way, Ella helps liberate Sethe by helping her forge her own identity by ridding her of the past. By Morrison using the house of 124 to illustrate how the death and resurfacing of Beloved has impacted Sethe, it makes 124 a place of recognition, where Sethe undergoes the traumas of slavery and her past and is able to triumph. Now that Sethe is fully free from her past, 124 can now become quiet.

Through the use of 124 Bluestone Road, Morrison illustrates the stages of claiming oneself. In the personification of the house, it is revealed that Sethe's inability to accept her past is, in part, due to Beloved. Seth's past continues to influence her present as she struggles with the guilt she harbors over the death of Beloved. Morrison shows how slavery can negatively affect a person, as the decisions one has to make, especially as a mother, can have traumatic effects on mental health. These institutions have resulted in a life in which one is still subjected to the torment of the past even in their new lives. This has also resulted in generational trauma seeing that like Sethe, many individuals who suffer from these events continue to impact their children as they are not able to adequately provide for their children as they cannot formulate their freed selves.

Furthermore, the institution of slavery was so injurious that the tactics used to keep blacks oppressed ultimately left them struggling to find their place in society afterward. While *Beloved* covers the racist institutions in place within the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the legacy of slavery remains in the 21 century as institutions and racial practices continue to impact Black Americans today. Rankine illustrates this in *Citizen* as she reveals how these injustices are still a reality. In her book-length poem, Rankine addresses racism as well as its structural and institutional forms to illustrate the racial terrorism that continues to impact the black experience today. Rankine's incorporation of images, news articles, quotations and text that isn't exactly prose, or conventional poetry, addresses the subject of racism in a way that will resonate with the uninformed but also those who are exhausted from the impact of slavery.

### **Racial Bias: A Reality Behind the Writing**

The existence of racism is evident in every aspect of American society. Whether it is in the workplace or medicine, racism contributes to the discrimination and marginalization of Black Americans. Through poetry, Rankine illustrates how racism shapes the Black experience in contemporary society. She called *Citizen* an attempt to “pull the lyric back into its realities”. Usually, when one hears the word lyric, they think of the beauty of poetry. In *Citizen*, Rankine takes the beauty out of the lyric to illustrate the deep-rooted racism prevalent within society. Rankine also writes *Citizen* in prose with second-person narrative, personalizing these experiences to the reader. By doing so, she draws the reader into these experiences as if they were the ones experiencing these interactions firsthand. Although Rankine covers all levels of racism within *Citizen*, I will begin by discussing implicit bias

Considering that many implicit biases are small, there is a lack of understanding of how these small interactions may have a significant impact on African Americans. Therefore, it is no surprise that when one has to deal with these biases every day, the residual effects from dealing with these biases that may seem like they are "too small" so to speak, build up over time and contribute greatly to the actions and reactions of individuals who are subject to this treatment. Claudia Rankine tackles the impact of implicit bias within *Citizen* using an unnamed speaker to reveal the impact of these injustices.

Throughout *Citizen*, Rankine reveals these implicit biases through a racialized lens. The speaker of the poem is hyper-aware of race throughout the text in order to acknowledge the ways in which racism is an everyday occurrence. In doing so, she counteracts our culture's desire to ignore racism by illustrating its prevalence within the minds and actions of individuals in society. Rankine begins to do so in the first section through the story of a young girl in a Catholic school.

A Black girl who goes to a Catholic school is taking an exam when a white girl asks her to lean right so she can copy her answers. Even though this may initially appear to be a racially innocent encounter, the white girl first notes that the speaker “[has] features more like a white person... [thus, feeling] better cheating from an almost white person”(Rankine 5). Historically, whites have restricted education to African Americans in an effort to reinforce Black subservience, restricting their chances of upward mobility in society in the process. This has led to the development of stereotypes that have deemed the white person more educated than Blacks. Therefore, the speaker assumes the white girl characterizes her as a white woman to feel better about cheating off of someone who has historically been deemed ignorant and uneducated. Hence, this assumption contains an example of how racial bias can alter one's perception of intention, which in turn contributes to the racialized experiences of African Americans.

In section one of the book, the speaker's reaction is similar to that of many Black Americans who have faced similar racialized experiences: non-confrontational: ”What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard?”(Rankine 9). The speaker of the poem refers to a time when she was driving in a car and an acquaintance informed her that his “dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there” (Rankine 10). Although outraged by the man’s statement, the speaker remains dismissive of the statement as a means to avoid provoking conflict. As usual, the speaker decides to “Drive straight through the moment with the expected backing off of what was previously said” (Rankine10). This is yet another example of how racial bias can negatively impact everyday life. The speaker's question as to why someone would make such a statement points to how microaggressions like these can take a toll mentally and physically on those who experience them.

The weary tone of this section also adds to the central theme of the poem as it shows the racial anxiety that one may experience from microaggressions and racial biases that are experienced on a daily. Rankine's implementation of repetition illustrates this exhaustion as the speaker recalls racial events that continue to impact her life as a Black American. In this part of the book, Rankine shows the racial anxiety faced by Black Americans as she examines the exhaustion and trauma that accompany these experiences through the speaker's reactions. This section of the book relates to contemporary society as it shows the different forms of racialized biases that Black Americans face. These biases may seem small, but they are not as these incorrect assumptions and biases contribute immensely to the everyday trauma and anxiety Black Americans face. Seeing that these interactions are so common, Black individuals tend to remain passive as a means to avoid conflict and they often do not cope with these interactions. But, as these emotions build, those who express their emotions still are misunderstood as the reactions of these individuals are acknowledged but not the traumas that have contributed to the reaction.

### The Repression and Expression of Racial Trauma

Although anger is one of the most human responses to mistreatment, it is often considered an unacceptable emotion when displayed by African Americans. The anger felt by Black Americans is used to reinforce negative stereotypes that fuel preconceived notions and biases against Black people. This concept is illustrated in *Citizen* as Rankine uses real experiences from people to show how a natural human response is deemed unacceptable in society when that reaction is a Black response. *Citizen* uses Serena Williams' experience at the 2018 U.S. open to elaborate on this concept.

Recalling the events at the U.S. Open, the speaker uses second person to make the reader experience the event as if they had witnessed it for the first time: “Serena in HD before your eyes becomes overcome by a rage you recognize and have been taught to hold at a distance for your own good. Serena’s behavior, on this particular Sunday afternoon, suggests that all the injustice she has played through all the years of her illustrious career flashes before her and she decides to finally respond to all of it with a string of invectives” (Rankine 25). The anger exhibited by Serena Williams is characterized as "rage you recognize" which means that it is not just a personal experience, but a shared one that Black individuals have had over the repression of racist experiences. However, white individuals who do not sufficiently recognize the feelings and emotions of Black Americans as they continue to ignore the impact that racism has on their lives. In turn, these emotions are internalized by Blacks to avoid scrutiny by white Americans. In discussing these injustices, the speaker makes sure to mention Serena's illustrious career. The term illustrious calls attention to the fact that Serena Williams is one of the best tennis players in the world but is still subject to racialization and dehumanization by her white counterparts. It seems that Serena's hard work and accomplishments as a tennis player are meaningless in a white

space seeing that " Neither her father nor her mother nor her sister nor Jehovah nor God nor NIKE camp could shield her ultimately from the people who felt her Black body did not belong on the court, in their world" (Rankine 26). Serena's reaction was one similar to that of many other white tennis players in the past, but since it was the reaction of a Black woman, it was used to reinforce negative stereotypes portraying her as an "angry Black woman" instead of an athlete demanding respect. The injustices that fueled Serena's reaction were not taken into account. Just like many other Black individuals in America, people only acknowledged the negative reactions of Serena rather than the negative experiences that she had as a Black woman that fueled her reaction and shaped her experience as a Black person. This is one of the many instances of how the expression of feelings and emotions is deemed socially unacceptable in society at least when that expression is related to Black anger. Despite the effort and accomplishments of Black people, their Black bodies are not fully accepted in white spaces such as the tennis court, golf course and baseball. Consequently, many Black Americans continue to suppress the trauma and injustices that they experience in order to be seen as socially acceptable within these environments, as they realize that one mistake could fuel the ideal that Black bodies do not belong in these spaces.

Rankine's speaker asks: "What does a victorious or defeated Black woman's body in a historically white space look like?" (Rankine 25). Rankine grapples with this question in *Citizen*. The quote by Zora Neale Hurston was used to illustrate what it's like to be a Black body in a white space. In her seminal essay, "How it Feels to be Colored Me", Zora Neale Hurston illustrates what it's like to be a Black person in America: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." This quote couples well with the subject of this section because of the way that "colored" is being juxtaposed with white in this quote. It is similar to the

way that the Black body and culture contrasts with that of white society seeing that it is never more apparent that the Black body is not accepted than when it is in the presence of the white society. Zora Neale Hurston's quote emphasizes this concept by putting the feeling into words. Although Zora Neale Hurston's essay "How it Feels to be Colored Me" is largely positive, Rankine uses this quote to shed light on the realities of being a black body in a white space. Rankine uses visual imagery to make this concept clearer to the reader later on in the book as she has the quote written in Black ink repeated on a page against the white of the paper. As the words get closer to the bottom of the page, they begin to smear, illustrating how Black one feels against a sharp white background.

Since Black bodies are not fully accepted in white spaces, Black individuals oftentimes have to find a way to navigate through these spaces in a socially acceptable way. They often do so through code-switching. Code-switching can be defined as the alteration of speech, behavior, or appearance in order to succeed. Due to systematic racism, Black Americans code-switch to appeal to white bodies in white spaces. Although this is the case, code-switching does not fully protect the Black body in these white spaces as they are still regarded as subservient to the white person and do not have the ability to express their experiences or culture in these spaces.

Despite the attempts by Black Americans to be seen as socially acceptable within white spaces through tactics like code-switching, racism is still perpetrated against the black community through white society's ignorance and inability to recognize the existence of racism in America. Rankine illustrates this concept as the speaker begins to recall a time when she was late when meeting up with a white friend and the friend said "you nappy-headed ho" (Rankine 41). The initial reaction of the speaker was to question what her friend said. The statement was both an example of racial bias on the part of a white person as well as an example of the

ignorance white Americans have toward racism as these biases are oftentimes passed off as humor. The speaker's friend says that she was joking, but the obliviousness of the friend contributes to racism as the friend's passiveness illustrates how instances of racism are not seen as injustices by the perpetrator. The colloquialism used within this short dialogue allowed the realism used in the text to become more apparent to the reader. As the poem progresses, the speaker begins to question why this woman would say this to her. As she continues to question this, the speaker begins to say that maybe this woman thought this because she was trying to evoke the stereotype of "black people" time by employing what she perceives to be "black people language" (Rankine 41). She then describes an instance in which she was on the phone with a manager and agreed to meet him in person. When she does, he is shocked that she is Black... It can be inferred that the manager believes that all Black people "talk Black".

The speaker then recalls another instance "when the woman with the multiple degrees says, I didn't know Black women could get cancer" (Rankine 45). This is yet another example of how ignorance and racial insensitivity continue to fuel racism in America. The speaker then proceeds to recall another instance where "A friend tells you he has seen a photograph of you on the internet and he wants to know why you look so angry" (Rankine 46). The speaker continues to recall different instances of racial bias and racism. After each story is told, the white space on the last page of each story gradually becomes larger until the last page of the section is blank. The white space used within this section evokes the feeling of silence, welcoming the reader to ponder the previous story. The white space on the page is also indicative of how white society's injustices against the Black person have caused one's blackness to be viewed as inferiority in these white spaces.

Stereotypes have shaped the way that Black Americans are perceived in society by devaluing the Black person and failing to acknowledge the relativity of racism to the Black experience. The lack of understanding of the Black experience, as well as Black culture, contributes to this racialization as white individuals still hold inaccurate perceptions of what Black Americans are like. The use of white space is impactful in this section as silence speaks volumes. The lack of response to these comments coupled with the white space seems to allude to the fact that nothing has to be said for the reader to understand what is wrong.

The speaker also uses two images at the end of this section. One photo says “I do not always feel colored” and the other photo says “ I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.” The photos both gradually smear as they reach the bottom of the page illustrating how Black bodies never feel truly accepted in these white spaces. I believe these photographs are significant because they remind the reader of how Blacks feel when confronted by racial disparities enacted by white America.

Although Black Americans code-switch in order to navigate through white spaces, they are still subject to the discrimination perpetrated by their white counterparts. In turn, they cannot express themselves freely as it could harm their careers. Rankine illustrates how one is subjected to these unprovoked racialized experiences in various circumstances exemplifying racism's active imposition on Blacks through these instances.

Section five of *Citizen* seems to offer a unique point of view as it directly confronts the need for words despite the constraints to what Black people say in white spaces. The speaker begins the section by saying “Words work as a release- well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture” (Rankine 69). The power of words is explained in this section. Words can be used as a way to express built-up feelings and anger, especially those that stem

from racism. This section has a different outlook on anger than that of the previous sections, where the speaker seems to internalize anger. However, in this section, the speaker seems to believe that expressing emotions through words is a necessity, but she doesn't know how. Her inability to articulate her emotions seems to illustrate the internal conflict one may experience when dealing with racism. The anger that one has from these injustices has been held in for so long, that they do not know how they should express these emotions.

### Slavery: The Modern Sense

Black people have historically been perceived as second-class citizens. This has been reinforced by contemporary racial practices that continue to oppress these individuals. While many institutions are designed to appear equal, they actively participate in the marginalization of African Americans. Rankine addresses these issues in *Citizen* as she talks about topics such as racial disparity, mass incarceration, and police brutality.

Rankine addresses the racial disparity prevalent during hurricane Katrina by including a series of quotes obtained from CNN in her poetry to illustrate the lack of assistance offered to the Black communities impacted by it. She begins section six by illustrating the traumatic events that many Black Americans went through while awaiting assistance:

Hours later, still in the difficulty of what it is to be, just like that, inside it, standing there, maybe wading, maybe waving, standing where the deep waters of everything backed up, one said, climbing over bodies, one said, stranded on a roof, one said, trapped in the building, and in the difficulty, nobody coming and still someone saying, who could see it coming, the difficulty of that. (83)

While Black Americans struggled to survive during Hurricane Katrina, the government lacked a sense of urgency to provide aid to these communities. Because of this, Hurricane Katrina revealed one of the many ways that institutional racism has impacted and claimed the lives of thousands of Black Americans. In response to these injustices, Rankine states that “The fiction of the facts assumes innocence, ignorance, lack of intention, misdirection; the necessary conditions of a certain time and place” (Rankine 83). Excuses for failing to provide relief to Black and lower-income communities reveal the “classic binary between the rich and the poor and the haves and have-nots” (Rankine 83). In recounting these events, Rankine exemplified not only

the racial and social disparities in America but also the trauma that Black people have experienced that could have been prevented had proper measures been in place. Through these first-person accounts, Rankine also reveals how society has continued to ignore the impacts of systematic racism. In doing so, she exposes the explicit and brutal conditions encountered by Black Americans during the hurricane:

Then each house was a mumbling structure, all that water, buildings peeling apart, the yellow foam, the contaminated draw of mildew, mold. The missing limbs, he said, the bodies lodged in piles of rubble, dangling from rafters, lying facedown, arms outstretched on parlor floors. And someone said, where were the busses? And simultaneously someone else said, FEMA said it wasn't safe to be there. What I'm hearing, she said, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. He gave me the flashlight, she said, I didn't want to turn it on. It was all black. I didn't want to shine a light on that. We never reached out to anyone to tell our story, because there's no ending to our story, he said. Being honest with you, in my opinion, they forgot about us. (Rankine 84)

Through these accounts, Rankine has revealed the reality of being Black in America. Once again, society has disregarded the Black person revealing the racial divide still prevalent in modern-day society. Thus, one should not only view racism as a social construct but should also acknowledge its role in creating systematic disparities in our political institutions as these beliefs are put into practice. Through the portrayal of these accounts, it is apparent that Black communities still lack adequate resources as institutional racism has revealed the effects of such injustices that non-Black Americans want to ignore, leaving the Black person in America, once again, forgotten. These injustices can also be seen through the corruption within the criminal justice system.

The story of Trayvon Martin also reveals how institutional racism has allowed unwarranted attacks against black people to go unpunished. Trayvon Martin was a 17-year-old Black boy who was shot and killed on his way home from the convenience store by George Zimmerman. Rankine devotes a section of her book to Trayvon Martin to reveal the injustices that many black men like Trayvon Martin have faced. This section is titled "February 26, 2012", which is the day that Trayvon Martin was killed. This section is introduced by the following statement: "My brothers are notorious. They have not been to prison. They have been imprisoned. The prison is not a place you enter" (Rankine 89). The word "brothers" used in the sentence implies that the speaker is referring to Black men; thus, this quote illustrates how systematic racism has impacted the Black man in America. From these lines, it is apparent that a link can be drawn between Black men, such as Trayvon Martin, and the systematic racism that impacts them. Black Americans in situations similar to Trayvon Martin's are frequently treated as guilty until proven innocent. Eric Garner, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Aubrey, among others who were killed by the police, fall into this category as they were unable to prove their innocence prior to systematic racism claiming their lives. By stating that Black people have not been to prison, but rather have been imprisoned, Rankine illustrates that this is not the fault of the Black individual, but rather that of the institution. People like Trayvon Martin have not been physically imprisoned but have been deemed guilty by the perpetrator and, presumably, by the criminal justice system that lets the crimes against the black man go unpunished. Trayvon Martin was simply walking down a street, and evoked George Zimmerman's hostility simply because he was a black man in a gated community. Although this is the case, Zimmerman was still acquitted of all charges although he committed an unwarranted attack against a black man even after a 911 operator told him not to pursue Martin. Thus, Black men are depicted as the perpetrator even

when they are the victims of crimes. As depicted on the cover of the book, Black men have been placed against a white background that disregards the Black experience and continues to perpetuate injustices that contribute to the trauma and dehumanization of the Black individual.

Criminalization isn't the only dehumanizing process Black Americans undergo; they have also been hypersexualized and dehumanized in a way that allows the assertion of white dominance and Black subservience to be implemented within society. In Kelly Brown Douglas' book *Sexuality and the Black Church*, she addresses the beliefs engendered by white society that contribute to hypersexualization and the dehumanization of Black bodies. She addresses the practices used by the white male to retain power over the Black male after emancipation.

Douglas asserts that: "As odious as castration was, no crime against the Black man more clearly indicated the White male fear of Black male sexuality or power than lynching" (Douglas 47).

Systematic racism, especially that which is rooted in the criminal justice system, was developed as a means by which white men asserted power over Black men. Due to irrational fears rooted in inaccurate perceptions of the Black man resulting from the misunderstanding of Black cultural heritage, practices such as lynching became widely accepted within society. Kelly Brown Douglas cites Leon Litwack, who states: "to endorse lynching was to dwell on the sexual depravity of Blacks, to raise the specter of the Black beast seized by uncontrollable savage sexual passions that were inherent in the race" (Douglas 48). Dehumanization of the Black male body has portrayed the Black male as an inhumane creature, which in turn fuels negative perceptions and reactions towards the Black males in the name of upholding white standards.

Because of this, lynching was primarily used as a "weapon employed to control Black men and women socially, economically, and politically. Lynching is thus a classic example of the tools used to enforce and uphold White Patriarchal hegemony" (Douglas 48). Furthermore, there is a

continuing presence of systemic racism in contemporary society which tends to justify racism toward Black men, ensuring the innocence of the perpetrator. Consequently, Black men are victims of the institutions in place as stereotypes continue to justify unjustified crimes against the Black man such as the innocent deaths at the hands of the police. The speaker continues to illustrate the pain Black people have endured as she says:

Those years of and before me and my brothers, the years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs, boy, hey boy, each a felony, accumulate into the hours inside our lives where we are all caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its roots our limbs, a throat slices through and when we open our mouth to speak, blossoms, no blossoms, no place coming out, brother, dear brother, that kind of blue (Rankine 90).

The preceding quotation illustrates how deeply racism is ingrained in America. In this section, Rankine illustrates the progression of history and the oppression of Blacks that has followed. In this way, trauma continues to be passed down for generations, since every generation of Black people continues to encounter the same traumas as their predecessors. In section six, there is a Black and white photo of Black men being lynched. This photo is one of the many uses of visual imagery used by Rankine within the book. If you look at the original photo, you can see the two men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, being lynched, but in the photo displayed in the book, you cannot see them. One interpretation of this photo is that although you can see people pointing in the direction of the men, their bodies fade into the darkness just like many other Black Americans have, seeing that our country does not choose to recognize such injustices, but would rather them be a faint memory. This photo was one of the many photos depicted within

the book that resonated with me because it seems to illustrate how the Black body is disregarded as Blacks are still not treated as equals within society.

Rankine again uses imagery and textual effects to illustrate the desensitization of white Americans towards the Black person. At the end of section six, there is a list of names of people who have died at the hands of the police. These lines begin with the words “in memory of” and end with the name of the person who has died. As the photos get closer to the end of the page, the words begin to fade. As these words fade, indicating two things: first, that the list of those who have died is too long to fit on one page, and second, that the deaths of these individuals seem to become an everyday occurrence in society, desensitizing the masses to these injustices. Rankine concludes the section with a quote that reads as follows: “because white men can’t police their imagination Black people are dying” (Rankine 135). Through this quote, Rankine reveals how those who perpetrate violence against the Black person are consumed by theoretical conceptions of what might happen, rather than the realities of the situation. In relation to the previous sections of *Citizen*, this observation is relevant as it illustrates how white bias results in the deaths of Black people because these individuals control the institutions that police our society.

Through the recounting of racial injustices within the criminal justice system, Rankine explores the pain felt by black Americans. The speaker who dominates the narrative in *Citizen* begins section seven by mentioning an ache: “Some years there exists a warning to escape-- you, floating above your certain ache-- still the ache coexists” (Rankine 139). This ache is indicative of the continued trauma and pain that Black Americans continue to face in society. By implying that the ache may never go away, Rankine illustrates how persisting systemic racism has affected and will continue to impact, the lives of African Americans for generations to come. As society

continues to move forward, the same cycles of institutionalized racism continue to claim the lives of Black Americans while disregarding their cries for justice. The ache continues as George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of an innocent black man. Rankine titles part of section seven July 13, 2013: the date that George Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges in Trayvon Martin's death. In this section, the speaker begins the section by saying "A friend writes of the numbing effects of humming and it returns you to your own side. It's no longer audible. You've grown into it. Some call it aging- an internalized liquid smoke blurring ordinary ache" (Rankine 151). By her friend writing about how humming numbs him from traumatic events, the speaker reflects on how her sighs are no longer audible as she has become accustomed to the injustices she sees before her every day. The familiar ache that usually accompanies the unwarranted deaths of Black people fades due to the system's constant failure to provide justice for those who have been wronged. It is only when whites are unfairly treated that justice will be served, not when whites are perpetuating the unjust behavior. Justice has become arbitrary, as it tends to be contingent on the color of one's skin.

As the poem progresses, the speaker mentions how radio stations continue to talk about Trayvon Martin. Rankine references the title of the book: "Yes, and you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go" (Rankine 51). Accordingly, the reference to the title of the book in this section implies that the term is arbitrary since all citizens are not accorded the same rights. In his excerpt from Rankine, Rankine indicates that although Blacks are considered citizens, they are not treated as such given that racism and the deaths of individuals of color are daily occurrences. Despite this, society ignores the effects of these traumas to disregard history despite their continued impact today. In saying "let it go", the speaker illustrates how Black Americans have to suppress their emotions as white society has devalued them and continues to disregard the Black person

through racial practice. The rage at hearing about George Zimmerman being acquitted reveals how these injustices are so common that the coping that accompanies these experiences surfaces in the form of repression.

Through the use of poetry as well as visual imagery, *Citizen* reveals the severity of racism within America. Because of this, it serves as a reminder that although racial tensions have simmered as our country has progressed, they have not become nonexistent as we are still dealing with a modern-day version of the same issues, we have dealt with for the past 400 years. Rankine illustrates this concept by using real-life events such as the murder of Trayvon Martin to exemplify how these issues are still a reality. Because of this, *Citizen* shows how the trauma experienced by the Black person in America is not just casual but active as the actions and reactions of individuals contribute to the marginalization and brutalization of Black Americans today.

## Conclusion

These two texts show how racism has shaped our country from the dawn of slavery to the recent deaths of Black citizens at the hands of the police” (Hinton). Not only do they show how racism has shaped the systems and institutions in our country, but they also use textual trauma to illustrate the direct impacts that these racial injustices have had on the Black experience. Moments act as catalysts for African Americans to push against the racist institutions that perpetuate violence against the Black body. Writers resist narratives that ignore racism as a source of trauma by illustrating the racial disparities and traumatic events one undergoes as a Black person in America. Characters and speakers reveal these traumas as they are used to depict how these experiences are not only personal but shared as the institutions in place affect all Black Americans. In doing so, these texts reveal how racism has impacted those who were directly subjected to the institution of slavery as well as those who have been indirectly impacted by it through institutional and racial terrorism that continues to reinforce these racial practices. Generational trauma serves as a reminder of how these racist injustices have not gone away. Writers continue to feature these traumas to help those who have not experienced them understand and allow those experiencing them to know that they are not alone. The residual effects of slavery continued to impact American history. A lack of education on topics regarding Black oppression has resulted in an uneducated mass that disregards the traumas and intrusions slavery has on the daily lives of Black Americans. Although this is the case many authors continue to challenge these ways of thinking as they continue to inform the uninformed.

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