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## MASTER'S THESIS

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## Abstract

The issue of race in America in the twenty-first century is still a turbulent matter. The end of segregation in schools, politics, marriages and workplaces created a mask that hid racial inequalities and injustices (Whitmarsh 1). In a time where police brutalities have frequently surfaced in the media in a supposed “post-racial America”, Claudia Rankine writes a thought-provoking 160 page long “book-length poem” about everyday racism arguing that the overlooking of microaggressions (brief daily commonplace verbal and behavioral racial slights) are allowing macroaggressions (blatant racial act such as hate crime) to occur. Rankine’s “book-length poem” is an experimental work melding poetry, prose, essays, commentaries, video transcripts and imagery, which challenges the notion of what poetry can do and what poetry is supposed to look like. This thesis is a study on Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* in regards to her approach to the African American racial experience in a supposed “post-racial America”.

*Citizen* is filled with anecdotal microaggressions from both Rankine herself and her friends, but also moments when microaggressions escalate to incident that have been frequent in the media such as the Trayvon Martin shooting and Zinedine Zidane’s World Cup head-butt.

Naming her book *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), Rankine challenges the notion of citizenship and African American’s position as second class citizens. African Americans are still experiencing hardships that stems from slavery such as racial profiling, stereotyping, and racial slurs. Their citizenship which took centuries to gain, does not protect them from these hardships.

Rankine is concerned with the subtle “everyday racism” African Americans experience on a daily basis and the profound affects this has on their self-image, but also the threat this poses to their lives. Rankine intervenes in current debates about racism due to her approach on everyday racism. In a time where macroaggressions such as police brutalities have reached the news and is taking up a lot of the racial discussion in the United States, Rankine decides to take out a magnifier to look at where the disease starts. *Citizen* is able to urgently speak about microaggressions as if they were macroaggressions. The urgency is created when Rankine follows up her anecdotes with meditations that show how racial comments and gestures are affecting people’s mental state.

My interpretation is that Rankine is putting forth a message that claims that microaggressions should be considered an act of racism to the same degree macroaggressions are.

# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	
1	
Table of contents.....	3
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 2: The Historical Self and the Self Self .....</b>	<b>24</b>
2.1 Historicizing African Americans’ Struggle for Citizenship .....	24
2.2 Rankine on Everyday Racism and Contemporary Issues Concerning Citizenship.....	31
<b>Chapter 3: The Lyric.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Chapter 4: When Such Things Happen He Must Grit His Teeth .....</b>	<b>50</b>
4.1 Celebrating Freedom Hundred Years Too Early.....	50
4.2 Script for Situation Six: Violence and the Segregation of Words .....	59
4.3 I Do Not Always Feel Colored.....	70
<b>Chapter 5: Blackness in the white imagination.....</b>	<b>78</b>
5.1 The Twenty-first Century Narrative.....	78
5.2 Policing the Imagination.....	89
<b>Chapter 6: Creating a Link.....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>106</b>

# 1 Introduction

**If they don't see the happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black.**

– Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil* (1982)

In a time where police brutalities have frequently surfaced in the media in a supposed “post-racial America”, Claudia Rankine writes a thought-provoking 160 page long “book-length poem” about everyday racism arguing that the overlooking of microaggressions are allowing macroaggressions to occur. Naming her book *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), Rankine challenges the notion of citizenship and African American’s position as second class citizens. Rankine is concerned with the subtle “everyday racism” African Americans experience on a daily basis and the profound affects this has on their self-image, but also the threat this poses to their lives. This thesis is a study on *Citizen: An American Lyric* in regards to its approach to the African American racial experience in a supposed “post-racial America”, but also a contribution to the recent reception *Citizen* has received. *Citizen* has been called “urgent” by *The New York Times* (Lee), “especially vital” by *The New Yorker* (Chiasson), and “unforgettable” by the well respected poetry scholar Marjorie Perloff (“*Citizen: An American Lyric*”). Rankine’s “book-length poem” is an experimental work melding poetry, prose, essays, commentaries, video transcripts and imagery challenging the notion of what poetry can do and what poetry is supposed to look like.

*Citizen* is filled with anecdotal microaggressions from both Rankine herself and her friends, but also moments when microaggressions escalate to incident that have been frequent in the media such as the Trayvon Martin shooting and Zinedine Zidane’s World Cup head-butt. This thesis will refer to African Americans using the terms, African American, Black, and Black Americans due to the complexity and the subjectivity of what is considered appropriate.

Rankine starts off *Citizen: An American Lyric*, with a quote from Chris Marker, the French filmmaker of the documentary, *Sans Soleil*, which explores the nature of human memory where he visits humanity as if from another planet (Bradshaw). Rankine meditates throughout *Citizen* on what it means to be black in the United States of America in the

twenty-first century and in the midst of her meditations, Rankine ponders on what memory is. All of the events that happen in a person's life accumulate and become stored in something we call memory. Memory, in both good and bad, triggers human emotion and takes us back in time. Rankine takes the issue of racism which has been a part of the U.S. memory for centuries and brings it forth into the twenty-first century where the legacy of racism continues at a time when nobody alive has a memory of slavery.

Racism and the U.S. memory can be connected to the notion of cultural memory. Cultural memory, a complex term and a whole study of its own, is how a society is able to preserve their history and culture through a collective memory. Memory is an individual phenomenon, however, what makes memory collective is how minds work together in a society. People normally recall, recognize, acquire and localize their memories in society. It is generally impossible for people to remember coherently without their group context. Groups provide us the opportunity to recall, and they also shape the way we recall things. For instance, adults have a hard time knowing if a particular childhood memory is actually of the original event or if it is different fragments of the original event that has been told to them through various retellings and intervening experiences (Erli, and Nunning 155). Cultural memory, however, can be divided into two levels. The first level of cultural memory is connected to biological memory. This means that memory can never truly be individual as memory will always be shaped by collective contexts, which is closely related to collective memory. People we live with or meet and various things we see from the media are all things that make us recall our past and help us build new memories. We are always being influenced which means that this first level of cultural memory refers to socio-cultural contexts. This type of cultural memory is understood in accordance to for instance oral history. The second level of cultural memory is connected to the shared experience a social group has through the media, institutions and practices. "Memory" is used as a metaphor here. People do not literally remember, but we select different versions and perspectives of the past in accordance to current needs and knowledge. (Erli, and Nunning 5) The latter definition of cultural memory is more appropriate to *Citizen*. Rankine writes of a mixture of cultural memory and collective memory. The cultural memory Rankine is referring to is the shared experience African Americans have of racism in the United States, and the collective memory Rankine is referring to is the historical memory of slavery that looks at what it means to be American and the collective narrative of the United States (Erli, and Nunning 5).

You like to think memory goes far back though remembering was never recommended. Forget all that, the world says. The world's had a lot of practice. No one should adhere to the facts that contribute to narrative... (Rankine, *Citizen* 61)

In this quote from *Citizen* Rankine is saying that memory is beyond the history of the self. A country can also have a memory that is connected to history, and this memory goes far back. Rankine says that remembering was never recommended indicating that this is something that African Americans have been told. It is not that they do not want to remember, but they have been urged to forget. "The world's had a lot of practice" means that the world has experienced many atrocities where certain people have always been urged to forget what they have seen and experienced, but also certain fragments of their history. Ultimately Rankine is criticizing the historical narrative of the US where she claims that no one should adhere to this narrative when it omits parts that they have been urged to forget. Remembering the past is important. Rankine does not only meditate on the condition of black people in the U.S and the implications that follow, but Rankine consciously looks back at the past to look for both questions and answers for the present and the future. Rankine actively refers to writers who left a mark on the cultural memory of America to show us how American history is vital in the discussion on racism in America.

Rankine prefaces *Citizen* with the quote "If they don't see the happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black." The quote is taken from the beginning of Chris Marker's documentary. Marker shows an image of three children on a road in Iceland from 1965. The narrator explains that someone (a "he") had said that, for him, this was what he described as the image of happiness. He had tried to link it to other images several times, but he had failed. Instead he believed that he would have to put the image in the beginning of a film all by itself one day followed by a long piece of black leader where if they fail to see the happiness, at least they would see the black (Criterioncollection). Rankine's use of this quote at the very beginning of *Citizen* can be challenging to understand. *Citizen* is layered with intertextual references. Her reference to Marker's quote is used as a preface which means that Rankine is introducing the whole of *Citizen* with this quote. The narrator of the documentary film noted that this was an image of happiness. If people failed to see the happiness which is the central and most important part of the image, he knows that they will at least see the black leader that follows. The black leader is more blatant and less disputable than the image of happiness

which could be considered subjective. He perceived the image as an image of happiness, but everyone might not see what he sees. Rankine could also refer to the quote with a similar meaning. If people fail to see the struggles black Americans go through and refuse to see the dire consequences of the anecdotal events that are portrayed in *Citizen*, at least they will be able to see the black; the hypervisible color of their skin which so many black people in the US are profiled by.

### **Introducing Claudia Rankine and *Citizen: an American Lyric***

Claudia Rankine is an author, a playwright, and a poet who was born in Jamaica in 1963, but moved to New York with her family when she was seven years old. Rankine is the author of five poetry collections; *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004), *Plot* (2007), *The End of the Alphabet* (1998), *Nothing in Nature is Private* (1994), and *Citizen* (2014) being her latest one. Rankine has also edited numerous anthologies. One of these anthologies was the *American Poets in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: the New Poetics* (2007). Rankine was in 2013 elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Rankine has taught at various Colleges and Universities. She has a MFA in poetry and is currently living in California while being the Aerol Arnold Chair in the University of Southern California English Department (“Poet Claudia Rankine”).

Claudia Rankine’s recent contribution to the current discussion about racism, *Citizen: An American Lyric* was published in 2014. *Citizen* is described as a book-length poem by her publishing company and battles the issues about everyday racism. Rankine uses different events that have happened in her own life and to people she knows to describe the affects of everyday racism and what it eventually turns into. Rankine also meditates on police brutalities and other racially sparked incidents that have become known on a national as well as a global level. While using poetry, prose, essay, commentary, and the visual image, Rankine explores the consequences everyday racism has on black Americans as citizens of the United States. *Citizen: an American Lyric* is a follow-up of Rankine’s *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: an American Lyric* which came out ten years prior to *Citizen* with the same subtitle. *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* does not exclusively discuss race the same way *Citizen* does. However, like *Citizen*, it plays with different genres (this time with poetry, essay and images). In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine explores the new century and some of the issues that come as a result of our modern world. She addresses events such as 9/11, race riots and the constant flow of



information from the media that people are overwhelmed with. The poet Robert Creeley commented on *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* by mentioning the melding of genres that he believes creates the most moving testament of the times we are living in he has seen so far. He expresses it as a master work and something she has created as her own ("Poet Claudia Rankine"). *Citizen* follows the same path and Rankine chooses to do a melding of poetry, prose, essay, commentaries, and images which again has created a master work that has been recognized by a wide range of critics.

*Citizen* has won the NAACP Award for outstanding literary work in poetry, both the PEN Open Book Award and the PEN Literary Award where the 2015 judges were the writers E. Erica Doyle, W. Ralph Eubanks, and Chinelo Okparanta who noted that *Citizen* confronts issues of racism head on and shows what it feels like to be thrown against a twenty-first century's sharp white background ("2015 PEN Open Book Award"). *Citizen* also won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry (although *Citizen* was the first book to ever be named a finalist in both the criticism and poetry categories) where it was stated that "Rankine maps the uneasiness and charged space of living race now, miraculously breaking racism's intractability down into human-sized installations, accounts of relationships and examples of speech." ("National Book Critics Circle Announces Award Winners..."), and was a finalist for the National Book Award. "*Citizen* also holds the distinction of being the only poetry book to be a New York Times bestseller in the nonfiction category. Among her numerous awards and honors, Rankine is the recipient of the Poets & Writers' Jackson Poetry Prize and fellowships from the Lannan Foundation and the National Endowment of the Arts" (claudiarankine).

### **Reviews and initial reception**

Hilton Als, an associate professor of writing at Columbus University's school of the Arts, reviewed *Citizen* and described it as the "best note in the wrong song that is America" ("*Citizen: An American Lyric*"). Als comments that the various realities are almost too much to bear, but you end up bearing them because they are the truth. He argues that *Citizen* is as large, frightening and beautiful as the country itself. When Als gives the *Citizen* the same attributes as the country Rankine is writing about, Als makes an important point. What makes Rankine's work large although it is only a 160 page long book with images and sometimes blank pages, is how she is able to comment on racism which is still a large part of the American society. Rankine visits a great amount of incidents and everyday occurrences that a

large amount of people are able to identify themselves with. Everyone has a part to play in the discussion on racism and Rankine includes everyone. She includes the ones who experience it, the ones who perform it, and the ones who sit back and do nothing about it. *Citizen* is also frightening as Als describes it. Rankine unravels the blindfold that has deluded certain people to believe that America is not a society that puts emphasis on race. Rankine's accusative tone writing about a society that you are a part of and contribute to, can rightfully be deemed frightening. I would claim that the beauty Als sees in *Citizen* is Rankine's writing when she meditates. Her writing is calm and very much aware of itself. Every word is carefully chosen and carefully placed in order for her to write little, but say incredibly much.

because white men can't  
police their imagination  
black men are dying (135).

Jonathan Farmer, a poetry critic for the *Slate*, wrote in his review of *Citizen* that *Citizen* was the best book he had ever wanted to *not* read. Farmer believes *Citizen* to be genius as it is able "to instruct us in the depth and variety of our participation in a narrative of race that we recount and reinstate, even when we speak as though it weren't there" ("Citizen: An American Lyric"). Farmer argues that Rankine is showing us how we participate in a narrative of race. America is a racialized society, so much so that "to be without racial identity is to be in danger of having no identity" (qtd. in HoSang and LaBennett 212).

The term racialization is a relatively new term to American studies and cultural studies. In order to understand racialization, the term "race" has to be defined first. Race signifies social identity, meaning and power. Race can justify different forms of social hierarchy and power (212). Racialization, on the other hand, is "a process that produces race within particular social and political conjunctures" (212). Racialization gives a racial meaning to a relationship, group or social practice that was previously racially unclassified. Racialization is a historical process as well as an ideological one (212). To not speak of race is to omit a huge part of American society, both historically and ideologically. The narrative of race bases narratives on social identity, meaning and power. Farmer is pointing out that as long as one is a part of the American society, one cannot escape taking part in a race narrative. Rankine emphasizes the fact that everyone has a position in racial America. Farmer's point about *Citizen* being a book he did not want to read reinforces the fact that Rankine is describing a

frightening reality. His realization is that the readers of *Citizen* are forced to take responsibility one way or another, and by reading it he automatically has to take a stance on the current affairs of racial America.

Marjorie Perloff, a well respected poetry scholar and one of the foremost critics of contemporary poetry (“Marjorie Perloff”) argues that *Citizen* has a shock value that is rarely found in poetry. Rankine describes activities that are so ordinary that one does not notice the guarded racism that is beneath it all. “These tales of everyday life – whether the narrator’s or the lives of young black men like Trayvon Martin and James Craig Anderson – dwell on the most normal exterior and the most ordinary of daily situations so as to expose what is really there: a racism so guarded and carefully masked as to make it all the more insidious” (“*Citizen: An American Lyric*”). By describing racism in America as something insidious, Perloff is able to bring forth an important part of Rankine’s literary project. Rankine is showcasing how racism in America is not reserved to a white policeman killing a young black man. Racism can be someone telling a black girl that she is pretty despite being black. Racism becomes insidious when the girl that is receiving this “complement” does not recognize the complement as an insult, and the person who gave the complement does not realize that what they said was wrong. Racism will then slowly build itself up and become detrimental.

### **Reasons for writing *Citizen***

One of the reasons why Rankine wrote *Citizen* was in light of the police brutalities that have been seen through the media for the past few years. She wanted to show that everyday racism allowed those actions to happen. Ultimately by not confronting “small” issues, larger issues got a pathway. Another reason for writing *Citizen* was that she initially wanted to connect some health issues black people had to what they experienced every day. The thought was that the reason why they experienced these health issues (more than compared to the rest of the population) was because everyday racism had an effect on their health. She eventually realized that there already existed a term for it; “John Henryism” (Sharma).

In *Citizen* Rankine writes that you are arriving in the driveway and deciding to remain seated for another ten minutes in order to reduce the stress. “A / friend once told you that there exists the medical term – John / Henryism – for people exposed to stresses stemming from / racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge / the buildup of erasure” (11).

John Henryism is a medical term which “refers to an individual's self-perceived ability to meet the demands of the environment through hard work and determination.” (McKetney

and Ragland 787). John Henryism was based on investigating racial health disparities by the researcher Sherman A. James. The medical term is mostly associated with African Americans as the study is based on the supposed mythical character, John Henry, who was a hard working African American man. He died while successfully competing against a mechanical steel driving machine. James created a scale of measuring John Henryism where if one scored high on the scale one usually had higher blood pressure than the ones who scored low. Research has shown that African Americans who have low education, but have above average John Henryism, usually have high blood pressure compared to others who have other combinations of education and John Henryism (McKetney and Ragland 787). “The buildup of erasure”, Rankine writes in reference to John Henryism. What people who are dealing with racism are trying to dodge is essentially all the moments of their lives where they have experienced racism, but at the same time have tried hard to forget. They do not want these moments that were meant to be forgotten to buildup and suffocate them. Instead, they achieve themselves to death trying to dodge these memories. Rankine commented in an interview that John Henryism is a slight comfort. There is an actual term for what so many people are going through. It is easy for people to feel that they are the only ones going through something when in all actuality there are many people feeling the same pain. She explains that with a term like this, black people will realize that there is not something wrong with them, but with the place they are living in (Sharma).

### **Critical synopsis**

*Citizen* is divided into seven sections. They are not divided as traditional chapters. The chapters do not have titles and they are only sectioned off with a blank page with roman numbers. Each section contains many events that happen daily in places such as the subway, grocery store, and coffee shop. The events are caused by comments, glances, back-handed compliments, attitudes and so on. Some of these events are a few lines on a blank page, while other events go on for several pages. *Citizen* is made up of meditations as well that ponder on the affects the everyday events have on African American’s mental state. Rankine’s poetry is a mixture of essays, prose, imagery, and scripts. She has a section where she uses something she calls Script for Situation videos. Script for Situation are texts she wrote to use as voice-over for documentary films she created with her husband. In these Script for Situations Rankine inserts both the text form the videos and also, in some cases, still images from the videos.

## I

The first section in *Citizen* is mostly dominated by microaggressions. Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al. 271).

Rankine writes most of *Citizen* using second person pronoun (with few exceptions that will later be discussed in chapter two of this thesis). Rankine starts *Citizen* with a short eight-line meditation on dwelling in one’s past.

“When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any / of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked / among your pillows” (5). You are alone in this scenario in your room and in an empty house. You are contemplating your past as you are laying on your pillow while darkness has settled outside the window. You cannot be bothered to turn on any of your devices which forces you to deal with what you are feeling. Rankine is describing how when the day has ended and no one is around you to distract you from your thoughts, you dwell on what you have experienced. Memories float around and you are forced to deal with the emotional implications of everyday racism. By using this scenario in the beginning of *Citizen*, Rankine is informing us of the impact and how these scenarios are affecting the mental state of African Americans. The comments do not disappear into thin air, rather they stay, they linger and they seep into the body. It is as if Rankine is telling us to keep this in the back of our heads when reading *Citizen*.

Rankine continues with an incident in school where a black girl allows a white girl to cheat from her in class. Rankine writes that, “You never really speak except for the time she makes her / request and later when she tells you you smell good and / have features more like a white person” (5). Comments similar to these are what Rankine is developing into bigger issues. They all start out small and innocent in the sense that they can be easily overlooked by both parties; both the person who is saying the remark and the one receiving it. It might not be intended to be malicious, but that only means that they carry around a set of beliefs that they themselves are not aware of. The first section of *Citizen* is mainly presenting incident that seem harmless, innocent, easily overlooked and perhaps, for some, not much thought of. Incidents like when a white person mistakes you for the only other black person they know and you end up making excuses for them because doubting what you already know is the only way to stay sane. “You need your glasses / to single out what you know is there because doubt is / inexorable... Did she really just say that? Did I / hear what I think I heard?” (9).

You do not want to face the reality by believing that what the other person told you was maliciously and racially intended. Excuses are made in order to not feel what you already feel. Rankine is implying that in essence this excuse is pointless because the doubt cannot be stopped anyway. The convincing will not stop what you already know.

Rankine ponders on why certain people feel comfortable saying things to you that you consider inappropriate. Rankine argues that it is strange that certain discussions that are clearly inappropriate somehow become appropriate when they are proposed to a black person. Rankine often makes the readers ask these questions, but she does not give the readers the answer. Sometimes, the answer is in the question. The first step is to acknowledge that there is a problem. Instead of doubting what you already know, Rankine challenges the readers to face the problems and ask why. Why is it OK for certain people to come up and ask questions that are out of line and in essence rude?

Another issue Rankine presents in the first section, is the issue of confrontation. Rankine has said herself in an interview that she has often stepped around things because confrontation is messy. However, confrontation is exactly what is needed. The fear of confrontation comes from the fear of being accused of playing the victim. No one wants to be accused of being oversensitive or reading into things that are not there, however, the situation Rankine portrays in *Citizen* is fairly evident. A man is calling some loud teenager at Starbucks for niggers, you tell him that you are present and that there is no reason to go all KKK on them. He responds by saying, “Now there you go” (16). This man is probably so used to accusing people of being overly sensitive that he has gotten a distorted view of what racism is. Rankine describes a proud man who thinks he is in the right, and you have finally gotten the guts to stand in a room full of strangers – calling him out.

## II

The second section is about stereotypes and black expectations. Rankine makes matters a bit more serious for every section as all of these small situations add up. And many small situations have added up when Serena Williams, a famous African American Tennis player, finally snaps at the US Open semifinals in 2009. Rankine discusses Serena’s Tennis career in a twelve page long essay. Rankine showcases how the expectation rises in Serena’s career where she has experienced racial slurs and unfair calls over the years, and also when she experienced her breaking point.

African Americans are expected to be angry, but at the same time to have the ability to suppress that anger, all the while disregarding where the anger actually comes from. With her different anecdotes/events and meditations, Rankine is clearly emphasizing the emotional implications and the natural outrage that follows. By stereotyping African Americans, it makes it seem as though there is no real rage behind the stereotype.

Rankine inserts an image of Hennessy Youngman, who is a youtube personality discussing how to be a successful black man. He sarcastically gives a tutorial where he argues that you have to succumb to the black stereotype in order to succeed. You have to be what the white man wants you to be. Rankine almost gives a review-like commentary on the video where she ponders on Youngman's intentions and his awareness of his blackness, but also the awareness of his anger. In this commentary, Rankine reflects on the difference between real rage and the animated rage that is attached to the black stereotype. Rankine tries to understand the notion of the black body and how its blackness becomes even more hypervisible in a predominantly white sport. The last image in this section is of a white Danish tennis player who jokingly stuffs towels in her shirt and shorts to imitate Serena. Rankine mentions in her essay that when the act was questioned to be racist, *CNN* wanted to know if outrage was the proper response (36). Rankine expresses how the incident was mostly taken as a joke, completely disregarding the underlying microaggression that was present in her joke.

### III

The third section is about these frequent encounters with microaggressions and their emotional implications. However, now they are said more and more by people who are considered friends or acquaintances. The other two sections focused more on comments given by strangers. The third section opens up with an account on code-switching. Code-switching is switching from one language variety to another when the situation requires it (Trudgill 201). Rankine writes,

You are rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood  
of Santa Monica. This friend says, as you walk toward her,  
You are late, you nappy-headed ho. What did you say?  
You ask, though you have heard every word (41).

The account continues with a meditation where you are making up excuses in your head for your friend in order for you to come to terms with what just happened. This section contains

more confrontations where the “you” dares to speak up, but there is still a progressing mental strain that comes with the frequent encounters of subtle racism.

Rankine includes remarks on Judith Butler in this section, a major literary theorist and philosopher, in order to comment on what makes language hurtful. Rankine states,

We suffer from the condition of being addressable...  
For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person. After considering Butler’s remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts (49).

As humans we are addressable which means that hurtful language will be able to affect us. Rankine believes that the importance of Butler’s views is that hurtful language is not there to make you disappear; rather hurtful language is there to expose you and make you vulnerable. Hurtful language can be considered performative language which means to say something and do/perform something at the same time (Bennett, and Royle 262). A simple example of performative language is “I do”. Something is said, but at the same time an act follows the expression/declaration. Similarly to that statement, Rankine acknowledges that Butler’s remark is that hurtful language calls people out and makes them vulnerable. What is said also has the power to do something. Hurtful comments have the ability to affect the mental state of people which is what Rankine is indicating when she presents these microaggressions that she often meditates on. The friend called her a “nappy-headed ho”, which immediately makes her flustered and confused. By incorporating Butler’s view on what makes language hurtful, Rankine is acknowledging how driven her accounts are by language and its power.

Rankine continues section three with a row of ignorant comments black Americans have received from their white countrymen. Incidents like when you hear two men making remarks about how black people seem to have a language of their own since it is so difficult to understand them when they are talking. “Standing outside the conference room, unseen by the two / men waiting for the others to arrive, you hear one say to / the other that being around black people is like watching / a foreign film without translation” (50). You are left with being in awe when you realize that these two men are people you have to have a meeting with. The way Rankine portrays this scenario indicates the awkward feeling that is left in the air. You are painfully aware of your blackness and you realize that these men are also aware



of it. There is also a realization of how these comments are not meant for your ears, which makes them all the more malicious. Rankine also showcases other awkward moments like when after a brief phone conversation with a manager you come over to sign the form only to hear him blurt out that he did not know that you were black. Other ignorant comments such as when a lady admits that she did not know that black women could have breast cancer, adds to the feeling of being “the other”, as if blackness is a shield that protects you from certain human deceases which in essence means that the lady’s comment dehumanizes blackness.

#### **IV**

The fourth section is about trying to forget everything one experiences, but realizing that it is not possible. Instead, everything that has been experienced turns into a worrying sigh of ache that convey deeply registered affects. “To live through the days sometimes you moan like a deer. / Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another / sigh. Another stop that” (59). To make these sounds becomes a form of survival to live through the days. They cannot be controlled. They are a way of breathing. There is also this disturbing voice that is telling you to forget, but you cannot. Rankine uses most of the fourth section to meditate on the emotional and physical implications of the encounters with these events. The encounters are unexpected and can show up anywhere like the streets, the grocery store, the subway, work and etc. There is no escape, and when they finally let their body feel what it feels they are still shaking. All those experiences cannot disappear. The comments cannot escape their ears. The sighing forces them to remember, but then they remember that the outside world tells them that remembering is not recommended. Instead they are urged to forget. However, they realize that forgetting is not really an option. Rankine brings up a really important issue, which is the issue of the dismissal of black experiences. Rankine argues that the exposure of everyday racism towards black Americans have a serious impact on their health as well as their view on themselves and their country. However, the burden becomes even more heavier to carry when these experiences are either dismissed or urged to forget.

#### **V**

The fifth section is about issues concerning the history of black Americans. Rankine starts the section with writing, “Words work as release” (69). Rankine states the importance of language. Words have the ability to spark emotions and make people recall memories. There is also the doubt that comes back where one does not know other people’s intentions and what

they truly mean. Rankine is also stating that the body has a language. “A pulse in the neck, the / shiftiness of the hands, an unconscious blink, the conver / -sations you have with your eyes translate everything and / nothing” (69). Rankine believes that what words do not explain, the body is able to explain. Intentions and gestures have to match, which means that words and body language has to match. Ultimately what Rankine is implying is that gestures can be just as hurtful as comments.

Rankine writes about where black Americans stand in American history. She looks at invisibility in another sense than she has before. The literal invisibility of being bumped into and claiming to not have been seen is one form of invisibility, but here Rankine also looks at how black Americans have been overlooked in the historical narrative of American history. Their story has been hidden behind a narrative that has forgotten them the same way black Americans are urged to forget where they came from and what they have gone through. Their invisibility has caused them to fall outside of American history. Rankine explores the first person narrative which has always been the white man and how black Americans would never fit into that narrative. This also means that the small part of black history that is remembered can both be misconstrued and largely omitted. Black Americans are affected by their lack of representation and how they are being portrayed in history.

Since Rankine described this other form of invisibility which is the lack of representation in American history, Rankine also describes its counterpart, hypervisibility. In this scenario you are waiting at a bar in a restaurant for a friend when you have a conversation with a white man who later shows you a picture on his phone of his wife. When you say that she is beautiful he responds by saying, “She is, he / says, beautiful and black, like you” (78). I believe that Rankine wrote about this scenario to show that even people who clearly are not racist can still be stimulated racially by the society they live in. He simply had to point out her blackness and yours at the same time. The fact that she was black mattered.

## VI

The sixth section is mostly made up of Script for Situation videos that highlight the violence and death that come as a result of microaggressions. Script for Situation videos are videos Rankine created with her husband. The texts in *Citizen* are transcripts of these videos which Rankine wrote to use as voice-over. In these Script for Situation accounts, Rankine inserts both the text from the videos and also, in some cases, still images from the videos. Rankine has Script for situation videos of Hurricane Katrina (a hurricane that hit in 2005 that went

from being a natural disaster in the US to a social disaster), Trayvon Martin (an African American teen killed by a neighborhood watch), James Craig Anderson (an African American man murdered by a group of teens in a hate crime), Jena Six (six black teenagers who beat up a white teenager at their High School), Stop-and-Frisk (an account on the policing of black men) and the World Cup (Zinedine Zidane, a French-Algerian soccer player, who head-butted a player from the opposite team due to alleged racial slurs in 2006) . In these Script for Situation videos Rankine meditates on certain events that have gotten attention from the media. Rankine’s meditation on these incidents are deep thoughts that she writes sometimes as a stream of consciousness. She wonders why these incidents have happened and why the outcome was what it was. Sometimes her meditations are portrayed as a scenario where there are conversations between people to see what they are saying to each other and how they feel about the situation. Other times they are simply thoughts that Rankine lets spill on the pages. At this point in *Citizen* Rankine is presenting scenarios and issues that are considered so serious that they have gotten media coverage. The previous sections, I believe, are build-ups to these events. Most of the other scenarios have been subtle everyday racial encounters. The encounters in the sixth section are not subtle at all. They are detrimental and fatal. Rankine is showcasing the horrible outcome of subtle racism.

Almost at the end of the sixth section, she dedicates a page to the recent deaths of the victims of police brutalities where she writes, “In Memory of Eric Garner, In memory of Micheal Brown, In memory...” (134). After mentioning four names, the rest of the page is continued with “In memory” as a separate line all throughout the page (twenty-five times to be precise), but without names.

In memory

In memory

In memory...

There are simply too many to name them all. Rankine could have only mentioned four names in order to indicate that there is no way that she could mention each and every one who has been killed by law enforcement over the past few years. However, for every line Rankine writes “In memory” without a name following, the writing becomes lighter. The black color is fading and at the very end of the page, one can hardly read it because it has become too faint. This can also mean that Rankine wanted to show us that these names are eventually forgotten.

## VII

The last section is about the aftermath of the violence in the previous section. Rankine addresses worthlessness and not knowing who you are. There is a certain calm tone in Rankine's writing. It seems to be a type of calm that would only come after a storm. What Rankine writes about in the last section is the aftermath of everything that happens to the black body. This section is about what they are left with and how they move on. There is no pain left, there is no sorrow. There is only confusion and feelings that have become numb. In the beginning of the last section Rankine calls upon "the immanent you" (139). Is it possible to be who you are without outside influences? Rankine explains that you are floating and aching above your own existence, and therefore that must be the immanent you. The you that is only you and not other people's definition of you. Rankine is suggesting that all the labels and stereotypes have worn you out to the point where you exist outside yourself. You have to live outside your body in order to still be yourself.

Rankine ponders on the want to escape. The want comes from wanting to exist in a place where your existence matters. Your existence here is just that of an alien. The hurtful feeling of realizing that you do not belong here is numbing. Yet, there is a certain confusion because African Americans do belong in America. Where else would they go? Rankine wants to know what this existence means. The existence of the African American is a complicated existence. They are present, yet they are absent. Perhaps what Rankine is indicating is that they are here in the flesh, but not in mind. They long for a place that will see their existence and appreciate it. At the same time, Rankine could refer to African Americans being present in both body and mind. The only thing that is missing is acknowledgement as worthy citizens. Rankine writes that, "what happens to you doesn't belong to you, / only half concerns you" (141). This goes back to the dismissal of black experience. African Americans are only partly a part of who they are. The rest does not belong to them. Rankine could indicate that the rest is parts of their culture that has been transformed into a mainstream culture that makes it seem as though it does not belong to them anymore. The rest can also be parts of their history that has been omitted from their history books in school. The rest can be so many things, but Rankine does not specify. Essentially, this is how you are a citizen. The small accounts Rankine started with developed into death and destruction, if not literal death, then the death of identity and the loss of one's place in society.

### **Contextualizing *Citizen: an American Lyric***

Cornel West, a respected scholar who is also an activist, philosopher, intellectual, and professor of Philosophy and Christian Practice amongst other things (“About Dr. Cornel West”), prefaced his book *Race Matters* (2001) by saying that no other modern people have been taught to systematically hate themselves like black Americans. “Black people in the United States differ from all other modern people owing to the unprecedented levels of unregulated and unrestrained violence directed at them” (vii). West argues that they have experienced a psychological violence which has been reinforced by powers of state, and they have experienced physical violence in order to control their minds and exploit their labor for centuries (vii). “The unique combination of American terrorism – Jim Crow and lynching – as well as American barbarism – slave trade and slave labor – bear witness to the distinctive American assault on black humanity” (vii).

African Americans are experiencing a lot of inequality, but there are still white supremacists who deny the reality of black lives and their condition although there are evidences in the form of statistics that prove the claims West is making, West gives statistics of racial profiling, drug convictions and death-row executions; as well as special education treatments, psychic depression treatments and unemployment levels (viii). However, *Citizen* addresses many situations that are not measured in statistics. Everyday racism is tricky in the sense that it can be perceived as very subjective. If white supremacists are able to deny racial inequality in America although there are clear evidences, surely everyday racism would be even easier to deny. Rankine is, however, able to very clearly present and problematize the use and affect of everyday racism by continuously asking the readers questions and leaving it to their common sense to figure it out. Racism can be denied as much as one wants, but can one deny the stories, the anecdotes in *Citizen*? West also argues that in spite of black Americans experiencing an undeniable progress in America where black people can be found in most fields, white supremacy still lingers. Here is where the notion of “post racial America” comes in.

### **Post-Racial America and Police Brutalities**

This thesis was sparked by a concept and a situation that failed to make sense to me; namely, “post-racial America”, and the video footages of police brutalities over the past few years. The first thing that triggered me to write this thesis was the constant footages of black Americans, men in particular, who were being gunned down and killed by law enforcement

for the last couple of years. It was shocking when similar stories would surface continuously. What I failed to understand was that this was happening in the twenty-first century with a black president. However, this was not something new. The main reason why the killings were being covered on the news was because the incidents were recorded. Law enforcement did not all of a sudden start targeting black people. I understood that law enforcement had a long history of violence towards black Americans. The absence of video cameras allowed many murders to go unnoticed, and also create an illusion for outsiders to believe that America was reaching racial equality, but now injustice was revealed. The whole world was able to see the injustice of their deaths. The killings caused uprising in black communities as the criminal justice system would often not protect the victims, but rather the killer. Movements such as “Black Lives Matter” would become prevalent and the injustice of racial America would become a hot new-old topic. What became clear in the midst of all the chaos, was that America was *not* a post-racial society. I was surprised to see that “post-racial America” was actually a term. How can “post-racial America” be a concept to be believed when horrendous crimes were happening to innocent black Americans? There was a twisted link between these notions that I wanted to understand.

After the election of President Barack Obama, Cornel West argued that what was meant by the term “post racial America” was not that the US had become a country where racism did not exist, rather the term simply meant “less racist” (Adams). The presence of Obama showcased both how the US had become less racist, but also how it was still racist. A black president was elected, but there was still opposition, not because of his qualifications, but because of his blackness.

The election of President Barack Obama was celebrated in the States both from liberals and conservatives. The election was a stamp on the fact that America had indeed become a post-racial society. However, during Obama’s campaign, Obama experienced racist attacks. These taunts did not end after he became the president, on the contrary, they escalated. The U.S secret service stated that Obama had experienced death threats that were racist in nature that were taken very seriously. Fox news also decided to air a discussion on a supposed “coming civil war” where guests argued that the civil war would be partly a race war. The election of a black president that was supposed to result in the common belief that America was indeed a post-racial society, decided to prove the exact opposite (Dawson, and Lawrence 247). The belief that the US had become a post racial society was not held by everyone, the ones that did hold this belief were mostly white Americans who had believed for over a

decade that black Americans had or would soon achieve racial equality. These were also the same people who would suggest that tragic events such as Hurricane Katrina had nothing to do with race. Michael Dawson, a professor of political science and Lawrence Bobo, a professor of sociology and African American studies, argue that the majority of the people who feel this way are white because of the simple fact that they do not experience what black Americans experience (247).

The concept of white privilege is based on the fact that white people are given certain benefits for the sole purpose of them being white. White privilege also makes it difficult for white people to see that they are privileged because it is an unearned asset. It is an unearned asset that is considered normal because they have had it their whole life. Another problem with white privilege, which is explained in detail by Peggy McIntosh's paper on white privilege and male privilege (1988), is that those who experience white privilege are usually under the impression that their lives and their opportunities are universal. This means that they believe everyone has the same shot in life as them. To have the same shot in life would mean for instance that racial equality would exist, as race is a socially constructed concept that is based on appearance. However, racial equality does not exist and America is indeed not a post-racial society, but white privilege can give the impression of such a society from someone who benefits from it (4-7). I am mentioning white privilege briefly in order to state that this is one of the main ways someone would be able to justify the concept of post-racial America. I wanted to specify that this belief is not completely baseless, but that with privilege one can become blind and have a distorted view of the society one lives in.

This thesis is designed to analyze and contribute to the discussion on *Citizen* and its approach to racism. I have divided this thesis into eight chapters where the introduction is considered chapter one, and the conclusion is considered chapter seven.

Chapter two discusses citizenship and the term "everyday racism". This chapter consists of two essays where I in the first essay historicize African American's struggle for citizenship due to Rankine's book title which challenges the notion of who has the right to hold the status of citizenship. The second essay deals with contemporary issues regarding citizenship which is highly focused on what Philomena Essed terms "everyday racism". The affects and conditions that surround the term puts African Americans in a disadvantage as citizens.

Chapter three discusses form. *Citizen* does not exclusively fall under one category of genre although Rankine indicates that it is a lyric by *Citizen's* subtitle. This chapter has an

emphasis on voice and discusses how *Citizen* both rejects and embraces the lyric, and how Rankine is challenging the readers' notion of what poetry is supposed to look like.

Chapter four is highly focused on intertextuality. The chapter discusses important literary writers, the violent implications of words and Rankine's use of imagery. There are in total three essays. The first essay discusses Rankine's literary project while using James Baldwin's essay "A Letter to my Nephew". The second essay discusses Zinedine Zidane's World Cup exist which is one of Rankine's Script for Situation videos. Here Rankine incorporates James Baldwin, Maurice Blanchot, Ralph Ellison and Frantz Fanon to work on their ideas on violence. Rankine explores what triggers violence and the implications of symbolic violence. The third essay looks at imagery in *Citizen* and how they contextualize Rankine's events and meditations.

Chapter five widens the scope of discussion on *Citizen* from how everyday racism affects individuals to how everyday racism affects a country. There are two essays in this chapter. The first essay tackles the issue of the media, specifically as a newsgathering organization where the national tragedy of Hurricane Katrina and the death of Mark Duggan will be discussed in light of the media's portrayal of these events. The second essay focuses on the criminal justice system, specifically the police, where the death of Trayvon Martin and the "stopping and frisking" of black men is discussed.

Chapter six discusses the development of Rankine's meditations in order to look for a link between the meditations. The chapter consists of one essay with a few mediations from all the sections in *Citizen*. If there is a link between the meditations which correlates with how Rankine's events escalated, then they could further contextualize Rankine's literary project.

Finally, this thesis contains many electronic websites as secondary sources from scholars, reviewers, critics, and events that are cited in newspapers due to the recent publication of *Citizen*.



## 2 The Historical Self and the Self Self

Citizenship for African Americans has been a struggle since crossing the Atlantic Ocean. African Americans went from being treated worse than animals to becoming second class citizens. Although African Americans have gained more or less the same rights as their white countrymen, African Americans are still struggling with incarceration, poverty, lack of education and unemployment. Rankine names her “book-length poem” on everyday racism, *Citizen*. The title contains a question as Rankine wanted to ask “who gets to hold that status despite everyone technically having it?” (Kellaway “Claudia Rankine...”). The status of being a citizen is closely tied to American history and African Americans’ struggle to gain citizenship. Rankine presents the issue of the “historical self” and the “self self” in *Citizen* where a friend argues that as friends you interact with mutual interests and compatible personalities, but “sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self and her black self, arrive with full force of your American positioning” (14). Rankine comments that your joined personal histories should help you understand each other better; instead your joined personal histories focus more on what is meant rather than what is said. What Rankine means by this is that the conversation becomes more focused on who the white person was in American history and who the black person was in American history and how that contextualizes their conversation. The past is still a part of the present. African Americans are still experiencing hardships that stems from slavery such as racial profiling, stereotyping, and racial slurs. Their citizenship which took centuries to gain, does not protect them from these hardships. Historicizing African American citizenship becomes vital in Rankine’s discussion on who is granted the right to uncompromised citizenship, and also how everyday racism is a contemporary issue concerning citizenship.

### 2.2 Historicizing African Americans’ Struggle for Citizenship

#### 1750-1865

Gaining and expanding citizenship did not come easy for the African Americans. The U.S law had inequalities as well as customs of the early republic that excluded large parts of the population. This meant that African Americans started off with absolutely little to no rights. During slavery, the unpaid labor of the slaves was a crucial element to the staggering profit of the industries. The slaves were actually the single most important element. After slavery, the

goal was to pay the African American workers as little as possible. The reason for that was to continue the economic benefits. If the workers had been paid a suitable amount, the economy would take a blow, but the workers would have taken a step closer to becoming citizens. (Gates et al. 4). African Americans went from being slaves who were treated as animals to finally becoming what I will discuss, namely “citizens”. The constitution did eventually grant African Americans slaves “the status of 3/5 of a person for the purposes of calculating representation in Congress but did not grant them the right to liberty, property or to vote. And the first legal regulations of who could become a U.S. citizen drew sharp restrictions based on race.” (Orleck). Therefore, by law, African Americans were not being dealt with as a full person, but rather 3/5 of a person.

These laws and common held beliefs made many people who had full citizenship continue to resent and treat the people who did not have full citizenship badly. The resentment was backed up by their laws and their religion. Essentially African Americans had little to no rights. During slavery, for instance, many of the slaves were not harmed by people who did not own them because they did not want to damage the property of somebody else. It had nothing to do with the slaves, but everything to do with the owner of the slave and preserving their right to their own property. After slavery, however, black Americans were not protected by this law and the killings of black people could go unnoticed. The laws that catered against black people also reinforced the citizen’s beliefs of who really deserved to be an American citizen. There was no harm in patronizing them or physically hurting them. Black people were unprotected. The result of all of this was that “every expansion of citizenship rights in American history has been the product of fierce and extended political struggle. It took 72 years of sustained political struggle for women to win the right to vote and a century of civil rights activism by African Americans *after the end of slavery* to overturn Jim Crow segregation laws in the South.” (Orleck). Expanding their citizenship was difficult to grant because it had become common belief to consider them as less worthy. Every grant and expansion was a fight against a system that had corrupted the minds of many to consider themselves superior.

### **1865-1954**

After slavery, African Americans were granted their freedom but segregation and injustice as citizens prevailed and persisted for over a century. The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified by the nation in 1868, declared that all persons naturalized or born in the United States were

American citizens regardless of color or former slave status. (“Primary Documents in American History: The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment...”). African American men were given the right to vote in 1870 in the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment (“Primary Documents in American History: The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment...”). However, this right was not properly executed for almost a century. African Americans were hindered to vote through many different methods. Things like poll taxes meant that poor African Americans could not vote since they did not have the means to vote. This was only a few years after slavery resulting in that many African Americans would not be able to participate. Another method to hinder African Americans to vote was literacy tests. Only the African Americans who could read and write could vote. But this created some problems. Poll taxes and literacy tests were supposed to exclude the poor and uneducated to vote. More exclusively, they were supposed to exclude African Americans. However, many poor and uneducated white people were also unable to vote because of those laws. This was unfortunate since these laws were created to exclude African Americans and not their fellow white people. In order to fix that Louisiana came up with the grandfather clause. The grandfather clause was created in 1898. This clause contained the fact that those who were able to vote before 1867, and those who had a father or a grandfather who were able to vote before 1867 were exempt from the taxes and tests. This naturally only applied to white Americans leaving a substantial amount of the black and minority population unable to vote (Pilgrim).

One of the biggest injustices African Americans experienced after slavery was Jim Crow segregation. Jim Crow segregation was the name of a racial caste system in the United States from around 1877 to 1960. Jim Crow segregation was able to make racial discrimination continue as a way of life. Jim Crow was not just a set of black laws, but also a set of norms and etiquette. African Americans had to abide by these laws and norms that essentially handicapped their way to citizenship and equal freedom and rights. The laws treated African Americans as second class citizens. The laws were also supported by Christian ministers who claimed that white people were the chosen people, whereas black people were destined to be slaves and servants. They were supposedly cursed and therefore everything was justified. God himself supported and agreed to racial segregation. There was, as a result, no need to feel guilty about something even God approved of. At the same time, scientists and other people who had an academic platform to speak on believed and stressed the fact that black people were less intelligent and culturally inferior to white people. Politicians expressed their fear of integration and the dangers of it making the citizens shiver at the very thought of

it. Media outlets would also print different articles that reinforced stereotypes. They would also refer to African Americans using names such as niggers and coons (Pilgrim).

The Jim Crow laws, norms and etiquette were the main reasons for segregation. Transportation, restaurants, toilets and etc were separated into blacks and whites where neither could mingle with the other. The Separate Car Act was passed in Louisiana in 1892 which was challenged by a black civil rights organization that Homer A. Plessy was a part of. Plessy, who was seven-eighths white, tested the limit of segregation when he decided to sit on a seat in a railroad coach that was reserved for whites. Plessy could easily pass for being white, but according to Louisiana law he was considered black. Since he could pass for white he declared while sitting in the white section of the railroad coach that he was black. He was arrested. When in court, Plessy's lawyer argued that the state of Louisiana could not decide whether or not a person was black or white since one has been given privileges while the other is more or less oppressed. This was refuted because as long as African Americans were given the same legal freedom and legal process as whites, segregation would not interfere with their rights. The Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court Case was a landmark case due to the establishment of the doctrine "separate but equal". The doctrine was based on the fact that as long as blacks were given the same opportunities as whites, they could still be equally separated (Pilgrim). Plessy's lawyer tried to argue that segregation essentially broke the law, but as long as the segregation applied to both parties, the fact that one was more privileged than the other was not a good enough argument (Pilgrim). The "separate but equal" doctrine would stand until 1954 when the Brown v. Board of Education decision would overturn *de jure* racial segregation.

#### **1940-**

The result of all of these struggles and more eventually caused the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement is often associated with iconic speeches, questioning the educational system, having the right to vote in peace without being threatened and ending Jim Crow laws. Kenneth R. Janken, a professor at the Department of African and Afro-American Studies, writes that scholars and student's alike need to discuss more of what actually caused the movement. What happened in the mid twentieth century was the result of earlier struggles. Two that particularly stand out is the NAACP campaign against lynching and NAACP legal campaign against segregated education. With the campaign against lynching, the NAACP were able to make the Roosevelt administration pass a federal anti-lynching law. The legal

campaign against segregated education in the fifties was a bigger struggle, however, because it was a struggle to reshape the way economic and political power was exercised. (Janken) NAACP lawyers sought court orders to let school districts allow black students to attend white public schools in the early fifties. One of these class actions was the *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. The plaintiff was Oliver Brown who had a child who was denied access to a white school. Brown's argument was that the city's black schools and white schools would never be equal and that this segregation violated the Constitution's Equal Protection Clause. His claim was dismissed due to the fact that the schools were "substantially" equal enough. Eventually thanks to the leadership of Chief Justice Earl Warren, a decision was made that the segregation of children in public schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (McBride).

The civil rights movement sparked a change that caused many new laws to be approved and many old ones to be removed. Anyone with a sixth-grade education was to be considered literate in 1964 which removed the literacy test. Also, poll taxes were outlawed in federal election in 1964 and later in 1966 were banned in all elections. The Jim Crow segregation was finally put to rest, however African American professionals such as lawyers and teachers ended up moving to white neighborhoods making the segregation not only based on race, but also class. The civil rights movement did not achieve equality for African Americans, but it was a step closer to equality. Today, Black schools still earn less than white schools, educated African Americans earn less than their white counterparts, racism is still a big part of the American culture, and many African Americans grow up in the projects. Growing up in the projects makes it difficult to break out of an evil circle. Growing up poor with broken families, low education due to lack of means and lack of positive influences, and easy access to drugs and crime excludes them from the rest of the society. Many African Americans are influenced by their living situation to do nothing and aspire to little. Often this is taken out of context. African Americans are perceived as being people with low ambition, lazy, violent, and less intelligent, which are all outdated perceptions that somehow are still able to prevail. People forget that their environment is what molds them and gives them expectations. The problem is also much deeper than their living situation (Janken).

Nathan Rutstein wrote a book called *Healing Racism in America* (1993) where he discusses the issues and affects of racism and how to potentially heal them. He has a chapter in his book about second class citizenship. Rutstein argues that the reason why many African Americans have low self-esteem, inferiority complexes, self-hatred, and lack of confidence is

because of their wounds. These internal wounds have been created by continuous racial injustice and racial slurs as well as the historical connotations those racial acts have, which has made them vulnerable to any form of racism. He claims that simple situations such as being stared at when boarding an airplane can aggravate their wounds (89).

You would think that the wounds would have healed by now, considering the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, the end of Jim Crowism, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling that ended school segregation, and affirmative action policies. They exist because the disease of racism still exists in whites (89).

Rutstein argues that these wounds are not exclusive for African Americans living in the inner-city slums, but also middle class African Americans suffer from the same disease. Being a middle class African American does not spare you from racism. They are constantly being reminded of how powerless they are and who really makes the rules. In fact, middle class African Americans' face to face encounter with having the same degree as their fellow white co-workers, but still experience being paid less or fail to reap the same benefits gives them a reality check. Rutstein argues that this is why African Americans are still second class citizens. It does not matter how far up they reach in the social hierarchy, they still have to deal with the social implications of being black. Similarly to how President Barack Obama experienced racial slurs and death threats both during his campaign and after he was elected.

In one of the last pages of *Citizen* Rankine writes that, "Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. /Move on" (151). After all the injustice you have to go through as an African American in the United States, you are still a citizen. Although Rankine writes that you are a citizen, Rankine is indicating that it does not make sense. She writes that this is *how* you are a citizen. There is a tone there that implies that the way you are a citizen is not the same way another person is a citizen thus pointing out the differences between citizens in the United States. *Citizen* focuses a lot on everyday racism, but further on she also addresses murders and violence towards black people who were innocent or did not get the chance to defend themselves. This is how Rankine claims you are a citizen. African Americans are compromised citizens who experience racism, injustice, pain, suffering, fear, discrimination and more. She follows it up with "Come on. Let it go. Move on." Rankine takes on the voice of what many African Americans might hear often – that they need to move on from their

traumatic past and history. A voice that claims that how you are a citizen is not that serious as long as you are a citizen. But a big part of Rankine's literary project is that it *is* that serious. Rankine's voice is ironic as she mocks the very basis of those statements. How can someone move on from something that still has a large impact on their lives? Rankine is challenging the notion of citizenship because having citizenship and being a citizen might not be as closely related as one might imagine. To have citizenship has nothing to do with the mental state of a citizen. Citizenship is a grant that is given, but the feeling of being a citizen and being treated as a citizen is both an internal and an external factor that is not granted. How you feel as a citizen is based on how you are treated. African Americans are expected to settle with the idea that the way they are treated is good enough, but Rankine begs to differ. In an interview she says, "One hopes that when you step out with that passport, that it overrides racial distinctions – sexual, gender, all of those things." ("Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*...") However, the accounts in *Citizen* prove that these distinctions are not overridden more than five decades after the civil rights movement.

## 2.2 Rankine on Everyday Racism and Contemporary Issues Concerning Citizenship

The concept of “everyday racism” is vital in discussing *Citizen*. *Citizen* is mostly constructed by everyday incidents that are interrupted by racially fueled comments or gestures. These comments and gestures are “microaggressions” that are coming from friends, co-workers, and strangers. An everyday incident can consist of a person being asked if their card will work at the cash register when the ones before them were not asked. Rankine’s retelling is usually as short and swift as the encounter itself. The interruption is sometimes so quick that one does not have the time to reflect or even fully understand what has happened, but other times the interruption is a slow stab that creates a wound that lasts a lifetime. In order to understand the impact of Rankine’s accounts we have to define everyday racism and contextualize what this means for contemporary issues concerning citizenship.

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Essed explains that the term “everyday racism” was “meant to identify as theoretically relevant the lived experience of racial oppression. Everyday racism is not about racists, but about racist practice, meaning racism as common societal behavior” (Essed, “Everyday Racism” 447). Everyday racism is racism, but racism is not necessarily everyday racism. Racism is “a generalizing definition and valuation of biological differences, whether real or imaginary, to the advantage of the one defining and deploying them, and to the detriment of the one subjected to that act of definition, to the end of justifying (social or physical) hostility and assault” (Memmi, 183). This definition of racism does not describe the frequency of these acts or their degree. The most important criterion distinguishing racism and everyday racism is that everyday racism involves only familiar and recurrent practices which also includes their subtlety. They are practices that can be generalized and it is important to note that they are repetitive (Essed, “Everyday Racism: A New Approach” 177).



Racism in itself is not difficult to recognize in its extreme forms. Essed uses the example of white youth beating and killing a black person or a white person throwing a banana at a black soccer player. These are incidents that show clear signs of racism. However, everyday racism is much more subtle. Everyday racism requires attention. It requires the recipient to be aware of the situation as to what is being said and how it is being said. Essed explains that everyday racism is more coded. These coded practices could be ingrained in institutional practices where people only appoint people of their own race resulting in a completely white workplace, or racially segregated cafeterias (not intentionally) at work where the white manager joins the white table where they will benefit from networking and relevant information. These coded practices can also be as simple as an African American student being asked by a white teacher why he/she writes so well. According to Essed, everyday racism violates the civil rights of ethnic minorities with incidents that happen on a day-to-day basis (Essed, "Everyday Racism" 447).

### **Three strands of everyday racism**

There are three strands of everyday racism according to Essed. They are mutually dependent processes and consist of the key words marginalization, problematization and repression. The marginalization happens when people who are ethnically or racially different are socially excluded. For instance, Middle Eastern people being stopped on airports for a supposedly random "routine check", or black Americans being stopped by the police although they have not done anything wrong. It can also be a small comment like the following one Rankine writes about in *Citizen*: "The man at the cash register wants to know if you think / your card will work. If this is his routine, he didn't use it / on the friend who went before you" (54). In this scenario, nothing is said to confront the situation and the recipient of the racial stigmatization is left speechless. The man at the cash register singled the customer out and excluded them based on racial difference. However, it is a moment that can easily be overlooked. The man at the cash register is not aggressive or confrontational about it. It is only when the recipient realizes that this question was not asked to the white friend that they knew that this was based on appearance and stereotyping.

The second strand of everyday racism is the problematization of other cultures and identities. Rankine writes about an anecdote where a black person stands outside the conference room while waiting for the others to arrive. While standing there the black person overhears two men talking. One of them says to the other that watching black people is like

watching a foreign film without translation (50). The man is clearly referring to African Americans who share the same tongue as him. By stating this comment he takes a clear step away from black people emphasizing that there is an “us” and “them” dichotomy. He also makes it clear that the “film” they are in is somewhere he does not want to be or take part in. He ridicules them by indicating that their English is not comprehensible. White and black Americans do have their respective cultures, but they also share a country and various traditions. The man is alienating the African Americans in their own home.

The third strand of everyday racism is “symbolic or physical repression of (potential) resistance through humiliation or violence” (Essed, “Everyday Racism” 448). Essed’s point is that when people are constantly told that they are oversensitive and that matters are not as serious as they are, while continuing to do what aggravates the other person, naturally they become discouraged as they are not taken seriously. In a meditation on feelings, Rankine writes, “Don’t feel like you are / mistaken. It’s not that (Is it not that?) you are oversensitive / or misunderstanding” (152). Rankine writes that it is not that you are oversensitive or misunderstanding. You are not mistaken; meaning that you should not doubt yourself. However, in the same breath she adds, “Is it not that?” There is a question in the middle of this firm and reassuring sentence. Rankine is using one’s own voice of doubt as well as other people’s comments. This person has probably been told often that they are oversensitive and that they are taking things too seriously. Consequently the voice of doubt is very present in their mind which makes them question themselves before anyone has a chance to. Everyday racism can cause a defense mechanism in people who are exposed to it where people will expect or anticipate it although they might not be in a situation where they are being discriminated against. This is the result of self-protection (Essed, “Everyday Racism” 448).

Everyday racism is also when the dominant ethnic group of a society prefers their own over other minority groups. This is not solely because they want to be with people from their own group, but because they believe deep inside that they are better than them (Essed, “Everyday Racism” 448). The dominant group can cross oceans in the sense that a white American can prefer for instance a white Englishman over an African American although they both share citizenship and history. Rankine writes about an event that happened to her which was published in *The Guardian*. Here, Rankine gives an anecdote about the time she went to the US Open with her nine year old daughter to see Serena Williams play. Beside them was a white man who was cheering for the other player. Rankine asks if he is American and he

replies that he is. When asked why he was cheering for the other player Rankine is given the answer that he wants a close match. Later when it is a close match and the man continues to cheer for the player from Belarus, Rankine asks him again to which he leaves his seat. Rankine laughs while telling the story, but quickly emphasizes on the fact that it is not funny (Cocozza). This man preferred an outsider over his own fellow American based on skin color. Serena Williams's citizenship and their shared histories was of little consequence. In his eyes, the player from Belarus might not have been an outsider, she could have been one of his. And Serena Williams could have been the true outsider. Similarly in *Citizen*, Rankine gives an account of a real estate woman who could not fathom that she had made an appointment with you to show you her house. The real estate woman did not know that you were black as you had only spoken on the phone. She "spend much of the walk-through telling your friend, repeatedly, how comfortable she feels around her" (51). No one bothers to ask who is making her feel uncomfortable. Without any more information it is clear that the real estate woman and your friend are from the same ethnic group and that she would prefer your friend over you.

### **Micro and macroaggressions**

There are two different types of aggressions in *Citizen*. The first aggression is microaggression, which is a term that was first coined by psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce in the 1970s. However, the term has been redefined and amplified in recent years (qtd. in DeAngelis). Columbia University psychologist Derald Wing Sue has been intrigued by the notion of racial microaggressions. His definition is that "racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities" (Sue et al. 271). Microaggression resembles everyday racism in that they are small incidents or comments that often can go unnoticed. They are also targeted towards minorities and are often embedded in people's way of thinking. It is difficult to make a distinction between microaggressions and everyday racism due to the fact that they are often used as synonyms.

Sue gives an example of microaggressions. Two people of color board a plane where they are not granted seats beside each other. They choose to sit near the front of the plane and talk while sitting across the aisle from each other. Eventually three white men sit in front of

them. Right before takeoff the flight attendant asks the two people of color if they could go to the back of the plane. The flight attendant's explanation was that they needed to balance out the plane. The two people of color become angry as they feel that they are being singled out. When they express this to the flight attendant she claims that she merely wanted them to do it for the safety of the plane and also to give them privacy. He claims that the flight attendant was acting with bias without being aware of it (DeAngelis 42). Everyday racism and microaggressions both can happen without it being intentional. The two people of color reacted with anger due to the fact that the three white men had arrived after them, there were more of them as well as they were sitting in front of them. It would have been more natural to ask them to go to the back to balance out the plane's weight. However, the flight attendant had a mindset that made it more natural to ask the two people of color to move.

There is an incident in *Citizen* where a black person is sitting by the window seat on United Airlines. Eventually a woman and her daughter arrive at the same row and the daughter tells her mother that these are their seats. Her mother then makes the comment that she will sit in the middle seat (12). The comment she made indicated that this black person was not to be trusted and that she would take the bullet for her daughter; or perhaps she thought that this black person would not dare do to her what the black person would dare to do to her daughter. Rankine also plays with the reader's perception of stereotypes when she decides to not tell them what gender the black person is. Automatically the mind might think of a black man as they are stereotyped as dangerous, and automatically the readers might stop themselves to not become a part of what Rankine is writing against. Both of these incidents are microaggression, but they could also be classified as everyday racism. This thesis will use both terms due to their similarities.

The second aggression Rankine writes about in *Citizen* is macroaggression, or "majoraggression" as Rankine describes herself ("Using Poetry to Uncover..."). Rankine explained that she wanted to track the moments that disrupt. These moments are moments that mostly people will not confront or sometimes not even understand like the microaggressions that were previously discussed. Rankine defines "majoraggressions" as big incidents like murder. These are not considered microaggressions or everyday racism as they are life-threatening incidents. Rankine's goal was to show that these small moments (microaggressions) add up and lead to these bigger moments. Rankine believes that "majoraggressions" exists because microaggressions are overlooked. When these small violences which can come in the form of remarks and gestures are overlooked, they give out

the signal that they are not harmful. As a result of that people will continue with microaggressions and black Americans will continue to be affected by them. Eventually, these moments lead to moments of bigger misunderstandings when a situation escalates and physical violence seems plausible or people of authority carry these microaggressions.

Essed argues that if everyday racism is used by authority and people of higher status, it will cause even more devastating damage to the recipients. This is when microaggressions are turned into macroaggressions. In *Citizen* Rankine writes in memory of seventeen year old African American Trayvon Martin who was shot and killed by a neighborhood watch in 2012. Rankine writes,

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 (89-90).

In one of the tapes where George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch, was calling for dispatch, he used a racial slur against blacks (“Trayvon Martin Shooting..”) and Rankine is suggesting in these few lines that the shooting was more than just a conflict between a teen and a neighborhood watch. She puts the incident in a historical context where she is suggesting that the incident was racially motivated. Rankine is retelling black history in this passage and black Americans roles as citizens. She goes all the way back to the passage which she is more than likely referring to the middle-passage when Africans were put on ships in horrible conditions for months over the Atlantic ocean and eventually to America. The hardships on the ships are well known to have been beyond horrific. After arriving in America most slaves worked in different plantations for as long as slavery lasted. Then the Great Migration where millions of African Americans moved from the southern parts of the United States, which were considered more racist, to the Northern parts of the United States, which were considered to be more open minded. The end of slavery was met by Jim Crow segregation which lasted for over a century. Blacks would not get the same opportunities as whites which would result in whites being better off and the majority of black people being poor. Blacks and whites hardly lived in the same neighborhoods. Whites would often move out if black families would move into their neighborhoods and eventually blacks were left

with living in the inner cities under difficult conditions such as poverty, crime and low education. The profiling of blacks was and is still a reality. Rankine also mentions one in three which is a statistic that states that one in three black men will go to prison at least ones in their lifetime (Kessler). She mentions this right after mentioning profiling which means that Rankine is insinuating that many black men are imprisoned on false accusations. The two jobs are a result of one in three black men going to jail. Mothers are left with children they have to take care of and most of the time one job will not do if they are already in a difficult situation. They might have low education which again can result in a low paying job, thus needing two. Also, the felonies Rankine is referring to, I believe, is the felony caught on tape when police officers are calling out black men who when they are aggravated by the profiling the situation escalates and end in death for the black men. All of these situations that black people today are experiencing and things they have not experienced but is a part of their history accumulate and becomes a part of the body. And they are left hanging on to a rope of hope that the future will be brighter than the past. I strongly believe that Rankine is indicating that African Americans have a past filled with violations against them which means that there is no rope to actually hold on to. The current racial sparked incidents that are happening in the media is just a reminder of what has been and what is still continuing. The past was horrible and the present is not good either with cases such as Trayvon Martin.

The case of Trayvon Martin got an exceptional amount of media coverage due to the suspiciousness of a racially motivated murder as Trayvon Martin was unarmed and considerably smaller than Zimmerman. He was eventually found not guilty by a jury of six in which five were white (Botelho). In the passage above, Rankine meditates on what it means to be a black man/boy in America when anything can be turned into a crime. She meditates on opportunities lost when protecting oneself is the main objective in a black man's life. There is no doubt about Rankine's position on the Trayvon Martin case. She later writes, "because white men can't / police their imagination / black men are dying" (135). This goes in accordance to Essed's point. When everyday racism is used by authority and people of higher status, it will cause even more devastating damage to the recipients both emotionally and physically. Following Rankine's point on the difficulties of the black man, Rankine continues, "Trayvon Martin's name sounds from the car radio a dozen / times each half hour. You pull your love back into the seat / because though no one seems to be chasing you, the / justice system has other plans" (151). When police brutality towards black men is not dealt with and we are meant to believe that the killings are done in the name of justice and peace, the news

creates fear for people who look like the victim and a lack thereof for people who might engage in these brutalities. Also, the fear black men feel for the safety of their own lives cannot be ignored. When they hear or see the news, they are being told to watch out. It is not safe to be black.

The study on black people's daily experience became relevant because there was a need to make the lived experience of racism more visible. It also became relevant to find out black people's knowledge about racism and their perception (Essed, "Everyday Racism: A New Approach" 176). This idea of black people's awareness of racism was described by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois as "double consciousness". Du Bois was a scholar and an activist leader who emerged in the first decade of the twentieth century. Even today he is still considered one of the most influential African American writer, scholar and activist. He wrote about sociology and the history of black Americans, and he also edited numerous journals that tackled the issue of race. Du Bois did not believe in slogans and personalities to change bigotry and injustice as well as the conditions of black people. Rather, Du Bois believed in ideas and principles in order to move forward. "Du Bois wrote not as a detached social scientist but as a cultural interpreter, historian, advocate, and oracle of his people" (Du Bois 682).

Du Bois is best known for his book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). He was convinced that what was considered black culture, what he called the "soul" of the black folk, had to be respected by the white folk as well as the black folk. The notion of the "soul" is dual in the sense that it can both mean black people's culture as well as their literal soul. Their human life, dignity and worth needs to be respected. Another way to look at the soul is their spirit. Their spirit has been damaged due to oppression. Their mind, body and soul has to be respected and deemed just as worthy as white people's. Du Bois voiced this passion in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Here, Du Bois presented the term "double consciousness" and explained that:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness,  
this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of mea-  
suring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt  
and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls,  
two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark  
body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder...

(Du Bois 689)

Du Bois believes that black people have knowledge of the racist ideas many people possess. They are aware of how they are being perceived and how others view them and this must have a clear affect on them. The sense of being constantly aware of one's surroundings weighs heavy on their heart, their mind and also their health as previously discussed. The fact that Du Bois wanted white people to also respect the 'soul' of black folk is reflected in this quote, especially when he mentions two unreconciled strivings. The account Rankine had on the two men talking about being around black people was like watching a foreign film is very similar to the notion of these two unreconciled strivings. If black people are striving to accept their black side as well as their American side, but is constantly met with experiences that suggest that America does not want them and views them as different, then there will always be a two-ness. The two concepts cannot merge into one holistic being, rather they always have to choose which part to play.

Small remarks and subtle events evokes the "two-ness" as Du Bois describes it. Black people are constantly reminded of the fact that they are not completely American. There is a sense of worthlessness and alienation that takes place when a person is considered to be less than normal. Rankine captures such a moment in *Citizen* when she writes,

And when the woman with the multiple degrees says, I didn't know black women could get cancer, instinctively you take two steps back though all urgency leaves the possibility of any kind of relationship as you realize nowhere is where you will get from here (45).

In this scenario Rankine shows the ignorance of one person, but the shattering consequences it could have on the recipient. By stating that she thought black women could not have breast cancer, it is like stating that black women are a different species, and that white and black people have different illnesses that are exclusive to them. This is similar to how the white race is not raced. Everyone seems to have a race besides whites. The danger behind this belief is that the underlying message is that white people are just people, which is close to saying that whites are people, but people of other colors are something else (Dyer 2).

Everyday racism is the lived experience of racial oppression. Everyday racism consists of microaggressions that are frequent and familiar, but also subtle and coded.



Macroaggressions exists because microaggressions are overlooked. Everyday racism discourages identity and a sense of home. Simultaneously it encourages exclusion, alienation and self-doubt. To be a citizen, as previously stated, is more than just having citizenship. African Americans are constantly racialized and never nationalized unlike their fellow white Americans. Black Americans are always referred to as “black Americans”, “black people”, “African Americans”, and labels of that nature. White Americans, however, are often just “Americans”. Black and white Americans do not only share the same citizenship, but they also share the same history and ultimately the same country. Everyday racism, however, reduces African Americans to second class citizenship. The case of citizenship in the US today is not about having the right to vote or having the right to attend the same schools. Much of the contemporary issues regarding citizenship today are connected to discrimination despite equal rights.

### 3 The Lyric

*Citizen: An American Lyric* is vastly acknowledged to be a work that comes under multiple categories. Dean Rader, a professor and cultural critic, calls *Citizen* “a disturbingly riveting melange of prose poetry, painting, photography, fragmented aphorisms and lyric essays” (Rader), and *The New York Review of Books* defines *Citizen* as a combination of “commentary, “lyric essays,” reproductions of artworks, frequent quotation from artists and critics...scripts for films, and an eight-page lined poem” (Laird). What has mostly been agreed upon is that *Citizen* is a melding of genres. Although the genre of *Citizen* needs to be discussed, Rankine’s publishing company names it a “book-length poem”, Rankine names it *An American Lyric* indicating that it is poetry, and the back-cover of *Citizen* says “Essays/Poetry” for searching purposes and placing on shelves.

There has not been a common consensus on the genre of *Citizen*, perhaps because its content overshadows its form and thus becomes of little consequence. *The Guardian* claims that “Claudia Rankine’s book may or may not be poetry – the question becomes insignificant as one reads on” (Kellaway, “Citizen an American Lyric”). Although this might be the case, it is still important to explore Rankine’s *avant-garde* approach to the discussion on racism.

#### Defining the Lyric

The term lyric today is mostly described in two ways: either as a short poem that expresses the poet’s deepest feelings and thoughts, or as a snug composition. These two definitions have become fairly prominent in our time. The lyric is traditionally in first person pronoun, there is a persona and it involves performance. The lyric derived from the Greek *lurikos* which were verses that would be sung which explains why the lyric is connected to performance and song, however, most poetry in our days is mostly read on paper (2). Lyric poetry expresses intense feelings because the poem is meant to be kept short. As a result of that the feelings that are expressed are concentrated and intense. Lyric poetry gives attention to feelings and feelings only (qtd. in Brewster 30). These are some of the characteristics of the lyric. However, the lyric is difficult to define in genre theory. Sometimes it is viewed as a universal and timeless disposition, and other times the lyric is looked upon as generic defined by its purpose, formal features and subject matter (Brewster 1-2). Probably the best known classification of the literary genres is divided by Aristotle. He divided them into dramatic, epic and lyric. Aristotle

defined the lyric as “merely a minor component of tragedy, alongside plot, character, diction, reasoning and spectacle” (3). Aristotle did not fully explain what lyric poetry was which made it even more unclear. Antonio Sebastiano Minturno in the sixteenth century defined lyric poetry as one of the three “presentational modes” together with the dramatic and the epic. Theorists have argued later that lyric poetry is as much of a mental state as a poetic style. Hegel argues that lyric opens up the inner world of a person who is separated from the outer world, and Vietor believes that lyric is merely “basic attitudes that are expresses feelings” (3). There is a clear conflict and confusion on what the lyric is and even many of the modern theories of the lyric genre are based on these confusions making it difficult to place the lyric in a proper place (3). What is commonly agreed upon, however, is that the lyric is fundamentally concerned with the nature and conditions of address, the lyric “I” (2).

### **Second Person Pronoun**

As lyric poetry is supposed to show the poets deepest feelings and thoughts, lyric poetry is mostly written in first person pronoun. Rankine chooses to do the exact opposite. Rankine uses second person pronoun mostly throughout *Citizen* where the “you” is mostly black and “he/she/they” are white. There are a few places in *Citizen* where this distinction is blurred and there is a requirement for paying closer attention. In one place Rankine writes, “Exactly why we survive and can look back with furrowed / brows is beyond me” (72). Here she is referring to black people and how they are able to survive the injustice they experience so often. Rankine later refers to white people as “you” when she addresses who the narrative has been in American history by stating, “Maybe you are right, you don’t really have anything to / confess” (72). However, for the vast majority of *Citizen* Rankine’s use of second person pronoun is a black person.

The second person pronoun evokes emotions and makes the impression of the stories more powerful. By constantly referring to “you” she makes the readers question themselves and certain choices they have made. For instance, Rankine calls you out when your friend called you by the name of her black housekeeper when she was distracted. You try to justify it by thinking that you and the housekeeper are probably the only two black people she knows. “You never called her on it (why not?)” (7). The question floats in the air for the readers to contemplate on. You are either the one who is called by the name of your friend’s housekeeper, or you are the friend.

The second person pronoun has various functions. Rankine described *Citizen* as both loving and accusative (Cocozza). The accusative part can partly be linked to her use of pronoun. By using the second person pronoun, Rankine is pointing fingers and forcing you to stay put. This is a story that applies to everyone and she is telling you to sit down and listen. The other accusative part is how Rankine is criticizing the American society by portraying how racism is still alive and well.

Rankine's use of second person pronoun throughout *Citizen* also raises the question of who she is talking to. Is it the same you throughout the whole book, or can the readers decide themselves? Can the readers identify with the scenario that has happened to them and then embody that you? I believe that Rankine is talking to everyone. It is up to the readers to find out where they fit in the equation; whether they are being discriminated or whether they are discriminating. Rankine does not give you the chance to be neutral. You have to be either one or the other. If you insist on being neither, then you are the person who watches everything happen and says nothing. Rankine is implying that this is how the society works. Everyone has a role in the society and being neutral is not a role. To be neutral would imply that you have no place. Her portrayal is the portrayal of real everyday life. These are not made up stories, but events that have happened and are happening every day. By addressing us directly, Rankine drags us into the harsh reality refusing to make these stories her own stories, but stories that belong to everyone.

### **The Lyric "I" and First Person Pronoun**

Gillian White, an associate professor of English, partly discusses "the lyric I" which is the persona and the mediator of the lyric poem (258). "The lyric I" has experienced a lot of critique. There seems to be a conflict of who the "I" is in terms of gender and persona and also in terms of subjectivity. There are six instances where Rankine chooses to become the mediator of *Citizen*. In these moments Rankine decides to adopt the scenarios and present them as her own, although some of them suggest that they cannot really be her; for instance when she embodies a man who is stopped by the police (105). In other moments she drops the "I" and chooses to go with "we". There are also times where she writes, "I they he she we you" (146, 140). Rankine's change of voice only happens towards the end of *Citizen* suggesting that it does not matter whose story this is. The stories belong to everyone. White's approach to "the lyric I" is an approach that presents poets who have consciously addressed the "the lyric I" and its implications in their poetry. The reason why that approach

is relevant is because Rankine also has a “poem” in *Citizen* where she addresses the implications of the first person pronoun which in turn can be discussed as the “the lyric I”. Rankine is meditating on the power and function of the first person pronoun. “Sometimes ‘I’ is supposed to hold what is not there until / it is. Then *what is* comes apart the closer you are to it” (71). Rankine believes that the first person pronoun is a symbol for something and that the power “I” has is absolutely insane. Rankine wants us to question who “I” is and how we are relative to that pronoun. The closer you are to the “I” the more you question yourself and what you are. Rankine writes, “Shit, you are reading minds, but did you try?” (71). As lyric poetry is considered a form of poetry that allows readers to look into the minds of the poet, Rankine is asking us if we ever have tried to put ourselves in other people’s shoes. It is not about reading other people’s mind, but it is about understanding what struggles the other person has fought and acknowledge those struggles. Perhaps Rankine is defending her use of the second person pronoun. By using the second person pronoun you are forced to put on the role that is given you, but with the first person pronoun you are put in a position to either immediately take on that role or reject it.

There is a difference between being spoken *for* and being spoken *to*. What Rankine does is that she speaks directly to us, but traditional lyric poetry dares to speak for us. White argues for the case of how lyric poetry treats us by using the poem of a young contemporary poet, Paul Bradley. The poem named *Anybody Can Write a Poem* (2010) explores the first person pronoun in the form of an online argument. White believes that Bradley is insinuating that the consequences of saying the pronoun “I” is like death. What White means by this is that there is a type of violence that comes with daring to speak for others without their consent. Ultimately what is happening is that the writer is rejecting the reader’s voice and projecting their own voice onto them (260).

Rankine’s meditation on the first person pronoun is put in a historical context where Rankine finds it strange that black Americans are able to live and survive (figuratively and literally) in the conditions they are living in. How they are able to survive and look back is beyond her. She says, “Drag that first person out of the social death of history, / then we’re kin” (72). I believe Rankine is referring to who the first person pronoun has mostly been through history. The first person pronoun for the most part has been the white man. Everything has more or less been seen through their eyes and their narrative. It is only when that narrative is crushed and killed that white Americans and black Americans can become kin. Rankine is arguing that we have to go through something similar and be able to identify

with each other in order for the “I” to have power. In this case it makes perfect sense that Rankine would want to write *Citizen* in the second person pronoun. She knows that everyone would not be able to identify with that “I” and so she wanted to make sure that her stories and meditations would apply to everyone.

### **Poetic Devices**

*Citizen* is mostly referred to as poetry. Therefore I will in this section treat *Citizen* as poetry in order to measure to what degree Rankine uses poetic devices. At first glance it might be difficult to understand where Rankine’s poetry starts and where it turns into prose or essay, but her use of poetic devices makes it a bit easier. For the sake of this section I will refer to certain passages in *Citizen* as “poems”, although Rankine does not exclusively divide her passages into poems with titles and clear beginnings and endings.

Rankine does not write traditional poetry. Her writing is mostly not in structured verses. Rankine uses free verse to completely free herself from any shackles. There is no noticeable structure in her poetry. The few places where it seems as though she is following a structure, Rankine makes sure that this is not the case. For instance, Rankine has a poem with nine stanzas. Most of them have two lines each, but then, in order to intentionally create an unbalance in the stanzas in order for it to not be structured, or perhaps because what she wanted to say was more important than the structure, Rankine has two stanzas with four lines, one stanza with three lines and lastly a single line that stands on its own at the very end. What seemed like a structured poem at first glance turns out to not be very structured at all. Regardless of Rankine’s mixture of genres that can be confusing to define, Rankine’s use of poetic devices singles her poems out and creates a familiar feeling in an otherwise unfamiliar mixture.

### **The Sound of Words**

The easiest way to determine Rankine’s poetry from her prose is her undeniable use of rhythm. Her poetry has a beautiful flow that cannot be described as anything other than poetry.

Blue ceiling calling a body into the midst of azure, oceanic,  
as ocean blushes the blues it can’t absorb, reflecting back  
a day  
the day frays, night, not night, this fright passes through

the eye crashing into you, is this you? (75).

The rhythm Rankine uses here is undeniable. The words are bouncing up and down like waves, which correlate with the ocean she is describing. That rhythm can also be detected when Rankine reads excerpts from *Citizen* where she adds a calm and soft voice.

The most noticeable form of poetic device would be Rankine's use of *repetition*. Rankine repeats both sentences and single words. The repetition emphasizes the importance of the sentences and words and the message she is trying to convey. In one of her poems Rankine writes, "Each time it begins in the same way, it doesn't begin the / same way, each time it begins it's the same". Then after a six lined stanza, Rankine repeats, "Each time it begins in the same way, it doesn't begin the / same way, each time it begins it's the same" (107).

Rankine has instances where she also uses *rhyme*, although very rarely. She writes, "...far into this day are the days this day was / meant to take out of its way" (75). Both the rhyme and the rhythm is undeniable in this passage. There are also uses of *euphony* such as, "blushes the blues" (75).

### **The Meaning of Words**

There are sections in *Citizen* where Rankine speaks directly to someone. In a section Rankine dedicates to the memory of Trayvon Martin, Rankine writes both about and to her brothers (figuratively). I believe that her brothers are all the black men in the United States. She writes about the days of their childhood and what they have gone through and still have to go through. Rankine addresses them directly at certain points and says, "my dearest brothers" (89), which is an *apostrophe*.

All literature has *Connotations*, but there are passages in *Citizen* that are particularly rich connotatively. Many of her words give associations and need prior knowledge of the connotation of certain words in order to know the depth of what Rankine is referring to.

Don't lean against the wallpaper; sit down and pull together.

Yours is a strange dream, a strange reverie.

No, it's a strange beach; each body is a strange beach,  
and if you let in the excess emotion you will recall the  
Atlantic Ocean breaking on our heads (73).

Rankine writes prior in *Citizen* that “Someone claimed we should use our skin as wallpaper / knowing we couldn’t win” (71). To use ones skin as wallpaper is to put ones skin to rest and not make it a topic of discussion. A wallpaper is something that disappears in a room and is very little commented on. Rankine could also draw lines to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), where the first person narrative feels a type of imprisonment in the wallpaper. There can also be an imprisonment in a color. If ones skin color is always referred to instead of the person then that will obviously become a type of imprisonment where one cannot be anything other than that color. Rankine tells you to not lean against the wallpaper as a warning to not lose yourself and to not become invisible. It is so easy to just be a color. By referring to the Atlantic Ocean Rankine is taking her meditation to the middle passage and slavery. Your body is a strange beach and if you let excess water into your beach which is essentially excess emotion into your body then you will be reminded of your slave history. Her meditation would be tragically confusing if the reader would not have known what Rankine was referring to.

*Personification and metaphors* can also be found in *Citizen*. “Yesterday called to say we were together” (75), which is personification. Rankine gives “yesterday” human traits such as calling and talking. And an example of a metaphor would be “and because words hang in the air like pollen” (156), where Rankine is comparing words with pollen.

### **The Postlyric and Unrecognizability**

These few examples of poetic devices which are found in *Citizen* are only a few amongst many. These poetic devices prove more than anything that *Citizen* can be defined as poetry. The problem is that this would not work for *Citizen* as a whole. My findings of poetic devices only work for the sections that can be considered poetry. There is an obvious mixture of genres which in Anthony Reed’s opinion, an assistant professor of English and African American studies at Yale University, does not create a new genre of its own, but can be considered “postlyric”.

In his book *Freedom Time* (2014), Reed categorizes Rankine’s writing as “postlyric”. He defines postlyric poetics as a “dialectical interruption of the lyric mode” where Rankine, amongst others, have been able to create a voice that is somewhere between the “I” and the “we”. What Reed means by this is that Rankine’s use of the second person pronoun in *Citizen*, which she defines to be a lyric, interrupts the very basis of the lyric “I”, which has



been previously discussed to be a central part of lyric poetry (Brewster 2). The dialectical interruption is an interruption of voice, but also an interruption of form. Rankine does not let the readers know where her poetry starts and where her poetry ends, which can open up a conflicting discussion on which passages can be considered poetry and which cannot. It becomes a part of her intention to challenge the reader's perception of what poetry is supposed to look like. The three quotes following are all taken from *Citizen*:

“Before making the video *How to Be a Successful Black / Artist*, Hennessy Youngman uploaded to YouTube *How / to Be a Successful Artist*” (34).

“The man at the cash register wants to know if you think / your card will work” (54).

“Slipping down burying the you buried within. You are / everywhere and you are nowhere in the day” (141).

Dean Rader, a professor, poet and cultural critic, argues that *Citizen* “frustrates easy assumptions about poetry” (Rader). It makes the readers question what poetry really looks like, what it speaks to and what it wants thus creating unrecognizability in what we thought we knew so well. The first quote is a commentary on the youtuber, Hennessy Youngman. The second quote is a retelling of an event in the form of prose, and the last quote is a meditation that resembled poetry due to its poetic devices. The unfamiliarity in the mixture of these three quotes is not so much in what Rankine chooses to write about. Racism has been a timely topic in the United States for as long as racism has existed. The unfamiliarity occurs when different genres are put together, but are still categorized as a “book-length poem”.

Reed embarked on his project in order to explore black experimental writing in poetry which turned into his book, *Freedom Time*. He argues that experimental writing creates what Erica Hunt called “unrecognizable speech” and that this unrecognizability opens up new ways to think about issues we already know of. This unrecognizability is a positive disruption as it “pushes at the ruling order's ideological coverage and disciplines of knowledge” (1). This definition of experimental writing correlates with how Rankine writes *Citizen*. Radar, argues that “The most-talked-about book of American poetry of 2014 is Claudia Rankine's [Citizen](#). In fact, it is hard to think of a book of poems in recent memory that has received more acclaim” (Radar). Radar's comment suggests that there is more than the content of *Citizen* that has caused this acclaim. Rankine's unrecognizable speech possibly creates new ways to think about race. But it also prompts the question, “What makes *Citizen* unrecognizable?”

The ideological coverage of racial criticism and the disciplines of knowledge for racial criticism is not necessarily poetry. Rankine could have chosen to write *Citizen* as an academic piece, or chosen a sociological approach. Instead, Rankine decided to incorporate a melding of genres while identifying it as poetry.

Reed believes that genres in general are very abstract. Genres are naturalized by history and before it becomes a genre it needs the rule of genre for it to become legitimate. What Reed is then arguing is that books such as *Citizen* will be difficult to point out as long as they do not fully fit into one genre, and that most genres were considered abstract until they were categorized under a genre. The only thing that will normalize the genre of *Citizen* and make it less abstract is if *Citizen* can fully fall under a genre that most people will be able to agree on.

## 4 When Such Things Happen He Must Grit His Teeth

After the overview account of African American history in chapter two, and the overview of form in chapter three, this chapter is devoted to an analysis of intertextual references. *Citizen* is layered with intertextual references both in the form of images and in the form of quoting and channeling intellectuals and writers.

Baldwin's heartfelt essay, "A Letter to My Nephew" which looks at the racial problems black Americans were facing in the sixties, and Rankine's brutally honest poetic approach to racism which essentially discusses the same issue in the twenty-first century, opens up a discussion which explores both Rankine and Baldwin's literary project.

Zinedine Zidane was a soccer player that played for France during the World Cup in 2006 where he, in the finals, head-butted someone of the opposite team due to alleged racial slurs. Rankine meditates on the incident with famous thinkers such as James Baldwin and Frantz Fanon. Rankine ventures on a journey to understand where violence comes from and that violence is not just physical, but also verbal.

The images in *Citizen* create a new level of depth in Rankine's message and as a part of my exploration on intertextuality in *Citizen*. Many links are made when Rankine inserts these images because they are somehow connected to her text and her intentions, but at the same time the image connects us to an artist or/and an author that also have intentions for their work.

### 4.1 Celebrating Freedom Hundred Years Too Early

Rankine's literary project is highly influenced by James Baldwin, and she actively refers to him in *Citizen*. Her use of Baldwin's ideas indicates that they share many of the same outlooks on racial America, although they write sixty years apart. They both believe that America has a long way to go before they experience racial equality. They both address black struggles with urgency. They also address black invisibility and how fragile black lives are in the US. An interviewer asked Rankine why she chose to write about race. She quoted Baldwin and said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced" (Khorana). This means that it is first when they acknowledge the issues in their society that they can eventually be dealt with. The fact that Rankine chose to draw inspiration from Baldwin in order to briefly explain her intentions for her literary project,

further proves that Rankine is very much influenced by his ideas. Understanding Baldwin's ideas can further elaborate Rankine's ideas in certain passages, and also her literary project as a whole. I believe that Rankine decontextualizes Baldwin's quotes in *Citizen* in order to make the readers frame the quotes and learn more about him as a literary figure.

James Baldwin was a playwright, novelist and essayist who wrote most of his work post World War II. Baldwin became an iconic writer and one of the leading voices in the civil rights movement. He is considered one of the twentieth century's greatest writers and he was able to be on the bestseller list more than once. Baldwin is known for exploring racial and social issues, especially in his collection of essays such as *The Fire Next Time* (1963). He wrote about the black experience in America. Baldwin wanted to educate white Americans on how it is or what it meant to be black in the United States ("James Baldwin Biography"). Baldwin tried to understand the psychological implications of racism. Unlike Rankine who focuses on how these social issues mostly affect black Americans, Baldwin was also concerned with how the use of racism affected white Americans. Baldwin also explored black bitterness with a sense of urgency. Black bitterness was a detrimental result of oppression that needed to be acknowledged and cured. However, in order for black bitterness to stop the oppression had to stop as well. Baldwin tried to accurately portray real life. Black Americans who read his work would be able to see the truth in his work as it was exactly, more or less, what they had gone through. Even white Americans were able to see the truth although it was not to their own benefit. He was also concerned with the failure of the American dream. The notion that all men were created equal yet treated differently, did not make any sense and resulted in the failure of the American dream. That dream was not for everybody. Only certain people were able to fit the bill in order to have a shot at the American dream. Baldwin described himself as a 'disturber of peace'. Everything that was so blissfully overlooked Baldwin wanted to shake and disturb. It is only when something is addressed that it can be worked on ("Using Poetry to Uncover"). Similarly, Rankine does disturb the peace in some ways as well. Jonathan Farmer writes "*Citizen* is one of the best books I've ever wanted not to read" ("Citizen: An American Lyric"). He clearly admits that this is the kind of book he would not want to read mainly, I believe, because he knows that the reality Rankine is describing is saddening. This again proves that he believes that Rankine is accurately portraying reality and that with doing so she is disturbing the peace. However, Baldwin's use of the word "peace" is quite strange. Baldwin wrote in a time where the American social climate was anything but peaceful. He wrote in a time where they were fighting for their civil

rights and against segregation. What peacefulness was Baldwin speaking of? Rankine falls into a similar category when she writes during a time where the police brutalities towards black men have been exposed on video and the country is experiencing uproar. Since Baldwin was concerned with the psychological implications of racism, the peace he is referring to could be the implications of racism that were not known. The fact that racism can affect people mentally was probably not the main social issue in America in Baldwin's time. He is disturbing the peacefulness of mind. Rankine is also able to do that. Rankine writes about how everyday racism allows bigger and more serious acts of racism to happen. This is also psychological. By letting people get away with small remarks and gestures, it makes them believe that they are not doing anything wrong. These microaggressions become normal. Rankine is disturbing that peace and telling us that these small remarks that we overlook are more serious than what we think.

Rankine does not view herself as an activist although her frequent use of Baldwin's ideas suggest otherwise as Baldwin was very much an activist (Khorana). Perhaps Rankine appreciates Baldwin's ideas and enthusiasm but chooses to give a more subtle approach, the same way *Citizen* is subtle but still carries groundbreaking truths. Rankine's literary project is very much focused on showcasing the black experience. *Citizen* does not address white American's point of view or their inner thoughts, although in some cases these are indicated. Rankine mostly looks at racism from the view of the one experiencing it. This is because she decides to focus on African Americans and their day-to-day encounters with injustice and prejudice. The cause of racism, or the thought-process of the one who is responsible for the racial utterances, is not central in *Citizen* as she decides to write about the process and outcome of racism rather than the cause. Rankine also actively writes articles about the black struggle and black lives where she problematizes their status as Americans, and most importantly, human beings. In *Citizen*, Rankine explores how racism is able to persist. Rankine understands that the black experience and the black struggles are not fully comprehended. She understands that the struggles are not taken seriously enough. Rankine decides to defamiliarize what is otherwise familiar (the treatment of African Americans) to make the readers question what they have viewed as normal all along. Her view is that we as human beings will always fail each other in some way, but she views this type of failing as something ancient. This has been going on for way too long (Khorana).

"A Letter to My Nephew" is an article Baldwin wrote which was first published in *The Progressive magazine* in 1962, but Baldwin later adapted it in his essay collection *The Fire*

*Next Time*, which was a contribution to the civil rights movement, the following year. Baldwin writes it as a letter where he is advising his fifteen year old nephew on the country he lives in and what he has ahead of him. Baldwin is his father's brother. He has known his brother since he was born and therefore knows how he has changed. Baldwin blames the country they live in and their countrymen. They are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and they neither have knowledge of it nor wish to have knowledge of it. Baldwin is quite bold in his statements, but he does not entirely blame his countrymen because he views them as innocent. They have become accustomed to this way of life where oppressing and demeaning the black men and women is considered normal. Baldwin's statements are gripping, but not as unfathomable as Rankine's writing. When Rankine suggests that dead black bodies are essentially a part of daily life, it is difficult to understand that she is not talking about the situation fifty years ago, but actually today. Baldwin wrote this piece during a time where the civil rights movement was rising. He wrote during a time where the discrimination towards black Americans was evident and a time where they lacked many of the rights white Americans were privileged enough to have. Rankine writes about today, 2016. The belief that most people would like to hold on to is that today's America is different and has come a long way since Baldwin's time. However, Baldwin recognized in 1962 that a victory can be celebrated a bit too early as he writes to his nephew that "You know and I know that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too early. We cannot be free until they are free" (Baldwin). It seems as though Baldwin's view on celebrating a victory too early is still relevant. The United States is not a post racial society. Racism has not been eradicated from the American culture as Rankine insists in *Citizen*. When Baldwin says that they cannot be free until they are free, perhaps he is referring to the fact that his fellow countrymen have to free themselves from the shackles of racism. They have to liberate their minds from the pollution of racial discrimination. Only when they are free of this mindset will African Americans be free from oppression. Rankine's literary project is very much concerned with the notion of freedom. Unlike Baldwin who believes that they will only be free when their fellow countrymen are free, Rankine believes that her countrymen are already free and have the freedom to express themselves without having their words and actions linked up to the color of their skin. However, they are discussing two different types of freedoms. Baldwin's freedom is the freedom of mind, whilst Rankine's freedom is the freedom of speech. However, both of their literary project is focused on the freedom of living while being black and the struggles that come with it.

They way I believe Baldwin views freedom in accordance to this particular essay is that freedom is a mental state which is why I name it the freedom of mind. One can only become free when one chooses to be free. However, at the same time, Baldwin expresses that people who live in the same country have to both free themselves mentally in order for them to truly experience freedom. Here Baldwin argues that freedom is dependent on the people you live with. Freedom is not something that is completely an individual journey. This might sound a bit confusing, but I believe that this is the way Baldwin would justify that: Baldwin wrote about white morale and the implications of this destructive way of thinking. Baldwin believed that it was dangerous for white people to put themselves on a pedestal and believe that they were more superior than other people. This way of thinking was destructive, because they are ultimately oppressing other groups of people in order to uphold their beliefs. I think that Baldwin viewed this mindset as a type of prison. Similarly, black Americans believing that they were less worthy was also a destructive mindset and a type of prison. What these two mindset also have in common is that they are both lies. Only when everyone frees their minds of such lies will one truly experience freedom. The reason why ones freedom will be dependent on other people is because although you free yourself, you will still meet these people who will have these destructive beliefs about you and the likes of you that might eventually pollute your own mind and imprison you again.

I view the freedom Rankine addresses as the freedom of speech. Rankine is more concerned with how our speech is censored, dissected and interpreted. Although we do currently live in a time where non-blacks are under the surveillance of how they address black people as it can be viewed as offensive, this type of restrictiveness is needed. Rankine is not concerned with that. Black Americans have a long history of being called degrading words and so censoring these type of words enforces how unacceptable they are. The type of freedom Rankine addresses is the freedom of speech where black Americans seem to only be able to speak as a group. Freedom is to be able to speak for oneself and take responsibility for oneself. Black Americans do not have the freedom to be their own person; like in *Citizen* when the woman you work with calls you by the name of another woman you work with to which Rankine calls it a cliché (43). The woman is unable to differentiate them, perhaps because their color comes before their individuality. However, Rankine's and Baldwin's views overlap here in the sense that black freedom is connected to white freedom. Black Americans, both as Baldwin suggests and Rankine suggests, are not free because the way they are being perceived and treated affects them and reminds them of the power-balance of the

country. Rankine also believes that freedom is the freedom of living while being black in one's own imagination and not through a white imagination. To live everyday in someone else's imagination means that you do not have the freedom to fully be yourself. They both believe that freedom is connected to the way one thinks of oneself, but that this is not necessarily in your own power.

Baldwin claims to his nephew that the white Americans simply have not reached them yet. He has to tell his nephew of how to deal with them because they might not even know that he exists. He knows in what conditions his nephew was born because he was present, but their fellow countrymen were not present. Their countrymen do not see his nephew's grandmother either although she has been working for them their whole lives. She does not exist to them. This takes on the issue of invisibility which Rankine is not afraid to address in *Citizen*. In one of Rankine's scenarios she writes about a man who knocked over a woman's son in the subway. The man does not stop to see if the child is okay, but decides to keep on walking. "He's okay, but the son of a bitch kept walking. She says she grabbed the stranger's arm and told him to apologize... Yes, and you want it to stop, you want the child pushed to the ground to be seen"(17). Rankine emphasizes on the fact that the child being pushed is not the main problem. The main problem is that he did not see the child. Even when he knocked him down and had physical contact with him, he did not *feel* his existence. It is an issue of being disregarded as a human being and being looked upon as less worthy. This is exactly what Baldwin means when he says that their countrymen have become accustomed to this life where demeaning black people is a part of the norm. The man in the subway did not acknowledge the boy because he had not *learned* to acknowledge him or see him. Invisibility is a part of Rankine's literary project. Rankine discusses invisibility in both a literal sense and a metaphorical sense. The literal sense would be the child who was knocked over for literally not being seen, and a metaphorical sense would be the lack of acknowledgment of, and the turning of a blind eye to what African Americans go through on a daily basis. When Baldwin mentions how they are not being seen, he is talking about how their existence is often being ignored or looked upon as less worthy, but Baldwin is also saying that their countrymen have not yet seen the conditions they live in and the conditions their lives are dictated by, and they do not understand the conditions either. Similar to Rankine, Baldwin gives a sneak peek to what it means to be black. The emphasis is not necessarily on how it *feels* to be black as feelings are subjective. One does not know how it feels to be something one is not. The emphasis is on what the position and role of black people in the United States are as citizens



and what the answer to that question really means; both in terms of how black people view themselves and how they are being viewed by their fellow countrymen.

Baldwin is able to express his deepest thoughts and emotions because he cleverly writes the essay as a letter. There is no limit to what he can say and what he cannot say. Letters are normally personal where expressing ones deepest feelings and concerns are well-suited and appropriate. Letters are sealed which means that they are only meant for the person the letter is sent to. The content of letters are limitless and by writing this thought-provoking essay as a letter Baldwin is expressing his thoughts the way he would to his nephew, although he knows that the letter will be read by many. The same way, Rankine decides to write *Citizen* as poetry which also gives her a wide range of freedom to express thoughts that otherwise would be revised and edited.

Baldwin tells his nephew that his nephew has been born and raised in a way that is a direct result of him being black. There are limits to his ambitions. Every direction he takes in his life is dictated by a set of rules which do not favor him or wish him well. His fellow countrymen do not wish for him to succeed or see any worth in him, but they wish for him to settle for mediocrity. Baldwin ushers to say to his nephew, however, to not believe them. He should never be defined by how other people view him or what they tell him. His fellow countrymen will perhaps beg to differ, but they do not know Harlem, and he does. Baldwin was born and raised in Harlem. This is his way of saying that his countrymen do not know where he is from and therefore do not know his experience and what has happened in his life. The life he has lived is nowhere near the life of the people he is addressing. He tells his nephew to trust his experiences and to know where he is from. When he knows where he is from; the possibilities of where to go are endless.

Baldwin's depiction of his countrymen closely resembles one of the scenarios in *Citizen*. Rankine also believes that their countrymen do not know them and that they perceive them as much less than what they are. Rankine even goes as far as to say that their countrymen considers them as objects.

In the next frame the pickup truck is in motion. Its motion activates its darkness. The pickup truck is a condition of darkness in motion. It makes a dark subject. You mean a black subject. No, a black object (93).

The black man, according to Rankine's understanding, is a mere object. Rankine is referring to the history of the police and African American men. A black person in a vehicle is no longer a person, but perhaps an extension of the vehicle. When a black person is stopped by the police, the person is no longer a human being, but rather an object which carries a bag full of stereotypes. Rankine believes that they are being stopped because of the color of their skin and not because of something they have done. Another important point is that objects can easily be thrown away as soon as they lose their value, or they can have absolutely no value to begin with. It goes beyond the notion of a black subject because a black subject would still be a human being. Getting rid of an object requires no conscious. With the same mindset of the lack of value in black people, Baldwin says that "You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity and in as many ways as possible that you were a worthless human being" (Baldwin). Rankine has seen this worthlessness and chooses to portray it as the relationship between black men and the police where "the killing of black people is an unending spectacle... there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black" (Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life"). In this quote, which is taken out of an article Rankine wrote, she is saying in essence that being black is a good enough reason to experience all the inequality and misfortune that happens to black people daily in the United States. As a black person one has to be cautious of everything one does so that it does not cause suspiciousness. Rankine uses examples of basic everyday activities such as walking outside and playing music. Neither of which should cause any type of suspiciousness. These are all excuses because as a black person being black is the problem.

Rankine's literary project is to showcase the vulnerability attached to blackness. Blackness in itself is not vulnerable, but it is constantly being put in vulnerable situations. Their freedom is something they can take and control, but as long as their treatment goes against the essence of what freedom means, it will sadly be difficult to achieve. Rankine is interested in how this state of blackness has come about. The historical context of African Americans is central in exploring the state of blackness. Rankine is fully aware of why black Americans are in the state they are in. *Citizen* has many passages that have connotations to American history and the treatment of black people throughout the centuries. What Rankine is focusing on, however, is why this mindset has not been dispelled as ancient as it is. As long as one group feels that they are superior this unbalanced system will continue.

Rankine agrees to a certain extent with Baldwin when he argues that their countrymen are not to blame for this. Racism has become embedded in the American culture. Rankine acknowledges that racism has become a norm. She believes that the lack of problematizing of small issues give life to bigger issues which white Americans cannot be blamed for. If we do not look these issues in the eye and take action however uncomfortable the confrontation will be, no one can really be blamed. Rankine believes that acknowledgement needs to come first. White people have to acknowledge that white blindness and white privilege exists. It is difficult to address something that is sometimes claimed to not even exist. By presenting her subtle accounts of everyday racism, she is educating people on different kinds of racism. Brutal remarks or physical violence does not have to take place in order for it to be called racism.

## 4.2 Script for Situation Six: Violence and the Segregation of Words

In the sixth situation script, Rankine describes a notorious match from the World Cup in 2006 where the soccer player Zinedine Zidane head-butted a player from the opposite team sparked by alleged racial slurs. Script for Situation videos are videos Rankine created with her husband. They take up different well-known events that have happened and are in the form of re-enactments or actual footages from the events. Rankine has written the texts for each of the situation videos and her texts are used as voice-overs with Rankine's own voice; sometimes also accompanied with slow, subtle music. In *Citizen* Rankine inserts both the script from the videos and also, in some cases, still images from the videos. Rankine meditates on Zinedine Zidane's famous head-butt during the World Cup in 2006 with quotes from Maurice Blanchot, Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, and James Baldwin. Their views on violence, language and imagery play an important role on how Rankine approaches the head-butt. The concept of violence and what triggers it (mainly words) is mostly what Rankine focuses on and that is also what I will be focusing on. The unfortunate incident that was widely discussed mainly in the soccer world, Rankine is now discussing as a deeply rooted racial problem.

Black Blanc Beur is the slogan that was used after France won the World Cup in 1998 for the first time. Zinedine Zidane, a French-born Algerian who was at his peak at the time, scored two of the three goals during the final and became a national hero. The slogan means; Black, White, Arab. It was supposed to represent unity in diversity. The France soccer team was a diverse group who had roots in different parts of the world. It was this social phenomenon that created the special attention. France saw this as the result of successful integration and celebrated it ("Black, Blanc, Beur"). Rankine plasters the words Black Blanc Beur over the pages where she discusses Zinedine Zidane's World Cup exit in 2006. The slogan represented unity, but Rankine ironically plasters these words on an incident that was on the opposite end of unity. What happened on that soccer-field ripped unity apart and created a clear line between "us" and "them". After a successful career, Zidane ends it with an infamous head-butt that would haunt him ever since.

On the pages where Rankine discusses Zidane's exit, Rankine shows us still images taken from the video of the incident taken in slow motion. What happened in a matter of a few seconds take eight pages of reflection, pondering and meditation. Zidane, who was the captain of France's national soccer team, had plans to wrap up his soccer career after the World Cup in 2006. France was up in the finals against Italy when Zidane ended up doing

something that would become a permanent association to his name. During the second period of extra time, Materazzi provokes Zidane by saying a few words that were not comprehended at the time by the viewers. Zidane tries to walk away but eventually turns around and goes straight for a head-butt to Materazzi's chest which knocks him straight down to the ground. Zidane immediately gets a red card and is sent off from the field as the exit of his career while Italy wins the World Cup ("I'm sorry But No Regrets"),

After much speculation it is believed that Materazzi said some racial slurs to Zidane which provoked him, although Materazzi said himself that he did not say anything about religion, racism or politics ("I'm Sorry But No Regrets"). He, naturally, never specified what he actually said and Zidane uttered that what he said had "touched the deepest part of me" (Rankine, *Citizen* 128). Different lip readers have tried to decipher what Materazzi actually said, but they have come up with different answers such as; "You are the son of a terrorist whore", or "Calm down, liar, an ugly death to you and your family, go f\*\*\* yourself" ("I'm Sorry But No Regrets"). Another variant was "Big Algerian shit, dirty terrorist, nigger", which is the one Rankine uses in her situation video which is transcribed and illustrated in *Citizen*. Rankine repeats these words throughout the pages. The repetition brings up a feeling of annoyance. They linger in the ears for the readers to remember. Rankine wants to make the following points about violence; violence is like a gunshot, but something or someone must have triggered it. She is trying to make the readers understand why Zidane did what he did. Zidane had himself said in an interview that "You hear them once and you try to move away. But then you hear them twice, and then a third time" ("I'm Sorry But No Regrets").

Rankine ponders on the incident that happened with quotes from both Zidane and other well known writers as well as images from the incident. She uses one page for quotes and images and the next page for names. These names are the names of the people she quotes. Rankine does this for eight pages straight. Four pages are quotes and images while the other four are only names with the exception of when she also quotes what the lip readers have said. In that case she also adds them. She chronologically gives us the sources of who she is quoting. The first person she quotes is also the first person she writes at the top of the next page and so on. Rankine has carefully picked out quotes that are relevant to the incident. It is after careful observation that one realizes that these are not Rankine's words. She does not use quotation marks due to the fact that Rankine changes or omits certain words in the quotes which gives them a flow that naturally fits the images in context and relevance.

## **Subjective, objective and symbolic violence**

Out of verbal and physical abuse physical abuse gets most attention, naturally because physical abuse is the most noticeable form. However, violence does not only have one form. Violence, according to Slavoj Žižek, a sociologist and philosopher, comes in three forms; subjective, objective and symbolic. Subjective violence is the type of violence that gets most attention like riots and shootings. This type of violence is obvious and difficult to ignore. The evidence of physical violence is also apparent unlike words that do not leave a visible mark. Objective violence, however, creates the conditions for subjective violence. Objective violence is the inherent violence of a system. If a governing system is established by violence, then it depends on it in order to continue. Objective violence comes in both physical and subtle forms which sustains dominance. Objective violence again depends on symbolic violence which obtains the violence of the governing system and eventually results in subjective violence. Symbolic violence is mainly focused on language, and with the violence of words, is able to create the notion of “the Other” (Drahos 17). When a group of people are ostracized systemically, it is usually to the benefit of the governing system. The ostracizing creates violence and violence is what determines dominance. The fact that one group is able to discriminate and oppress another group of people is clearly connected to power. And this power is used to maximize their human potential (Unnever, and Gabbidon 73). To maximize their human potential would mean that they are in a position to gain as much benefits and comforts as possible. By denying it to some, others are able to get more. Žižek believes that there is a clear connection between these three forms of violence and that they depend on each other. However, subjective violence is what is mostly discussed because it is the form which is most noticeable. When Rankine decides to discuss the power of words, she is stating the importance words have and the violent impact it can have on someone’s life. I strongly believe that she is bringing forth the argument that while we are mostly giving physical violence all of our attention, there is another type of violence that is destroying us from the inside. This violence should be equally as important as physical violence.

## **Zinedine Zidane**

Rankine quotes Zidane after the images of him jogging away from Materazzi. He says, “Every day I think about where I come from and I am still proud to be who I am” (122). How

is this quote relevant to the incident and what is he saying in essence? Zidane says that he is *still* proud of who he is. *Still* indicates that he has gone through troubles in his life that has shaken his pride, but he is still proud of who he is despite all of those hardships. He grew up in a rough neighborhood and experienced racism both before and during his soccer career. As an Algerian living in France he was a part of a minority group which would explain why he could have gone through racism (“ZZ Top”). Zidane’s quote is followed by accounts of lip readers responding to the transcript of the World Cup. “Big Algerian shit, dirty terrorist, nigger”. Chances are that these words were not the first time Zidane had heard them. Zidane is explaining that after all he has gone through and despite the verbal harassment he is still able to be proud of who he is and where he is from. Zidane grew up in the rough back-streets of Marseille and has experienced a fair share of racial slurs. (“ZZ top”) He had shortly after the incident at the World Cup said that it is always the reaction that is addressed. The main focus always lies on the reaction and not the one who causes it. He understands that what he did was wrong and that it must be punished, but there would be no reaction without provocation. He is frustrated with the lack of responsibility from the other party.

Zidane is not letting himself be broken from his hardship. He views it as an achievement because there are many youths who are troubled for not knowing where they are from or who they are. Zidane, however, was able to channel his frustration in his soccer matches. He says that he has a need to fight hard every day and in every match. This shows that this is his way of dealing with his anger. He wants to prove to people that he is more than what they expect from him. Although he has been unfortunate and had irregular outbursts of violence in his matches, he does not justify that. He is well aware of the fact that it is wrong, but he finds it hard to walk away when something is repeatedly uttered to hurt him or degrade him (“ZZ top”).

### **Maurice Blanchot**

Rankine starts with a quote from Maurice Blanchot who was a French philosopher. Blanchot was considered one of the excellent intellectuals of postwar France. His novels and *récits* can arguable be considered some of the most significant contributions to French literature in the twentieth century. Most of what is known about Blanchot is through analysis of his books and essays due to the fact that he avoided photographs, interviews and academic affiliation. Blanchot’s work often takes the form of meditation inspired by writers such as Franz Kafka

and Rainer Maria Rilke. His work frequently and thematically articulates itself as critical to existential thought (Redfield 92-93).

The quote from Blanchot says “Something is there before us that is neither the living person himself nor any sort of reality, neither the same as the one who is alive, nor another... What is there is the absolute calm of what has found its place” (122). Blanchot discusses the notion of the image in his essay named “The Two Versions of the Imaginary” from *The Space of Literature* (1955). He starts early on in the essay to present the view on the usual analysis of the image. The usual analysis is that we see the object first and not the image. It is after the object has been seen that we come to look at the image. The object has to move away in order for the image to be grasped. What is meant by this is that we see things first and then we imagine. The imagination does not come before the object has been seen. In the living motion it is comprehensible, but the minute it becomes an image it becomes something we cannot grasp. It is impassive, distancing and a present thing in its absence. It is here, but not really (254). The images Rankine puts in *Citizen* are in slow motion. We see six images in a row of a calm Zidane slowly jogging away from his opponent on the first page. Nothing has happened yet. Zidane is hearing a few words from his opponent but he is still jogging away. We know this only because we have done a background check on it. By quoting Blanchot Rankine is telling us how little we really know. We tend to make assumptions very quickly and pretend to know what has happened. What we see is not really the living person nor is it anyone else. What we are looking at is a perception. We are looking at the calm of what has found its place. The object is dead, but succeeds in convincing us that it is present. We cannot experience what has been experienced. We are simply looking at it from a distance and we feel comfortable about having that power. “Neither the living person himself nor any sort of reality”, could also indicate that Rankine is stating that sometimes the recalling of memories tend to overpower ones judgments and act as the voice of reason. Memories are not a current reality, but something of the past. As Materazzi’s words touched the deepest part of him, Zidane acted with what those words evoked.

When something like this happens one is quick to make assumptions of what was said and who is really at fault. However, what one fails to see is the emotional scars that have built up all these years, which is a part of Rankine’s literary project. Microaggressions can affect people, both in how they view themselves and the society they live in. What we see is just the after effect of what has already happened.



There have been other instances where Zidane has experienced taunt that have caused emotional wounds. These wounds are a part of Zidane's personal history, but also a part of a calm that has found its place. The wounds exist because something has caused them to exist that is currently not there anymore. The wounds are just the aftermath. However, Materazzi's comments opened those wounds. After an unpleasant encounter with a friend earlier in *Citizen* Rankine writes, "You both / experience this cut...and like any other injury, you / watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture." (42). Rankine is referring to an injury that already exists. It is rupturing along its exposed suture, which means that it is an injury that has been stitched, but it is reopening. Zidane's wound(s) reopened, but it is an internal wound. No one is able to see it. The only thing that can be seen is his reaction to the exposed suture. The fight Zidane is fighting is more on the inside and the violence of Zidane's reaction is visible, but Materazzi's symbolic violence which is based on language was invisible due to the internal damage it created.

### **Ralph Ellison**

Ralph Ellison was an African American writer who lived through the Second World War, Jim Crow and the civil rights movement until his passing in 1994. Ellison was the grandson of a slave and he grew up being painfully aware of the state of his people. The novel Ellison is most known for is *Invisible Man* (1952) where he brought on a new black protagonist. His protagonist was not an angry man fighting against a society that wished for him to fail. On the contrary, Ellison's protagonist was educated and articulate which was not common to see in black protagonists at the time. Ellison's views and literary project were very much based on the black identity. He believed that blacks had their own traditions and a beautiful culture that was far from what was commonly believed. The belief that African Americans were unsophisticated was false. He believed that African Americans had enough culture to have a full sense of identity, and that America was enough to discover one's identity. They did not have to seek elsewhere in order to fully have an identity. To embrace and love one's culture was the way to freedom (Seidnitz).

Rankine quotes Ralph Ellison and writes, "Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word" (122). Ellison's quote about the word having the power to segregate is taken from Ellison's essay "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" which is a part of the essay collection *Shadow and Act* (1964). The essay in question is about the horrible and vicious stereotypes about African Americans

that are in the mainstream American Culture (Lewis). Ellison believes that words, in all their complex forms and formulations, have the power to put people in groups and differentiate them. Similar to how racialization has made it possible for labels to be ascribed in order to differentiate and create domination over another group merely with words. Ellison notes that words are perhaps “the least understood form of segregation”. He is acknowledging that hurtful language is considered much less serious than physical violence. Hurtful language is, as Ellison describes, insidious. Words have the ability to slowly cause harm which makes it all the more dangerous. By stating this, Ellison is encouraging people to pay attention to the affects of language.

Ellison believed that if words could make people free, then surely they could imprison people and make them blind. Ellison is using performative language where he believes that words have the power to grant freedom, but also rob that very freedom. Depending on how words are used, they can have such a profound power. By saying words such as “Big Algerian shit, dirty terrorist, nigger”, Materazzi is clearly drawing a line between himself and Zidane where he is expressing racial superiority. In one sentence he is able to degrade Zidane’s appearance, ethnicity and religion. The discussion Rankine had on Judith Butler and what made language hurtful correlates with what happened to Zidane. Zidane expressed how Materazzi’s words touched the deepest part of him. Hurtful or racist language, as Rankine addressed, is not there “to denigrate and erase you as a person” (49), rather it is there to make you hypervisible. Materazzi’s words made Zidane more aware of himself and how he was different in that moment. He became a black smear on a very sharp white background. Rankine uses Ellison’s words, and also Butler’s theory to show how language is performative and the profound and detrimental outcomes that can come from these words when they are used maliciously.

### **James Baldwin**

And there is no (Black) who has not felt, briefly or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees and to varying effect, simple, naked, and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter in a day, to violate, out of motives of the cruelest vengeance... to break the bodies of all white

people and bring them low, as low as the dust into which he himself has been and is being trampled; no black who has not had to make his own precarious adjustment... yet the adjustment must be made – rather it must be attempted (Rankine, *Citizen* 124).

The quote is from *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) which is a collection of essays by James Baldwin. Rankine inserts this quote by James Baldwin at the time when Zidane is jogging away from Materazzi while looking back at him. This combination gives the effect that these powerful words by Baldwin are going through Zidane's head as he is looking back at Materazzi. Baldwin is speaking out of frustration. He argues that all black people have felt at some point a certain violence where they just wanted to break the white bodies they met. All black people have felt it because they have all experienced racial oppression and injustice. This violence is sparked by a hatred that Baldwin describes as simple and unanswerable. It is a type of hatred that does not need explanation because it is natural to hate the one who has harmed you in one way or another. That type of hatred is logical, unlike the hatred the white faces have for Baldwin and his people. Baldwin is suggesting that their hate is not logical. They simply hate him because he is black. When Baldwin expresses the want to smash any white face, he is indicating that all white faces remind him of his mistreatment. One white face is enough to remind him of all white faces that have caused him harm. The hatred does not differentiate. Perhaps there was more than just Materazzi's words that provoked Zidane. He might have seen a face that had previously mistreated him time and time again which sparked his final reaction. Baldwin speaks of vengeance which again foregrounds the argument on his "valid" hatred. His violence is coming from a place of hate which is again coming from a place of vengeance. There is a natural want to fight back. The breaking of the bodies is to bring them down to the level they have brought him, and the attempt at precarious adjustment is to hold all this hatred together and not act upon it. He wants to crush them so that they can understand what it means to be crushed. Baldwin does not express this hatred and want for violence as something constant. There must be something that triggers it. Zidane is jogging away from Materazzi while trying to hold in the want for violence; the want he has of crushing him to the ground with his head-butt.

In an interview where Baldwin discusses issues about the black struggles, Baldwin talks about young men, teenagers or in their early twenties, who are beat down and exhausted

because they have gone through everything there is to go through. They are tired and frustrated. In their case, there is only a matter of time before a person like that will reach their breaking point. There is only so much hurt and suffering a person can take before they will do something about it. Baldwin matter-of-factly states that humans are not by nature non-violent. By stating this, Baldwin's opinion is that one should not be shocked when someone who has gone through a lot finally snaps. That is human nature (Malcolm X Network 2 of 3). Right next to Baldwin's quote Rankine inserts a quote from Zidane where he says, "Do you think two minutes from the end of a World Cup final, two minutes from the end of my career, I wanted to do that?" (124). Zidane's comment on the fact that this was something he did not wish to do, but almost something he *had* to do would be understood by Baldwin. Baldwin said, "the adjustment must be made – rather it must be attempted." Zidane attempted to control his violence by walking away, but he was unable to do so. Instead, he broke Materazzi's body and brought him as low as the dust he himself was trampled in.

### **Frantz Fanon**

Rankine follows up with a quote from Frantz Fanon where he says, "The Algerian men, for their part, are a target of criticism for their European comrades" (122). Fanon was known for being an active spokesman for the Algerian revolution. He was also known for his views on supporting violence against oppression. Fanon, who was originally from Martinique, was a psychiatrist who actively spoke against French colonialism, especially in Algeria where he had secured a position as a psychiatrist in 1953. Fanon served in the French Army and did not like how the Arabs and Africans were treated. They were all under whites who claimed to be their superior. When Fanon arrived in Algeria he experienced the same degradation. One million Europeans ruled over around nine million Arabs and Berbers. The Arabs and Berbers were also uneducated with a large percentage being illiterate. When the Algerian National Liberation Front led an uprising against the French Army in 1954, the French Army mercilessly used Gestapo methods to control their subordinates. People were being beat, tortured and killed. The death of one soldier could result in the French Army destroying a whole village. Fanon used his time to aid the people who needed it. After experiencing all this violence Fanon realized that since violence was what upheld the colonized society one could only destroy it with greater violence (Adam).

Rankine quotes Fanon again when she writes, “When such things happen, he must grit his teeth, walk away a few steps, elude the passerby who draws attention to him, who gives other passerby the desire either to follow the example or to come to his defense” (126). When Zidane first heard Materazzi’s comment he did not immediately react to it. He decided to walk away. After he decided to walk away a few steps, he turned around and went for the head-butt. This was mainly because Materazzi kept talking which further provoked him. Fanon is describing the expectations of the oppressed. When you hear these words it is expected of you to grit your teeth and walk a few steps. Is this to remove yourself from the situation in order to not create harm, or is it to protect yourself from harm? The police brutalities that have been caught on video suggest the latter. By engaging in the altercation and in the word exchange African Americans have suffered fatal injuries. The answer in that case would be to grit your teeth and walk away as Fanon states. However, Fanon does not state it as his opinion, but as an expectation. Rankine places Fanon’s quote right under the images of Zidane turning around and raging towards him. At that moment Zidane had to make a choice. He could either grit his teeth and walk away while saving himself a lot of trouble, or he could rage towards him with all the rage he had inside of him and make a statement. The rage would be all the microaggressions that had built up in his life, and the statement would be that he would no longer tolerate it.

“We hear, then we remember” (126). Rankine quotes Baldwin shortly after Fanon indicating that in his choice there was a spur of memories that sparked his decision. The words he received from Materazzi awakened previous incidents and they all gathered and created a reaction. Zidane first heard what was said as he was walking away, then he remembered and walked back. In his decision, Zidane chose the latter. He chose to come to his own defense and not become a passerby in his own life. Zidane did not want to accept the treatment he was given and he refused to succumb to what was suggested that he was.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon has a whole chapter, named “Concerning Violence”, which is dedicated to how anticolonialism must be revolutionary. In it he writes, “colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence” (48). Fanon believes that colonization and decolonization is only a matter of strength. When the colonizers/the oppressors/the ones in power are met with people who realize that all they have is their violence, the oppressors start to talk about non-violence. Fanon did not believe in non-violence, but he had a valid reason for it. His views here are very similar to Baldwin’s.

Baldwin believed that violence was a natural reaction to oppression, and shared Fanon's views on why non-violence was problematic. When asked about King's non-violence method, Baldwin answered that he acknowledged his effort and the fact that he had gone through a lot, but at the same time, King alone could not solve the nation's central problem. African Americans are produced by a society that glorifies violence and so he did not see how non-violence would work when the society is using violence towards them. African Americans "anyway are themselves produced by a civilization which has always glorified violence unless the Negro had the gun. So that Martin is undercut by the performance of the country. The country is only concerned about non-violence if it seems that I'm going to get violent. It's not worried about non-violence if it's some Alabama sheriff" (Malcolm X Network 3 of 3). Both Baldwin and Fanon believed that non-violence was only proposed when the oppressed started to rebel. It is a solution that is used when they need to urgently come to term for the public good. Fanon believed that it was an attempt to settle the situation down before anything regrettable happened. What Fanon would prefer, however, is for the general public to rebel and set fire to buildings and so on, for then the people with power who sit around a table would panic and urgently look for a solution to create peace. Fanon is also known for the quote "violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (74). Was this not what Zidane did? Perhaps the head-butt was Zidane's way to restore his self-respect. He refused to be demeaned and he wanted to stand up for not only himself, but for everyone like him.

Ultimately, like Baldwin, Rankine considers violence an inevitable reaction to oppression. I believe that Rankine uses Zidane's head-butt to show two different forms of violence meeting and how they are treated. The violent and degrading words that came from Materazzi became bleak in comparison to Zidane's violent physical act. Even the fact that the words instigated Zidane's physical violence did not make the violent words more serious or the physical violence less outrageous. By not addressing verbal abuse, we give life to bigger and more life altering issues. I am not arguing that Rankine supports physical violence, however, I am arguing that Rankine supports a reaction. Central to her literary project is how everyday racism has detrimental social consequences. Violence is one of these consequences although to Rankine, racist violence is on a spectrum with casual remarks she can hear in the supermarket. She argues that if that shopper who is sharing these casual racial remarks one day is able to be on a jury or perhaps is a police officer then physical violence will continue

from the oppressed as a reaction to what that shopper instigates (“Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen Shows*”). Rankine does not want for incidents like Zidane’s head-butt to be treated as an incident without context. His reaction has a history of similar incidents which eventually added up. It does not solely come down to what Zidane heard, but how many times he had heard something similar and that these words touched the deepest part of him. The context is also beyond Zidane and his life experiences. By incorporating these famous thinkers, Rankine is drawing lines between a head-butt in the twenty-first century- and colonialism, segregation, and oppression half a century before that.

### **4.3 I Do Not Always Feel Colored**

There are eighteen images in *Citizen* altogether. The use of imagery is seen in both Rankine’s writing and the visual art in *Citizen*. Her visual art is a combination of pictures, paintings and sculptures. In the discussion on intertextuality, the importance of the images’ meaning cannot be ignored. The images carry a story that Rankine wants to share and they are also a part of the message Rankine is giving. My focus will be on one image from each section (except for section four which does not have images). When analyzing a text or an image one has to make a choice of whether or not one will consider the creators intent. “It’s rare, in today’s meta-tastic world of process, reference and intent, to come across a photograph that doesn’t urge you to think about its maker” (Murphy). This is what the maker of the first image in *Citizen*, Micheal David Murphy, says on his homepage. My intent was to remove the makers from their image in order to independently connect the images to Rankine’s text. However, on Murphy’s note, I will consider the creators commentary on their images as well if possible.

#### **Jim Crow Rd.**

*Jim Crow Rd.* is the title of the first image (6). It is a photograph taken of a road in a beautiful neighborhood with white houses and a bright blue sky. In the midst of all this beauty there is a sign that says Jim Crow Rd. Murphy, the creator, writes that this road is in a typical Southern neighborhood. The road runs through a small country store, a strip mall and a couple of McMansions. The road is close to Forsyth County which was a sundown town until the 80s. Sundown towns were towns where African Americans or other minority groups were prevented from living in their community. It was an organized jurisdiction to keep the towns all white, however many towns could allow one black family as an exception. (“The Importance of Sundown Towns” 4) The name comes from the various signs that would warn

the African Americans who lived in their communities to leave. The signs often read “Don’t let the sun set on you” (10). Rankine places this photograph after an incident in school where a black girl allows a white Catholic girl to cheat from her during their exams. The black girl cannot even remember her name which clearly emphasizes that they are not friends. They only speak together when the request for cheating is made. The teacher, Sister Evelyn, never notices. The black girl ponders on how Sister Evelyn might believe that the two girls think alike, does not care about cheating as they might feel humiliated, or that she never saw the black girl sitting there (6). The notion of invisibility plays an important role here. The black girl wonders if the teacher has even seen her. I believe that Rankine is being metaphorical here. The teacher has seen her in a literal sense, but perhaps not in an ‘accomplishment sense’. By that I mean that Sister Evelyn probably does not know much about the black girl. She does not pay her much mind. This incident is actually followed up by an incident of your friend who accidentally calls you by her black housekeepers’ name. I would imagine Sister Evelyn often forgetting the black girl’s name or mistaking her for another black girl which has made the girl suspect that perhaps Sister Evelyn does not see her.

There is an elementary school nearby Jim Crow Rd. In the description of the photograph, Murphy wonders if the children of that elementary school are being taught what Jim Crow really means. Will teachers teach the children the consequences of this policy? The black girl in Rankine’s scenario has been taught to justify the actions of people around her. Instead of saying ‘thank you’, the white Catholic girl complements her with saying that she smells good and has features more like a white person. The black girl assumes that this is her way of thanking her. She also justifies her teacher for not intervening in the cheating by assuming three possibilities, none of them being maliciously intended. Rankine is reflecting a certain type of innocence. An innocence created by a lack of knowledge perhaps. Would the black girl have taken it as “lightly” as she did had she known the depth of the white girl’s comments? I believe that Rankine inserted the image of the *Jim Crow Rd.* to emphasize the crude history that lies behind it and how effects of it still exists. Murphy’s thoughts on whether or not the children who live near the Jim Crow Rd. are taught about its meaning can be connected to the these two girls. The black girl is twelve years old. She does not know how to react to this incident because she does not understand it. Likewise, the white girl does not understand her own comment and what it really means.



## **Hennessy Youngman**

Hennessy Youngman is a persona played by the artist Jayson Musson who makes youtube tutorials about various *Art Thoughtz*. In one of these *Art Thoughtz* videos he educates his black audience on how to become a successful black artist. His suggestions are blunt with a hint of satire, but very much based on black expectations. Rankine inserts a still image from the video and gives a commentary (23). In the still image, Youngman is wearing a white tank top, a chain around his neck and a cap with the cartoon character *Goofy*. However, the portrayal of Goofy is not goofy. The cap has an angry version of him where he is intensely staring straight ahead. On the still image it says “Be angry”, which is his first suggestion. Youngman’s overall suggestion is to succumb to the black stereotype in order to succeed as a black artist. You have to be angry, you have to be unpredictable, and you have to be exotic. Rankine believes that he is underscoring how difficult it is to metabolize real rage. Youngman never speaks of real rage. Rather he speaks of an animated rage to live up to black expectations. He gives an example of watching the Rodney King video (which is a video of a black man who was beaten up by police force) in order to inspire this anger. This is the absence of real rage Rankine is referring to. Real rage that is built up by experience is everywhere for black Americans. Inspiration for real rage is not needed although Youngman is suggesting that it is. Youngman is more or less being ironic to showcase how ridiculous their reality is. He knows that real rage is everywhere. He knows that a type of rage that is inspired by something outside of yourself is easier to deal with than the real rage you experience daily. Rankine views this real rage as a type of knowledge. To understand real rage would mean to face the issues African Americans are experiencing which can be too painful. The knowledge Rankine is speaking of is one of disappointment as you realize that nothing you do will change the way you are perceived. Individuality is absent as everything is connected to blackness. The color comes before the person. Youngman is essentially ironically insinuating that you become a caricature of yourself. That is the only way you will be fully accepted by white people.

Rankine’s commentary on the video is a short analysis of what she believes Youngman is trying to say, and also what he leaves out. I believe that she chose this video to further comment on the state of blackness. The state of blackness is one connected to only blackness. Youngman’s underlying argument is that you have to be their type of “nigger” in order to succeed. I also believe that Rankine’s use of Youngman goes even deeper than what I have discussed. The points that are made about rage are based on the fact that the stereotype of

black people being angry is valid. The stereotype is not valid, but the root of their anger is. The stereotype is almost mocking the real rage black Americans have every right to feel by making it seem as though the rage is baseless. Both Youngman's and Rankine's point could be that their white countrymen might think that their rage is fake which is another way to completely ignore black struggles. Youngman is ironically suggesting that black Americans should throw on all of these stereotypes as if it is an accessory in order to highlight that it is actually something that is embedded in them due to their wounds.

### **I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background**

The painter Glenn Ligon painted two images with two quotes taken from the author Zora Neale Hurston's essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (Rankine, *Citizen* 52-53). Hurston is considered one of the greatest writers in the twentieth century by many of her admirers. She wrote mostly in the 1930s but is still considered a product of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston was the granddaughter of slaves and had a relatively difficult childhood while living with different relatives. In 1928, Hurston was a student at Barnard and it is during this time that Hurston wrote this particular essay. (Gates, and Smith 1029-1030) Hurston describes how she grew up and when she started feel colored. During her childhood, Hurston had been living in Eatonville, Florida. She describes Eatonville as a little Negro town. Hurston explains how she only grew up with people who looked like herself besides the occasional white people that would travel through Eatonville, but never stay there. The only difference between white and black at that time for Hurston was that the whites only travelled through Eatonville, while the blacks stayed. Hurston expresses how she liked talking to them and that the whites would give her dimes to dance for them while they were passing through the town. Hurston notes that the black people of her town disliked her joyful tendencies, but accepted her either way. She was one of them. It was only when Hurston left for school when she was thirteen that she noticed that she was colored. She was no longer in her little town where everyone looked like herself. She makes the same observation when she was studying at Bernard College. That is when she noted that she did not always feel colored, but she felt most colored when she was thrown against a sharp white background (Hurston 1040-1041). Arguably the reason why she started to feel colored was because her color became a topic and an issue. The color of her skin was actually addressed when it normally would not in her home town. I do not believe that the reason why she felt more colored in these circumstances was because she was the only black

girl amongst a group of white people. I believe that color itself does not necessarily make that distinction. She used to see white people as a young girl, but she never felt colored then. She also specifies by saying that she does not *always* feel colored. She is colored only when she is thrown against a sharp white background. The emphasis here is the sharpness. The sharp words that are pointed towards her blackness is what is making her feel colored, not necessarily her color itself.

Rankine inserts the two images that take up two whole pages, one image for each page. The first image is a painting that has the quote, "I do not always feel colored" written on it repeatedly. The words are thick and black which becomes more and more unclear to read as it smears against a white background. The next image is exactly the same. The only difference is the quote. This time the quote reads, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background". The words fit perfectly in with the painting as the black words are thrown against a sharp white background. I believe that Rankine is reinforcing these quotes by the two incidents she writes about prior to the images. The first incident is when you are standing outside the conference room and you hear two men who are waiting for the others to arrive say that watching black people talk is like watching a foreign film without translation. Rankine also adds that these two men are people you will sit on the same table with during the conference. You decide to wait a little before you enter the room after them (50). Rankine knows that confronting these two men would make the situation a lot worse; and worse would mean to make a bigger deal out of it than it already is. Another problem could be that by not confronting it, it becomes an issue you can deal with personally. No one will ever know except you. It would also make you feel more colored since you are being smeared against a white background while being black in a room filled with people that you fear could have the same thoughts. The fear of confrontation is an ongoing theme in *Citizen*. The people in *Citizen* question the situation they are in, but they rarely actually stop it. It is as if they are crippled by the fear of what would come after.

The other incident Rankine presents is when you make an appointment with a real estate woman who clearly thought that you were white when she was talking to you on the phone. This assumption is both made and proven when you meet up with the real estate woman to show you around her house only to repeatedly mention how the friend you came with is making her so comfortable. Nobody bothers to ask who is making her uncomfortable (51). The two quotes on the images are essentially about being mostly aware of ones blackness only when it is compared to whiteness. When you meet the real estate woman only

to realize that she regrets making the appointment with you because of your appearance, you become aware of your surroundings and how much you differ from it. A confrontation becomes an unsafe bet because you are aware of how colored you are, but with a confrontation you are announcing your uncomfortable observation that you hope is only a fragment of your own imagination.

### **Untitled (speech/crowd)**

The next piece is another creation by Glenn Ligon. It is not created with paint, but silkscreen, coal dust, oilstick, and glue on paper. The creation is spread on two pages in *Citizen* (Rankine 110-111). The image is mostly black and grey. At first glance it looks like a dark grey background with abstract black and light grey dots. The size and shape of these dots varies. However, if you look closely, faces start to make their way through the grey. At the very top of the image there are no signs of humans, but when you look downward the faces appear. They become clearer and clearer to the point where you can see both their faces and facial expressions. The crowd is made up of mostly black men. Shouting, protesting, perhaps rioting? The crowd blends into the grey and the black making it seem as though if you have seen one of them – you have seen all of them. This image is placed after one of Rankine's Script for Situation videos. This Script for Situation is called "Stop-and-Frisk". In this Script for Situation Rankine is meditating on the relationship between black men and the police. She uses first person pronoun and embodies a black man being stopped by the police for no valid reason. They are looking for someone and you just happen to fit the description. Rankine repeats throughout the meditation that "you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description" (105-109). Similarly to the image by Ligon, he is just one of the crowd. His face is not properly looked at.

He fits the description because the only description needed is to be black. As a black man he is representing a whole community, and one wrong means that everyone like him did wrong. Essentially he is paying for somebody else's sin. Peggy McIntosh argues that a part of white privilege is to be treated as individuals who can only answer for their own sins (4). She also stated that she never had to face the responsibility of speaking for people of her racial group (7). On the flip side of this, other groups tend to have to answer for the sins of their whole community/race, which is what the man in Rankine's Situation video is doing. He is being racially profiled and prosecuted for simply fitting the description of a black man who

happens to be driving while being black. The image connects with Rankine's text with the notion of the absurdity of racial profiling and how this hinders black individuality. Ralph Ellison writes in the prologue of *Invisible Man* (1952), "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me... When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination" (Ellison 258). James Baldwin also states that "I learned in New Jersey that to be a Negro meant, precisely, that one was never looked at but was simply at the mercy of the reflexes the color of one's skin caused in other people" (Yardley). Both of these quotes are channeling Rankine's approach to invisibility. Their approach to invisibility is that it is not a choice. They are invisible simply because people refuse to see them. Ellison writes that people refuse to see him, and Baldwin writes that one is never looked at which more or less goes under the same category. Another similarity is how they describe the way they are perceived. Ellison argues that he only becomes a figment of their imagination whilst Baldwin argues that people perceive him however way they want depending on what reflexes his color gives off. Ultimately they both argue that how they are perceived has nothing to do with them, but everything to do with how other people choose to see them. Rankine's account on the man who was stopped and frisked for no apparent reason showcases the type of invisibility that is seen in Glenn Ligon's painting and that is also described in Ellison and Baldwin's writing. The man was stopped because of the wrong reflexes his skin color gave off in the police officers imagination.

### **The Slave Ship**

The last image in *Citizen* is *The Slave Ship* which is a painting that dates back to circa 1840 by Joseph M. W. Turner. The painting is of a rough ocean with a ship that is experiencing difficulties. The storm, or perhaps typhoon, that is on its way is causing the ship to sail on top of enormous waves. The meeting-point of the sky and the ocean has a disturbing blood-like color. That color is continued into the ocean with a mixture of grey and black. The ocean is filled with what seems like garbage at first, but after careful observation, it looks like a mixture of body parts and fish. The most prominent body part is that of a leg with a chain around the ankle. The title of the painting indicates that the ship that is seen in the horizon is a slave ship, and the humans in the ocean are slaves that have been thrown out. The most disturbing part is the fish that are going towards the leg as if to eat off of it, and the seagulls that are flying around the body parts like it is some type of prey.

The fact that Rankine would put this painting at the very end of *Citizen* (160-161) is very intriguing. She ends her account on what it means to be a black citizen in the United States in the twenty-first century with a painting of a slave ship. The slave ship is where it all started. The ships were the first step into slavery for black people in the United States. By putting this painting at the very end, Rankine is suggesting that we need to look deeper into history to solve the problem of racism. Prior to the painting Rankine writes, "I can hear the even breathing that creates passages to dreams" (159). In light of the painting that follows, the passages Rankine is referring to could be "The Middle Passage" which was the journey on the slave ship. This journey is known to have been inhuman and a good portion of the slaves were thrown out of the ships for various reasons such as diseases. The dreams Rankine is referring to could be "The American Dream". America was supposed to be the land of opportunity. However, for the slaves, America became the land of imprisonment and destruction of mind and soul. They were forced to forget who they were, but also denied the right to become a part of the country they were serving. The slaves that were on that ship could never have imagined what battles they would fight and the fact that the battles would continue on till this day.

The five images that have been discussed carry profound racial implications that African Americans have gone through and are still going through. The image of Jim Crow Rd. tells the story of segregation, Youngman Hennessy brings out stereotypes that are overshadowing their real origin, Hurston emphasizes on alienation when ones color jumps out before the person, the untitled image focuses on invisibility where blackness can be represented by a single person, and the slave ship takes all these issues to the very beginning and contextualizes them.

Rankine writes, "I don't know how to end what doesn't have an ending" (*Citizen* 159). Somehow I believe that Rankine placed the painting of the slave ship at the very end of *Citizen* to create some sort of circle. All the events and accounts Rankine has meditated on throughout *Citizen* all have a connection to and circle back to slavery and slave mentality. Rankine is saying that slavery and slave mentality is a vital point in the discussion about racism, although she has avoided it mostly throughout *Citizen*. Perhaps this is more of a lesson she is trying to teach us. The history of racism will show what has been done wrong and what needs to be done right.

## **5 Blackness in the White Imagination**

Rankine meditates on blackness in the white imagination which can be perpetuated by the media (specifically newsgathering organizations). How Rankine encourages us to think about the media system gives us answers to how the media can affect the opinion of the general public and also the questions Rankine wants us to ask whenever the media presents racial news coverage that are underlying with microaggressions. Rankine writes in a time where police brutalities have become explicit and frequent in the media. The attention to microaggressions remains necessary in a time where there are explicit microaggressions as Rankine argues that microaggressions are causing these atrocious acts. Police brutalities have surfaced in the media and can no longer be pushed aside or claimed to not exist. Rankine believes that so many black men are shot and killed by the police because they cannot police their imagination. The police are mostly stopping and frisking black men not because of criminal behavior, but because of imagined behavior. Rankine sees a connection between the media and the criminal justice system where one perpetuates the black stereotype while the other takes action on that perpetuated imagination.

The first section of this chapter will discuss how Rankine encourages us to think about the use of microaggressions in the media system and how the media portrayed the black victims during the Hurricane Katrina and the shooting of Mark Duggan. “Media” will exclusively refer to newsgathering organizations. The second section will be a discussion on how Rankine encourages us to think about the criminal justice system in light of recent police brutalities.

### **5.1 The Twenty-first Century Narrative**

The media is a very important communication channel that is central in the American democracy. The media opens up a platform where news can be shared, discussions can be made and influences can be given. The media is recently considered a phenomenon more than it is considered an abstract category which covers a number of unrelated institutions. The media encompasses newsgathering organizations as well as mass communications, which means that radio, films, television and books can be considered varies forms of the media as a communication platform. (Bogart 15) Lately the social media phenomenon has also taken the world by storm connecting people from all over the world to share everything from serious

issues to funny videos. For the sake of the discussion on Rankine's accounts, the media will refer to newsgathering organizations in order to look at how the news presents different issues that involve black people in *Citizen*.

### **The Media System in the US**

All countries do not have the same media system. It is most common to divide the media system in three models; the Democratic Corporatist Model, which is mostly found in northern Europe, the Polarized Pluralist Model, which is prevalent in the Mediterranean, and finally the Liberal Model, which is the one we will be discussing. These are ideal types which means that these models fit the countries they are used in only roughly as there are considerable differences between the countries that are grouped together. The Liberal Model applies to Britain, Ireland and North America. The Liberal Model focuses mainly on commercial media and a dominance of market mechanism (Hallin 11). The media system in the U.S also follows The Libertarian Theory which emphasizes on conveying the truth without the pressure of corporate owners or advertisers. The truth is not supposed to be influenced and changed by people of power. The idea is that people who are given all the information on an issue will be able to determine what is true and what is false and make good choices. This does not mean, however, that people who oppose the ideas that are believed to be true will not be heard. On the contrary, the theory is that all people should be heard and all opinions considered. The job of the media is to present different ideas and viewpoints of an issue. This is commonly referred to as the free-market place of ideas where all voices are heard. The U.S advocates freedom of press (Biagi 365). Although all voices are supposed to be heard, this concept raises questions of whether or not all voices are equally valued. It is one thing to have the freedom to utter yourself in a public platform, but how much is that freedom worth if you are not taken seriously? Likewise, it is close to impossible to have a neutral-based media platform. There is always an opposition of "good" and "bad", where mainly the media decides for us what will be considered good and what will be considered bad. When watching the news or reading a newspaper, the media clearly has an agenda, although this Libertarian theory indicates that the media only presents the truth and the final judgment lies with the people. The media decides for us how important an issue is by how often it is showcased and emphasized. When an issue is constantly repeated it creates a connotation to what it is linked to. The front page cover of a newspaper or the opening story on the news gives us the signal that this is of great importance. For instance, Muslims and terrorism, which is two terms used



so often together, that for some they could be mutually interchangeable. The media has an immense power to tell us what we need to do, think and feel. It does not necessarily mean that the media is able to make us all have the same opinions about certain issues, but we mostly agree on the importance of certain issues because we are all equally exposed to it. This section will focus on how Rankine encourages us to think about the Media system in light of two incidents she discusses in *Citizen*.

### **Hurricane Katrina and the Media**

Rankine depicts the lack of help black Americans experienced when the Hurricane hit New Orleans in 2005. Rankine presents the urgency and despair that occurred during the national tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in one of her Script for Situation videos with quotes collected from *CNN*. The event is known as a tragedy, not only because of the obvious damage and loss of nature, homes and human beings, but the immense suffering black Americans went through and the way the media painted a national narrative that viewed them more as looters than victims (Craven).

Hurricane Katrina killed more than thirteen hundred people in five states, most of the deaths occurred in New Orleans where the majority of the victims were poor black people. The conditions made it difficult for anyone in the city to leave and any rescue workers to come in. Dead bodies were left floating in the water. Around fifty thousand in New Orleans were jammed in the city's convention center waiting for help for several days (Vorhees 417).

The media played a central role in the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Everything was watched live on television, but very little was being done. A whole nation watched in shock as people were screaming in desperation. Microaggressions towards poor black victims grazed the news. The city was portrayed to be a dangerous lawless state that made rescuers reluctant to go out and help. The Bush administration were spreading false information through the media about what caused the flooding and issues they had with the federal disaster relief. Many false claims were not challenged. This was particularly problematic because the television was the primary source of information which meant that this information was reaching the whole of the US as everyone was watching the national tragedy unfold (Vorhees 417). Rankine starts her account on Hurricane Katrina by writing,

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).

Rankine is drawing a picture of what black Americans were going through during Hurricane Katrina. After hours had passed they were simply just standing there desperately waiting for help. Rankine plays with words when she says, “maybe wading, maybe waving”. Both “wading” and “waving” sound similar to “waiting”. They were maybe wading and maybe waving, but more than wading and waving, they were definitely waiting. The real tragedy is that Rankine’s account is when they have been waiting for hours, but all in all they would wait for days. “The deep waters of everything backed up” can both be symbolic and literal. It is literal in the sense that some were standing on top of rooftops because the deep waters had risen almost to that height. However, it can also be symbolic in the sense that the deep waters of everything backed up could be all the frustration and emotional baggage. Why are they not getting help? They are being filmed, but why is nobody helping? The emotional baggage is emotions of anger and disappointment that they have been carrying around from previous experiences and now it is all cooped up on a rooftop being very transparent. It seems as though everything in their lives have led up to this moment. There is no helping hand in sight which validates everything they have ever feared to believe. Nobody is coming. Rankine says that “nobody could see it coming”. This phrase is particularly powerful. It has a double meaning. Nobody could see the hurricane coming. It was predicted, but nobody could know the extent to which it would ruin so much and become catastrophic. At the same time, nobody could see this other catastrophic event to happen. The fact that black Americans would suffer as much as they did was also a certain surprise. Similarly to the hurricane which was predicted, the way black Americans would be treated could be predicted, yet like the hurricane, it was not expected to reach the extend it did. They were, as Rankine writes, climbing over bodies, stranded on rooftops and trapped in buildings.

It is a battle of the poor and the rich, the have and the have-nots, and the blacks and the whites. The victims fell under all of these categories. They were poor, they had little and they were black. It was a classic binary between those who deserved to be helped because of everything they had and everything they were, and those who did not deserve to be helped

because of what they did not have and what they were. “You simply get chills every time you see these poor individuals, so many of these people almost all of them that we see, are so poor, someone else said, and they are so black” (85). As mentioned, the majority of the black victims were poor, but they were also “so black”. This expression indicates that there are different degrees to being black. I believe that to be very black is to fall under most of the black stereotypes. The less you fall under the stereotypes, the less black you are. If the hurricane victims were very black they would be falling under the categories of being underprivileged, undereducated, poor, unemployed, thieves, violent and angry. This is not to say that they were all of these things, but with the use of microaggressions this is what the narrative the media went with. Black Americans were described as looters when they were fending for their lives trying to find food, while the white Americans were simply “finding” things (Vorhees 418).

Rankine writes, “The fiction of the facts assumes innocence, ignorance, / lack of intention, misdirection; the necessary conditions / of a certain time and place” (83). Here Rankine is describing what everyone wants to think. Perhaps the rescuers did not know the dire situation they were in, perhaps they did not intend for it to go so far, and perhaps they got wrong the information. “The fiction of the facts” describes a reality so terrifying that it sounds more like fiction than it does reality. Because the reality sounds more like fiction, the victims are trying to make sense of it all by making up excuses for them. Rankine does showcase the concept of making excuses for the other party a few times in *Citizen*. Sometimes the excuses of trying to rationalize the injustice that occurs almost sounds like chanting. It is as if they are trying to convince themselves of it although it is not true. Somehow this could be a way to try to stay sane in an insane situation. However, I do strongly believe that Rankine is sharing these thoughts to emphasize that although some black Americans try to make sense of it all by making up excuses, deep down they know that they will always doubt it.

“You need your glasses / to single out what you know is there because doubt is / inexorable” (9). Doubt cannot be stopped in these situations when the racial aspect is staring you in the face. It is almost as if you need these “glasses” to look deeper into the situation to have the confidence to say that it is racism. Excuses are there for people who cannot face the truth such as the interaction between a man and a woman who were waiting for help during Hurricane Katrina suggests,

Faith, not fear, she said. She'd heard that once and was

trying to stamp the phrases on her mind. At the time, she couldn't speak it aloud. He wouldn't tolerate it. He was angry. Where were they? Where was anyone? This is a goddamn emergency, he said (83).

The woman is trying to stamp the phrases on her mind. She would like to hold on to the faith that people will not abandon them. The fact that she needs to stamp the phrases on her mind shows how difficult it is to believe. She has to convince herself that this is not racially motivated. She has to believe better about her fellow citizens. She would rather believe the fiction of the facts. The man, however, is mad because he sees it for what it is. He knows why the help is not coming. It is ironic how the black Hurricane Katrina victims were looked upon as angry looters, when that would be a natural reaction to desperation. To try and find food and ways to live should be common sense, and to be outraged from the lack of help should equally be viewed as common sense.

### **The power of the media in light of Hurricane Katrina**

The news coverage of Hurricane Katrina was very much based on the fact that they did not have much of a first person narrative. The journalists had difficulties to reach the victims which resulted in many speculations. It was easier to remember the news anchors than the actual people in danger (Craven). Even so, the depiction of the black victims was not the same as the depiction of the white victims. There was a clear difference between the two narratives. Rankine repeats multiple times in her account of Hurricane Katrina, "Did you see their faces?". I believe Rankine chose this quote to emphasize the lack of humanity in the news coverage. Rankine criticizes the media, but at the same time chooses to go with quotes from a newsgathering organization. The quotes Rankine has taken from *CNN* only highlight the suffering even more. Rankine's indication is that although black Americans were experiencing slander; the images of people on rooftops, the dead bodies and the cries for help should have been enough to override the false claims that were being made. The faces were actual human beings who were suffering. They were not the savages they were described to be. They were only in desperation. When the hurricane hit, black people were rumored to rape, murder, steal and do other horrible crimes. This was the national narrative the media chose to go with. New Orleans became a lawless state filled with dirt, dead bodies, and crimes. There was no human voice present. Deen Freelon, an assistant professor of

communications at American University, commented on the tragedy of the Hurricane how black Americans were neglected and dehumanized. He said that “typically with black people, we have to humanize ourselves” (qtd. Craven). The quote indicates that unless black people speak up and defend their humanity, there will not be anyone else out there willing to do it for them. This also means that if black people do not humanize themselves, they will be considered savages. The base of the argument is that the starting point of depicting black people is that of dehumanization.

Rankine encourages us to realize that the media clearly has an agenda. The media has the power to brutally tear down a community with their words and depictions. Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster, and the focus was mostly on the disaster. There was no one to blame for it, and because there was no one to blame for it, it was difficult to understand why certain things happened. It is difficult to believe that the victims were systemically given little help because of who they were. It also raises the question on why the media was using microaggressions when describing the black victims. The media does have an agenda, and in this case they used their agenda to demonize the victims of the hurricane. What is easily forgotten is that the media is not a detached unit of our society that is observing us from the outside with neutral glasses. The media is very much a part of our society. The media already knows what we like, dislike, believe and consider false. They know which buttons to push for something to be believable. By feeding into the black stereotypes that are already somewhat believed, the media was able to make New Orleans a dangerous city with dangerous angry black people.

### **Mark Duggan and the Media**

Mark Duggan was a twenty-nine year old black man who was shot dead by the police in Tottenham in 2011. Rankine gives an account on the incident. Duggan was shot getting out of a minicab after being accused of illegal possession of a gun during a planned arrest. He was shot by officers from Scotland Yard’s Operation Trident which is a special operation unit addressing gun crime in black communities (Peachey). In the media Duggan was sometimes described as a gangster and a drug dealer, although these were only allegations and nothing that was confirmed. Other times he was described the way his family described him; a loving father of four and a soon husband-to-be (Barkham). The shooting of Duggan caused a lot of uproar in England as his death had too many unanswered questions. The media played a big role in how everything played out. New information was constantly grazing the newspapers

and news stations, much of it tainting Duggan's name and justifying the action of the police. At one point it was believed that Duggan fired his gun first which was what led to the police shooting him. Later it was confirmed that Duggan never fired his gun (Le Marie). All of these discussions were going on before anyone was sure of whether or not Duggan even had a gun. A witness claimed that one of the police officers planted the gun at the scene (Pettifor). The jury came to the conclusion in January of 2014 that it was a lawful killing despite the fact that new information had come in that Duggan had gotten rid of the gun before he was shot, which would mean that the police did not shoot in self defense. The killing of Duggan quickly triggered the 2011 England riots which first started in London but also occurred in different towns in England.

Rankine's Script starts off with you sitting on the fifth step of a staircase in a house in London. You see a torn passport photo where half the woman's face is blown up and framed as art. You ponder on what art really is with a quote from Baldwin. Baldwin believed that "The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers" (qtd. in Rankine, *Citizen* 115). At first it seems strange that Rankine would start her account of Duggan's death with a meditation on art. However, Rankine is focusing on Baldwin's views on the purpose of art which could be applied to the aftermath of Duggan's death. Baldwin's claim is that finding the questions that are overshadowed by the answers is the true purpose of art. In Duggan's account, Rankine is looking at the relationship between questions and answers. Usually, a question is followed by an answer, but Rankine is exploring the thought of turning that order around. During the protests of Duggan's death people were screaming for answers. There were so many dots that could not be connected and people wanted to know the truth of what really happened. According to Rankine perhaps people were asking the wrong question. They already knew the answer. They knew that what they were hearing and reading was wrong. Why else would they riot and protest? Rankine writes about how the government officials in England addressed the violent outbreaks as "sheer criminality" and "opportunism" (*Citizen* 116). The media went with the same language and wrote about it in that sense; all the while overlooking what the core reason for the riots were. Rankine stresses how all the focus shifted to the riots – forgetting what started it and that an unarmed man was shot to death.

Rankine's account of the incident is a conversation between two middle aged people sitting on a staircase in London. One of them is you. You are speaking to the other middle aged man about the recent riots in Hackney. Rankine writes, "He says the / riots were similar to the Rodney King- LA riots; however, / he feels that the UK media handled them very

differently from / the US media” (115). You do not ask why. Perhaps Rankine feels that it is obvious that he should think so. Although the Rodney King incident and the Mark Duggan incident enter the same discussion about police violence towards black men, they were still different circumstances with different outcomes. King survived, but Duggan died. King’s beating was caught on tape, but Duggan’s killing was hardly seen. King could defend himself, but Duggan would never have that chance.

Rankine meditates on whether or not it would have been different if there had been actual footage of Duggan’s execution.

In the United States, Rodney King’s beating, caught on video, trumped all other images. If there had been a video of Duggan being executed, there might be less ambiguity around what started the riots, you hazard to say (116).

The man who believed that the LA riots and the Hackney riots were handled differently is perhaps overlooking or is consciously aware of how different the portrayal of the incidents were. Rodney King was severely beaten on camera which made that fact undeniable. Duggan’s death did not have that type of clear evidence which created more room for speculations. Duggan’s case had few witnesses and no possible way to re-watch it. Rankine is convinced that there would be less ambiguity on why the riots started if there would have been footage from the scene. However, that fact in itself raises questions. Do black lives have to be blatantly wronged with clear evidence in order for them to be believed? And even when the evidence is obvious, why do so many offenders go free without being convicted? Rankine does not say, she merely ponders on the fact. Rankine compares Rodney King and Mark Duggan in terms of the public reactions to the incidents. Both incidents sparked riots. “A similar accumulation and release drove many Americans / to respond to the Rodney King beating. Before it hap / -pened, it had happened and happened” (116). The accumulation and release Rankine is referring to is that of racial injustice. Similarly to how black Brits had held in their anger and injustice, black Americans had done the same. And they both found a chance to release it together with other people who had had similar experiences. These were incidents that had happened time and time again, but they had not gotten the attention they deserved.

### **The power of the Media in light of Mark Duggan's killing**

During the aftermath of Duggan's shooting the focus was mostly on the riots that took place shortly after. The media coverage was so consumed with the vandalizing and stealing that Duggan's case lost its shock factor. Rankine is definitely emphasizing how the media has the power to overshadow important issues, and also how similarly to the account on Hurricane Katrina, the media is able to create false claims about a case. The fact that Rankine is addressing Duggan's case means that she thinks that there is an issue about his death and the result of the verdict.

In Rankine's account of Mark Duggan, the middle aged man asks, "Will you write about Duggan? The man wants to know. / Why don't you? you ask. Me? he asks, looking slightly / irritated" (116). You assume that perhaps the concept and feeling of a riot seem too foreign to him. Rankine describes the man you are sitting with to be "a novelist with the face of the English sky" (115), which indicates that he is an Englishman. He finds it strange to write about something he is not able to associate himself with and considers you to be a more suitable candidate for that task. Rankine ponders on how difficult it can really be to feel another person's injustice. Why can the man not try to put himself in other people's shoes and try to feel or try to understand their injustice? There will be no room for discussion if only black people write about black people problems. Rankine is indicating that it is important for people of all background to engage themselves in current issues that are happening in their society. As Rankine mentioned, citizenship should be able to override racial distinction, but if a society is grouped into colors, then racial issues will always be exclusive to the race it concerns and never be addressed as a social problem that concerns everyone ("Claudia Rankine's *Citizen...*").

Rankine calls the incidents with police violence "wrongfully ordinary". "As a black body in the States, / your response was necessary if you were to / hold on to the fiction that this was an event 'wrongfully / ordinary' "(117). Rankine is referring to the need black Americans had to go out and riot as a response to the Rodney King beating. By mentioning this in Mark Duggan's account, Rankine is justifying the riots that followed Duggan's death. A response is necessary to show that a black body cannot be in danger simply because it is a black body. Rankine calls these events "fiction and "wrongfully ordinary". In the account on Hurricane Katrina, Rankine described the conditions to be so horrible that the "fiction of the facts assumes innocence..." (83). Rankine is referring to how the fact that they were being left behind in the Hurricane was such an evil fact, that if you believed that they did it out of



necessity and innocence – that would be considered fiction. Similarly Rankine draws on this same fiction when she is describing how wrongfully ordinary the police brutalities are. The fiction is the belief that this was not an ordinary act because the truth is that police brutalities can be considered ordinary in the US. Something ordinary is something acceptable and normalized. A response was necessary to emphasize how that this was not an ordinary act, although it was. Rankine stresses the importance of a reaction which is channeling Rankine's account on Zinedine Zidane. Without a reaction it will be overlooked and seen as normal. Something ordinary is not usually wrong as wrongful acts are classed as mistakes that should not be repeated. However, police violence, especially in the US is, in Rankine's words, wrongfully ordinary. A response is necessary to emphasize that although it is seen often, it does not make it right.

## 5.2 Policing the Imagination

The criminal justice system has a long history of being involved in the racial oppression of African Americans. African Americans have a unique position in the American society as a racialized minority. They have a history of oppression and a history of being falsely accused of crimes they did not commit (Unnever, and Gabbidon 5). The policing of the imagination is a quote taken from *Citizen* after Rankine has meditated on several deaths of black men killed by law enforcements. “Because white men can’t / police their imagination / black men are dying” (135). The policing of the imagination is referring to an imagination that is not controlled. This imagination views African Americans as dangerous and a threat to the point where law enforcements fail to make rational decisions, and black men end up dying. Holmes and Smith, authors of *Race and Police Brutality: Roots of an Urban Dilemma* (2008) argue that police violence comes from certain police-minority conflicts. There are different and frequently conflicting concerns about crimes and its victims. The police view the minority as a danger and therefore they respond differently to them. They use a “working personality” that compromises mistrust, cynicism and hostility. On the flip side, the minority sees the police as a threat and an oppressive power symbol (34). The police imagination of African American offending is not baseless. African Americans account for twenty-eight percent of all arrest, yet they only make up thirteen percent of the American population. Furthermore, Robbery and homicide is largely committed by African American men which means that black men, who essentially only make up six percent of the American population, are arrested for nearly half of the homicides and robberies committed in the United States each year (Unnever, and Gabbidon 2). However, these statistics do not explain why African Americans are committing these offences and the larger picture that connects police violence, African American offending, and American history. I will use one of Rankine’s Script for Situations concerning “Stop and frisk”, and one meditation on Trayvon Martin’s case in order to find out how Rankine encourages us to think about the criminal justice system.

In order to understand why a substantial amount of African Americans are active in the criminal offence department, we have to briefly look at what African Americans have faced and are still facing. African Americans have a unique lived experience that they do not share with other minorities or whites in America. They were brought forcefully to the United States as slaves and were living under the rules of slavery for over two hundred years (Unnever, and Gabbidon 4). They were treated as animals and only valued for how they benefitted their

white masters. The slaves were also living in horrible conditions and disobedience or mistakes could easily result in horrible punishments including lashing and mutilation of various limbs (Unnever, and Gabiddon 5). After slavery, they had to go through Jim Crow laws which ultimately reduced them to second class citizens. They were isolated and treated with contempt long after slavery (Unnever, and Gabiddon 4). Whites who were resentful would brutalize African Americans and continue to subordinate them. Law enforcement would either engage in these awful acts or they would turn a blind eye to them. The twentieth century continued the atrocities where police brutalities were still commonplace. Rape cases were also exclusively almost reserved for black men who allegedly had raped white women (Unnever, and Gabiddon 5).

Unnever and Gabbidon, professor of criminology and professor of criminal justice, argue that “the foundation for the continued racial subordination of African Americans...is the inimitable dislike that whites have toward African Americans” (6). They showed a data of Americans who ranked their preferences among minorities. The results showed that blacks were ranked the least attractive minority the Americans would want as neighbors (qtd. in Unnever, and Gabiddon 6). Racial segregation and strong contempt continues to impact African Americans. The impact sometimes triggers riots and unrest. However, these riots and unrests do not occur without any forewarning. Usually these riots and unrests come in the aftermath of criminal justice injustices. An example of that would be the Rodney King beating which resulted in the acquittal of four Los Angeles police officers although they were accused of the beating. The acquittal soon sparked the riots that followed (Unnever, and Gabiddon 6). It is important to understand that these incidents are not the only reason why riots occur. On the contrary, the incidents that spark them only further prove their point. They are not a deciding factor for their beliefs. Criminal justice injustices that are out in the open for everyone to see on the news make it easier to gather many people for their common cause. Their point is that African Americans are being targeted.

### **Stop-and-Frisk**

How a case is handled is first determined by what happened and under what circumstances. Rankine emphasizes racial profiling when she is making us think about the criminal justice system. In Rankine’s Stop-and-Frisk situation video which is another of Rankine’s Script for Situation videos, Rankine takes on the narrative of a black man who is being stopped by the police for no apparent reason other than the color of his skin. Rankine writes,

I knew whatever was in front of me was happening  
and then the police vehicle came to a screeching halt in front of  
me like they were setting up a blockade. Everywhere were  
flashes, a siren sounding and a stretched-out roar. Get on  
the ground. Get on the ground now. Then I just knew (105).

This is one of the few accounts Rankine chooses to take on a narrative and use the first person pronoun. But why would she choose to embody an account that is not hers? Rankine could be indicating that these specifically horrifying moments of injustice and oblivion can only be understood with experience. As previously discussed in chapter three, the second person pronoun forces the reader to become a part of the text, but the first person pronoun gives the readers a choice. One can either become the “I” or immediately reject it. Rankine gives the readers a choice. The way Rankine is describing the situation makes it seem as though he has violated a serious crime. The police vehicle is blocking his car, the sirens are loud and the flashing lights are disturbing. Although the man knows that he has not done something wrong – that is not comforting. He knows the minute he is stopped that it cannot be anything other than the fact that he is black. He is second guessing himself wondering if he was speeding, but he is aware of the fact that he was not. The man was carrying a briefcase as he had been at one of his client’s house, indicating that this is an educated black man (perhaps a lawyer). “ I left my client’s house knowing I would be pulled over. I / knew. I just knew” (105). Before he is stopped he opens up his briefcase on the passenger seat so that they will see that there is no threat in case he will be pulled over. He is already anticipating it although it has not happened yet. Rankine is describing a constant fear that comes with being a black man. He is eventually pulled over. He is pulled to the ground, cuffed and pushed into the police vehicle. He was eventually charged with speeding, told to strip naked and then put his clothes on again only to walk all those miles home again. The whole situation is too dramatic for a simple speeding ticket. The pulling to the ground, the cuffing, and the speeding is suggesting a bigger crime. As if they were looking for something else.

Rankine repeats, “You are not the guy and still you fit the description / because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting / the description” (105). Here she is clearly stating the reason why he is being pulled over. The police were looking for anyone who looks like

him. Rankine is indicating that they were not looking for a specific face with a name. They were simply looking for a man driving while being black. When Rankine mentions that he was already prepared to be pulled over by his decision to open up his briefcase in the passenger seat, she is already stating that this is a constant worry and fear black men are walking around with. Rankine expresses how mad he is by saying that he cannot drive himself sane. “You can’t drive yourself sane” (107). He is so angry he is crying. It is difficult to stay sane while driving when the fear of being stopped is constantly on the mind. The recent video clips of police brutalities towards mainly black men show that it does not take much to be killed. A sudden movement, a rude comment, and a life can be lost. “This motion wears a guy out. Our motion is / wearing you out and still you are not that guy” (105). Rankine is expressing how it is tiring to always look over your shoulder because you know that you can be blamed for something you have not done. Rankine is portraying the feeling of distrust African Americans have to the police, and how this feeling is valid. It is wearing you out because you are not the guy. When Rankine says “and still” you are not the guy, it suggests that this has happened to him many times before, and every time it has happened, he has not been the guy. It also suggests that the police will continue chasing you until you are the guy. This oppression is closely related to Unnever and Gabbidon’s theory about African American offending. Many African Americans have a distrust to the justice system because the justice system is “out to get them”. Similarly, Rankine is also stating that the law enforcements who stop and frisk black men without a valid reason are unable to police their imagination to the point where they are almost seeking them out convinced that they will find something illegal.

### **Trayvon Martin**

Rankine starts a short account of Trayvon Martin’s case with a blank page with a date on it. The date reads “July 13, 2013”. Trayvon Martin was a young seventeen year old man who was shot and killed by a neighborhood watch due to an alleged altercation. July 13, 2013 was the day the jury acquitted the shooter, Georg Zimmerman, of manslaughter and second-degree murder charges (“Trayvon Martin Shooting”). Rankine lets the date speak for itself as it is standing on its own on the blank page. The page creates a certain pause. It feels like Rankine is telling her readers to stop up for a second and ponder on what that date really means. That date means that a young black man who had his whole life in front of him was shot and killed and no one had to answer for that sin. That date means that you can get away with murder; if you are the right type of murderer and your victim is the right type of victim. The date lies

heavy on the page reminding the readers of what the justice system can do and where it potentially fails.

Rankine writes on the very next page that just this morning there was another “what did he say?” (151), suggesting that a comment was expressed that needed a double-take because it was inappropriate. Rankine is jumping from the date of Zimmerman’s acquittal to a couple who are experiencing a confrontation outside their vehicle. “Come on get back in the car. Your partner wants to face / off with a mouth and who knows what handheld objects / the other vehicle carries” (151). Your partner wants to have a verbal conversation about a conflict they are experiencing with the other vehicle, but who knows if the other vehicle is carrying a gun? Rankine is suggesting that as a black person it is not safe to defend oneself as defending oneself can be a threat of its own. Rankine is creating a type of paranoia where the partner who is sitting worried in the car believes that simply confronting an issue is life threatening, but the paranoia is based on reality. However, Rankine claims that sometimes you have to back down although you are in the right because while you are fighting for a small cause, that small cause can cost you your life. Sometimes you have to priorities what you life is worth. “Trayvon Martin’s name sounds from the car a dozen times each half hour. You pull your love back into the seat because though no one seems to be chasing you, the justice system has other plans” (151). Rankine does not specify if the news they are hearing are the news of his shooting or the news of Zimmerman being acquitted of murder. Considering the fact that the date of the acquittal is on the opposite page, chances are that Rankine is referring to the acquittal. You pull your love back into the seat because you are witnessing what it means to be black. It means that you are not safe. It means that you can be killed without actually committing a crime.

The account Rankine has on Trayvon Martin is more of a meditation on the feeling after the jury’s verdict. Shortly after the account of the couple who are sitting in their vehicle listening to the radio, Rankine starts the meditation. There is a numbing effect of humming, there is sighing and aching. The body is trying to cope with all the injustice it has experienced. Rankine realizes how this is everyday life. You grow used to it. The news of yet another killing gives a numbing effect because you have become desensitized to it. Yet you feel something. Rankine is exploring the notion of feelings when your feelings are not validated by the people who are causing you to have these feelings. “Can feelings be a hazard, a warning sign, a dis / -turbance, distaste, disgrace? Don’t feel like you are / mistaken. It’s not that (Is it not that?) you are oversensitive / or misunderstanding” (152). Rankine is claiming

here that you are not oversensitive or misunderstanding because this is a serious issue that needs a proper reaction, but people will question you and claim that you are oversensitive and that you are misunderstanding the situation in order to disregard your feelings and to validate their position on the matter. Rankine shortly after describes a reaction you get when you express your feelings about a certain topic regarding race where the other party disagrees with you. The reaction is a demeaning response where you are being told that you are ridiculous. None of the other black friends they have feel the same way you do and how you feel is how you feel. This remark on the claim that none of the other black friends they have feel the same way you do is a disregard of perspectives. Just because they are both black does not mean that they have to feel the same way or perceive things the same way. This issue comes under the category of the lack of black individuality. The sense that a minority is being grouped and painted with the same brush is highly problematic. This remark suggests that if one black person makes a comment on something, all others must think and feel the same way.

When they also suggest that “how you / feel is how you feel even if what you perceive isn’t tied to / what is...” (152), is indicating that if your feelings contradict what they believe they can pretend like those feelings were never uttered. Those feelings are also not tied to what is. However, Rankine questions what this mean. What are they referring to? What are your feelings not tied to? I believe that they are referring to the truth. Rankine is questioning the truth because sometimes the truth is just a matter of perspective. They believe that your feelings are not tied to the truth because they do not agree with what you are saying; perhaps because what you feel is not in favor of their own race or it is making them uncomfortable. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Rankine is asked what makes racism so hard to call out. Rankine answers that it is believed that making other people feel uncomfortable is worse than racism. (Kellaway, “Claudia Rankine...”) The offence of making someone feel uncomfortable could be partly the reason why they tell you that you are ridiculous. You put them on the spot choosing discomfort.

The fact that Rankine is addressing the notion of feelings and people’s disregard of them has a connection to Rankine’s literary project. When important issues are not being discussed or they are stopped by remarks claiming that your feelings are not valid and that it is not tied to the truth, it allows issues to pass without the importance of it being stressed. Therefore it can happen over and over again while it loses its shock factor. Similarly, Trayvon Martin’s killer was acquitted by a jury, and the jury is made up of regular citizens who are exposed to the same things everyone else is. Rankine does not explicitly blame Zimmerman

for murder, but her meditation on feelings and numbness proves that she is leaning towards it. She does not need to say it in order for it to be understood. However, Rankine's focus is not on Zimmerman. In fact, Rankine does not mention him at all. Her goal is not to point fingers and give blame. Her goal is to make us think and reflect over what we are allowing in our society and what is being supported by our laws.

Rankine wrote an article for *The New York Times* shortly after the Charleston shooting in June, 2015 where nine African Americans were shot dead in a church during a Bible-study meeting. The importance of this article is that Rankine reinforces her ideas on the development of racism. She believes firmly that racism does not descend out of the blue; rather it is a gradual process that grows by a lack of acknowledgement. Rankine describes the shootings as an event out of time indicating that the event and the times we are living in should not be connected. We live in a time where we should have put issues like racially motivated murders behind us. Rankine claims, "The spectacle of the shooting suggests an event out of time, as if the killing of black people with white-supremacist justification interrupts anything other than regular television programming. But Dylann Storm Roof did not create himself from nothing... Every racist statement he has made he could have heard all his life. He, along with the rest of us, has been living with slain black bodies" (Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life"). Dylann Storm Roof is the twenty-one year old white American killer who shot them. He is a self-identified white supremacist, but who was also described as a "disturbed young man". Rankine ironically observes the fact that various news outlets have described him as being disturbed. There is no doubt that Rankine finds this amusing as it is a reoccurring theme when the killer is white. Mental insanity can be accepted and understood. However, rarely does an African American shooter or killer get a description like that. Rankine understands that even the way white Americans are being referred to on the news is privileged. They are often served with the benefit of the doubt whilst African Americans can be killed on the spot without actually doing a crime and without a chance to explain themselves. The recent footages of different police brutalities towards African Americans, especially African American men, indicate that such a statement might not be far from the truth. Footages taken from incidents such as when Eric Garner, an African American man who was strangled to death by police officers for selling single cigarettes (although Garner himself claimed that he did not sell anything), gives an insight on what it means to be black in America. Garner is jumped on by several officers while being choked. He clearly says that he cannot breathe several times and shows no form of resistance. He later died in the hospital ("



'I can't breathe' "). Before Garner was choked, he tried to explain the situation and how frustrating it was to always be followed and questioned, but Garner's voice was deemed worthless. It is this comparison that Rankine finds baffling. One side of America has the authorities make excuses for them for crimes they have committed while another side of America has authorities accusing them of crimes they have not committed. *Citizen* highlights the different behaviors, words and attitudes African Americans are exposed to and receive, and how they are supposed to be fine with it and act as if nothing is wrong or out of place. Rankine is making us stop and think. These incidents which have been going on long before the phenomenon of video recording, suggests that not much has changed.

## 6 Creating a Link

*Citizen* contains multiple meditations that seem autonomous and random. Rankine's meditations are usually followed by her stories which come in the form of different events and incidents from her friends and gathered together with her own personal anecdotes. These incidents make up most of *Citizen* except for her meditations and her significantly large section dedicated to Script for Situation where the stories are mostly not mere incidents, but huge well-known events that had detrimental outcomes like Trayvon Martin's death. Rankine's literary project is laced with racial issues black Americans face on a day-to-day basis that often goes under the radar, but also how these small day-to-day incidents build up and turn into macroaggressions in her meditations. Every section brings up these issues over and over again, but something changes for every section creating the possibility for a link between the different meditations or the different sections in *Citizen*. This last chapter in this thesis is a collection of different meditations in *Citizen* where I will explore if there is a common thread that connects them which will potentially support the argument that *Citizen* is consciously using the placements of the different meditations as a tool to further emphasize Rankine's literary project.

What every section has in common is that they all contain some form of meditation. The meditations work as a pause in Rankine's anecdotal stories. The incidents are usually a short interaction. There is no time to sit down and truly reflect on what has happened. Consequently, the issues are not truly dealt with. Rankine sits the readers down after every few incident to self-reflect. Rankine goes into the depth of her/your/our feelings to embrace the frustrations these incidents create. Following an incident where your friend calls you by her black housekeeper's name in the first section, Rankine meditates on the impact the wrong words have.

An unsettled feeling keeps the body front and center. The wrong words enter your day like a bad egg in your mouth and puke runs down your blouse, a dampness drawing your stomach in toward your rib cage. When you look around only you remain. Your own disgust at what you smell, what you feel... (8).

In this excerpt from a meditation, Rankine describes a feeling that comes after an interaction where the wrong words were said. The body becomes hypervisible as the words that enter the body pushes your body to the surface. If your friend had seen you as an individual and not a black body, then she would not have been able to call you by her housekeeper's name. You are naturally hurt. This is a friend which means that it is someone you are close with. The unsettled feeling indicates a type of worry. Is this person truly your friend if they are able to mix you up with someone who works for them? Am I the help? These feelings of worry and disgust at the thought fill up your body. The wrong words are not said by you but yet they enter your mouth. Or Rankine could indicate that you should have called her out on it and since you did not, you said the wrong words as well. Either way, you end up puking out these words that are almost like poison. The body rejects these words as a reflex. Overall Rankine is emphasizing the distaste you have for what has been said to you, but like always, it is a struggle you deal with yourself. It is a struggle that is always going on by yourself inside your mind. Rankine does not let you have a conversation with someone else about what you experience, it is always just you. This is Rankine's way of saying that everyday racism is so swift and frequent that many people end up not discussing it. One incident might not stand out more than others due to their frequency and consequently you deal with them yourself which only makes them build up.

The dampness and horrible smell on your blouse after the puke is your transparent feelings when you decide to look at what the wrong words make you feel. You stink because you feel horrible. Instinctively you draw your stomach in so that the dampness of the blouse will not touch your skin. You acknowledge how you feel, but you still do not want to deal with it. The puke could symbolize your feelings which you refuse to keep inside your body. By puking your feelings out on your blouse without it touching your skin, you are again refusing to deal with it. "The / blouse is rinsed, it's another week, the blouse is beneath / your sweater, against your skin, and you smell good" (8). Eventually you change out of your blouse and you wash it, which means that you wash your feelings away. You smell good now and the hurt of that day is gone. However, what you fail to realize is that you will always remember that blouse as the blouse you puked on. And although the blouse is clean now, there will always be that memory of the day you refused to let it touch your skin. The friendship you have has been tainted, but still, you do not want to deal with it. The first section contains this meditation where there is a certain denial for the reality that is faced. To acknowledge it would mean to actually confront it face on, and that is not desirable.

In the second section Rankine writes,

Again, Serena's frustrations, her disappointments, exist within a system you understand not to try to understand in any fair-minded way because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systemic, as ordinary (32).

Serena's frustrations are evident in various matches where the umpire's have given her unfair calls. Rankine describes a frustration, but also a disappointment. Disappointments are followed by hoping for something and then having that hope taken away. Serena has not given up on being treated fairly, but yet again she is experiencing a letdown. Rankine is still describing a type of denial, but this time the denial is more self-aware. "you understand not to try to understand". The self-awareness is an awareness that knows not to dig too deep into intentions or actions because they will only lead to further disappointments and an erasure of the self. The acknowledgement and the understanding of the unfair calls would be to understand that the black body is put into a system that erases the self. Rankine indicates that to confront this would only ruin yourself as you realize that this is everyday life. This is your ordinary. She later quotes Patricia Williams, an African American lawyer and author, "The cold game of equality staring makes me feel like a thin sheet of glass... I could force my presence, the real me contained in those eyes, upon them, but I would be smashed in the process" (34). Race equality is a cold game in the US because it fails to be the very meaning of the term. Williams understands that there is no room to be yourself, and if you are yourself you will be smashed the way Serena has been smashed on a sharp white background. When Serena finally decided to show her frustration in the US Open Semifinals in 2009, Serena was kicked out, banned for two years and received a fine ( Rankine, *Citizen* 29).

In the third section Rankine meditates on an incident where you are late for meeting with your friend. When you finally arrive she tells you that you are late, "you nappy-headed ho" (41). Rankine writes in her meditation,

Maybe the content of her statement is irrelevant and she only means to signal the stereotype of "black people time" by employing what she perceives to be "black people

language”. Maybe she is jealous of whoever kept you and wants to suggest you are nothing or everything to her....

You don’t know what response she expects from you nor do you care. For all your previous understandings, suddenly incoherence feels violent (41-42).

There is yet another shift in Rankine’s meditations. Now, Rankine dares to question the reason for the action. In the previous sections Rankine did not dare. Digging deeper would only mean self-destruction, but now it cannot be helped. The meditation is built up by speculations similar to the speculations in the first section when the little girl in school is wondering why Sister Evelyn never catches the other girl copying from her. “Sister Evelyn must think these two girls think a / lot alike or she cares less about cheating and more about / humiliation or she never actually saw you sitting there” (6). The speculations in the first section are more innocent, more willing to think positive thoughts. The speculations in the third section are more sinister. There is a possibility that she is signaling a stereotype and also employing “black people language”. She chooses to go for a statement that is racially charged and ultimately quite offensive. After the incident nothing is being said. There is no response from your side. There is a moment where nothing is being said and the incoherence of her comments exposes a silence that Rankine describes as violent. “You both / experience this cut...and like any other injury, you / watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture” (42). The suture is indicating that there has been a cut there before that is being re-opened. This is not something new. Like Serena’s account where Rankine points out that this erasure of the self is ordinary, these moments also become ordinary. Yet, there is acknowledgement of the violence of these words now and they hurt.

In the fourth section, Rankine writes,

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? (63).

This meditation is channeling the first meditation where Rankine writes, “When you look around only you remain” (8). Due to the frequency of everyday racism there comes a time where there is no one to blame. They become irrelevant because they have become a culture and a norm. Simultaneously the world is telling you to forget, but how does one forget what one goes through on a daily basis? The world is wrong, as Rankine expresses. All the moments that you have experienced are stored in you. They have become a part of you. In the first section, you take off your blouse and rinse it as if your feelings and memories can be rinsed away. However, Rankine argues that the body is a cupboard and everything is stored in that cupboard, even the rinsed blouse. You cannot forget, and now you have finally realized that. There is also a certain strength that comes with saying that the world is wrong. You have avoided confronting people, but now you are confronting the entire world – begging to differ and telling the whole world that its wrong.

In the fifth section Rankine writes, “

Words work as a release – well oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture...What will be needed, what goes unfelt, unsaid – what has been duplicated, redacted here, redacted there, altered to hide or disguise – words encoding the bodies they cover. And despite everything the body remains (69).

Here Rankine is emphasizing how your words can be duplicated, redacted, edited, altered, but ultimately your body cannot lie. What words fail to say, the body makes sure to utter. This is another problem with everyday racism. Certain hostile gestures cannot be called out because they are merely based on body language. The frustration of these encounters is expressed when she ends the meditation with “Occasionally it is interesting to think about the outburst if / you would just cry out – / to know what you’ll sound like is worth noting” (69). There is a certain fire inside that wants to rebel and break free from these suffocating encounters. Perhaps Rankine is entertaining the thought of a reaction to the oppression which is presented in the next section.

In the sixth section Rankine writes,

“The missing limbs, he said, the bodies lodged in piles / of rubble, dangling from rafters, lying facedown, arms / outstretched on parlor floors” (84). “Call out to them. / I don’t see them. / Call out anyway” (86). “beaten until knocked unconscious / ...hearing their own breathing their / own ears allowing their blows to take custody of this body / fallen against the hardness of the concrete floor leveled / without give?” (100).

“And there is no (Black) who has not felt, briefly or for long / periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees / and to varying effect, simple, naked, and unanswerable / hatred; who has not wanted to smash any white face” (124).

The quotes are taken from three different meditations in the sixth section. Not only are the people in these scenarios ready to confront racism, but they are actually ready to do something about it. Rankine also describes how everyday racism creates an escalation when it comes to how African Americans are treated. Rankine’s accounts so far has shown how African Americans have been treated in the sense that they have gotten racial comments and been ignored, but in this section the accounts are more lethal. The treatments have escalated to death and destruction.

The first two quotes are from the account on Hurricane Katrina which depicts the lack of help African Americans experienced. There are dead bodies laying around and no help in sight. The dead bodies stretched out on parlor floors is a symbolic description. The word “parlor” can also be used to describe an open room that guests are welcomed to sit in. The description can be interpreted as the Hurricane victims being in this open space where everyone was welcomed to watch. The whole nation was watching, but since they were guests in this house, they decided to not interfere. Their death was a matter that did not concern them.

In the second quote, one person is urging another person to call out for help even though no one is seen. Essentially they are screaming out into mere air. Similar to the encounter of the previous section when Rankine says “Occasionally it is interesting to think about the outburst if / you would just cry out – / to know what you’ll sound like is worth noting” (69). This is that outburst. They are crying out daring to show their despair; the despair of being oppressed, overlooked and forgotten.

The next quote describes the Jena six, six young African American teens, beating up a fellow white student for what was believed to be racist comments. In August 2006, a black student had asked if he could sit under a tree on campus or if it was reserved for the white kids who usually sat there. Three nooses were hanging from the tree the next day. Following

the incident with the nooses, other incidents sparked tension between the white and black students which led to the Jena six attack in December of the same year (“Race, Violence..”). The black teenagers beat up the white teenager until he was unconscious. Rankine is describing how hard they beat him in order to insinuate their anger which is another outburst and another crying out. Rankine writes that their blows allowed them to take custody of the body; the word custody indicating an act of law enforcement which means that they are taking the law into their own hands. There was perhaps a part of them who knew that if they had gone the proper route and told authority on the white kid, the case would not have been taken seriously. Instead, they chose to take matters into their own hands. They wanted to level him with the ground and give him a taste of what those nooses made them feel.

The last quote, which is a paraphrased quote by James Baldwin, can be used to explain the teenagers’ anger in some form. Baldwin explains that there are some moments where any black person will feel an unanswerable hatred. There had been tension between the white and black teenagers at Jena. There were incidents that were developing which eventually created an explosion. The white kid that was attacked could have been just a white face. The Jena six did argue that he had expressed some racial slurs, but his face accompanied by these alleged slurs could have represented all the injustice they had experienced during these months of tension. His comment as well as his face finally became the trigger. All the microaggressions have built up and overflowed which is a central concept to Rankine’s literary project. Rankine’s account on Jena six resembles her account on Zidane. They both experienced a trigger that made them lose control, and in both instances the focus was more on the violent act than the violent comments that can rupture their internal suture.

In the seventh section Rankine writes,

You are you even before you  
grow into understanding you  
are not anyone, worthless,  
not worth you.  
Even as your own weight insists  
you are here, fighting off  
the weight of nonexistence (139).



Rankine's sections have gone from denial to utter outrage, but this section shows the aftermath of all of that. Rankine is showing the readers that you do not start out feeling nonexistent, but that the world is ultimately telling you what your worth is. The emphasis is on "even before you / grow into understanding you / are not anyone." Rankine is making sure to explain that you are not worthless or nonexistent, but that this is a feeling, a metaphorical weight. It is only when you grow into understanding that some people will perceive you as worthless and you believe them, that is when the feeling of worthlessness occurs. Your own weight is the proof that you are here and you do exist. The weight of nonexistence is an additional weight that needs to be fought off. Ultimately, this is the result of all the mental strain African Americans have gone through and all the extra weight is creating an injury. Towards the end of *Citizen* Rankine writes,

You are not sick, you are injured –  
you ache for the rest of life.  
How to care for the injured body,  
the kind of body that can't hold the content it is living?  
And where is the safest place when that place  
must be someplace other than in the body? (143).

Rankine makes a distinction between illness and injury. Illness does not necessarily have to have an external factor to cause the illness. Injury, however, is caused by an external factor and it creates an injury or a wound. Rankine takes care to bring awareness to that difference. She wants African Americans to know that they are injured, and their injury can eventually heal. She also wants to make sure that African Americans know that they are not the reason for their injury. It is important to understand where the pain is coming from and that this is not something that they are inflicting onto themselves. This injury, Rankine writes, is an ache for the rest of life. The ache is an ache that is yearning for a life where the color of their skin does not determine their lives. Also, Rankine writes that the body cannot hold the content it is living, which goes back to the description of the external weight that African Americans are carrying. The emotional baggage is so heavy that it lives outside of their body, yet it is still attached to the body. At the same time, Rankine describes the body as a container when she mentions that the body cannot "hold the content it is living", which is followed by "And where is the safest place when that place / must be someplace other than in the body?" (143).

The weight of nonexistence is so heavy that the body cannot contain it. The body cannot handle the life it is living which is a life that is more like death. A life where they are not seen, or a life where they are only seen through a white imagination. Rankine is asking where they can live when their own body is not a safe place to live. Their bodies cannot hold death. If they allowed their bodies to hold death, they would truly be nonexistent seeing as a dead body is a nobody.

All of these meditations which have been taken from different sections in *Citizen* show that there is actually a link between the different meditations. The link is a development where the different events have built up and gradually created a change in mindset and also a change in action. The first mediation was a denial of dealing with one's feelings. There is a want to avoid confronting the situation or believe that what is happening is reality. The goal was to quickly rinse off the blouse and begin a new day pretending that the incident never happened. This meditation gradually developed into frustration and eventually anger where there was a want to break their faces and level them with the ground so they could feel the same pain. Eventually, in the last meditations there was a realization of the fact that to live in one's own body is not safe. Black lives matter, but unfortunately not to everyone. Rankine describes a mental state that is battling with its own existence. A part of the body, the physical part, is insisting that it is present. But the other part of the body, the mental state, feels the erasure of the self and insists that it is nonexistent. All the incidents have added up to the point where one understands that their life is considered worthless; and still the battle of the self continues.

## 7 Conclusion

This thesis has been a study on Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: an American Lyric* in regards to her approach to the African American racial experience in a supposed "post-racial America". This study focused on Rankine's accounts on everyday racism which were designed to show how subtle forms of racism are disguised and the type of threat they pose to African Americans' lives. The aims have furthermore been to explore Rankine's literary project in terms of intertextual references where I incorporated the critical thinkers James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, Ralph Ellison and Maurice Blanchot. My study on *Citizen* is arguing that Rankine believes that African Americans are still second class citizens due to the physical, mental and emotional affects of everyday racism that comes in the form of microaggressions. One of the reasons why racism is able to persist in this day and age is because these microaggressions are not challenged as much as macroaggressions are which often overlooks the relationship between the two.

Rankine intervenes in current debates about racism due to her approach on everyday racism. In a time where macroaggressions such as police brutalities have reached the news and is taking up a lot of the racial discussion in the United States, Rankine decides to take out a magnifier to look at where the disease starts. *Citizen* is able to urgently speak about microaggressions as if they were macroaggressions. The urgency is created when Rankine follows up her anecdotes with meditations that show how these small microaggressions are affecting people's mental state. My interpretation is that Rankine is putting forth a message that claims that microaggressions should be considered racism to the same degree macroaggressions are, and they should both be considered detrimental.

Rankine points out that citizenship is not the same for all Americans. The daily affects of microaggressions which becomes what we defined as "everyday racism" correlates with Cornel West's commentary on how no other people in America has been taught to systemically hate themselves like African Americans (vii). The self-hate comes from the constant microaggressions that are affecting their mental health, as well as reminding them that they are different which reinforces the idea that African Americans are still treated as second class citizens.

Rankine also intervenes in current debates about racism with writing about racism in an unfamiliar way which opens up new dialogues to talk about the issue of racism. Rankine mixes different genre's which according to Reed creates an unrecognizable speech. The

unrecognizability comes from claiming that *Citizen* is a lyric and then interrupting the very basis of the lyric with the use of the second person pronoun, and challenging our perception of what poetry is supposed to look like.

Rankine writes mostly in second person pronoun which rejects the lyric “I”, but at the same time she claims the lyric by naming *Citizen* an “American Lyric”. By using the second person pronoun, Rankine includes all her readers in her accounts. The focus is not on how she feels and what she thinks, rather the focus is for everyone to forcefully enter these everyday situations and to understand the implications that follow, both physical and mental.

*Citizen* is both accusative and loving. *Citizen* is accusative because it calls out racial injustice, both on a small scale and a big scale. The small scale is when Rankine accuses individuals who are engaging in racial acts, and the big scale is when she accuses the media and the criminal justice system for racial injustice. The loving aspect of *Citizen* is the acknowledgement that many engage in everyday racism without knowing it and the wish that *Citizen* will be an eye-opener.

Rankine’s poetry allows her to put emotions into social and political issues. The microaggressions in *Citizen* are not emotional. Rankine shifts from one event to the other like a video without a narrator. She merely presents them, allowing her readers to make sense of them. Her meditations, on the other hand, are emotional and reflective. In chapter four, where I was discussing Baldwin and Rankine’s approach to race, I noticed the leeway that was created for both of them when they both chose to write these accounts on being black in the US using genres that allow emotional subjectivity. Due to the fact that Rankine categorizes *Citizen* as poetry and Baldwin categorizes his essay as a letter, they are both allowed to be subjective, emotional, relatable and sympathetic to their cause.

Rankine’s work encourages the readers to think about the media and criminal justice system in terms of the injustice that is being perpetuated towards black Americans. Rankine’s accounts show how the media perpetuated the black stereotype, and how the criminal justice system takes action on that perpetuated imagination. The Hurricane Katrina is one of the examples Rankine uses to emphasize how newsgathering organizations use a narrative that sometimes work against African Americans where they feed into certain stereotypes that influence their presentation of events. Also, Rankine believes that the reason why the police brutalities have gotten as much attention as they have is because of the recording of these brutalities, and not necessarily because there is a common concern for them. The police in the US has a long history of violence towards minorities, but only now is

there a nationwide, and also a worldwide condemning of these atrocious acts that have been present in the States for centuries. She compares the Rodney King beating, a black man assaulted by four officers, and the Mark Duggan shooting, a black man shot and killed by officers. Rankine suggest that Duggan's death would have a different after-effect had his death been recorded. Rankine acknowledges, however, that recording of the events does not necessarily mean justice for the victim. It simply means that everyone is able to witness the injustice.

Rankine draws on critical thinkers such as James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, Ralph Ellison and Maurice Blanchot to work on their ideas as they are a part of her project.

Chapter four gives a thorough introduction to Rankine's literary project. Rankine like Baldwin knows that America is celebrating freedom and justice for all too soon. Baldwin writes that this celebration was a hundred years too early, and Rankine is channeling these thoughts in *Citizen* where the notion of post-racial America is still far away. Rankine believes that blackness is a vulnerability that determines how you are treated. It works almost as a handicap that is impossible to disguise.

*Citizen* also approaches violence as a reaction to oppression. Rankine's point is that a reaction should be considered natural. When violence is used as a form of resistance to oppression, there is a context there that is often not acknowledged. Violent words can linger in the body until something triggers it. Rankine's account on Zinedine Zidane, the French soccer player who head-butted a man from the opposite team, shows how the wrong words at the wrong time entered his body and his retaliation to those words. In Zidane's account, Rankine draws on James Baldwin, who agreed with Rankine that a reaction to violence is natural, Frantz Fanon, who believed that violence had to be fought with violence, Ralph Ellison, who acknowledged that words had the power to segregate people and Maurice Blanchot, who discussed imagery and how deceiving perception can be. By incorporating these famous thinkers, Rankine is drawing lines between a head-butt in the twenty-first century- and colonialism, segregation, and oppression half a century before that. Rankine's literary text enables us to perceive racial injustice in our present time in a way that provides historical perspective.

Rankine does create a link between the different meditations in *Citizen*. What connects the meditations is a gradual self-realization on what position African American's have in the American society. Rankine's meditations are a pause in her anecdotal events similar to pauses in *Citizen* that come in the form of blank pages. These pauses are silent – an awkward pause

in a conversation you quickly want to fill, but her meditations are not silent pauses. They are reflective, engaging, and thought-provoking. Rankine takes the readers through the development of the affects of racism. The anecdotal events that seem harmless, are affecting the mental state of African Americans leading the emotional injury lead by these comments and gestured to outward injuries through negligence of black lives and police brutality.

In conclusion, it is important to note that this thesis has only touched upon the surface of *Citizen*. The layers of intertextual references in *Citizen* are vast. My intention was to decide which references that would work best with my research questions. Due to the direction I chose to take in this thesis, where I was more focused on bringing out Rankine's literary project and finding out what her general account on racial America was, I chose to touch upon central aspects of *Citizen*, such as citizenship, everyday racism, the lyric, the black experience, violence and imagery. I found it very important to break down *Citizen* to basic concepts Rankine approached due to the untouched nature of *Citizen*. *Citizen* had only been out for less than a year when this project started. There was no analytical work on *Citizen* to look for reference. Due to the lack of information on *Citizen* as a fairly new book, I wanted to make sure that this project could potentially become a starting point and a reference for further research

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