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Liberation from Fear: Institutional Racism and the African American Home

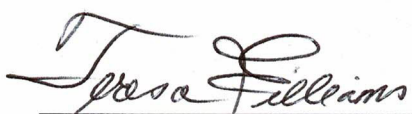
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Liberation from Fear:
Institutional Racism and the African American Home

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This paper will be investigating instances of personal and institutional systems of fear as they intersect with the discourse of the African American household. As the literary texts vary in genre, gender, and time, personal testimony concludes that despite legal emancipation and the enactment of civil rights, the United States fails to institutionally liberate its African American citizens from violence and fear. James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Thomas Chatterton Williams' *Losing My Cool: How a Father's Love and 15,000 Books Beat Hip-Hop Culture*, and Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* inform this analysis through the inspection of slavery, "emancipation", institutional racism, mass incarceration, and violence within the family as a reaction to fear. The texts make it apparent that policing the black body is an American value which has evolved throughout history, a value that has not changed despite the legal liberation of African American people through emancipation, desegregation, and the Civil Rights movement. As the violence and policing of the African American body is unpacked, this paper will also uncover the necessity for institutional change and dismantling of racially oppressive systems within the American landscape.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* focuses on the systemic practice of violence inflicted upon the African enslaved person. As slavery became an American business powered by the greed, fear and imagined superiority and inadequacy among "people believing themselves to be white"¹ (Coates, *Between* 1), the snatching of black bodies became the white American imperative.

Racialized violence inflicted by white men throughout generations informed the identities of

¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, throughout *Between the World and Me*, defines whiteness as having "never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy" (7). Believing oneself to 'be white' means subscribing to a racial hierarchy that places whiteness above all else. Those who possess white skin may or may not believe themselves to 'be white', for whiteness here functions as a belief system and racist practice.

both white and black Americans; *Beloved* traces one family's journey through slavery and the lessons concerning what it means to be black in America. The common thread found among many of the black characters within *Beloved* is their acute sense of fear and subsequent apathetic attitude towards life.

It is important to first consider the origins of fear and violence within an American, racialized society. The formation of the New World brought about serious violent practices that ensured the control and conquering of the racial "Other". When American soil was successfully plundered, white men justified the rape, pillaging, and killing of the "Other" through Manifest Destiny. As the American practice of slavery became racialized by snatching African people from their homes, white slave-owners feared that the influx of black bodies on American soil would threaten the hierarchy of whiteness that colonists created; *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors* explains that "the exploitation of minority peoples in America was, after all, the mirror image of American colonial exploitation" (Margolies 169) in its attempt to curb white's fear of the "Other".

Racialized slavery began as a means to control the black body through the passing down of violence and subsequent fear from white slave-owners: "(t)he new slaves were systemically stripped of tribal and familial ties but plantation owners who feared that any semblance of cultural continuity might lead to future conspiracies and uprisings" (Margolies 14). The false superiority of whiteness is predicated on black suffering, for "(h)ate gives identity...illuminat(ing) the border...illuminat(ing) the Dream of being white, of being a Man. (Whiteness) name(d) the hated strangers and...thus confirmed...the tribe" (Coates 60). While the means to incite fear and violence have developed throughout history, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* focuses her narrative on the female slave experience. The enslaved black women within *Beloved*

embody the fear and violence that were instilled in and modeled for them through the white slave master and the practices of white supremacy.

Throughout *Beloved*, many of Morrison's characters question their ability to love both themselves and others, as feelings of love or trust were crushed during their enslavement. Sethe's relationship with her mother informs Sethe's own desperation to form loving relationships with her children, and to fight for her children's freedom. Sethe recalls only knowing her mother by the branded mark upon her skin, a sign of her mother as a slave woman (61). Thwarted by the practice of slavery, Sethe's unfulfilled maternal connection prompts her to try to love and protect her children as her mother never could. There are various kinds of love that black people practice in *Beloved*, allowing Morrison to highlight the diverse presentation of relationship between black people. Sethe's motherly "love is too thick", despite her belief that "(l)ove is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (193-194), meaning that love is essential to life and survival, especially in the black community. It is not possible to survive on thin companionship, community, or love.

The practice of slavery aimed not simply at achieving American financial prowess, but also at establishing a clear racial hierarchy which placed whiteness as the superior. In order for such a hierarchy to succeed, fear and violence were utilized to place enslaved black people at the very bottom of the human chain, socialized to "love nothing" (Morrison 1108). During this time, "whites...use(d) their power to curb (black folk's) life force" (Margolies 119) to maintain the racial hierarchy. The destruction of anything that gave black people a sense of hope, identity, or family was essential in the creation of whiteness.

Beloved focuses on a family who has been stripped of everything that made them human. The characters struggle with love and freedom because they have been purposefully deprived of such essentials for generations. Without a sense of autonomy, how does one choose love or

hope? White Americans and slave owners conditioned black slaves to believe they were nothing, their mind becoming just as immobile as the enslaved body. In the context of suffering born out of the conditions of the enslaved mind and body, love became impossible.

As a story told through generations of both enslaved and freed African American women and their relationships, *Beloved* focuses on the effect which violence has on generations of African American people. The trauma of enslavement passes through family lines, ruining relationships and the futures of black families. In *Beloved*, Sethe's experience with her parents inform her own choices as both a mother and lover. While Sethe's mother "threw them [children] all away" (74) which were born as a result of her masters raping her, she allowed Sethe to live and gave her "the name of the black man" (74), her biological father. These violent beginnings have violent ends, as Sethe carries this fear with her throughout her life and into her own motherhood. Terrified that her children will endure the same enslavement she did, Sethe "(swung) the baby toward the wall planks" (175), murdering her baby, Beloved, in a panic. It is Sethe's fear of whiteness that convinces her that death would be much more liberating than any life as a slave.

If love represents the freedom of a person and their autonomy, it is fear that is binding and dominating. Haunted by her own captivity and its attendant trauma, Sethe murders her child in an attempt to take "and put (her) babies where they'd be safe" (193). The essence of the mother-daughter bond was shattered by Sethe's fear of her children's enslavement. In many ways, the moment that Sethe chooses to kill her child marks the only choice she ever made in her life; while some of the townspeople/black community members deem this action barbaric (194), Morrison invites readers' critiques of Sethe's desperate desire to protect her children from slavery its concomitant oppression. Operating from a sense of fear and panic, Sethe revises the

notion of violence, re-inscribing it to counteract the violence of the white slave master. To Sethe, the murder of her child was a blessing; Sethe sent “(her children) away from what (she knew was) terrible” (194). Sethe sends her children to Heaven rather than watch them to Hell on Earth.

Sethe’s reasoning for killing her daughter, while some characters find barbaric, is natural to one who has been conditioned to fear and anticipate violence rather than love or trust. “The jungle whitefolks planted in (the slaves)...spread...(until) they were scared of the jungle they had made” (234), meaning that the animalistic nature of slavery that was created to maintain whiteness and destroy blackness has not only succeeded in ruining black lives, but slavery has also forced black slaves to destroy themselves. Those who view Sethe as an evil murderer forget that she is the demonized product of a country which has deemed her non-human since birth. The destruction of Sethe’s body and her child’s body was the intended purpose of enslaving black people in America: the destroyer did not matter as long as black bodies were the ones being destroyed.

While any American is capable of ruining black bodies and families, it is a white supremacist ideology that fuels such destruction. As a system of power, slavery served to control the racial “Other” within American society and simultaneously uplift white masculinity. With the abolishment of slavery did not come the dismantling of violent oppression based in “Otherness”; if anything, white American society adapted new tools to systemically destroy the black body in ways that appeared not only lawful, but essential for the maintenance of national pride and wealth. The failure of the racial hierarchy threatens American progress, and so “the white man, terrified at these realities, proceeds to force upon the (African American) ...another role to suit yet another fancied pattern of existence” (Margolies 134) that serves white supremacist interests. As James Baldwin unveils in “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth

Anniversary of the Emancipation” from *The Fire Next Time*, the creation of segregation, the American ghetto, and redlining contribute to “universal feelings of existential dread and despair and terror that sociologists relate as being particularly prevalent among...[black] slum dwellers” (179) in America.

While the Thirteenth Amendment sought to create American citizens of once enslaved blacks, necessary reparations did not ensue for African American men and women. As former enslaved people and the sons and daughters of enslaved men and women began to settle on American soil as citizens, segregation and different land-owning laws targeted black families, preventing one’s access to and achievement of socioeconomic affluence. In the article “The Case for Reparations”, Ta-Nehisi Coates recounts how black people were “cut out of the legitimate home-mortgage market through means both legal and extralegal...to keep...neighborhoods segregated” (7-8) during the second wave of the Great Migration (1930s-1960s). *The Fire Next Time* is a powerful African American text because “Baldwin speaks...of...the dark secrets of the soul – sinister and complex passions, the realities of which white Americans...refuse to recognize” (Margolies 105) within American society. On the one hundredth year anniversary of the emancipation of black people from slavery, James Baldwin pens *The Fire Next Time* to his nephew as a means to illustrate the systemic oppression of black Americans, asserting that The United States “is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon” (24). Baldwin speaks of “this innocent country... [that] set (him) down in a ghetto...(and)... intended that (he) should perish” (21), holding black people captive within its walls of financial, social, educational, and vocational disparity.

In writing *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin uses candor in advocating for the protection of his family and future generations of black Americans in the face of systemic abuse. Baldwin’s

own ancestors and family escaped the clutches of slavery, and he makes plain that his own people have not yet been liberated from a state of bondage. He asserts that the country that he and his family call home has simply created a new means to captivate the black body. Baldwin begs his nephew not to “believe what white people (say) about him” (18) as a black man, that one “can only be destroyed by believing that (they) really are what the white world” (4) believes black men to be. Similar to Baldwin’s own assertions regarding self-love within the African American community, Baby Suggs delivers a powerful sermon, inspiring her fellow black community members to “love the skin on your back (for) yonder they flay it...they do not love your hands...Love your hands! Love them...You got to love it, *you!*” (103-104). Black people must love and protect themselves first, that “(t)he people who must believe they are white can never be (their) measuring stick” (Coates 108), for there is no system or order in the country which guarantees the safety of black bodies, especially within spaces that celebrate white superiority.

Baldwin also affirms to his nephew that white people’s hatred “does not testify to (his) inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear” (22) of the black community’s aptitude for perseverance. The same fear that informed white men to enslave African American individuals now motivates them to oppress black people systemically. By seeing “the reality which lies behind...acceptance and integration” (Baldwin 22), Baldwin implores both his nephew and his audience “to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it” (24), beginning with the act of self love and love for one’s community. Baldwin begs his nephew to “survive...for the sake of your children and your children’s children” (7), and ultimately, the future of the African American community. By presenting all of this knowledge and wisdom to his nephew, Baldwin incites his readers and family to be critical of the nation which intended them to perish. By

proclaiming equality but not providing the means to create such equality through economic/educational opportunity, resources, and safe living environments, America may assert that it is a free country, but in reality, its freedom is limited to the white population that reaps the benefits derived from the subjection of the black population.

As James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* reveals, America is not a safe place for the black man to live. Inspired by the Negro spiritual entitled "Mary Don't You Weep", the title of Baldwin's letter references the apocalyptic event that such danger and violence against the black man could provoke. In the couplet, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign / No more water, but the fire next time" (Traditional), the singer informs the audience that while God has promised his people to not end the world by *water*, his followers are not safe from the dangers of fire. For Baldwin, this biblical reference signifies a simple truth; "if (Baldwin's) prescription goes unheeded, the holocaust may be closer than most Americans care to imagine" (Margolies 124). It is apparent in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* that such realities may not be far off, as widespread violence channels deadly ends amidst the gun fire.

The unrelenting presence of violence within the world of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* illustrates James Baldwin's own fears for his nephew as a black man. As a child, Malcolm watched white supremacists terrorize and destroy his family during the early stages of desegregation. Before Malcolm became an influential leader and writer, his father was a supporter of "Marcus Garvey... [who argued for] black race purity and exhort[ed] the Negro masses to return to their ancestral African homeland" (1). Aside from Malcolm's father's beliefs, his "big, six-foot-four, very black" (1) body inspired fear within the town they lived. Despite Malcolm's father relocating the family to another area of town due to various violent threats, he continued to preach in both public and private settings. While he grew up, Malcolm modeled his

own activism after his father, influenced by his willingness to speak the truth despite any and all threats to his life. The violent murder of his father ultimately propelled Malcolm X's family into disarray and fear; the destruction of a black man at the hands of white terror forever fractured the construction of black families and love.

Before Malcolm X's father was brutally murdered, the family endured abuse and threats from the predominantly white town in which they lived. Malcolm's pregnant mother and the rest of his family were threatened one night as their yard and house were lit aflame by Ku Klux Klansmen, while "the white police and firemen (that) came and stood around watching as the house burned to the ground" (3). The presence of a black family led by a black father who challenged systems of white superiority clearly threatened the American life so many white citizens strove to live. The actions of the Klansmen as well as the ignorance of the police force illustrate the nation's desire to rid itself of blackness. Due to these events, Malcolm asserts that it is "the American political, economic, and social *atmosphere* that automatically nourishes a racist psychology in the white man" (378). Organizations dedicated to maintaining whiteness demanded the loss of black lives; while the police officers involved with the house fire may not have caused the violence per se, their choice to not protect Malcolm's family illustrates their complicity with racialized violence.

The practice of violence inflicted upon black bodies prepares Malcolm X for the difficult life he would have ahead of him, carrying his father's message of black power across the nation. As a child, he recalls how all of the black men in his life have met violent ends at the hands of whiteness. Malcolm X grows up learning that a big, black, male body is dangerous in white America. He writes that he expects his own life to end in violence, as such violence is the white

American imperative and has disproportionately affected his black, paternal family. Malcolm recalls how

four of his (i.e. Malcolm's father's) six brothers die(d) by violence, three of them killed by white men, including one by lynching. What my father could not know then was that of the remaining three, including himself, only one...uncle Jim, would die in bed, of natural causes...My father was finally himself killed by the white man's hands...It has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence. I have done all that I can to be prepared (2).

The power to control and ruin the black body has been passed through generations of white Americans, just as Malcolm learned to both hate and fear white power structures that threatens his life and the lives of his family members.

Aware of the discourse surrounding the black male body in America, the violence inflicted against his family, despite how vulgar and shocking their deaths are, does not surprise Malcolm. As Malcolm learned as a small child, there is a lack of protection, even from those sworn to protect, for the African American individual. Despite the personal anecdotes Malcolm provides within the autobiography, it is apparent that such violence is not an isolated incident, or random. As James Baldwin indicates in *The Fire Next Time*, calculated, systemic actions were taken to almost ensure the death of black people, whether it was in the ghetto, in the South, in the streets, or at home in bed – and then it was expected that African American people “lift (themselves) out of these white man's *slums*” (X 293) that were designed for the destruction of the black community. Due to such violence, it is impossible to argue that the African American community can be considered free in society. The pursuit of life itself, let alone liberty and

happiness, is impossible when black men are killed for their bodies and beliefs posing a “threat” to white America.

In a familial sense, perhaps what informed Malcolm of his own untimely death was the murder of his father at a young age. As Malcolm’s father, Earl Little, was a proud Black Nationalist, his beliefs are what triggered a series of events that led to his death. Living in a predominantly white town, he became the target of a group who called themselves the “Black Legion” (a white supremacist group and branch of the Ku Klux Klan). These men hunted Malcolm’s father down at night and brutally murdered him in the street, leaving his body for police to find. As Malcolm revisits the incident, he asserts that “the white Black Legion had finally gotten him” (10), meaning that as long as Earl Little continued to live and express his beliefs, he was never safe. It was only a matter of time before a white terrorist group would hunt him down without any punishment for the crime.

Although the murder of Earl Little took place almost ninety years ago, black men in the twenty-first century experience similar violence, as indicated in Ta’ Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* and Thomas Chatterton Williams’ *Losing My Cool*. Those texts assert that while the black individual in America is considered free, contemporary history proves the opposite. Violence has been a tool utilized to oppress African American people and as a means for the oppressor to maintain power and control. While there are *legal* doctrines that claim an African American person’s freedom and liberation from an enslaved state, the truth of the matter lies in the streets where too many black men and women have been left to die without shame, consequence, or care.

Thomas Chatterton Williams’ autobiographical narrative entitled *Losing My Cool: How a Father’s Love and 15,000 Books Beat Hip-Hop Culture* bridges the gap between Malcolm X’s

segregated America to the current state of race relations in the nation today. Dedicated to his father, Williams evaluates the beauty and struggle of being a black man across generations in America. As a biracial man born of a white mother and black father, many of the conflicts Williams faces originates from a complicated sense of a racial, masculine identity and self. As a result, Williams attaches his identity to the manifestations of violence within his neighborhood, as well as the stereotypes of black men. When Williams began to perform the role of the hyper-masculine black man, he noticed that such a role was not only common, but “that the white kids (he) went to school with were willing to buy into the ‘hood persona (he) was busy developing” (25), rather than William’s true identity as an individual.

The fear of violence as a black man informs Williams’ performance as a stereotype. While his father, whom William lovingly addresses as “Pappy,” experienced the desegregation of the South and some of the most violent outbreaks during the Civil Right Movement, it is Thomas who must navigate the world as a black man who seeks to be educated and free and safe from the streets he grew up on. While studying at Georgetown University during the 9/11 attacks, Williams cites the weeks and months that follow as the first time that such anxiety and fear was common for both white and black Americans. The period after the 9/11 attacks was Thomas’ first memory of both “white and black (people)...(being) on edge” (187), constantly. Williams also states that such fear was nothing new for the African American community, who lives in such fear constantly.

The fear of death and violence becomes apparent as Thomas grows up with his older brother. At his own home, and inside his own garage, Thomas’ older brother Clarence was threatened, beaten brutally, and arrested for a speeding ticket discrepancy by two white police officers. Having experienced police brutality throughout his life, Thomas’ father recognized the

attack as the manifestation of white power being exercised on a vulnerable black body, claiming that the event carried “too much baggage, too much symbolism involved” (174) for him to not consider the situation a matter of racial discrimination. Both Thomas and his father conclude that such an incident regarding “an infraction so venial as a speeding ticket” (175), would have never taken place within their white neighbor’s homes – that mere suspicion of Clarence’s actions as a black man were enough for the police to react with violence. Despite Clarence’s innocence, it was his black body that the police officers found guilty and too threatening within a white space.

Ta’ Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* echoes this theme of unjust violence inflicted upon black men and connects with Williams’ fear as a brother, son, and father to his black family. In fact, Coates asserts that often what results in the death of black men and women are not actions that justify being shot and killed. Rather, the history of fear and hatred of the black body motivates the aggressor’s violence. Such violence and disgust has informed the white American consciousness since black bodies were brought to the nation, and over time, has become a practice of superiority that is essential to white power. Not only has such violence shaped the identity of those who believe themselves to be white (white as superior to “Others”) but has also formed the identities of African American families as they navigate a national landscape which never intended for them to survive. Coates asserts that “hate gives identity. The very bottom of society illuminate(s) the border, illuminate(s) what we ostensibly are not, illuminate(s) the Dream of being white, of being a Man” (60) in America.

Inspired by the opening of *The Fire Next Time*, which is Baldwin’s open letter to his nephew, Ta-Nehisi Coates penned a similar, longer letter to his own son. Detailing the many trials faced by a black American man, Coates informs both the reader and the audience of the long history of violence and negligence inflicted upon African American people in *Between the*

World and Me. Written in 2015, Coates' letter to his son underscores the conception of the Black Lives Matter movement following the violent murders conducted by police officers of black men, women, and children such as Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and countless others. *Between the World and Me* is not only a perfectly timed op-ed directed to white America, but it also encapsulates the relationship Coates shares with his son in the context of his growing up in a nation that does not value his life.

In *Between the World and Me*, Coates writes of his own fears and hopes for his son as he grows up in America. Just as Thomas Chatterton Williams does in *Losing My Cool: How a Father's Love and 15,000 Books Beat Hip-Hop Culture*, Coates asserts that white American fear rhetoric attempts to justify the over-killing of black people, as if being black in any situation such as "buying cigarettes, (or)...for seeking help... (or being) a twelve-year-old child" (Coates 9) is somehow punishable by death. Failure to acknowledge the systemic "destruction of the black body as incidental to the preservation of order" (84) is to remain complicit with the unjust killing of black bodies. Just as blackness is hardly read as innocent, whiteness cannot claim innocence in these deaths: "a [white] American innocence, carefully designed to ignore the terrors that afflict the human heart by the simple refusal to admit their possibilities...is evil, because it fails to allow the full [potential] of human life...leading to the most brutal kinds of racism" (Margolies 118) and racialized violence. To this end, Coates addresses that while black men and women may not engage in evil or threatening actions, merely prescribing to white innocence endangers black bodies.

While Pappy from *Losing My Cool* relived his personal "baggage and symbolism" as his son Clarence was beaten and arrested as an innocent black man, Coates' *Between the World and Me* illuminates the emotional process of unpacking such baggage and symbolism experienced by

African American people throughout history. Power, violence, and systems of oppression have been reimagined throughout American history as a means to control the racial “Other”. Coates criticizes police brutality as a racial act, for “the police departments of (America) have been endowed with the authority to destroy (the black) body” (9), a privilege passed down from “flaying backs...chaining limbs...(raping) mothers...(selling) children and various other acts meant, first and foremost, to deny (black people) the right to secure and govern (over their) own bodies (8). The grief Pappy feels is directly connected to his own fears and struggles as a black man that grew up during the Civil Rights Movement, and from his ancestor’s struggles – watching the police almost snatch his son’s life from him was not only traumatizing, but it served as a reminder that whiteness is still synonymous with power.

By analyzing *Beloved*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *The Fire Next Time*, *Losing My Cool*, and *Between the World and Me*, one understands how American institutions have evolved to grant surface, legal liberties and freedoms to African American people (such as liberation, the right to vote, desegregation/integration, affirmative action), and yet still maintain systems of complete authority that incites fear and violence in order to police the black body. In the era of mass incarceration and police brutality, Coates argues that such institutions not only promote the separation of black families, but also provide justification for the murder of black people. The violence of police brutality supports the white claim of the black body as property: “that the officer carries with him the power of the American state and the weight of an American legacy, and they necessitate that of the bodies destroyed every year, and some wild and disproportionate number of them will be black” (103). To manipulate, terrorize, and ultimately kill a person at will is to assume complete power over that person. To systemically ensure the death or capture of black bodies not only fractures the black family, but creates a business of black suffering.

Coates also reflects on themes found within Toni Morrison's neo-slave narrative *Beloved* throughout *Between the World and Me*; by unpacking the long history of violence and fear inflicted upon African American people, one can see why such households display similar acts as a means to maintain a safe, controlled environment. In *Beloved*, Sethe kills her child in order to save her from slavery. While such extremes are not present within *Between the World and Me*, Coates does cite his own relationship with familial violence as a means to protect him rather than to harm. Growing up an African American man, he learns that he has "been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels...you do not have the privilege of living in ignorance of this essential fact" (107). Coates remembers his own father saying, "either I can beat you, or the police" (16). While Coates believes beating a child is harmful and encourages violence, he also realizes that his father's actions derive from a desire to save Ta-Nehisi Coates from his own untimely death; his beatings as a child were "administered in fear or love" (17) with the intention to protect Coates. One finds the 'violence as love' value in both neo-slave narrative *Beloved* and *Between the World and Me*, proving that the presence of fear and violence was valued, encouraged, and practiced by those in power, who have always been white men.

A country heavily influenced by the perpetuation of violence and fear by white supremacist systems demands and institutionalizes the suffering of the racial "Other." The maintenance of white power necessitates the recreation of oppressive systems that threaten the lives of African American people. White power exercised through slavery, "emancipation," institutional racism, economics, police brutality, mass incarceration, and the dehumanization of the black body displays the evolution of oppression in order to remain effective. Examined through the lens of inheritance, white Americans instilled fear and violence in the African

American community as a means to maintain control and power over the “Other”. All the authors reveal that terror has been systemically passed down through generations of African American people. Apparent in these texts is the idea that despite the evolution of law over time, American society has never truly liberated the black man or woman, but rather found alternative means to control and oppress the black body.

While the literature of the authors may present the failures of an American society regarding race relations, the authors also strive to inspire societal and system change through their writing. As a student of English literature and activist, I find myself often drawn to texts which explore the diverse voices of American writers that do not fall into the traditional American literary canon. My education which brought me to intellectual encounters with these varying narratives as an English major prompted this thesis. My interest in social justice inspired the fusion of writing, education, and activism, ultimately triggering a conception of systemic solutions to the racial injustice that has been presented throughout this thesis. While awareness is essential in solving any problem, one must also remember that any belief or knowledge lacking action remains stagnant.

The second section of this thesis identifies institutional changes within the American landscape that are essential in the dismantling of historically racist systems that instill fear and violence within the African American community. African Americans throughout history have been “subjugated to the worst forms of political, social, and educational segregation, as well as grinding poverty, police and mob brutality, and all the other evils of the American caste system” (Margolies 16). Systemic means of reform include education, gun, police, and prison restructuring, providing affordable psychological care for all Americans, as well as ensuring the inclusion of African American leaders within local, state, and federal government; such reform is

essential, for “critical race theory captures how race is structurally embedded within institutional structures, i.e., law enforcement, exacerbating the expression of White hegemony and ostensibly increasing the likelihood of disparate treatment of marginalized societal groups...to keep them subjugated” (501) in American society. Furthermore, any racial, American “revolution...implic(s) the overturn of...political, social, and economic system(s)” (Margolies 168). The reformation of these systems not only affect institutions within the American landscape, but the interpersonal relationships within African American communities and America at large.

One theme that *Beloved*, *The Fire Next Time*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Losing My Cool*, *Between the World and Me* explores is the act of remembering the past in order to create a better future for new generations of African American people. The remembering or “rememory” process of one’s historical past is not only essential in the cultivation of personal identity, but the formation of a healthy, national consciousness. The purposeful forgetting that “(m)istakes were made. Bodies were broken. People were enslaved” asserts that “‘(g)ood intention’ is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream” (Coates 33), rather than liberate people from the Dream itself. The disregard and ignorance of a narrative that focuses on “Otherness” deems the mainstream, white history as the superior truth to all else, transforming “(p)lunder... into habit and addiction, the people who would author the mechanized death (in) ghettos, the mass rape of private prisons, then engineer their own forgetting, must inevitably plunder much more” (Coates, *Between* 150). *Beloved* is a powerful neo-slave novel *because* it places the “Other” – black women – at the forefront of American history. Centralizing the lives and narratives of commonly silenced voices in the classroom, at a young age,

encourages an entire generation of Americans who truly understand their nation, their peers, and themselves.

The lessons and values a student learns as she journeys through the American education system shapes her relationship with race. The enforcement of white ideals as the mainstream purposefully neglects American history and diverse American voices. An education that disregards the importance of race ignores “cultural cues, sometimes subtle, sometimes inadvertent, sometimes unconscious, but always implying the subhuman nature of the (African American), challeng(ing) and destroy(ing)” (Margolies 157) blackness from a young age. For many students, higher education is the first interaction with literature and other course work that focalizes the experiences of African American people. The lack of representation of African American intellectuals in schools across the nation is not a matter of a lack of resources, but a *deliberate* forgetting and erasure of the black American narrative. The fact that “black beauty was never celebrated in movies, in television, or in the textbooks...[and] everyone of any import...was white” (Coates, *Between* 43), suggests that the act of erasing African American voices from the narrative not only dismisses American history, but perpetuates ignorance and racial tension across generations.

James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* and Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* seek to educate both their families and their readers regarding broken American systems that perpetuate cycles of poverty, white privilege, and oppressive environmental conditions. Both narratives offer insight to American society that many have chosen to forget; “America begins in black plunder and white democracy, two features that are not contradictory but complementary” (Coates, “The Case” 25). America was created in the image of whiteness, and much of American society still functions to serve whiteness today. This simple acknowledgement of America’s

racist past is essential in the education and betterment of society. An education that works to deconstruct the past sets its students up for success in the future.

Education, when implemented properly, is an extremely powerful tool for eradicating racial injustices. The American education systems fails not only when they place whiteness as normative, but also when education and opportunity become a privilege rather than a right. The history of redlined districts and the creation of “ghettos” as James Baldwin details in *The Fire Next Time* maintains a system that oppresses people not only at home, but within America’s schools. Many African American authors assert that “(t)he stifling and frequently destructive atmosphere of the ghetto... [is] a symptom of specific social dysfunction” (Margolies 179) and systemic, racist practices. Access to educational resources, economic growth, and occupational opportunity “suffer(s) and stifle(s) and die(s) in the miserable ghettos of America in order to” (Margolies 120) maintain the racial hierarchy. By forcing black Americans into neighborhoods with poor education, little job opportunity or chance of financial growth, class stagnation ensues.

Affordable psychological care, much like education, is essential in healing past wounds borne of racialized violence and empowering communities to seek psychological repair. Violence continuously inflicted on African American communities requires careful navigation of dangerous socio-political landscapes, not only threatening to the individual, but the community as well. Generational trauma as expressed in all of the texts analyzed in this paper reveals that the

swift and brutal severance of all interpersonal and cultural relationships had an unimaginably destructive impact on the African’s personality, and the deleterious results of this de-individualization – extended and aggravated by three hundred years of slavery

and oppression – remain today as a burning scar on the personality formation of most
(Margolies 14-15)

African Americans.

Attempts to cope in the face of fear can inflict trauma upon the individual, as Malcolm X, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin and Thomas Chatterton Williams make plain in their writing. According to Baldwin, the outcome of African American citizens believing what white people say about them is the psychological demise of the individual. Racism affects not only the physical body through violence, but one's mental health as well, for "(w)hat...could be more pathetic than the smashed innocence of childhood, the abrupt and brutal separation from one's loved ones, the first terrifying confrontations with the evils of racism?" (Margolies 154). The systemic separation and destruction of the African American family unit also affect the psychological makeup of a person; as Malcolm X and Toni Morrison reveal, there is no accidental fracturing done to black families. The purposeful ruining of black family structures contributes to cycles of poverty and mental illness. Affordable and accessible psychological care must focus on assisting African American families and repairing generational, psychological trauma.

While the "rememory" process may be helpful in the healing process, it also can trigger emotions and memories of traumatic events. Malcolm X's pain regarding his father's murder follows him throughout his life, ultimately to his own untimely death. "Inheriting Racist Disparities in Health: Epigenetics and the Transgenerational Effects of White Racism" uncovers the African American community as tightly bound, the suffering of one member affecting the lives of each person; "the harmful physiological impact of white supremacy and white privilege can reach across multiple generations" (191), impairing one's ability to live and maintain a

family line. As explored throughout Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, life and love seem impossible due to the trauma Sethe experienced as a slave woman. When fear and violence occur, the imprisonment of a person's psyche follows. There must be an active and constant attempt to counteract those negative influences.

James Baldwin and Thomas Chatterton Williams explore the stress and psychological damage that racial oppression inflict on African American individuals. Observing his own life and considering the future of his family, Baldwin asserts that there is danger in growing up as a black person in America and being constantly at odds with white America; Baldwin tells his nephew that to grow up and survive black requires ignoring mainstream notions of beauty, intelligence, family, and love *because* such notions were not created with blackness in mind. These messages, that influence both black and white American children from a young age, coupled with the destruction of the African American family, negatively affect the psyche. "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" asserts that there are deep psychic reverberations of living in a culture in which dominion and objectification of the self has been institutionalized. If from the earliest years on, one's fundamental need to be recognized and affirmed as a human subject is denied, that need can take on...destructive proportions in the inner world (Schapiro 209)

of the subject's psyche. Although both Baldwin and Williams both reflect on the personal and communal trauma that oppression inflicts on people, Williams details the extent to which his entire identity as a biracial man suffered under anti-blackness attack from the moment he was told he was both "white" and "black". Learning his father's story with the Civil Rights Movement and his brother being abused by American police officers reaffirms Williams' own

fear of whiteness and proves that “interventions against white racism must address... the economic, geographical, social, and psychological” (190) in order to be effective.

The systemic violence inflicted on African American people prove that “it is not just the racist present that is harming contemporary African Americans. The “racist past experienced by their ancestors” (Sullivan 210) and the deliberate destruction of African American families also negatively affect the mental landscape of generations of black people. Research asserts that “before real headway can be made against racial inequalities, black families must be repaired so that they have the same high degree of stability as white families” (205); having one’s family members continuously snatched from a community dramatically alters one’s perception of and engagement with life and the world. Whether the snatching of bodies is a physical death or removal from a familial space, the absence of loved ones and members of one’s community disenfranchises the future of that community for generations. Accessible and affordable mental health care is not only essential in the maintenance of life and mental wellness within the African American community, but helps “reduce existing racial health disparities” (211) found among African American and white communities.

Much like psychological unrest, mass incarceration perpetuates cycles of violence, poverty, and loss within the African American community. Representation of mass incarceration and their disproportionate affect on American black men and women in Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* points to imprisonment as racist practice. Since “race classification has been used as bases of making laws since slavery” (Honoré 109), it is not surprising that “a black child has a one in four chance of ending up in prison” (Hallett ix) at some point in their lives. “The Impact of African American Incarceration on African American Children in the

Welfare System” determines that “African Americans are disproportionately assigned to every phase of the criminal justice system” (Honoré 109), traumatizing the community. In fact,

(w)ith longer sentences being imposed for nonviolent drug offenses, with aggressive campaigns aimed at criminalizing young people, and with the growing number of children left orphaned by the criminal justice system, the carceral reach of the...private corporations resonate with the history of slavery (Gilmore 195),

leaving traumatic scars of enslavement and incarceration throughout generations.

When every one out of every four black men will spend some time of his life in a jail cell at some point, with “8 percent of the world's prisoners (being) black men” (Coates 132), it is impossible to claim the criminal justice system as not racist. Imprisonment is synonymous with poverty, violence, and loss. Moving forward, “movements that challenge the terms of mass imprisonment will necessarily be joined with antiracist movements” (Gilmore 203), as mass incarceration and private prisons disproportionately harm African American people. The act of targeting and incarcerating certain racial groups maintains oppressive systems of power within the government and society.

The private prison system financially benefits from the oppression and disproportionate incarceration of black people. Michael Hallett’s book *Private Prisons in America: A Critical Race Perspective* reveals that private prisons “do not come close to effectively reducing crime, since maintaining a steady supply of criminals (even if they have to be invented,) is very profitable for those who benefit from the ‘criminal control industry’” (xii) and invest in for-profit prisons. In fact, the reemergence of private prisons in a contemporary American setting only occurred in “the 1980s...[when] blacks began again to dominate U.S. prison populations, as the drug war reached full implementation” (4), meaning that such prisons were created with the

intention of incarcerating African American men. Implementing private prisons in America so as to capture black men and women for profit also suggests that the practice of slavery and mass incarceration are not as disconnected as one may believe.

One must understand private/for-profit prisons as a source of forced labor, to become the foundation of “lucrative, profit-driven, white-owned businesses” (Hallett 2) through various private vendors and investors. Economic gain through the forced, unpaid labor of majority black prisoners is painfully reminiscent of the business of slavery. “Slavery and Prison – Understanding the Connections” asserts that “the punishment industry becomes a leading employer and producer for the U.S. ‘state’, and as private prison...corporations bargain to control the profits of this traffic of human unfreedom, the analogies between slavery and prison abound” (195). As “(m)odern private systems, like the Convict Lease system...reap profits for private owners and shareholders” (Hallett 3), the private prison system demands the filling of their institutions to ensure financial gain, even if such wealth demands the lengthy incarceration of nonviolent subjects, or even innocents.

Reforming prisons to protect black people from unlawful detainment is essential in the rehabilitation of the community and home. Coates highlights the criminalization of black men in *Between the World and Me*, which connects to white America’s fear of black bodies and the need to control them. The dismantling of private (commonly known as for-profit) prisons, is essential; “knowledge of the United States laws, policies, and procedures that perpetuate racial disparities in the criminal justice... system can guide changes in policies that reflect discriminatory practices within the criminal justice...system” (Honoré 116) and help heal communal wounds inflicted by a deep history of forced labor and incarceration. Without the need to fill prisons for the purpose of economic gain while wrongfully incarcerating black men and women, black

homes and families have a greater chance at maintaining the family unit and succeeding in future generations.

American prisons, specifically private prisons, lack true rehabilitation and reformation programs that set inmates up for success after being incarcerated. As Kim Gilmore writes in “Slavery and Prison – Understanding the Connection”, “incarceration [is] hardly a deterrent to crime and...it actually tend(s) to exacerbate crime” (200) rather than rehabilitate prisoners and remove them from the criminal justice system. The system that endorses private prisons and the unlawful imprisonment of African Americans must be eradicated. Breaking the cycle of imprisonment is very difficult for African Americans; the disproportionate amount of black men within the private prison system proves that black “bodies have refinanced the Dream of being white. Black life is cheap, but in America black bodies are a natural resource of incomparable value” (Coates 132). The act of racial profiling and unlawful detainment of black citizens is a systemic issue that begins with abolishing for-profit prisons.

The presence of violence within any family or community restricts the potential for life and growth. Gun reform, which infiltrates many communities in America, disproportionately affects African American people; in fact, the journal titled “Reducing Access to Guns by Violent Offenders” claims that while “whites are more likely than minorities (blacks and Hispanics)... to own a gun” (7-8), “(h)omicide is the leading cause of death for black [males aged fifteen to thirty-four]...[and]...(86 percent) [of] homicides are committed with guns” (10-11), meaning that while many African-American citizens do not own guns, they comprise the overwhelming majority of gun violence victims. While school shootings saturate the cover of online media outlets and all television news broadcasts, similar violence occurs within black urban settings regularly – not to say that gun violence within predominantly white spaces is not an issue, but it

is important to recognize that groups such as Black Lives Matter have advocated for gun reform and justice for years. Due to gun violence contributing “to racial and ethnic...mortality [,] (f)ocusing just on males age fifteen to thirty-four, homicide victimization rates in 2015...were seventeen times as high for black” (11) males, proving that gun violence is a racialized issue.

The lack of accountability that surrounds gun violence as a racial issue proves American complicity with violence inflicted upon black people. As each text under examination within this thesis reveals, the snatching of black bodies began as a white supremacist American value, an “imperative”, shaping America’s discourse on race and the notion of a debilitated blackness since its inception. Fear wields weapons, such as guns, poverty, inaccessibility, and intimidation in the destruction of the African American body and family. Much of the argument for gun reform is reminiscent of James Baldwin’s own statements regarding the black man being placed in ghettos meant to kill him – that corruption is a business meant to ensure the failure of the racial “other” in America, and gun violence and unlawful distribution is merely another means to maintain oppression. By practicing gun control and limiting access to guns for all people, gun violence will decrease in The United States, especially among the African American community.

One of the most important and necessary components of systemic reform regarding racial injustice is police reform. The police force in America appears impenetrable, and yet it has been institutionalized as necessary for the security of all America people. It is hard to consider an organization sworn to protect its citizens from violence would uphold values that terrorize and threaten specific communities within American society. While sworn to protect American citizens, “officer(s) carr(y) with [them] the power of the American state and the weight of an American legacy, and...necessitate that of the bodies destroyed every year, some wild and disproportionate number of them will be black” (Coates 103). In *The Autobiography of Malcolm*

X, Malcolm testifies to the local police's deliberate neglect of black families and black safety. Malcolm also cites some of the officers as the men who killed his father, asserting that it is the violence inflicted by the white police officer against the African American community that will be excused as duty:

The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of this country's criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority. The abuses that have followed from these policies—the...random detention of black people... the torture of suspects—are the product of democratic will (Coates, *Between* 79).

Militant power structures utilizing violence to control the racial "Other" in America is nothing new, rather the means to control have been reimagined throughout time. However, as political activist groups demand justice and accountability surrounding the deaths and violence committed by those meant to serve and protect, the push for police reform surges forward in a revolutionary way.

Political activist groups and social justice advocates' demand for justice regarding the brutal murders of black Americans reflects the need to remember and claim ownership over one's past. The act of "rememory" is essential in police reform *because* "(i)n America, it is tradition to destroy the black body – it is [the] heritage" (Coates 103) of racial violence which informs police brutality. Rather than serve, many police officials practice rules of power and dominance, guided by their own sense of fear or implicit bias towards black people, believing that the "destruction of the black body as incidental to the preservation of order" (Coates 84). While it is not just white police officers that practice this rule of dominance, white supremacist power informs the act of endangering and snatching the lives of African American people.

Coates reminds his son that “racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, [and] breaks teeth” (10): police officers wield the civic power to perform such destruction. Along with the education reform mentioned previously in this thesis, it is imperative that each police force has rigorous training in de-escalation strategies and diversity ethics, implements the use of body cameras, and revises the criteria for Use-of-Force Standards. The healthy maintenance of any institution necessitates vigilance and constant reflection; an institution is failing if it does not uphold its core values. Police reform is essential because American citizens recognize its inability to serve and protect black citizens.

The protection of any citizen requires psychological strength and the ability to de-escalate high-stress situations. Lives are endangered when officers implement use-of-force rather than social problem-solving skills. In fact, an article titled “The Effect of Police Body-Worn Cameras on Use of Force and Citizens’ Complaints Against the Police: A Randomized Controlled Trial” reveals that “cynical officers held more favorable attitudes towards the use-of-force, while officers reporting higher levels of professional efficacy held more favorable attitudes towards the use of social skills to solve problems” (Ariel 513). The article observed de-escalation strategies as an effective tool to substantially reduce forceful responses, as well as reducing the incidence of complaints (525) regarding police brutality.

Implementing body cameras in the police force also dramatically affects the level and frequency of force used throughout one’s service. Ariel writes that his research provided “(a) rich body of evidence on perceived social-surveillance—self-awareness...and...proposes that people adhere to social norms and change their conduct because of that cognizance that someone else is watching” (511), proving that surveillance can help *prevent* police brutality. In the event

of police misconduct and extreme use-of-force, body cameras still provide “an external set of behavioral norms... [thus] (p)olice–public encounters become more transparent and the curtain of silence that protects misconduct can more easily be unveiled, which makes misconduct less likely” (518) and protects citizens from police-related violence.

Aside from body cameras and psychological/diversity training, uniform Use-of-Force standards are essential in the protection of African American lives. “Racism and Police Brutality in America” by Cassandra Chaney and Ray V. Robertson write that “(b)lacks are more likely to be victims of police brutality...[and] to be accosted while operating a motorized vehicle” (482) than their white counterparts. While police reform affects everyone, black Americans benefit the most from such revision, especially in terms police force standards. While surveying multiple police forces across America, Ariel discovered that no one force could “agree on what constitutes ‘improper use-of-force’ or ‘excessive or unnecessary use-of-force’”, even though they were both scrutinizing the same incidents” (514) via video recording. When questioned about the confusion regarding standards of force, multiple officers testified that “rules and laws relating to police use-of-force are simply ‘too vague to be regarded as a comprehensive set of operational guidelines’” (514). Considering the vague limitations individual police officers have regarding force, it is apparent that such limitations must be revised and concretized so as to prevent further loss of life and confusion regarding what amount of force is truly acceptable in any one situation.

The last implementation of systemic reconstruction lies within local, state, and federal government. Local election and politics are incredibly important for the African American community where creating systemic change in small areas is concerned, since “(t)he election of African-American legislators...enhances the political empowerment of African-American

constituents” (Grose 452) and the greater community. While political action on the federal level may be difficult, the expansion and evolution of a community can be severely altered by the major, local, political players. The election of officials that challenge systems of oppression, voter suppression, and believe that “political empowerment [is] the hiring of African-American district staff, as these staff are typically responsible for constituency service in legislators’ congressional districts” (452) is crucial for community success. To change order of power, one must start where the power does. Positive representation of black political leaders would benefit black communities in the work force, government, and at home. Diversity is essential in every aspect of life, encouraging success, growth, and more opportunities for African American citizens to influence local, state, and federal legislature. When a diverse and educated cast of politicians lead their communities, political reform activates the inclusion of historically silenced voices within that society, thereby empowering and electing individuals that have suffered under American systems of oppression.

Electing local government officials that advocate for education, police, prison, gun reform and proper psychological care is essential in dismantling systems of racist oppression. By empowering and uplifting African American communities that are often targets of subjugation, true reform is possible. Lawmakers and government officials that stand with the African American community are essential to the true liberation of the community from the tyranny of fear and violence; “Race, Political Empowerment, and Constituency Service: Descriptive Representation and the Hiring of African-American Congressional Staff” asserts that

The hiring of black staff provides descriptive representation at the staff level, may also...reach African-American constituents, and can perhaps lead to greater substantive

outcomes for African-Americans via constituency service if the black staff have stronger ties to the black communities of their districts than do the white staff (Grose 453).

The encouragement to vote and participate in local politics is also essential in liberation; throughout history, “(black) votes were courted in some parts of the country and discouraged in others” (Margolies 103), often through violence and other threatening acts. When local government successfully makes positive change for its African American citizens, systems of oppression begin to crumble, allowing further reform to take place, resulting in the advancement of more African American leaders to positions of power.

Positive representations of black political leaders are also essential in the dismantling of systemic oppression; ensuring the diversity of a cabinet, executive board, or team aids in advancing overdue dialogue and action about American race relations and the extent to which white privilege undermines success. Leaders who prioritize the dismantling of racist systems and reflect the diverse community which they serve also communicate positive messages to African American youth, promoting deliberate inclusion. Such reform is essential, for “if America is to survive and the races are to live in peace, the (African American) can neither be rejected nor integrated out of existence, but must instead proudly...enrich and reinvigorate a civilization now sadly deficient in its best traditions” (Margolies 189). Diversity and positive representation encourage communal empowerment and true political reform. Black political leaders who work to create a better future for their community enact change that empowers commonly silenced voices and deconstruct systems responsible for advancing such silence.

In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X, *Losing My Cool: How a Father’s Love and 15,000 Books Beat Hip-Hop Culture* by Thomas Chatterton Williams, and Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and*

Me, white supremacist systems of fear and violence are evident, shedding light on the institutionalized oppression of African Americans. Despite the variations in genre, gender, and time, each narrative concludes that while American society has emancipated African American people through the enactment of civil rights, The United States fails in truly liberating black individuals from systems of violence, death, and fear. Close textual analyses that span slavery, emancipation, Jim Crow, segregation, police brutality, and mass incarceration make it apparent that policing the black body is a white American value which has evolved throughout history. The values of fear and violence have not changed despite the legal liberation of African American people. When considering the systemic oppression of African American people throughout history, reform is essential in ensuring the empowerment of black Americans and the dismantling of racist systems. While American citizens must engage in the active process of remembering their origins, education, police, prison, gun, psychological, and governmental reform must occur for African American individuals to be truly liberated from fear and racialized violence.

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