The Responsibility of An Artist: Black Contemporary Music and Empowerment in the Age of Black Lives Matter

by

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Introduction

On July 26, 2015, Cleveland transit officers arrested a 14-year-old boy who was presumed to be publicly intoxicated, resulting in escalating tensions between law enforcement and community members. Following this incident, witnesses reported that the boy had been “roughed up” by the arresting officers and slammed to the ground. The arrest coincided with the first Black Lives Matter conference to take place in Cleveland. Since the boy was attending the Black Lives Matter event, activists caught wind of the situation and began to protest his arrest, which led to protestors eventually being pepper sprayed by authorities.\(^1\)

This incident came at a particularly sensitive time given the murder of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in November of the previous year by the Cleveland Police Department.\(^2\) The shooter claimed the boy appeared to be armed, which turned out to be a toy gun. Given Rice’s young age, this event had a lasting impact on the collective conscious of both Cleveland and the nation as a whole. Cleveland at the time was under investigation by the Justice Department for police brutality, the report concluding that the city needed to undergo a transformation to reform its police department, as they found that the “CDP engages in a pattern or practice

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of the use of excessive force in violation of the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution”.

When the boy was released to family members after receiving medical treatment, it became clear that against all odds, the protesters had won. They began to chant the chorus to Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright”, a song off of his highly acclaimed album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, and the footage went viral. This incident took place just over a month after Lamar performed the song at the 2015 BET awards, delivering some of the most poignant lyrics in the song – “hate po po, wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho” atop a police car, an American flag waving in the background. At the award ceremony, Lamar was given the title of Best Male Hip Hop Artist. The scope of music’s capacity for promoting civic engagement was perhaps best encapsulated in a 2015 article for Slate.com where author Aisha Harris asks, has Kendrick Lamar recorded the new Black national anthem?

The song’s prominent message – being representative of overcoming and remaining triumphant in the face of injustice – and its lasting impact is abundantly clear. The song has been used by protestors to unite crowds in countless situations, in 2016 at a Trump rally; protestors chanted the song in victory after the rally was cancelled for security reasons, and in less politically

3 Investigation of the Cleveland Division of Police. *United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division*, 4 Dec. 2014.
charged situations as well, from mega arena concerts to house parties. All of these scenes are examples of ways in which individuals can experience collective effervescence.

Collective effervescence, coined by Emile Durkheim, refers to the phenomenon in which emotionally charged events bring groups together through the means of a common experience, ultimately fostering a sense of unity. He theorized that individuals were able to experience this phenomenon through feeling a sense of belonging within a community and having a role in the social fabric, which in pre-capitalist society was fostered through institutions such as the church, more interpersonal economies, and marriage. In one of his earliest studies, focusing on suicide in Europe, Durkheim sought to explain what drove individuals to suicide within a broader social context. He found that factors such as whether or not one is involved in religion, their marital status, and the state of the economy could serve as indicators of whether or not one is more disposed to committing suicide.

All of the factors that Durkheim identified were related to how well integrated within one’s society an individual felt. Emile Durkheim observed early on in capitalism’s development that although it made labor organization more rational and accumulating unforeseen amounts of capital possible, new social conditions that came about as a result of capitalism actually served to create more isolated individuals. He examined what he claimed to be a general decaying of the social fabric as a result of the lessening coercive power of
institutions that previously fostered a sense of solidarity among the populace.\textsuperscript{6} Thus, the individualistic nature of capitalism that allowed it to flourish was also leading to conditions in which citizens began to feel disconnected from not only their labor but increasingly their society as well.

Individuals have found themselves more isolated then ever before – which Durkheim recognized as leading to higher rates of suicide. Durkheim argues that this stems from the decline of opportunities for engaging in activities that elicit these feelings of collective effervescence in an increasingly secularized society, which he argued was the main benefit of institutional religion.\textsuperscript{7} The erosion of sources of community that Durkheim observed in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and its ultimate impacts on individuals living in capitalist societies is an observation that continues to be true to this day.'

In 2000, Robert D. Putnam published “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” describing a similar phenomenon of the decreasing prevalence of associations in society. A key takeaway from this work is the ultimate impact this depleting sphere of public discussion has on democracy as a whole.\textsuperscript{8} Democracy in its truest sense requires an active and engaged populace to function properly, which for most of America’s history has not been the reality.

\textsuperscript{6} Durkheim, Émile. \textit{Suicide, a Study in Sociology}. Glencoe, Ill.: Free, 1951. Print.
According to Durkheim, it is crucial for the individual to understand the society they are a part of to understand themselves. He argues that humanity itself is linked to this feeling of belonging to a larger society, and thus the personal in entrenched in this large assemblage of societal influences acting upon the individual. In an individualistic capitalist society where there are fewer and fewer means of participating in the collective, coupled with the increased privatization of the individual, these feelings have fewer outlets. In the modern United States, I argue that in the present historical moment one of the primary forms that these feelings find their outlet is through the consumption of popular music.

In order to study this theorization of the social structures that have developed as a result of capitalism and the impacts they have on the individual and society as a whole, I will turn to the rising popularity and commercialization of Black expression in contemporary popular music as a case study in collective effervescence. I believe that we can take the frameworks provided by social theorists who focus on post-colonial racial theories to further delve into the political mechanisms at place in rap music in the age of Black Lives Matter and identify its larger social implications and impacts.

I have chosen to focus on popular music because pop culture can serve as an indication of where a society is, what it values, and what it aspires to. The other significant aspect of pop culture is that it is a site that invites the involvement of all people, from a wide array of classes, genders identities, and races, meaning that it is widely accessible. It serves as an equalizer, especially
now in an age where information is spread and consumed at unprecedented speeds and connects individuals in ways that have never before been possible.

The way pop culture is dissected and discussed is increasingly online on social media platforms where all a user needs is an Internet connection to participate in this new, digital public sphere. In modern America, it is through this technologically mediated collective experience that people engage with popular culture. In this study, I argue that in lieu of concrete social structures to provide the means for a populace to experience collective effervescence, popular music has become the primary vehicle through which societal issues are collectively felt and dealt with.

Popular music in America has functioned as a primarily communal cultural form that brings people together and plays a crucial role in community building and ultimately how we make sense of the world around us. It has the capacity for consciousness building, for boosting empathy and understanding, and, as is becoming clear as a result of a wave of politically active artists, for encouraging political action and civic engagement.

Although there is a long lineage of activism on the part of the Black community in American popular music, I believe that there are several key factors that have led to the increasing politicization of celebrities within the last decade, specifically the rise of digitally mediated public spaces and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement online.

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My thesis will consist of examining the music and impacts of three key contemporary popular artists and the ways in which they make sense of the political and historical movement starting in 2014 and continuing to the present, and the ways in which this has sparked wider discourse in the public sphere.

I will be turning to the careers of Beyoncé Knowles, Kendrick Lamar, and Janelle Monáe, focusing in on their becoming more vocal on electoral politics and the social issues confronting America today. In addition to specific albums, I will examine key music videos, live performances, as well as their broader public presence and cultural impact. These case studies will be situated within their respective musical lineages and the time period and context in which they were made, performed, and consumed. In examining the political nature of these contemporary Afrocentric musical events and albums, I hope to get into a deeper analysis and understanding of the ways in which we conceive of equality, activism, anomie, the role of the state, and post-industrial age democracy in contemporary America, and how this dialectic process has evolved.

In order to examine this phenomenon, I will be examining the social conditions that have led up to the Black Lives Matter movement, the goals of the movement, and the impact it has had on society at large. By looking at the music that has come out of this historical moment, I hope to illuminate the ways in which prominent artists play a role in consciousness building as a result of their specific social status and platform in an increasingly online society.

Given the nature of the topic at hand, in addition to Durkheim’s works, I will be also incorporating the works of Black feminist, post-colonial, and Marxist
theorists to get a fuller understanding of the many factors at play in the works of the artists I will be examining and the ways in which these messages are received. I believe that while Durkheim’s theory speaks specifically to the impact of industrial capitalism on the individual, it is crucial to incorporate theories dealing with the experiences of those who not only face anomie but those who face oppression under a “white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy”.

Understanding of conditions under which some citizens are multiply disadvantaged on the basis and intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality, will provide a deeper understanding of the way constructions of power impact people and the way they navigate society on a daily basis.

Durkheim’s work, however, will function as an especially helpful framework given that his theory is all based upon the assumption that all individuals are impacted by overlapping, interconnected forces at play in society, and this network is what comes to be incorporated into our consciousness and influences how we view both ourselves and make sense of the world around us.

Due to the contemporary nature of my project, looking from 2014 to the present, I will be examining a variety of sources – from traditional social theory texts, biographies of similarly prominent popular artists that also spoke for the issues of their day, to music videos from the artists I am focusing in on, concert footage, online articles, my personal experience working for an organization that registers people to vote at music events, and social media, where a lot of this cultural dialogue is taking place and seen on an elevated, global stage.
For different artists I will use a blend of these different varieties of sources, focusing on different aspects of their creative expression, and utilize the theories of different social theorists as they pertain to the subject matter tackled in each respective artist's music. I am deliberately not using a consistent framework through which to analyze each case study due to the facts that each artist varies greatly in how they express themselves as well as their general philosophies and views on the world. For example, Beyoncé relies on visuals and theatrics the serve as powerful symbolism within the public sphere. As such, the tools I will utilize to inspect the impact of these cultural events would not make sense in the context of examining Kendrick Lamar, whose visuals are more stripped down, meaning that one must turn instead to his deep lyricism to really observe and internalize his messages.

My ultimate goal with this work is to historicize the current political moment through the examination of these three key artists. I chose these artists as case studies for these broader societal phenomena due to the fact that they all, in very different ways, envision and call for the achievement of a truly democratic society through their art. I argue that these artists answer this common question of how true democracy may be achieved with their own ideals of what can bring empowerment within their communities.

I have chosen the examination of art that is consumed in a very public way because problems of inequality, in addition to being a result of certain policies and a history of discrimination, are a cultural problem. Within any society there are certain shared sets of cultural agreements and, as I argue
throughout this study, the arts play a large role in how we collectively arrive to these agreements.

At the root of my thesis is investigating the degree to which popular music both shapes and reflects the collective consciousness of the society in which it is popular. In a society of alienated and apathetic individuals, I seek to understand whether or not this framework can provide us with a deeper understanding of how music can play a role in developing more self-aware, conscientious, and empathetic citizens and build deeper connections as a result of participating in collective effervescence as it has been redefined through modern technologies. Today, mainstream musicians such as Kendrick Lamar, Beyoncé, Janelle Monáe, and many others, have put out bodies of work and statements that speak specifically to a new social movement and place legacies of Black Nationalism in the modern context.

The first chapter will look to Beyoncé to delve into the spectacle of her feminism, combatting the devaluation of the Black female voice in the public sphere with intentional hyper-visibility, as well as the implications and significance of her being one of the largest forces in the entertainment industry today. Beyoncé toes the line between the grandeur and the political, meaning public and accessible, and presents them to a global audience through her lyricism, visuals, and live performances. Ultimately, she finds her version of empowerment through success and acclaim, through labor, and through equal and fulfilling partnerships.
The second chapter will focus on the social theory of the landscapes of Kendrick Lamar’s discography, and the ways in which Lamar finds empowerment and liberation through the salvation of God and strong sense of self-love. Through his music he reminds listeners to look inward to find new philosophies of life and survival in the face of marginalization and hardships.

In the third chapter, I will bring my focus to the ways in which we can envision future possibilities of liberation and equity, in order to do this I will examine Janelle Monáe and the female, queer, digitized, slightly dystopian, Afrocentric futures she imagines for herself throughout her discography. In Monáe’s constructed realities, liberation is achieved through the act of radical imagination in order to envision a more equal and just society as an act of love.
Ch. 1: “Who Run the World?”

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles was born in Houston, Texas to Matthew Knowles and Celestine (Tina) Knowles on September 4, 1981. She grew up in a middle-class home, her mother running a hair salon in the city and her dad working as a sales manager at Xerox. From a young age, Knowles displayed musical talents, performing in church and school choirs, eventually culminating in the formation of Girls Tyme, alongside Kelly Rowland, LaTavia Roberson, and LeToya Luckett, managed by her father.\(^\text{10}\)

The group was discovered by a producer\(^\text{11}\) who in an effort to get the group signed landed them the opportunity to perform on the televised talent show Star Search, where they ultimately lost, a moment Knowles would go on to sample in her 2013 single “Flawless”.\(^\text{12}\) Following their loss, they rebranded several times before eventually landing on Destiny’s Child and eventually being signed to Columbia Records in 1997.

Today, Beyoncé is one of the most recognizable figures in the world. She has been named to countless listicles and articles by media outlets recognizing her as one of the most influential artists\(^\text{13}\), musicians\(^\text{14}\), people\(^\text{15}\), and women\(^\text{16}\) in


\(^{12}\) Beyoncé. BEYONCÉ. Columbia Records, 2013.

the world. She has the record for highest number of Grammy nominations for a woman with sixty-three nominations and twenty-three awards. She averages at around twenty-four million monthly listeners on Spotify, and has over 126 million followers on Instagram, with a combined following of 202,972,300 followers across Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

In addition to her musical talents, she has been praised for her humanitarian efforts, activism, and messages of empowerment within her music. After being named number one on BBC's Women’s Hour Power List 2018, judges explained why she was selected stating that, "She regularly reinvents her sound and is an empowering voice for black communities and marginalized groups globally. Feminism, activism, being a humanitarian, talking about being a mother...singing, dancing... a great performer. She deserves to be number one." 17 Through her career, performances, and music, Knowles has solidified her spot as American royalty.

In 2014, Saturday Night Live released a sketch about a fictional mob entitled the ‘Beygency’ 18 who comes after those who dare to say anything unfavorable about the “Queen Bey”. After a man, portrayed by Andrew Garfield, admits that he is “not a huge fan of that one “Drunk in Love” song”, the agency

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ensures that he is erased from the body politic, eliminating all evidence that he had ever existed. Even though he likes "most of her music", he is ultimately captured by the agency and thrown into a jail cell.

As the sketch comes to an end, Kate McKinnon stares into the camera and sneers, “who runs the world? [Beyoncé] does!” While clearly fictional, the sketch does play a bit into reality, specifically the efficiency of Knowles’ management team. This skit serves as an example of commentary on the perceived and thus actualized social power that an entity or personality can hold within popular culture. More specifically, the sketch evokes thoughts of one particular incident in which her team went so far as to actually attempt to remove certain unflattering photos posted of the songstress on Buzzfeed.com in 2013, even though the article, titled “The 33 Fiercest Moments From Beyoncé’s Halftime Show”, was explicitly in support of her.

The sketch may also speak to a perceived and actualized level of social and cultural power, a power that has led to the singer to feel the need to remind her audience of her humanity. Beyoncé’s tightly controlled image and brand, in addition to her talents as a singer, songwriter, actress, and persona have propelled her to being named one of the best entertainers alive today, and grant her a larger than life platform with which to spread her messages. A message, that I will argue, has gotten increasingly political over time.

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20 In her 2016 visual album Lemonade, a screen flashes stating simply that “God is God, I am not”. (Lemonade, 2016).
In an article succinctly titled, “Why Beyoncé Matters”, Larry W. Smith writes that the songstress has “opened a discourse that explores the place of famous women as agents of both political and monetary prowess”. Through her discography, musical visuals, live performances, and social media presence, Beyoncé Knowles has shifted the role we typically assign to pop stars. Evading the disposability typical of pop stars, Beyoncé’s two decade career has solidified her place as both a common household name, cultural icon, and now increasingly, a political activist.

In this chapter, I plan to explore the rise of Beyoncé Knowles-Carter as a political actor. She has become both increasingly vocal about electoral politics, her political views, and with her more recent works (BEYONCÉ, Lemonade, Everything is Love), tackles more directly racial issues and misogyny within our society. Additionally, she has increasingly used her large following and platforms, both through public appearances and social media, to speak out against societal issues and vocalize her political opinions. She has even partnered with the non-profit non-partisan organization, HeadCount, which registers people to vote at concerts and festivals, to get fans registered to vote at her past tours.²¹

I argue that due to the foundation laid by Black feminist thinkers, and older generations of pop stars, in addition to other factors such as her global success and the rise of the digital age, Beyoncé exists and is in a position in her

career where she is able to not only speak out against inequity, but effectively introduce more and more individuals to subjects like feminism and identity politics through her art.

In this chapter I explore the ways in which intellectual gatekeeping of feminist discourse has left many, such as the women that need it the most, feeling excluded and alienated from the subject. In addition to this history of anti-Blackness and classism within the feminist movement, another key factor is that of the delegation of Black consciousness to the sidelines of mainstream, popular culture. All of these topics, discussed through the lens of the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, will serve to explain the increasing politicization of Beyoncé.

In 1999, Beyoncé was propelled into stardom when she landed her first #1 hit on the Billboard Hot 100 chart as the lead singer of girl group Destiny's Child with their single “Bills, Bills, Bills”. Even at this early stage in her career, Destiny's Child's songs were centered on themes of equality and empowerment. “Bills, Bills, Bills” details a relationship where the man goes from “start[ing] out real cool, taking me places I ain't ever been” to “maxing out my card, [giving] me bad credit”23. The song launches into the chorus following the pre-chorus where Kelly Rowland states “you triflin', good for nothing type of brother, silly me, why haven't I found another? A baller, when times get hard, I need someone to help me out, instead of a scrub like you who don’t know what a man’s about”. The

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song tackles a subject less discussed in popular music, though within in the broader consciousness as a result of artists like TLC, specifically the “scrub” archetype, the man who takes advantage of the financial generosity of his partner, begging the question – can you pay my bills?

On the contrary of popular misconception the song is not about asking a man to completely finance their life, but rather seeks out a man that can provide when “times are hard”, to be equal within the relationship, and treat them with respect. It is these themes of financial security, equality in partnerships, hard work, and monetary prowess that have continued to run throughout Knowles’s discography and define her brand.

The music video that accompanies the track begins with closed doors opening to reveal the scene inside, a hair salon where Beyoncé and the other members tend to the hair of women and gossip about her “triflin’, good for nothing” man. In between the scenes of the members of Destiny’s Child running the salon, we see images of men in boxes akin to prison cells, labeled with words such as “tired”, “triflin’”, and “broke”. Contrary to the racially misogynistic cultural phenomenon of limiting Black women and boxing them in to a handful of dehumanizing tropes, the roles are entirely reversed, a trope that recurs throughout her later music videos and songs.

24 “A lot of people got the wrong idea and they thought that we were gold diggers…. So it was very important for me to let everybody know that Destiny’s Child are independent women, we buy our own diamonds, we buy our own rings, we pay our own bills.” – Beyoncé (dc31988. “Destiny’s Child Interview.” YouTube, YouTube, 21 Mar. 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOPcoxuks70.)

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the video, however, is where it is set. The use of the hair salon scene specifically pays tribute to Beyoncé’s mother, who ran Headlines in Houston as Beyoncé was growing up. We are given a glimpse of what goes on just beyond closed doors, specifically when one takes into consideration the cultural gravity of hair salons within Black culture and the importance of hair in the construction of Black female identity.

For Black women, hair is a crucial point of identity building, and in this context, community building as well. Many hairstyles, from full installations to braids take hours of painstaking work, and on the part of the person getting their hair done, hours in the chair during which time all there really is to do is talk to those around you. The use of the hair salon in the music video of their first number one single is an effective tribute to not only Knowles’s mother, but also the role of oral histories in the creation of self-identity and making sense of where one fits in the world around them.

At the beginning of Destiny’s Child’s success, none of its members, Kelly Rowland, Michelle Williams, and Farrah Franklin, were in relationships. Beyoncé has stated that growing up in the hair salon around older women and hearing them describe their relationships was her earliest inspiration for writing music. Focusing on Black female hair, especially as an important site of identity, labor, and pride, in their first music video is especially telling, and works to foreshadow a key theme in her subsequent works, specifically in the aesthetics of her visual album Lemonade.

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On “Sorry”, a standout track from the album, she sings, “you only want me when I’m not there / You better call Becky with the “good” hair”\textsuperscript{27}. This line in particular speaks directly to the ways in which Black women’s hair and how they choose to wear it is policed in the public sphere. More recent songs like Princess Nokia’s “Mine” and Solange’s “Don’t Touch My Hair” address similar themes. In a society where many women feel pressured to use products to straighten out hair that is deemed “unprofessional” in order to conform to hegemonic notions of what it means to look “put together” in the professional space, as well as “desirable” to partners in the private sphere\textsuperscript{28}, showcasing and celebrating a wide array of Black hairstyles through her visuals is especially powerful. Beyoncé specifically has been criticized countless times for her use of weaves and wigs that are primarily blonde, long, and considered white\textsuperscript{29}. This critique, however, speaks more directly to the level of respectability politics one must play into in certain societal positions. The topic of hair is especially prevalent in the discourse surrounding Beyoncé in relation to her daughter, Blue Ivy. As her daughter has grown up, especially earlier in her life, she was on the receiving end of articles, memes, and posts criticizing her hair and appearance. Knowles directly addressed this on “Formation”, and sings with pride, “I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros”\textsuperscript{30}. Through celebration of Blackness through this reclamation of hair and presentation of self and choosing

\textsuperscript{27}Beyoncé. \textit{Lemonade}. Parkwood Entertainment, 2016.
to deviate from the norm, one can reclaim one’s identity and challenge oppressive beauty standards. This divergence occurs and is a point of focus in Knowles’ more recent body of work and performances.31

Perhaps what is most interesting and radical about Beyoncé as a cultural figure is the fact that she openly embraces her heritage within a genre of music that has been historically reserved for and saturated with whiteness, a fact that extends to the feminist movement as well, challenging these structures while navigating a certain degree of adherence to respectability politics.

In 2016, Saturday Night Live released a sketch titled “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black” following the release of “Formation”. The YouTube video has since amassed over 17 million views. In it, white people are shown in a state of serenity “the day before the Super Bowl”, a level of peace that is promptly brought to a halt by the release of Knowles’ new video.

A scene not too different from their “Beygency” sketch is set, except one key difference exists. Following the release of the “Formation” music video, characters are bombarded by news reports describing Beyoncé’s embrace of her Black heritage and “unapologetic Blackness”. This leads one of the characters, played by Aidy Byrant, to say to her husband, “I think Beyoncé is Black!” The white world is brought to chaos, in an office setting with headphones plugged in, coworkers grapple with the new music with each other. One states “I don’t understand this”, another chimes in “maybe it’s not for us.” Another one follows,

31 I B I D
“But usually everything is!” The scene suddenly turns post-apocalyptic, cars piled in the streets, flames alight.

A Black observer confused by the mayhem, played by Sasheer Zamata, walks to her friend, portrayed by Vanessa Bayer who says, “we have to leave America! Beyoncé is Black!” The friend responds, “Amy, I’m Black.” She says, “What? No you’re not, you’re like my girl!” She responds, “There are Black people all over the world. That guy is Black!” The camera cuts to a man wearing a hoodie, jacket, and fitted cap on a street corner, Amy responds, “well I know he’s Black”. The biggest pop star in the world, like Amy’s friend, on the other hand, couldn’t possibly be Black. Blackness in media has often been defined as being constrained to the racist trope of the “gangster”, the categorized “other” that is seen as more the disposable subject within the body politic and SNL uses this opportunity to critique this thinly cloaked racism that remains prevalent in societal consciousness.

While clearly satire, the video gets at a lot of pertinent issues and offers a scathing critique of the whiteness of popular music and the degree to which popular music must conform and bend to the acceptance and comfort of its white audiences. “Formation”, both the song and music video, celebrate her background, (“daddy Alabama, mama Louisiana, you mix that Negro with that Creole make a Texas bamma”) upbringing (“earned all this money but they’ll never take the country out me, I got hot sauce in my bag, swag”), and specifically called into question the ability of law enforcement and the United States government to keep people safe. In the music video the words “Stop shooting us”
are spray painted on a wall, and Beyoncé is shown drowning atop a New Orleans squad car in the waters of Katrina as the video comes to an end.

While the music received largely positive feedback, there was a fair share of pushback. The performance of the new song at the 2016 Super Bowl, seen by over one hundred million viewers, led some more conservative viewers and police officers to go so far as to label Beyoncé anti-American and call for a boycott of her music. During her performance, Knowles and her dancers performed dressed in outfits reminiscent of the Black Panther movement and paid homage to legacies of Black struggle and the Civil Rights Movement.

Many accused the singer of increasing racial tensions and furthering racial divides. A Facebook page titled “Boycott Beyoncé” boasts over twenty thousand likes and asks viewers if they too are “tired of Racial Division?”33. Beyoncé in turn responded by selling “Boycott Beyoncé” shirts as tour merchandise. A deliberate move to display she wasn’t intimated by threats of boycotting as well as to indicate that she has no plans to stop using her platform to speak in on the issues facing her community.

Paying tribute to revolutionary leaders, particularly Black nationalist thinkers, is a theme that runs throughout Knowles’ music and visuals. In *Lemonade*’s accompanying film, Malcolm X’s voice plays while showing the faces of Black women. He states that “the most disrespected person in America is the Black woman, the most unprotected person in America is the Black woman, the most neglected person in America is the Black woman” Later, on the 2018 album

*Everything is Love*, she declares in “Black Effect”, “bitch, I’m Malcolm X!” While drawing comparisons between her and civil rights leaders is nothing new, she declares on “Upgrade U” (2006) that she can do for her partner “what Martin did for the people”, and on “Don’t Hurt Yourself” (2016) she proclaims she’ll “motivate your ass / Call me Malcolm X!” In 2018 the comparison holds considerably more weight given her newfound outspokenness on political matters.

In addition to her early music showing pride in her ethnic identity, Beyoncé established herself within the lineage of female musicians that make the empowerment of women a central theme within their music early in her career. Songs such as “Independent Women pt. 1” and “Survivor” solidified Beyoncé’s stances on the empowerment of women, themes she further works on and speaks to in later works such as “Run the World (Girls)” and “Flawless”.

Within the history of feminist movements, despite the key role and influence of early Black feminists in the shaping and advancing of the movement, Black consciousness has been largely cast to the margins, and those who are multiply oppressed due to the intersection of marginalized identities have been rendered almost entirely invisible by hegemonic forces within the United States\(^\text{34}\). Due to the mainstream nature of pop music, what is acceptable as pop music is largely based on what is normative within society creating a unique feedback loop that both informs and is informed by the culture it is situated in.

For this reason, Beyoncé’s unapologetic celebration of her Blackness was an exceptionally disruptive force within popular culture.

When taking this into consideration it becomes apparent how it could be possible that white populist America “didn’t know” Beyoncé was Black and as such, it is an observation that is extremely indicative of and highlights the degree of assimilation and respectability she had to carry with herself to be seen as being deserving of such a platform within a primarily white industry for the majority of her nearly two decade long career.

Artists, specifically female pop artists, have historically risked losing their platform by speaking out against racism and oppressive power structures openly. Due to this precedent, it becomes culturally and historically important that Beyoncé as both the person and the brand came to the conclusion that if our society will not acknowledge the suffering and oppression created as a result of disastrous policies and cultural norms, the proper response would be to display the word “Feminist” in neon lights and nod directly to the work and influence of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers during nationally televised performances viewed by millions.

Janell Hobson explores this topic in an essay entitled, ”Feminists Debate Beyoncé”, and makes the case that rather than politically dangerous, it was actually beneficial for Beyoncé to proclaim such public support for social movements because the Black feminist groundwork has been laid for her to be

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able to do so, for both her public personality and brand. Being able to fight invisibility and the silencing of Black women with her platform, and to do so in a spectacular way that commands the attention of the people in a hyper visible way is what makes Knowles, in addition to an entertainer, a powerful political figure and one of great controversy.

Beyoncé raps, “you know you’re that bitch when you cause all this conversation” on “Formation”, and indeed, what Knowles’s embrace of intersectional feminism inspires more than anything is public discourse. Being a prominent figure within the public sphere and consciousness, creating spectacles that lead to discussions surrounding deeply rooted inequality in society is something that may not be unique to her, or even this generation of pop stars, but as a result of other external factors, such as the rise of the digital public sphere as a site of discourse, has entirely new possibilities for consciousness raising.

As noted by Bilal Qureshi of NPR, “the majority of women that need feminism listen to Beyoncé. They don’t take women’s studies classes”. It is specifically a result of her music being accessible that Beyoncé is able to reach “every day women” and instructs them to “get in formation ... or get eliminated”. Angela Davis succinctly described in 2001 the connection between Black musicality and Black politics in her essay “Black Women and Music: A Historical Legacy of Struggle”. Davis writes,

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“Music has long permeated the daily life of most African-Americans; it has played a central role in the normal socialization process; and during moments characterized by intense movements for social change, it has helped to shape the necessary political consciousness. Any attempt, therefore, to understand in depth the evolution of women’s consciousness within the Black community requires a serious examination of the music which has influenced them – particularly that which they themselves have created”.

Musicality functions as a source of socialization, expression, of identity building, and thus consciousness building, all of which is possible due to the important interrelation of music and community38.

There are many aspects of popular music in particular that make it a likely tool for inspiring collectivity and organization. One key factor is the general composition of pop music, which is typically a few verses interspersed with a catchy, easy to pick up lyrics, and a very repetitive structure. This structure allows for audiences to easily pick up the song and internalize the message a song is sending. Another key factor is that most popular music is in 4/4 time, something that most Western people are used to and comes easily rhythmically, making it easy to both dance, sing, and march along to. Of particular significance is that of the music being easily translatable to something that can be marched to, something Beyoncé chose to play up in both her 2016 Super Bowl halftime show and her 2018 Coachella performance, which centered the experiences and histories of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, a

culture Knowles is intimately familiar with, both as a result of growing up in the South and her father having attended Fisk University, an HBCU in Nashville, Tennessee.

Another aspect that lends itself to collective experience, specifically her songs that can be classified as empowering, is the use of call and response, a musical practice deeply rooted in African and Afrodiasporic identity. Another crucial aspect is that the content of the song is typically relatable and marketable to a mass audience, which explains why love and relationships are a key storyline within much of Beyoncé’s music.

In the remix to “Feeling Myself” Beyoncé raps defiantly, “changed the game with that digital drop, know where you was when that digital popped.” In December of 2013, Beyoncé dropped her self-titled album at midnight with minimal prior notice or advertisement, her only clue came when the chairman of Columbia Records, Rob Stringer, vaguely implied that new music was on the way a couple of months before. The album was released in conjunction with the visuals for each of the fourteen songs on the record. This follows a broader trend of Beyoncé elevating the importance of visuals within her art, something she touched on after the release of BEYONCÉ.

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In a press release Knowles stated,

“I see music. It’s more than just what I hear. When I’m connected to something, I immediately see a visual or a series of images that are tied to a feeling or an emotion, a memory from my childhood, thoughts about life, my dreams or my fantasies. And they’re all connected to the music”.

She cites memories of watching the music video for Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” as a kid and laments the lack of similarly comprehensive works in the industry that is more focused on the release of quick singles. A sentiment that harks back to her consistent defiance against being a disposable figure within pop culture.

Within twelve hours, over a million Tweets were written about the album and it debuted at number one on the US Billboard Top 200 chart, and within days set the record for being the fastest selling record on the iTunes Store with 617,000 sales in three days. This move solidified Beyoncé’s spot as a cultural icon, and she did indeed inspire many artists to release music in a similar surprise format. This move single-handedly marked the shift from Beyoncé the pop star to the solidification of her “Queen Bey” status. A status, however, that has by no means exempted her from critique.

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Critics have accused Beyoncé time and time again of promoting a version of self- and female-empowerment that embraces and promotes capitalism and capitalist work ethic. This is a valid critique, especially given that the empowerment she has promoted from the beginning of her career has been explicitly related to and intertwined with the possession and flaunting of capital.

Beyoncé’s individualism and empowerment has been marked by her monetary independence, the ability to “pay [her] own bills” and “work hard [and] grind till [she owns] it”. In “Formation” she flaunts her wealth, rapping, “I just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making!” and tells us “your best revenge is your paper”. In an essay titled “Beyoncé and Social Media: Authenticity and the Presentation of Self”, Melissa Adveeff analyzes Beyoncé’s social media presence and finds that one of the biggest themes that Beyoncé highlights in her self-portrayal is that of her labor.

She prides herself on her ability to “grind from Monday to Friday” and “work from Friday to Sunday”. On “Six Inch” she sings “she work for the money / She worth every dollar and every minute” and on “Run the World (Girls)” prides herself on the fact that she was able to get “back to business” after the birth of her first daughter. What this theme speaks to is the role of Black exceptionalism in upholding unequal power structures where a select, privileged, few are accepted into positions of power, while the masses are left to face the full force of racial and class inequality. This is a theme that could even be linked to the

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44 “Bills, Bills, Bills” (1999)
45 “Formation” (2016)
centering of HBCU’s in her Coachella performance. Beyoncé, while seeking to provide a voice for the people, cannot be separated from her status as a Billionaire, or her marriage to industry mogul Jay-Z. Her status, wealth and presentation have led to critiques of her activism.

Despite the criticism she has received from those decrying the boycott of her music to distinguished social theorist bell hooks, however, she is also a widely accepted feminist icon which may be a result of other Black pop stars, such as Billie Holliday, Josephine Baker, Donna Summers, and Diana Ross to name a few, and Black feminist thinkers that led the way before her.

Scholars have noted that musicality is directly linked to Black women’s identity, specifically their sexual, racial, and political identities. Through musical and artistic expression, Beyoncé is able to express all facets of herself to her audiences. She does not shy away from a full range of expression, whether that is the expression of sexuality, pride, love, success, rage, or vulnerability. In fact it is this blend of all the multiplicities of emotions and self-expression that define Lemonade.

The way historians have analyzed the way society’s role on both race and gender intertwine to police the way Black women behave can shed insight on the way society views and makes sense of Beyoncé’s career. Due to the fact that Beyoncé expresses her femininity in such a way that both celebrates and takes

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control of her sexuality, in addition to her often-dramatized performances of high femme identity, her role as a feminist icon is often subject to scrutiny.

Her actions are heavily policed because she is not only subject to sexism and objectification as a woman but racial biases as a Black woman. What Beyoncé’s career perhaps best exemplifies is the creation of alternative sexual cultures, a theme prevalent in the history of women’s involvement in hip-hop culture. Examining music from the early Blues era to today’s age of Beyoncé, it is important to examine whether increasingly sexually explicit lyrics point to the claiming of female sexual agency or the continuation of the pre-existing notion of Black female hyper-sexuality. Scholars would argue that this is far too dichotomous of a way to approach this concept, that Beyoncé and previous super starlets do not conform to one or the other, but have effectively carved out their own space to express sexuality.

They would also argue that early starlets such as Josephine Baker were not ones to shy away from sexually “explicit” content and performance of self. Taking these themes as ways to directly interact with expectations of Black women as hypersexual yet undesirable subjects and the objectification of Black women’s bodies while shaming them for choosing to embrace this side of themselves, it becomes more clear how Beyoncé can be held up as a feminist icon despite exhibiting overt sexuality.

Beyoncé, by expressing her sexuality, as well as critiquing it, in a society that deems Black bodies as inherently deviant, unfeminine, and yet hypersexual, is an incredibly powerful move. Since our country’s founding on the backs of slaves,
society has assigned a sense of ownership over the Black female body. The Black woman, through history, has been portrayed as a commodity that was up for the grabs of anyone who wished to have her. Many academic texts on Beyoncé, particularly her performance and embodiment of body politics, have collectively not done enough to highlight the power behind what she is doing. They have not done enough to make clear how radical and important her new take on feminism is.

What we see through highly visible, vocal, and culturally prominent Black female artists exercising agency over her body, is this notion of Black women belonging to anyone being dismantled before us. We observe women through time taking back their bodies, taking back their sexualities, and taking back control of their agency and their personhood. We see resistance, we see women who take back their agency to finally decide how they want to be portrayed and express themselves. Additionally, doing so as a Black woman that is accepted as a face of ideal womanhood is inherently disruptive of whiteness being seen as the standard within American hegemony.

Most literature from the last few decades that delves into the representation of Black womanhood in popular media takes a rather abysmal view of the way in which Black women are typically represented. Rana A. Emerson identifies the typical tropes and one-dimensional identities attached to Black women in popular media in 2002, the categories she focused on being the “hot momma” or
jezebel, the asexual “mammy”, theemasculating “matriarch” and the “baby momma”\textsuperscript{48}.

While Beyoncé’s constructions of how she is represented in music videos have fallen into these designated typecasts in the past, she has never limited herself in her self-construction. On \textit{Lemonade} she plays the roles of the vulnerable scorned woman, the invincible “boss bitch”, the “ride or die”, the Glamorous woman, and the Liberator, a spokesperson for equality and freedom.

Emerson references prominent social theorist Patricia Hill Collins who wrote that “controlling images of Black womanhood are disseminated and legitimized through social institutions”\textsuperscript{49}, and expands upon this argument by “showing how popular entertainment serves as a space for the proliferation of these controlling images”\textsuperscript{50}. She points to Erykah Badu’s On and On video as an example of a more favorable representation of Black womanhood, as through “appropriating signs of Blackness, Black women are able to assert the particularity and forcefulness of Black femininity and agency through the music video”\textsuperscript{51}. I would argue that these very same themes Emerson points to as being a more favorable version of representation are all present in Beyoncé’s 2018 “APESHIT” music video. Filmed in the Louvre in Paris, France, the video explores themes of disruption in


\textsuperscript{49} IBID. pp. 133.

\textsuperscript{50} IBID.

\textsuperscript{51} IBID. pp. 126.
historically White spaces through spectacle\textsuperscript{52}, overcoming of colonial pasts, equality within partnerships, and the couple’s wealth.

Though the visuals certainly bring to mind this idea of subverting historically white spaces that Kevin Allred brings up in “Beyoncé’s Powerful New Music Video Eloquently Subverts White Spaces”, there is still the friction of these spectacles actually functioning in the service of these white hegemonic structures. Following the release of the video, the Louvre brought in a record number of 10.2 million visitors in 2018, which they partially attributed to the Carters’ video\textsuperscript{53}.

Beyoncé’s place in feminism and the question of whether or not she deserves the label has been the subject of a great deal of contention in the last few years. Nowhere is this debate encapsulated more poignantly than in the difference of opinion on the matter between renowned Black feminist social thinkers bell hooks and Angela Davis.

Angela Davis rose to fame as a result of her prominence as an activist during the 1960’s, her radical focus on prison abolition and civil liberties, and ties with both the Black Panther Party and the Communist Party, which resulted

\textsuperscript{52} “Going “apeshit” through the Louvre is a grandly disruptive spectacle. There are absolutely things to critique about the Carters’ enthusiastic participation in the system of capitalism, but it would be a mistake to view this takeover of the Louvre as merely a celebration of personal wealth. This is a power couple, in every sense of the word. What they are doing with their power, and their platform, is significant. (Perhaps they even want us to use this video as an opportunity to critique their own exceptional status?)” (Allred, Kevin. “Beyoncé’s Powerful New Music Video Eloquently Subverts White Spaces.” NBCNews.com, NBCUniversal News Group, www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/beyonc-jay-z-s-first-everything-love-music-video-powerful-ncna884851.)

in her famously being fired from her position as a professor at the University of California in 1969. Her chance involvement in the murder of Judge Harold Haley in 1970 by Jonathon Jackson as a result of her being the owner of the weapon even landed her on the FBI's top ten most wanted list, during which time she went into hiding to evade the police.

One of the most prevalent critiques against Beyoncé involves her role as a Billionaire entrenched in the capitalist logic of the music industry. This of course begs the question, can we trust feminism that is mass-produced and curated for the purpose of being sold? And to what extents can the word “feminist” even encompass all the differing lived experiences of different classes and races of women? Davis addresses these questions in a video where she critiques what she refers to “Mainstream Feminism”\textsuperscript{54}, stating that when she published \textit{Women, Culture, and Politics} and people began referring to her as a feminist she initially shied away from the term. Davis rejected the feminist label directly as a result of her experience of the term referring to white, bourgeoisie feminism, which is a trend we continue to see to this day.

The largest shift that we are seeing in the contemporary collective consciousness, Davis argues, is the rise of intersectionality within feminist ideology. While pop may be saturated with societal norms, such as whiteness, European standards of beauty, and consumerist and individualistic goals of success and notoriety in a capitalist structure, incorporating and uplifting new

\textsuperscript{54} AfroMarxist. "Angela Davis Criticizes 'Mainstream Feminism' / Bourgeois Feminism." \textit{YouTube}, YouTube, 8 Jan. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bezQkVfO9ToQ.
voices that have historically been left out of this structure and positioning them as also being the norm is culturally significant.

Furthermore, Davis has previously expressed her “appreciation for Beyoncé” during a keynote speech at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2014, focusing on modern racism, participation in politics, and intersectional feminism. She pointed specifically to the cultural importance of having a prominent popular artist such as Beyoncé and stated, “of course, when one talks about the corporate industry of mass culture and the commodification of bodies and music – of course all of that is there, but I did really appreciate the fact that Beyoncé brought in one of the most interesting novelists of our time I think, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and sampled her speech on feminism” in reference to her track “Flawless”.55

Davis also spoke to contemporary movements against institutional racism and violence and states “there is probably more hope in the younger generation now than at any time that I can remember in my lifetime.” This appreciation extended into February of 2016 when during a talk given at the University of San Francisco she stated, “I can say that I am happy that Beyoncé decided to do this evocative performance,” she said, referring to Beyoncé’s Super Bowl tribute to the Black Panther Party. Showing that she is hopeful about the direction in which society is progressing, “I embrace the fact that there is a broad

conversation that was staged by that performance.”56 In contrast to Davis’ acceptance, however, stands bell hook’s disapproval.

In a 2016 article titled “Moving Beyond Pain”, hooks decries *Lemonade* as an album that “stays within a conventional stereotypical framework, where the Black woman is always a victim” and “glamorizes a world of gendered cultural paradox and contradiction”. Hooks, in addition to critiquing its mixed messages and seeming glamorization of rage and violence rather than transcending the power dynamics present in marital relationships, also pushes back against the idea that this art was made for Black women, or primarily had Black female audience members in mind, stating that “commodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers”.57

To hooks, the concept of portraying a world of Black women uplifting and supporting one another is underscored by the idea that this focus on the Black female body is not revolutionary. Her rationality stemming from her argument that “from slavery to the present day, Black female bodies, clothed and unclothed, have been bought and sold”. To hooks, in presenting herself as a sexual being, Beyoncé does not transcend oppression, but feeds back into it, creating the means for her own subjugation.

hooks is not alone in this perspective, as authors such as Ajumu Baraka and Ernest Owens have expressed similar sentiments. Owens writes in his article “Appropriation, Capitalism, Blackness and Beyoncé”, that “being a visible face for female empowerment and black excellence is admirable, but exploiting that favor for capitalistic gain is disappointing”. In “Beyoncé and the Politics of Cultural Dominance”, Baraka makes similar points, focusing on the 2016 Super Bowl half-time show, describing it as not revolutionary but “the power of neoliberal capitalism to co-opt opposition, monetize it and provide some mindless entertainment at the same time”.

While there have been many that have rushed to hook’s defense, there has been a great deal of pushback against hook’s version of feminism. In the article “bell hooks vs. Beyoncé: What this feminist scholarly critique gets wrong about “Lemonade” and liberation”, the author writes that hooks has decided “that she has the right to build and tailor the box in which all expressions of womanhood and feminine artistry must reside”. She pushes back against hooks’ argument that Lemonade is not about empowerment but simply a commodity by expressing that even if selling images of Black female bodies is not revolutionary, “the concept of producing such images for the benefit of other black women is”, and even if this is a commodity to be bought and sold for profit, this “does not diminish its cultural significance”. Chelsea Hensley makes a similar argument in

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the article “Beyoncé’s feminism isn’t good enough for bell hooks, and neither is mine”. The author states “hooks imposes impossible standards on Beyoncé, and by extension, impossible standards on Black women.” Hensley continues by arguing that if Black women are subjected to the pressure of having to constantly go against every negative stereotype in order to avoid the risk of perpetuating their own oppression, then there is very little room for one to be an individual and fully themselves.

hook’s disapproval of Beyoncé’s particular brand of feminism, however, goes back to May, 2014 when during a discussion hosted by The New School in New York City, the theorist referred to Beyoncé as a “terrorist” and “anti-feminist” while speaking on her impact on today’s young women. This was said when discussion turned to Beyoncé’s 2014 Time magazine cover, which featured the singer scantily clad and looking straight ahead with an air of confidence and bravado, which hooks argues placed her “in the service of imperialist, white supremacist patriarchy”.

Co-panelist Janet Mock countered this argument by stating that as Beyoncé has worked as her own manager since firing her father from the position in 201159, it is not entirely fair to discredit Beyoncé’s involvement in the selection of the image chosen, and thus agency in how she is represented in the media. Hooks countered this, going so far as to say that by allowing this image to be circulated, “she [was] colluding in the construction of herself as a slave”.

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Author of “Bad Feminist” Roxanne Gay reflects on hooks statements in an article titled “Beyoncé’s control of her own image belies the bell hooks ‘slave’ critique”\(^6\). Similarly to Mock, Gay argues that given Beyoncé’s standing in the music industry, it is unfair to assume she had no control over the image being selected. By critiquing Knowles’ self-portrayal, Gay argues that hooks was engaged in the practice of calling Beyoncé a “bad feminist”, which Gay defines as a “popular feminist pastime during which we arbitrarily determine who is or isn’t doing feminism right”. Gay points out that hooks’ worry regarding the way young girls may misconstrue this representation and further internalize the dangerous notion that their bodies and self-worth are intertwined is a fair criticism, especially when taken into consideration alongside the hyper-sexualization and fetishization of Black women’s bodies in particular.

However, to dismiss the star’s claim to the feminist label is equally dangerous. Gay concludes with a scathing criticism of hooks personally, stating that it is “a shame to see how an intellectual as illustrious as bell hooks has allowed the limits of the patriarchy’s imagination of women – virgin or whore – to limit her own imagination of us”.\(^6\) When The Guardian’s Stuart Jeffries asked Davis about hooks’ terrorist comment she responded by saying,

I grew up at a time when, as a response to an interracial discussion group I was involved in, the church where we were having the discussions was burned. I grew up at a time where black people would move in to the white neighborhood right across the street from where we lived, and bombs would be set in those houses. I’ve never heard the word terrorism used in that context, but on the


\(^6\) IBID
other hand it is used to evoke this sense of danger coming from the outside without ever recognizing the extent to which the history of the United States has been a history of terror against indigenous people, a history of terror against people of African descent. So, to call Beyoncé a terrorist just does not work.\textsuperscript{62}

The word may strike particularly close to home for Davis, as “dangerous terrorist” were the words chosen by former president Richard Nixon to describe the activist in 1970’s when the FBI captured her.\textsuperscript{63} Rather than focusing her critique on whether or not Beyoncé is deserving of the feminist label, she focuses in directly on the language hooks employs to critique her. The word terrorist is frequently, and has historically been used to refer to those who directly threaten the state. We especially witnessed the rise of this vocabulary in the United Stated following the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, specifically targeted towards Middle Eastern Black and brown bodies. However, as Davis aptly points out, this language is rarely if ever used to refer to those who carry out attacks with racist motives, such as the more recent example of Dylan Roof, and this similar crop of domestic, white terrorists who in a way uphold values of the state, allowing them to evade the “terrorist” title.

Additionally, it is interesting to note hooks approval of well known “white feminists”, such as Emma Watson\textsuperscript{64}, without critiquing their complacency within capitalism, and specifically the way they normalize feminism that does

not take into consideration the degrees of sexism women face as a result of class, queer identities, nationality, and race. In "Why Our Feminism Must be Intersectional"\textsuperscript{65}, the authors Uwujaren and Utt explore this very concept of what they refer to as a "one size-fits all" approach to feminism that inadvertently excludes and overlooks the different experiences different women will face as a result of where they lie within this nexus of connections between race, gender identity, class, and sexual orientation.

It is this particular line of thinking of one-size-fits-all feminism from which one may not completely understand the significance of a Black woman reclaiming agency over her body, which typically stands to be hyper sexualized and fetishized by oppressive forces outside of her control. To subvert this issue unfortunate side effect of women's rights movements dating back hundreds of years is the concept of intersectional feminism, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, which "recognizes the multiple aspects of identity that enrich our lives and experiences and that compound and complicate oppressions and marginalization." When interpreting this debate through an intersectional lens, it becomes clear that while reclamation of one’s sexuality may be disempowering for some, for women who have historically had less agency over how their bodies are seen this act in itself can be one of empowerment.

Crenshaw herself commented on hook’s comments on \textit{Lemonade}, stating during an interview, ""Formation" and \textit{Lemonade} speak to experiences that are

\textsuperscript{65} Uwujaren, Jarune, and Jamie Utt. “Why Our Feminism Must Be Intersectional (And 3 Ways to Practice It).” Everyday Feminism, 13 Aug. 2016, everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/why-our-feminism-must-be-intersectional/
too under-represented in our culture. But there are costs to certain forms of visibility. I don’t think it is a bad thing to discuss what these costs are." When the author asks her to elaborate further on this, questioning whether or not it hurts the movement to have such large discrepancies over interpretations of what is or is not feminist, Crenshaw responds by saying that “[she thinks] there is a more robust debate about feminism in the UK – what a great problem to have.”

What we have seen in the trajectory of the career of Beyoncé Knowles is that of a figure who has found a certain level of comfort in expressing herself in an increasingly political way. Continuing this investigation I will move into an examination of Kendrick Lamar, who is featured on Lemonade’s “Freedom”. This is a track rich with discussion of racism in modern America in which he asks – “Father can you hear me?” This leads directly into my discussion of Lamar’s emphasis on faith in God as being the key to self-liberation.

Ch. 2: “Who’s Praying for Me?” The Gospel of Kendrick Lamar

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth was born in Compton, California on June 17, 1987. He was born to Paula Oliver and Kenny Duckworth three years after they relocated to California in an effort to escape the gang violence of Chicago, Illinois, where his father was a member of the Gangster Disciples. Despite growing up surrounded by the violence and the high-crime rates of his city, as well as growing up on welfare and in Section 8 housing, Lamar took all of these circumstances as sources of inspiration and began to write poetry at a young age.

As a straight-A student, Lamar was able to put his experiences into writing and began to release mix tapes under his stage name K-Dot. His first mix-tape, Youngest Head N**** In Charge (2003) propelled him to local fame and eventually caught the attention of Anthony Tiffith, the head of Top Dawg Entertainment. He was signed to TDE, under which he released several more mix-tapes before being signed to Dr. Dre’s label Aftermath Entertainment, under which he released his first studio album, good kid, m.A.A.d city, in 2012.67

Since the release of his first studio album, Kendrick has released three studio albums, untitled unmastered, To Pimp a Butterfly, and DAMN., all of which have been met with critical acclaim. In this chapter I will examine the trajectory

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of Kendrick Lamar’s career and the narratives he has constructed through his body of work. By examining the messages and themes within his discography, I will be specifically analyzing the extent of his political messages and the ways in which he grapples with and understands the current political moment. Although I am focused specifically on the age of Black Lives Matter and To Pimp a Butterfly is his first album to specifically respond to this movement, broader themes of recognizing systemic inequality, policing, gun violence, and empowerment of the Black community have been present throughout his artistic expression.

On his first full-length album Section.80, the track “Ronald Reagan Era” serves as an example of him discussing social policies that have affected his life in a medium that would not be typically be seen as being explicitly political, specifically the impacts of the Reagan administration on his life while growing up. Lamar grew up in the 1980’s and early 1990’s, meaning that he was more than familiar with the impacts of the War on Drugs on day-to-day life, which he speaks to and brings to life on the track. He describes the insurgence of drugs and violence in the streets combined with the increased surveillance by racist police officers, “heart racin’, racin’ past Johnny because he’s racist / 1987, the children of Ronald Reagan”. More recently, this disposition towards voicing political sentiments has only gotten more pronounced.

Featured on Isaiah Rashad’s track, “Wat’s Wrong” released in 2016, Lamar takes a more bold approach to speaking on electoral politics. He mentions Donald Trump by name, rapping “Might stay in the Trump Tower for one week /

Spray paint all the walls and smoke weed / Fuck them and fuck y’all and fuck me”\(^{69}\), displaying his lack of respect for the then presidential candidate. In this same track he takes the chance to follow this statement up with a reclamation of his identity and the pride he feels towards it, he raps, “I believe in Kool-Aid and God’s son / Do you believe that Black man is our sun?” This song is just one of many examples of Lamar embracing political messages within his music as well as using his art to uplift and empower his community, all of which are factors that have culminated in over twenty-four million monthly listeners on Spotify, thirteen Grammys, a Pulitzer prize, and the unlikely event of one of his most popular songs being co-opted by the Black Lives Matter Movement.

This chapter will be focused on the question that Kendrick finds himself trying to answer throughout his discography – how does one achieve liberation? For my analysis I have decided to sort Kendrick Lamar’s music into distinct categories, depending on the main themes they tackle. In each section, I will utilize different frameworks to interpret the lyrics.

In this chapter I identify three key topics that recur throughout his body of work, primarily his views on the prison industrial complex, impacts of generational trauma and capacity for violence, and the impact of biopower on the individual. In addition to these key problems, Lamar offers songs that are devoted to the solutions that he envisions for these problems. The primary message Kendrick seems to offer to his audience is that the key to liberation is

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through liberation of the self, which comes through devotion and faith in both
the self and God.

One of Kendrick’s early songs, “Cartoons and Cereal” (2012) opens with
segments of different television programs, meant to represent a young Kendrick
flipping through the channels before finally landing on a familiar voice. Bugs
Bunny asks, “What’s up doc?” and the scene is set for the song that follows. He
describes his childhood and upbringing through euphemisms that inspire
thoughts of innocence, standing in great contrast to the subject matter of the
lyrics. He begins, “I was raised in a sandbox, next to you and her” describing the
freedom he had in childhood, but also alluding to the fact that his parents were
young when they had him and as a result just as caught up in the violence of
Compton. He continues, “she was giving [birth] to a baby boy to be just like you,
I-I wonder what’s that worth / I-I wonder if you ever knew that you was a role
model to me first”70, speaking to the influence of his parents on his own ideals of
what it means to command respect and embody strength.

While watching T.V. provided some semblance of an escape from his lived
reality, he highlights a scene from his youth that poignantly informs the listener
that is this was not always the case. He recounts, “I-I woke up in the morning,
seen you on the news / Looked in the mirror, then realized that I-I-I had
something to prove”. I interpret this line to be in reference the murder of Tupac
Shakur, one of Kendrick’s biggest role models.

70 Speaking to the level of detail involved in the song, the stutter can be a way to place the scene
in time, which would be the late 80’s or early 90’s, as Lamar stuttered in his youth.
A moment that Lamar pinpoints as being a defining point in his life was seeing Tupac and Dr. Dre filming the music video for “California Love” in Compton when he was just eight years old. In an interview with the Grammys, he fondly recalls his father propping him up on his shoulders so that he could see the scene before him and said “that moment right there, whether I knew it or not, subconsciously I think it eventually branched me off to what I’m doing now”. Given this understanding of the impact Tupac had on Kendrick as a child, seeing news of his murder on the news could prove to be a defining moment in the loss of his innocence.

As he becomes increasingly cognizant of the violence around him and the conditions of his neighborhood and circumstances, his father instructs him throughout the song, “don’t be like me, just finish watching cartoons”. He raps in response, “which is funny now cause all I see is Wile E. Coyotes in the room”, meaning that he is surrounded by individuals who possess the traits of the Wile E. Coyote, who spends each episode hunting down the ever-elusive Road Runner. Here he points to the irony of the extreme violence that is the premise of the program, meant to serve as a way to preserve his innocence, despite its reflection of the violence surrounding him in reality.

In “m.A.A.d city” Lamar sets a vivid landscape for his audience, telling the story tinged with millennial nostalgia of the neighborhood he grew up in, which he describes as “the belly of the rough”, Compton, California. He describes the presence of gang violence, political corruption, and police brutality. He tells us

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he’s going to take the listener on “a trip down memory lane”, quickly clarifying that this is not a “rap on how I’m slinging crack or move cocaine”, but rather the “major pain” and “stress that [weighs]” on him as a result of his experiences.72

Within the track he describes several scenes from his own adolescence; recounting the time he was just 9 years old and witnessed a murder at a local burger stand and the time he staged a robbery at his workplace three weeks into his job as a security guard after he was “inspired by all of [his] friends”. He also explores drug use within his community73 and his experiences navigating gang affiliations and the gun violence that surrounded him. Writing of the mentality one must adopt in order to survive he raps, “we adapt to crime / pack a van with four guns at a time / with the sliding door”. Lamar’s proximity to violence is perhaps best exemplified by the line, “A wall of bullets comin’ from AK’s, AR’s, “Aye y’all – duck!” / That’s what Momma said when we was eatin’ that free lunch”, also speaking to his socioeconomic status growing up.

In a 2013 opinion piece written for The New York Times entitled “Hip-Hop Speaks to the Guns”, scholar and author Ta-Nehisi Coates reflects on the world Kendrick Lamar depicts Good Kid, m.A.A.d City, one Coates is intimately familiar with having also grown up in the inner city. What Coates specifically touches upon is the role Lamar plays in the chaos that surrounds him as well as the impact of gun violence on young people of color who grow up in neighborhoods that are afflicted with gang violence. While not overtly speaking

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73 He raps, “And they wonder why I rarely smoke now/ Imagine if your first blunt had you foamin’ at the mouth”.

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to electoral politics in the way *To Pimp a Butterfly* and *DAMN.* do, the album describes a community devastated as a result of government policy and the ways in which one can navigate survival and the ability on an individual to thrive in spite of having the odds stacked against you.

Directing the narrative to a more direct focus on gun violence, Coates writes that the album “gives us a broad reckoning with the meaning of everyday gun violence unfolding far from the tragic spectacle” and while critically acclaimed and being on the receiving end of mass mainstream success, he argues that the album “perhaps has the most to offer to those shocked into action by the senseless massacres we’ve endured over the past few years”. Lamar’s album diverges from what one may expect from a typical rapper in a major way, Coates argues, in that “rappers generally depict themselves as masters, not victims, of the attending violence [in their communities].” Lamar, on the other hand, portrays himself as vulnerable, as simultaneously a victim and master of his surroundings. He is the one pulling the trigger and the one who has friends and family taken from him in the very same way.

Coates continues, “‘Good Kid’ is narrative told from behind the mask. Fantasies of rage and lust are present, but fear pervades Lamar’s world. He pitches himself not as ‘Compton’s Most Wanted’ but as ‘Compton’s Human Sacrifice’”. He loves his city, even as he acknowledges that the city is trying to kill him. “If Pirus and Crips all got along,” he says, “They’d probably gun me

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down by the end of this song.” Coates speaks specifically to the power of music and the impact it can have on those who have lived through similar communities ravaged by poverty and violence, he writes, “when your life is besieged, the music is therapy, vicarious mastery in a world where you control virtually nothing, least of all the fate of your body”.76 In Kendrick Lamar’s elaborate descriptions of the disastrous impacts of public policy, the proliferation of arms in inner cities, and inequity, and the ways in which Lamar is able to capture this through his lyricism and vivid imagery, Coates is able to locate the world that he grew up.

He explains the impact of framing these realities through the context of governmentality in that it allows us to pinpoint the ways in which these circumstances were “created not by mindless nature but by public policy. It is understandable that in the wake of great tragedy we’d want to take a second look at those policies. But in some corners of America great tragedy has bloomed into a world that does not simply raise the ranks of the dead but shrinks the world of the survivors. “Good Kid” shows us how gun violence extends out beyond the actual guns.”77

In one of his most recognizable singles, “Swimming Pools”, Kendrick tackles his struggles with substance abuse and alcoholism against the backdrop of an almost deceivingly carefree driving beat. Contextualizing the history of substance abuse in his family for the listener, he explains “Now I done grew up 'round some people living their life in bottles / Granddaddy had the golden flask

76 IBID
77 IBID
/ Backstroke every day in Chicago”⁷⁸. On exploring the many reasons that one would turn to alcohol, he explains, “some people like the way it feels / some people wanna kill their sorrows” and on his own experience, “some people wanna fit in with the popular / That was my problem”. The song then goes on to describe Kendrick’s experience with peer pressure⁷⁹ as it was connected to his drinking habits and treating his body recklessly.

The chorus goes on to describe his giving in to temptation and being pressured by his friends to “turn it up a notch” and get a “pool full of liquor [and] dive in it.” The refrain that follows enforces the way in which drinking can quickly become a habit, emphasizing the normalization of drinking through the use of a staccato voice instructing him to “sit down, drank. Stand up, drank. Pass out, drank. Wake up, drank.” The chorus transitions to the second half of the song, in which Kendrick details the negative impact this environment and the song quickly transforms from something that could be played at a party to an explicit condemnation of a culture that turns to drugs as a form of escape.

He raps, alluding to his faith in God’s ability to watch over him, “in God I trust but just when I thought I had enough” at which point the song transitions to a skit where Kendrick’s friends are planning a set up seeking revenge after Kendrick is jumped. They plan only to scare the other group, however, matters escalate and reality strikes when the other group ends up shooting back and killing their friend Dave. We hear the realization in their voices after one of the men checks in to make sure everyone is okay he asks, “Dave, you good?” Then,

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⁷⁹ A theme that appears in his 2015 track, “You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma Said)”. 
after receiving no response, “Dave? Dave, say somethin’ – Dave? [They] killed my brother!” At this point, the album transitions to “Sing About Me”, a tribute to Dave.

On “Sing About Me I’m Dying of Thirst”, the first verse comes directly from Dave’s perspective. Lamar raps, “just promise me you’ll tell this story when you make it big / And if I die before your album drop...” His voice is immediately obliterated by the sounds of a gun being shot representing the bullets that took his life all too soon. Dave’s last request reverberates throughout the track, asking Kendrick to “promise that [he] will sing about me”. The second half of the song, “Dying of Thirst” is set around the advice of a woman, an older neighbor, telling Kendrick and his friends that they need to be baptized with the spirit as they grieve the loss of their friend.

Kendrick laments on the temptations he has fallen prey to as forms of escape, “money, pussy and greed what’s my next crave / whatever it is, know it’s my next grave” then expresses that he is

Tired of running, tired of running / I’m tired of tumbling, tired of running / I’m tired of tumbling backwards”. He mentions the advice of his mother, “my mama say / "See a pastor, give me a promise / What if today was the rapture, and you completely tarnished / The truth will set you free, so to me be completely honest / You dying of thirst / You dying of thirst / So hop in that water, and pray that it works.

Here, perhaps more explicitly than in other songs, he reveals that the key to preserving his well being and resisting the temptation of sin is to turn to the Lord for deliverance and strength to confront reality head-on.
The song cuts back to the voices in the parking lot – the neighbor asks the young men grieving Dave, “why are you so angry?” She then tells them, “you young men are dying of thirst”, and offers baptism and accepting Jesus as their personal savior as a solution. The woman leads them through prayer, and afterwards she instructs them, to “remember this day, the start of a new life, your real life”. The song ends with a voicemail from Lamar’s parents offering condolences for the loss of his friend, and then inspiration, his mom instructs him to “tell your story to these Black and brown kids in Compton”, reminding him of his life’s purpose.

In addition to this exploration of the trauma that can develop as a result of exposure to violence and marginalization, Lamar also rings back to Frantz Fanon’s post-colonial theories on capacity for violence in other tracks. Fanon argued “the colonist keeps the colonized in a state of rage”, a rage that must be released through expressions and acts of violence. Fanon explains, “At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence”, and for these reasons violence can function as a liberating act.

On *DAMN.*, his 2017 Pulitzer Prize winning album, Lamar does not shy away from airing his grievances towards the current state of the nation. “XXX”

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81 IBID pp. 51
82 Consistent with his history of paying homage to the legacies of musical acts that have inspired his craft, and specifically his incorporation of 1970’s funk aesthetics, he takes this track as an opportunity to sample James Brown’s “Get Up Offa That Thang”.
begins with an airy, breathy introduction by Bēkon, producer of eight tracks on the album, he sighs, “America, God bless you if it’s good to you...” Here it is made explicit that while we live in a democratic society under the basis of a constitution, one that promises equal protection for all citizens, this is not the current lived reality. This line challenges this notion of democracy in America going so far as to say that if America is “good to you” then you must be blessed by God.

He begins the song by outlining the mentality of those who are subjected to conditions of subjugation, “Throw a steak off the ark / to a pool full of sharks, he’ll take it / Leave him in the wilderness / with a sworn nemesis, he’ll make it / Take the gratitude from him / I bet he’ll show you somethin’, whoa”. Within this first verse he utilizes the symbol of the hungry shark as being representative of those who have been marginalized within American history. As Fanon explains, when you strip an individual of their self-worth, through the course of a lifetime of socialization, one is left feeling as though they have nothing to lose, a feeling Lamar compares to the blood-thirst of sharks. It is this quality that allows him to consider murder, tossing aside the norms of that does not value him in the name of revenge.

Shifting narratives, the listener is suddenly immersed on the receiving end of a call to Kendrick from a friend seeking advice, “Yesterday I got a call like from my dog like 101” His friend pleads, “K-Dot can you pray for me? It’s been a fucked up day for me / I know that you anointed, show me how to overcome”. He

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tells him that his only son has been killed “because of insufficient funds”, which could speak to the practice of debtor's prison, where those who do not have the money to pay for release may be held in prison, or criminal activity the son was involved in, or possibly general inequality – the line being reminiscent of Martin Luther King's famous “I Have A Dream” speech where he states that “America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds’”.  

His friend explains that he is asking Kendrick for advice because he is “anointed”, or being in the Lord's favor, and because God has blessed him, he must know how to overcome such a horrific tragedy. Contrary to what one would expect, Kendrick explains that his “soul [is] no better” and that he isn't going to “sugarcoat the answer”. He tells him that if he were in his situation, he would do all that he could to avenge the life of a loved one.

He continues, “ain't no Black Power when your baby killed by a coward / I can't even keep the peace, don't you fuck with one of ours / It be murder in the street, it be bodies in the hour / Ghetto bird be on the street, paramedics on the dial”. While acknowledging the importance of Black power and the movement for the protection of Black lives and the Black community, that no longer applies when it comes to his personal life, he doesn’t care if the killer is also a Black man, he’ll still take his revenge.

He calls attention to systemic inequality, and the scope of the surveillance state when he raps that “ghetto bird be on the street, paramedics on the dial”,  

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84 King, Martin Luther. “I Have a Dream”, August 28, 1963.
ghetto bird being another term for police officer. He is possessive over his family, because of the love and loyalty he has towards them, if anyone touches them it will be “murder in the street”, he describes the lengths he’d go to, even waiting outside of a church service, anything to catch the assailant and ensure that justice is delivered. When a society does not serve to protect you, specifically speaking to the historical extrajudicial killings of Black Americans without consequence, conceptions of morality surrounding murder shift and he makes the case that one is not obligated to follow the norms and laws of such a society.

Kendrick does not attempt to position himself as more enlightened; he instead expresses his faults and his humanity. He is not above seeking revenge, rather than giving his friend the sage advice he may have been expecting, Kendrick tells him the absolute truth. We then hear the sound of a gunshot, then followed by Kendrick cutting himself off to go speak at a convention. The entire mood shifts and Kendrick prepares us for the rest of the song, “Alright kids, we’re gonna talk about gun control.” In a way this line represents Lamar’s full embrace of his role as a political actor.

The song transitions into the next section, which begins with Bono lamenting, “this country is to me a sound of drum and bass, you close your eyes to look around”. Kendrick begins to explicitly critique the United States, he mentions that the “great American flag is wrapped and dragged with explosives”, alluding to the country’s foreign policies and the scope of violence the United States has inflicted in foreign nations. Ironically, they point out, this violence and
destruction is shrouded in the American flag, a symbol of the promises of democracy, Westernization, and modernity.

Lamar also takes the opportunity to critique the treatment of immigrants, mentioning the “barricaded blocks and borders” which conjures more recently the immigration rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration, specifically his plans for building a wall along the Mexican border. The listeners is forced to grapple with the history of violence within the United States, “look [at] what they taught us”, he states, as he mentions that this murder and destruction follows us all, from those in the inner cities to those working on Wall Street.

He then speaks, rather than in metaphor or focusing on personal experience, directly to electoral politics. Rapping, “We lost Barack and promised to never doubt him again / But is America honest, or do we bask in sin? / Pass the gin, I mix it with American blood / Then bash him in, you Crippin’ or you married to blood? / I’ll ask again-oops-accident” He mentions that since the inauguration of Donald Trump to the presidency, those who critiqued Barack Obama when he was in office are now remorseful regarding their inability to be grateful for how good, albeit far from perfect, things were. He asks whether or not America has been honest with itself about its violent past that continues to this day or chooses instead to continue to “bask in sin”.

In the last line of the song, he calls out the haphazard ways in which politicians and officials adopt policies without regard for the ways in which they will be disastrous towards marginalized communities. He raps, “It’s nasty when you set us up / Then roll the dice, then bet us up / You overnight the big rifles,
then tell Fox to be scared of us / Gang members or terrorists, et cetera, et cetera / America’s reflections of me, that’s what a mirror does”.

He decries the hypocrisy of conservative policies that have created the conditions for generational poverty and lack of equal opportunity, then using the results of these policies to reinforce popular stereotypes through the media, or “telling Fox news to be scared of [communities of color]”. He lays out exactly what America thinks of him, images so pervasive that they become internalized, so much so that this is what he sees when he looks in the mirror - “America’s reflection of me, that’s what a mirror does”. This internalizing of negative, racialized stereotypes that comes up throughout Kendrick’s music is also central to understanding the way the prison industrial complex operates in American society according to Angela Davis.

The prison industrial complex refers to the byproduct of “the massive prison-building project that began in the 1980’s created the means of concentrating and managing what the capitalist system had implicitly declared to be a human surplus”85, in such a way that crimes and thus criminals could be used as a source of profit. According to Angela Davis, the prison industrial complex refers to all of the institutions, corporations, and actors within a society that perpetuate and further the goals of the prison as a for-profit, inherently racist, neoliberal institution. In “Are Prisons Obsolete”, Davis describes the rise of mass incarceration within the United States, and the exponential rate at which it occurred. Davis recalls protesting prisons in the 1960’s, and the defining

moment that was the Attica Prison Riot of 1971, at which point the prison population was around 200,000 people.

She recalls this time in her life and expresses that at the time she could never have imagined the millions that would be incarcerated by the start of the new millennium and the United States being home to 20% of the world’s prison population despite only making up 5% of the world’s population. Davis then goes on to answer the question – what were the conditions that allowed this to happen? Davis describes the rise of mass incarceration, advanced further through the War on Drugs brought forth by former United Stated President Ronald Reagan, and the social conditions that allowed for Black and Latinx Americans to be arrested and fall victim to excessive policing at disproportionate rates.

One of the key features Davis points to as being crucial in the rise of the mass industrial prison complex is the increased normalization of the prison and policing practices within the American consciousness. She writes, “The prison industrial complex is much more than the sum of all the jails and prisons in this country”, it is all of the social factors and norms that allow it to exist and thrive.

Particularly a culture of racism that allowed for over-policing and the disproportionate imprisonment of communities of color, “not so much because of the crimes they may have indeed committed, but largely because their

86 The prison is considered so natural that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it.” IBID. pp. 10
87 IBID. pp. 107.
communities have been criminalized.\textsuperscript{88} Davis argues that while anti-prison activists draw attention to the human rights of prisoners, they often do not allow themselves to envision solutions beyond the prison. When faced with the question of whether or not we can abolish prisons, many are incredulous towards the idea that the abolition of prisons is a possibility.

Davis believes that this is because we as a society hold fast to the idea that the abolition of prisons would mean we would have to find a single institution designed for the task of dealing with criminality to fill in the gap prison abolition would leave behind. Instead, she argues that we must instead deals with the roots of criminality, especially since the prison system as is, has had no impact on abolishing criminality, but rather creates the conditions that lead to criminalization of certain people. She argues, “To reiterate, rather than try to imagine one single alternative to the existing system of incarceration, we might envision an array of alternatives that will require radical transformations of many aspects of our society”.\textsuperscript{89} The assimilation of prison culture into popular culture, the impact of media and entertainment, thus plays a role in public understanding of the prison as being permanent and fixed within our society.

These themes of the over policing and police violence appear often throughout Kendrick’s music. On his 2017 album \textit{DAMN.}, Lamar lays out what he’s scared of on “FEAR.” The song begins with a call from his cousin, Carl Duckworth explaining how the Black community are “a cursed people” and the true children of Israel, turning to Deuteronomy 28:28 as evidence. The song then

\textsuperscript{88} IBID. pp. 113
\textsuperscript{89} IBID. pp. 108
transitions to Kendrick solemnly begging “Why God? Why do I gotta suffer?”

The second verse comes a seventeen year old Lamar pondering the many ways he may eventually meet his fate, “I’ll prolly die anonymous”, speaking to the prominence of gang violence in his community, “I'll prolly die because these colors are standing out”. Then shifting focus to the role of police violence in the psyche of young Black men, “I’ll prolly die from one of these bats and blue badges / Body-slammed on black and white paint, my bones snapping”. He ends the verse with a direct reference to the murder of Trayvon Martin, “I’ll prolly die cause that’s what you do when you’re 17”, demonstrating the normality of an encounter with the police turning fatal when your community has been criminalized.

The song then shifts back to the voicemail from Carl Duckworth speaking on Deuteronomy and the persecution of the true children of Israel. “That’s why we’re in the position that we’re in”, he says matter-of-factly, and will be the case “until we come back to these laws, statues, and commandments”. Once again, when he is discouraged by social reality, he is reminded by loved ones to come back to God for deliverance.

Another crucial subject that comes up in Kendrick’s discography is that of the impact of the state on the individual level, reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s theories of biopower and the rise of an increasingly panoptic society. Foucault begins *Discipline and Punish* by describing the 1757 public execution of Robert-François Damiens after being charged with attempted regicide. His public

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execution was particularly gruesome, as he was sentenced to the amende honorable in addition to having “his body drawn and quartered by four horses and his limbs and body consumed by fire”.91

This imagery is then starkly contrasted by an example from just eighty years later, Leon Faucher’s rules for “the house of young prisoners in Paris”. The house, which was modeled around the ethics of Christianity, comes across more like a monastery, where the young prisoners paid the price for their violation of the rules of society through labor, prayer multiple times a day, and attending school. Foucault describes this shift in punishment as the mark of “a new age of penal justice” in which “the entire economy punishment was redistributed”.92

The key difference between the two forms of punishment, Foucault pinpointed, was the apparent disappearance of torture as “public spectacle”. Punishment began to be swept into privacy, the criminal justice system eventually evolving into an institution that everyone knows exists, but perhaps are not very familiar with unless they are intimately familiar with the system as a result of being swept into it through incarceration or the incarceration of a loved one.

Foucault explains that this allowed for discipline as a technology, as a tool for creating certain kinds of subjects within the body politic shifted from being direct and public to eventually being replaced with “subtle, calculated

92 IBID
technology of subjection.” What Foucault specifically observes is the rise of a panoptic society in which individuals are subjected to constant observation as a way to deter criminality and create a new class of individuals constantly under examination. He writes, “the practice of placing individuals under ‘observation’ is a natural extension of a justice imbued with disciplinary methods and examination procedures” and thus begs the question - “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?”

One of the key arguments Foucault makes is the observation that "the prison, and no doubt punishment in general, is not intended to eliminate offences, but rather to distinguish them, to distribute them, to use them.” This marks the shift that has allowed for the prison industrial complex as we know it today to develop, a which theorist Michelle Alexander has described as “The New Jim Crow.” It is these societal conditions, increased policing and incarceration of communities that are seen as being disposable, that have necessitated the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement which Kendrick explores on To Pimp a Butterfly.

Moving further from his critiques on the state of affairs that speak more to the impacts of policy than those who perpetrated them, Kendrick becomes a lot more confrontational on his politically charged 2015 album To Pimp a Butterfly.

93 IBID pp. 221
94 IBID pp. 228
*Butterfly*. The album combines many musical genres, jazz, hip-hop, R&B, and Blaxploitation funk to create something entirely new. The central themes of the album are perhaps best exemplified by “The Blacker the Berry”. Lamar raps “came from the bottom of mankind...you hate me don’t you? You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture / you’re fucking evil I want you to recognize that I’m a proud monkey”,\(^97\) directly calling attention to the prevalence of white supremacist ideals in America.

Directly criticizing the government he raps, “You sabotage my community, making a killing / you made me a killer”. Here he confronts the ways in which the government has profited off of violence against and within the Black community and creates the very “criminals” they seek to “get off the streets” by creating the very circumstances that lead one to choose criminality as observed by Davis. Lamar addresses the direct psychological impact of this form of policing has on individuals, including those who are not trapped in the system, “I mean, it’s evident that I’m irrelevant to society / That’s what you’re telling me, penitentiary would only hire me”\(^98\), embodying the theories of Davis and Foucault seemingly in conversation.

Building off of the legacy of the phrase “the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice”, which can be traced back to Tupac’s “Keep Ya Head Up” and the 1929 novel by Wallace Thurman, Lamar adds his own spin, “the blacker the berry, the bigger I shoot”. Similarly to the novel by the same title, this song speaks specifically to the issue of colorism. He raps, “the plot is bigger than me, it’s

\(^{98}\) IBID
generational hatred / it's genocism, it's grimy, little justification/ I'm African-American, I'm African / I’m black as the heart of a fuckin' Aryan", pointing out the way colorist ideals that privilege those with lighter skin are maintained and evolve across generations. Genocism, a term Lamar coined, refers to the legacy of oppression and violence committed against minorities within American history.

He raps that it:

"Don't matter how much I like to say I like to preach with the Panthers / Or tell Georgia State "Marcus Garvey got all the answers" / Or try to celebrate February like it's my B-day / Or eat watermelon, chicken, Kool-Aid on weekdays / Or jump high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements / Or watch BET cause urban support is important / So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street / When gang banging make me kill a [man] blacker than me? Hypocrite!"

While “I” is Lamar's anthem of self-love and acceptance, “The Blacker the Berry” serves as an introspective counterpart in which Kendrick grapples with his internalized colorism and his self proclaimed hypocrisy.

In a track that seems to combine the three key theorists I have highlighted in this section, “Institutionalized” tackles the mindset that is fostered within the inner cities. He explores the ways in which passed down, racialized trauma has a long-standing effect on the individual. He admits that he is “Trapped inside the ghetto and I ain’t proud to admit it / Institutionalized, I keep
running back for a visit hold up / I said I’m trapped inside the ghetto and I ain’t
proud to admit it / Institutionalized / I could still kill me a --- so what?”

While fantasizing the changes he would make within society if he could,
he states, “If I was the president, I’d pay my momma’s rent, free my homies and
them ... lay in the White house and get high, Lord”. This track specifically
explains the ways in which such a mentality is internalized, even when one
attains class mobility and access to resources, he is still focused on paying the
rent of his relatives and behaves as if he is still stuck in the inner city. He begs
throughout the song, “Master / take the chains off me”, speaking to the ways in
which racialized trauma is internalized in the consciousness of individuals. The
chains, though in his mind, are no less real.

In “Mortal Man”, following the first section of the song, Lamar finally
reveals the full text of the titular poem. At the beginning of the song he asks for
the listener to allow him to “make room for mistakes and depression” before
launching into a harrowing song exploring the extent of the impact he has made
on the world and the significance of having an audience and the extent of loyalty
there is towards him, in conversation with the toll having such a massive
platform can take on an individual. He asks the listener to consider the extent
of their relationship and sense of commitment towards Lamar as a person.

He asks us if racial stereotypes will eclipse the levels of success he has
attained, “If I’m tried in a court of law, if the industry cut me off / If the
government want me dead, plant cocaine in my car / Would you judge me a

99 IBID
100 IBID
drug-head or see me as K. Lamar / Or question my character and degrade me on every blog?” This leads him to reflect on how he wants to be received during his lifetime and comes to the conclusion: “want you to love me like Nelson, want you to hug me like Nelson / I freed you from being a slave in your mind, you’re very welcome / You tell me my song is more than a song, it’s surely a blessing”. Still, he reflects upon the ways in which figures that are now heralded for being activists and revolutionaries were criticized, targeted, and executed during their lifetimes.

In the poem he reads to Tupac, Kendrick addresses the state he finds himself in, in a position of success and fame, yet surrounded by the temptations of sin more than ever before. He explains, “The evils of Lucy was all around me / so I went running for answers”. He details his quest for success and speaks to the residual guilt associated with finding it.

Despite his newfound success, he remains loyal to his city and laments on the state of those he feels as though he has left behind, “But while my loved ones was fighting the continuous war back in the city / I was entering a new one / A war that was based on apartheid and discrimination / Made me wanna go back to the city and tell the homies what I learned”. He describes what he has learned over the course of his career and the message he wishes to his community, “Just because you wore a different gang color than mine’s / Doesn’t mean I can’t respect you as a black man / Forgetting all the pain and hurt we caused each other in these streets / If I respect you, we unify and stop the enemy from killing us / But I don’t know, I’m no moral man”. Afterwards, he states, “shit, and that’s
all I wrote,” at which it is revealed that he has been reading to Tupac Shakur, which launches into a full discussion on the liberation of those who have been marginalized.

Kendrick asks him to explain a metaphor that comes up in rapper’s music, the ground. Tupac responds, “the ground is the symbol for the poor people.” Tupac then goes on to describe the process by which wealth inequality is further exacerbated through the accumulation of capital via the mistreatment and exploitation of the working class, which festers resentment and thus the capacity for violence as Fanon theorized. Tupac explains, “The poor people is gonna open up this whole world and swallow up the rich people / Cause the rich people gonna be so fat / And they gonna be so appetizing, you know what I’m saying Wealthy, appetizing / The poor gonna be so poor, and hungry. They might eat the rich, you know what I’m saying?” In these lines, Tupac dives into Marxist ideology, which comes as no surprise given that his mother was an active member of the Black Panther Party, a history he celebrates in the posthumously released track “Panther Power”.

He relates these themes to the Los Angeles riots, which refers to riots that took place after the acquittal of four LAPD officers on charges of excessive force in the arrest of Rodney King in April of 1992. The case had been widely publicized as footage of the encounter was taken and subsequently broadcast on Television. The riots spanned over the course of two months and resulted in damages amounting to around a billion dollars and a total of sixty-three deaths in addition to thousands that had been injured or arrested. We hear Tupac from
beyond the grave, placed within the context of the Black Lives Matter movement prophesizing on what is to come. He predicts that

“next time it’s a riot its gonna be like, uh, bloodshed. For real, I don’t think America know that. I think America think we was just playing but it ain’t gonna be no playing. It’s gonna be murder, you know what I’m saying? It’s gonna be like Nat Turner, 1831, up in this motherfucker. You know what I’m saying, it’s gonna happen.”

Later in their conversation, Tupac explains to Lamar that he believes Black men have a short window of time within which to be resistant and “exhibit maximum strength” and fight back against their oppressors. Shakur explains that Black men, after this five-year window, face the toll of being socially conditioned to behave in a certain way. He offers, “they take the heart and soul out of a Black man in this country” as an explanation of why “you don’t see no loud mouth [Black] thirty year olds”. This point in the interview is made especially poignant by the fact that Tupac went on to be murdered at the age of twenty-five, right after the five-year window he describes.

Kendrick then asks if he can read one more poem to Tupac “describing [his] world”. He starts,

“The caterpillar is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it. It’s only job is to eat or consume everything around it in order to protect itself from this mad city. While consuming its environment the caterpillar begins to notice ways to survive. One thing it noticed is how much the world shuns him but praises the butterfly. The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness and the beauty within the caterpillar.”
The butterfly is "finally free, the butterfly sheds light on situations that the caterpillar never considered, ending the internal struggle. The butterfly is able to break free, and return to speak to the caterpillar and illuminate him on what the butterfly has learned in order to attempt to break the cycle of stagnation for the caterpillar. Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different, they are one and the same." He finishes the poem and asks, "what’s your perspective on that?" Tupac does not answer and the track ends with Kendrick pleading for a response, “Pac? Pac? Pac?” The question is then left for the audience to answer for themselves.

In conversation with these songs on the issues prevalent in society are his tracks that I refer to as being emblematic of his solutions for the problems he describes in detail.

“Alright”, one of the most critically acclaimed songs off of Lamar’s album To Pimp a Butterfly, is a triumphant song about the ability to rise above the hatred, inequality, and struggles one is faced with and wholeheartedly believe that things will be okay. Above all it is a song about hope, one that has struck a particular chord with Americans, many going so far as to argue it should be seen as a modern Black National Anthem. The Business Insider commented on the song that it has served a specific social function as “an anthem of

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101 "Alright" was nominated for seventeen awards, and won eight, including the title of Best Rap Performance and Best Rap song at the 2016 Grammys and Best Hip Hop video and Impact Track at the 2015 BET Hip Hop Awards.
positivity written amidst a backdrop of civil unrest.” The song came out at a specifically tense and defining moment for the Black Lives Matter movement, in past few months before the record debuted, the deaths of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner echoed throughout the public sphere and furthered the fervor of a movement devoted to addressing disproportionate rates of violence directed against unarmed, Black men by police departments across the nation.

Lamar himself has gone to refer to “Alright” as “the biggest record in the world”, stating that rather than viewing its success in terms of streams or radio plays, its success could be interpreted through its social impact. “You might not have heard it on the radio all day, but you’re seeing it in the streets, you’re seeing it on the news, and you’re seeing it in communities, and people felt it.” The song quickly became a new protest anthem for America, in similar vein to songs by Marvin Gaye (“What’s Going On”), James Brown (“Say It Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud”), Nina Simone (“To be Young, Gifted and Black”), and Billie Holliday (“Strange Fruit”).

Aisha Harris writes speaking to the direct impact that the song has had on a personal level, “Another black person shot by police? Turn on “Alright.” A young black teenager’s graduation party turns into an unnecessarily horrifying police encounter? Turn on “Alright.” A white supremacist murders black church members during a prayer session? Guess it’s time for “Alright.” A black woman

found hanging in her jail cell under suspicious circumstances? Well …”.

Immediately, the first line in the song, “alls my life I has to fight,” is a reference to the hardships Black Americans have faced throughout our country’s history. The line is a direct reference to Alice Walker’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Color Purple. On his inclusion of the reference, Walker stated in a 2018 interview, “I’m happy for him. I think he understands that this is the truth of it. Especially for poor people and people of color in this country. We’ve had to fight all of our lives. And it’s a good thing that we can talk to each other across generations.”

Here we once again see this dialectical process surrounding inequality through careful examination of and acknowledgement of the past.

In ‘Alright’, Kendrick expresses the pain, the “hard times” and “bad trips” he has survived, and how he is able to look to God and religion in order to find peace of mind. He proclaims, “if God got us, then we gon’ be alright”.

He raps, “when I wake up / I recognize you’re looking at me for the pay cut / But homicide be looking at you from the face down”, acknowledging here, and continually throughout the album, the ways in which the music industry seeks to exploit him. This also speaks to the ways in which capitalism seek to profit off of

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the commodification of Black culture.\textsuperscript{108}

He knows this is his reality, that he is being taking advantage of, yet he also acknowledges that “homicide be looking [at him] from the face down.” This calls to mind to the high rates of murder among people of color, specifically Black people, as a result of police brutality. Homicide, the possibility that he may be killed at any time is a theme and fear that runs throughout his discography, and play a role in his anxiety and depression.

One of the issues Kendrick grapples with explicitly on To Pimp a Butterfly is that of his vices and his inability to restrain himself from giving into sin, whether that is in the form of women or money, and he expresses that he hopes his mother is able to forgive him. He acknowledges that because he will one day “reap everything [he] sows”, a reference to Galatians 6:7. He confronts his sins and acknowledges that he may face his punishment when he dies and attempts to get in to heaven.

Despite his struggles with giving into his vices and his losing battles with his depression, he affirms that things will be okay. He sings, “we been hurt been down before,” yet he knows that progress and change will occur. The line “my knees getting weak and my gun might blow / But we gon’ be alright,” is indicative of his struggles with his own mental health and suicidal thoughts, a topic tackled in the music video as we see a man on the brink of shooting himself with a gun stopping when he sees Kendrick and a flock of people passing by his window.

\textsuperscript{108} Wynter, Leon E. American Skin : Pop Culture, Big Business, and the End of White America (2002). Print.
His tone of voice then shifts as he takes on the role of Lucy, a presence that haunts him throughout the album. Lucy asks, “what you want you? A house or a car? / Forty acres and a mule? A piano, a guitar? / Anything, see my name is Lucy, I'm your dog / Motherfucker, you can live at the mall!” In this line, the devil, or Lucy, offers Kendrick a variety of material goods to tempt him. He offers what freed slaves were offered by the Freedman's bureau following the Civil War, speaking to unfulfilled promises made to the formerly enslaved populations. This line is also a direct reference to a previous track on the album, “Wesley’s Theory” where rather than Lucy it is Uncle Sam offering him these material goods.

Shifting back to his own voice, he raps, “I can see the evil, I can tell it, I know it's illegal / I don't think about it, I deposit every other zero / Thinking of my partner, put the candy, paint it on the Regal / Digging in my pocket, ain't a profit big enough to feed you / Every day my logic get another dollar just to keep you / In the presence of your chico... Ah!” Kendrick responds that he knows who is behind the money, he knows that he is being tempted by the devil, yet he gives in and collects his money regardless, knowing he is giving into the temptation offered by the white, capitalist, music industry. Despite this, the material goods are never enough; there isn’t “a profit big enough to feed you.”

In a following line, “I write 'til I'm right with God”, Kendrick speaks to his talents and states that this is his way to make things right with God, it may also function as a double entendre, referring to the fact that he will continue to write poetry and music until his death, or “right” with God. Going off of the first
interpretation, this line may be specifically about his desire to build up and strengthen his relationship with the Lord as a form or product of his own journey towards self-improvement. It may also serve as evidence that he is aware of the social impact of his music, and the ways in which he is fulfilling the role that God had planned for him.

In one of the closing lines, he continues along where the chorus on “u” leaves off, he sings, “loving me is complicated...” He acknowledges that it is hard for him to love himself yet he continues on his journey towards self-love nonetheless, a journey best encapsulated by the leading single from TPAB, “i”, which appears later on in the album. The song was released as a single featuring cover art which depicts a Blood and Crip forming a heart with their fingers, Lamar told AMP Radio during an interview “Where I'm from, there's a lot of gang culture and things like that, so instead of throwing up gang signs, which we used to, I put a Blood and I put a Crip together and we're throwing up hearts”109.

Kendrick begins “i” by discussing the struggles and “trial[s]” and “tribulation[s]” he has faced throughout his life, such as witnessing acts of violence against his friends and family, substance abuse, and depression, he raps “the Devil wanna put me in a bow tie,” but because he knows God is on his side he is able to prosper and ultimately love himself. The chorus, extremely upbeat and full of powerful, moving energy, is a repetition of the line “I love myself!” is a testament to his self-love and his ability to overcome. The track, which went on

to win two Grammys in 2015 for both best rap performance and best rap song, borrows guitar riffs from “That Lady, Pts. 1 & 2” by The Isley Brothers that give it a sense of timelessness.

The next verse speaks more to the current issues affecting inner city communities he states that “they wanna say it’s a war outside, bomb in the street / Gun in the hood, mob of police / Rock on the corner with a line for the fiend / and a bottle full of lean and a model on the scheme”. While his community is afflicted with gun violence, police brutality, addiction and substance abuse, he chooses to instead shift the perspective and focus on a message of uplift. He shifts focus to infectious positivity as a way to deal with the pain of reality rather than the coping mechanism of “tuck and rotation”, which refers to the motion of rolling a blunt and smoking marijuana, as many people in these communities do to deal with “pains and frustration”.

Rather than turning to substances for solace, he is content because even if the “sky could fall down, wind could cry now,” he would be able to smile in the face of adversity as a result of his own acceptance and love of self. To find internal peace and peace with God, Lamar argues, is a means of achieving self-liberation in the face of a marginalized existence.

Daphne A. Brooks, professor at Yale University and author, reflects on this new musical movement in her piece for The Guardian title “How #BlackLivesMatter Started a Musical Revolution”, she writes on Kendrick Lamar’s performance at the 2016 Grammy’s of “The Blacker the Berry” and

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“Alright”, specifically, on the fact that he “spelled out black music as break-the-chains resistance to the systemic mass incarceration of black folk”.\textsuperscript{111}

Brooks argues that what we are witnessing, while not entirely new as there has historically been a lineage of politically conscious Black artists as well as a long history of a genre of specifically “socially conscious” music, is completely unique and very much a product of a growing awareness of state violence and policing inflicted upon Black bodies. While this oppression is not new, she writes that we are in “a new age of injustice, one with a heightened awareness of state violence and a national reckoning with the state-sanctioned disposability of Black lives, and so this moment clearly demands a new set of jams”.\textsuperscript{112}

It is important to distinguish between music that captured and sought to bring attention to the injustices suffered by minorities in the United States, as a result of the increasingly digital age, these acts of violence and brutality, such as “the killings of unarmed black men as well as women – Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Rekia Boyd – are etched into our public consciousness”.\textsuperscript{113} A key topic that Brooks touches upon is the way these images, while attracting a new, entirely unprecedented level of media coverage and attention to these injustices, ultimately have negative impacts the human, and specifically Black, psyche.


\textsuperscript{112} IBID

She writes that although there is a considerable amount of comfortable distance between the observer and the victims, to feel removed from the violence and trauma is a privilege only provided to white observers. She states, “We who watch these daily tragedies unfold on our phones and laptops and cable news watch from afar but feel the sad heaviness of what it means to experience one’s blackness as precarious and unprotected, as eviscerated of its citizenship. To live like that is to walk through the world always slightly numb and skeptical of what lies ahead.”114

Brooks argues that this new generation of socially conscious popular artists, including Lamar, are creating is an entirely “new sonic fabric of black dissent for our present-day emergency. Together they offer the most robust moment of resistant (and also heterogeneous, say, in contrast to the predominance of soul or funk), black popular music that we’ve ever had.”115

In 2018, in addition to his success in the music industry, Kendrick Lamar became the first rapper to win the Pulitzer Prize, which was awarded for his 2017 album DAMN. Author Amanda Petrusich reflected on the significance of such a win in an article for The New Yorker titled “The Cultural and Political Forces behind Kendrick Lamar’s Pulitzer”. Petrusich reflects on his win and states that the fact that he won such a prize “felt like a decisive dismantling of fusty ideas about high and low art and, especially, who gets to claim genius as his

114 IBID
115 IBID
own”. She argues that while one could laud the committee for its choice of such a “relevant” artist to give the award to, but to do so is to come “too close to diminishing [Lamar’s] deep expertise”. She writes that “Kendrick Lamar won a Pulitzer Prize in an era in which rap music is as alive and as pervasive as it’s ever been”, which begs the question, what are the cultural and political implications of this fact?

David Hajdu, a member of the jury that ultimately decided on who to award the Prize to stated that DAMN. was chosen because of the over one hundred and eighty pieces of music they evaluated, DAMN. was “the best piece of music”, he continued by describing the album as “complex, rich, full of surprise and invention. Sonically, it’s highly sophisticated and original. It brings together melody, harmony, counterpoint, texture—all those elements, in a fresh way. And lyrically, it’s very powerful”.

In addition to winning the Pulitzer Prize, 2018 was also the year of the release of the Black Panther soundtrack, which Lamar produced. The film’s afrofuturist narrative permeates throughout the soundtrack and leads us into major themes of the next artist I will be discussing, Janelle Monáe.

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Ch. 3: “The American Cool” Janelle Monáe’s World Building

Janelle Monáe Robinson was born in Kansas City, Kansas on December 1, 1985. She grew up in a working class background, her mother working as a janitor and her father as a janitor while battling a drug addiction. Her background is something that she has embraced and celebrated, choosing to don a tuxedo for most of her early career as a nod to the uniforms her parents had to wear for her to be where she is.

Early in her youth, Monáe displayed talents in music, theater, and performance and following her high school graduation she received a scholarship to study musical theater at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York City. Following her enrollment, she dropped out of the school and relocated to Atlanta, Georgia where she self-produced her first demo and eventually founded the Wondaland Arts Society alongside Chuck Lightning and Nate Wonder.

Monáe was propelled to stardom after Sean Combs discovered her first EP, *Metropolis Suite I (The Chase)*, and signed her to his label Bad Boys records in 2007. Her first full studio album released in 2010, *The ArchAndroid*, earned her a nod from the Grammys and landed in the Billboard Top album chart in the United States. Her second album, *The Electric Lady*, released in 2013 was consistent with her last album in the way of it being a fully developed narrative
depicting the life of her persona Cindi Mayweather. The album made it to number five on the Billboard album charts in the United States and led to her being named the winner of Billboard’s Rising Star award. It is her most recent album, *Dirty Computer* (2018), however, that I will spend the majority of this chapter analyzing. It is with this album, and the accompanying e(motion) picture, that Monáe leaves behind her Mayweather persona and embraces the vulnerability of being herself, someone who is more than ever vocal on politics and social inequality.

Throughout the course of this paper I have argued that modern conditions, largely shaped by late capitalism have led to a populace that is increasingly alone and jaded, plagued with increased polarization, high rates of voter apathy, and general lack of faith in electoral politics. Over the course of the last few decades we have seen abysmal voter turnout rates, disillusionment, and increased political polarization and unrest brought to new heights following the inauguration of Donald Trump.

One key aspect has arisen in since the turn of the century, which is the rise of a Digital Age that promises a new means of open and equal access to participation in a newly public, discussing sphere. The increased popularity and accessibility of the Internet has brought about an unprecedented platform for instantaneous and worldwide communication and information sharing. Another key development, the increased popularity of smartphones, means that many
who were previously left out of the public sphere now have constant access to the Internet as well as the capacity to broadcast anything they can record on their phones online and share it to their social media platforms.

It is this development that has led to the conditions that allowed the Black Lives Matter movement to flourish. The movement, which began as a hashtag, relied on social media posts displaying police violence against Black people to spark a nation-wide conversation and movement to adequately address the inequitable ways in which Black lives are criminalized on account of race, surveyed, policed, and seen as disposable within the body politic. All of these forces, I argue, have led to a cultural shift in which popular artists have felt not only the need to but are able to feel comfortable being increasingly vocal on electoral politics in the public sphere.

Speaking on the 2016 election and the new sense of responsibility it has given her as an artist, Janelle Monáe said, “I want to be active in bringing about change. I’m tired of the racism, the sexism…. I want to do all I can with my art and my platform to speak out against any injustice, because I strongly believe that an injustice done to my fellow brother or sister is an injustice done to me”. Monáe is emblematic of the new wave of artists making music in the age of Black Lives Matter – unapologetic, direct, and ready to make political statements. She continues explaining her career trajectory and the importance of

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120 This is still very class based, as this access is dependent upon having a smart phone and access to the Internet.
speaking to politics in her art, “I started my career writing protest songs, writing political songs, writing songs that would help spark the revolutio”.

In the same interview, she spoke directly to how she was planning to vote in the 2016 election and stated, “I’m not voting for Trump. I’m voting for Hillary. No politician is perfect, but the values Trump is running on are just evil to me.” Explaining what values she is alluding to she continues by explaining that she believes Trump is “one of the most sexist pigs known to man, and he’s completely unapologetic about it.” In addition to his sexism, she openly condemned his racism, saying, “This man doesn’t care about blacks, Mexicans or any minorities.”

Speaking further to his campaigning tactics and the policies that his supporters have rallied around, such as his proposed wall along the Mexican border, she continues, “If we vote for Trump, we are voting for someone who wants this country to be divided, who wants to lead by using fear, who wants to help the rich get richer and the poor poorer. You’re going to live in a dystopian world. Everything he is saying is based in negativity and fear.”

Within the same interview, Monáe expressed her discomfort in even seeing the debates between him and his opponent, Hillary Clinton, as “it made him look as if he was qualified for the job and he’s not at all qualified to be president of the United States”. This sentiment harks back to the age old truism that marginalized identities, particular women and Black people, have to work twice as hard to achieve the same things as their white or male counterparts.

122 IBID.
In the same interview, while discussing her political inclinations and need to convey a certain message with her music, she spoke specifically to her artistic inspirations, such as, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Prince, Nina Simone, and James Baldwin, and the ways in which past artists have paved the way for increasingly political messages within popular music. She stated, “you have all these black intellectual creatives who used their art to bring awareness to the injustices of the world. If they hadn’t contributed, we would not be given the opportunities that we have today as millennials. They helped kicked down doors for us, and I don’t want their hard work and sacrifices to be in vain. I feel a personal responsibility to pay back those who have helped fight for my rights”.123 These are legacies that shine through the use of sampling, lyricism, and visuals within Monáe’s narratives.

This need to speak to the impact past artists have had on her is indicative of how she views the overall historical dialectical process of the struggle for social equality and is very much in line with the themes she utilizes within her works to make sense of this broader struggle. Throughout her discography, Monáe uses time as a major theme to explore histories and futures to make sense of how that can teach us about the present and serve as a crucial tool for future building. NPR labeled Monáe the “21st Century’s Time Traveler”, calling her an “archivist of right now, interpreter of back then, dreamer of one day”.124

123 IBID.
More so than using different periods of time to understand the complexities of life, Sydnee Monday writes, “the full scope of her work illuminates how the past, present and future might exist simultaneously. Who we were, who we are and who we’d like to be swirl and layer until timelines merge”. These themes evoke the concept of radical imagination, which serves to “create and interrogate images of the world that we want so that they might propel us into the future. Afrofuturism re-affirms that the imagination is a necessary tool for dismantling old structure”.

In Monáe’s most recent album Dirty Computer, we can see these themes most prominently in the accompanying emotion picture, where each track is presented as a memory of Monáe’s character, Jane 57821. Throughout the film the oppressive government “cleans” Jane because she is a dirty computer and examines her memories, erasing them one by one. Within each memory different worlds and soundscapes are constructed where nostalgic imagery very much ingrained in the American collective memory, vintage cars and neon diners exist alongside a world of hovering cars and surveillance drones.

Monáe makes use of what the NPR article refers to as the “layering of time” to present a narrative. In the article Monday argues that when taking into consideration the current political moment, such themes can serve to remind audiences, “it’s not just collective memory that informs our future. When we

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125 IBID.
126 As coined by Grace Lee Boggs
127 IBID.
document the ways we intimately and publicly exist in these moments in time, we build that future, too”.128

Prior to the release of her last album, Janelle Monáe found herself asking herself one key question – what is the social responsibility of an artist? Her 2018 album Dirty Computer is her impassioned answer. The day before the release of her album, released on April 27, 2018, Monáe quenched long-standing rumors about her sexuality in her cover interview with Rolling Stone by coming out as pansexual129. In the interview she stated that, “being a queer Black woman in America...someone who has been in relationships with both men and women – I consider myself to be a free-ass motherfucker.”130 In a way, this captures the overall message of her last project. We see her freeing herself, not only from societal expectation but freeing herself from her android alternate persona, Cindi Mayweather, and giving herself the freedom to speak out against injustices present in our society while playing the role of herself.

At the center of the narratives constructed throughout her discography has been the exploration of the “other” within society. Those that are treated as less than, as inferior, as the portion of the populace that is seen as disposable within the body politic. In an interview with Complex she synthesizes these concepts explaining,

128 Ibid.
"I chose to focus my energy and my time on celebrating the folks that I felt needed it most. Just to name a few: my brothers and sisters in the LGBTQIA community, Black women, minorities, immigrants, lower class, working-class folks like my parents who worked as janitors and post office workers and trashmen. I wanted to focus on celebrating those voices that are not represented in the media as much as I’d like. I wanted to figure out how I could create a community and a safe space for us because honestly, when I take off my makeup, I take off my clothes as an artist and the performer Janelle Monáe I fall into those groups. That's my reality and that's how I grew up, and I want to protect us."

What is crucial about Dirty Computer is the way in which it captures the current social moment we find ourselves in and provides a glimpse into Monáe's experiences in processing this moment, living within it, and eventually imagining new possibilities from where are for complete liberation. This provides the listener with some insight into the ways in which current events are felt and dealt with within the collective consciousness. In an apathetic late capitalist society founded upon ideals of white supremacy, where the modern citizenry is largely fragmented and disillusioned, Janelle Monáe offers a critical lesson – how to practice and perceive revolution, and self-liberation in the process, as an act of love.131

131 “Monáe's time travel reminds us that while the present may be unsafe, the intimacies of right now are worth savoring. How we may love and with whom we may find love brings us light and longing in absurd and hateful circumstances. It inspires action. It not only anchors us in the present moment while considering the whole past, but it propels us into a new vision of the future: perhaps one that will be extricated from systems that oppress us; that is free, queer, black and only as far away as we can see on the horizon.” (Monday, Sydnee. “Janelle Monáe Is The 21st Century's Time Traveler.” NPR, NPR, 13 Nov. 2018, www.npr.org/2018/11/13/667045039/janelle-mon-e-is-the-21st-centurys-time-traveler.)
On the question of how to best speak on present day issues and lamentations in an effective, productive way, Monáe’s solution is to be direct, coming to terms with the multiplicity of perspectives at play within society, and making concrete strides to ensure the society we find ourselves in in the present will lead to the building of a more empathetic, inclusive, and equitable future. This is by no means a linear process, however, which is reflected throughout the album. Over the course of the tracks, messier feelings coincide with and exist alongside moments of clarity and are treated with equal justice, allowing her to express these sentiments as honestly and realistically as she wishes to.

Monáe gives herself the freedom to express the full range and different stages of her emotional processing. She expresses anger, resentment, grapples with past traumas and the injustices she has faced in her personal life, proposes strategies for organization, and ultimately leaves us with a message of unconditional love and bravery in the face of a society that does not value you. She declares, “I love my country” but reminds us to “love me baby, love me for who I am” in return.

Monáe has explained that the album can be seen as consisting of three distinct parts. The first, which she refers to as “the Reckoning”, provides insight to the first stage of her processing and making sense of the position of the other in society, the middle section she labels “the Celebration” and the final portion, “the Reclamation”, where she fully embraces and celebrates her American identity in spite of societal forces that cause her to feel as though she does not

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belong within the social fabric. It represents abandonment of the assigned label of “other”, or the “American Nightmare”, and reclaiming American identity.

In the emotion picture, in addition to the presentation of the other as dirty computers, there is also a strong presence of an oppressive, surveillance state that monitors its constituents closely, echoing Foucault’s depictions of a fully panoptic society. In her representations of these regimes, the use of science fiction to play up certain characteristics of the regime is crucial. Through depicting a dystopian sovereign to express her positions and critiques of the current political climate and moment, she reveals her own thoughts on modern social issues of oppression, surveillance, identity, equality, and the Trump administration. The use of narratives set in the future also allows her to create a new narrative and a new ending to the story.

Ultimately, the path we are presented with over the course of the album is that of “confront[ing] the great divide” and letting love in and celebrating it. As Jason Parham points out, the message from this work is clear; “love can be an oasis, if you let it.”133 Author Sydnee Monday comments further on her takeaway from the ending of the emotion picture as the main characters break free from the lab where they are held captive – “there’s pain but there’s no fear”. This seems to be Monáe’s way of reminding us that there is no fear when you choose and act out of love.

As Janelle Monáe looks upon the crowd at the 2018 Grammys presenting a speech advocating on behalf of the Time’s Up movement, she reminds the audience “just as we have the power to shape culture, we also have the power to undo the culture that does not serve us well”. Her words hold true, as well as a great deal of weight, as Monáe has made it abundantly clear that working to undo the societal structures that do not serve all of us through her work is precisely what she intends to do.

From the beginning of her musical career, Monáe has pushed against the boundaries of what pop music and a pop artist can look and sound like and touch on in their music. The majority of her discography is centered around the story of Metropolis, a world of androids and oppressive regimes where her alternate persona, Cindi Mayweather takes on the role of messiah - the mediator between humans and androids to ultimately provide liberation. In a 2010 interview with the Chicago Tribune, Monáe explains that “When I created “Metropolis,” I had this quote in mind: “the mediator between the hand and the mind is always the heart.” I wanted to represent the heart.”

She continues, “I chose an android because the android to me represents “the other” in our society. I can connect to the other, because it has so many parallels to my own life; just by being a female, African-American artist in today’s music industry.” In the New York Times profile focusing on Dirty Computer Jenna Wortham postulates, “Mayweather was a proxy for all the things about Monáe that made others uncomfortable, like her androgyny, her opaque sexual identity, her gender fluidity – her defiance of easy categorization.” It was a
role that allowed her to explore these themes in an expansive way while providing the comfort of a role that is constructed to be consumed by an audience.

With her most recent album, *Dirty Computer*, however, we see Janelle Monáe playing a new role – that of herself. She leaves behind the full orchestral suites and theatrical symphonies of past albums and trades them in for a more human presentation of herself and comes back to Earth, returning back from the year 2719 to the United States in 2018. On describing what led up to the release of this album, Monáe revealed that this album had been in the works for over a decade, and that she had the title ready since before she released Metropolis in 2007.

On what led to Monáe accelerating the release, she cited such reasons as the passing of her mentor, Prince, and the 2016 election and subsequent Trump administration. On why the Trump administration played a role, she has stated that she feels she has began to understand and feel the weight of the “responsibility of an artist”\(^\text{134}\), which has further fueled a sense of responsibility to give a voice to those who are currently finding themselves being silenced within the current political climate.

In an interview with the New York Times, she reflects on these feelings, stating, “this is the first time I’ve felt threatened and unsafe as a young black

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woman, growing up in America”. She continues, “This is the first time that I released something with a long of emotion. The people I love feel threatened. I’ve always understood the responsibility of an artist – but I feel it even greater now. And I don’t want to stay angry, but write and feel triumphant.” In her cover story for Rolling Stone, she spoke on her sentiments on the night of the results of the 2016 election and recalled that she “felt scared”, and wondered, “if I wake up tomorrow are people going to feel they have the right to just, like, kill me now?” Her anxieties towards what a Trump presidency would mean for marginalized communities led her to take the narrative into her own hands.

Monáe’s activism and outspoken nature on political matters is nothing new, while within recent years she has been active in representing movements such as Me Too, Times Up, and Black Lives Matter, she has a long track record of speaking for those who have had their narratives erased all while paying homage to the musical artists that have inspired and paved the way for her to be in her current position.

In 2015 she partnered with members of her musical collective, the Wondaland Arts Society collective, to deliver her track “Hell You Talmbout”, a song that consists of saying the names of Black American victims of racialized police and vigilante brutality The names are screamed, “Sandra Bland! Say her name! Say her name!”, followed by a strong chorus that maintains a sense of musicality to the piece despite its rawness. On the subject of this song, NPR writes, “the cosmic Space Age aesthetic and considered delivery are completely

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absent in “Hell You Talmbout”, instead, “voices crack and mics pop. Any creative distance between performers and audience has been eliminated, and what remains is an unadorned, visceral, undeniably earthbound piece of protest music”\textsuperscript{136}. Monáe went on to perform this song at the 2017 Women’s March on Washington, alongside the mothers of Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Dontre Hamilton, and Mohamed Bah.\textsuperscript{137}

More recently, in the aforementioned speech at the 2018 Grammys, addressing the crowd, she spoke assertively on the matter of sexual harassment in Hollywood, “and to those who would dare try to silence us, we offer two words: ‘Time’s Up.’ We say ‘Time’s Up’ for pay inequality, time’s up for discrimination, time’s up for harassment of any kind. And time’s up for the abuse of power – because, you see, it’s not just going on in Hollywood; it’s not just going on in Washington. It’s right here in our industry as well”.\textsuperscript{138}

In addition to time-bending, a key aspect of Monáe’s worldview and approach towards confronting and facing the issues we are presented with in modern society is her use of the science fiction genre to grapple with today’s issues and present us with imaginative narratives that present potential paths towards liberation. Within the landscape presented to us visually in the emotion picture that accompanies the album of \textit{Dirty Computer}, as with her older works,


the path that Monâ€¢e outlines for her audience through the unfolding of the plot is that of “self actualization as [a form of] revolutionary liberation”.139

Her use of science fiction narratives for this purpose is extremely deliberate and calculated, she has said that she chooses this medium to convey her messages because rather than presenting oppressive structures by “blaming” any one group and thus ostracizing them as a result, Monâ€¢e has stated that “[science fiction] gives the listener a different perspective”140 that allows a certain distance and thus accompanying comfort with confronting such issues.

The use of a science fiction lens allows audiences to view the subject matter from another perspective, that of an outsider looking in, which can be less confrontational and allow for a wider audience to be receptive to her messages. This range of perspectives can be heard most clearly on the final track on the album, “Americans”, where she gives voice to the multiplicity of identities that make up the American social fabric.

The first track on the album, “Dirty Computer”, launches into the major themes of the album and sets the context for the rest of the songs that follow. Monâ€¢e, joined by Brian Wilson, describes herself as a dirty computer. She sings that she is “not that special, [she’s] broke inside”, she is “crashing slowly, the bugs are in [her]”. She frames herself as a dirty computer that is “breaking down”, despite this she is able to “[pick her face] up off the ground”

She incorporates aspects of futurism that play into the digital culture, saying

“Searching for someone to fix my drive / Text message God up in the sky / Oh, if you love me, won’t you please reply?”

“Crazy, Classic, Life”, the next song, begins with a segment of a sermon given by Dr. Sean McMillan on the broken promise of American democracy. He speaks, “you told us that we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; among these life, liberty, and the- and the pursuit of happiness”. The sermon is then placed in stark juxtaposition with the uplifting dance song that follows.

In the emotion picture, the audience sees Monáe and her friends driving in a hovering convertible down a highway – the first memory to be examined and deleted. Through the memory we are introduced to a world of fun and freedom, the opening line encapsulating the mood of the entire number. She sings, “young, Black, wild, and free”, a line that harks back to Nina Simone’s “Young, Gifted and Black” (1969), “riding in a limousine”. This song, part of the “Reckoning” section, is a testament to the power of community and togetherness in the face of corrupt leaders. She triumphantly states, “We don’t need another ruler / All of my friends are kings.”

She sings “I’m not America’s nightmare / I’m the American dream”. Despite the fact that she is a dirty computer and ‘infected’, she is able to embody the ideals of the “American Dream”. By stating that she is not America’s

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nightmare, she is referencing a speech given by Malcolm X where he proclaims the Black community has only “experience[d] the American nightmare”\textsuperscript{142}. In addition to positioning herself in the context of the friendships and community around her, she explores themes of religion, and the pursuit of spirituality, she sings, “I just wanna find a God / and I hope she loves me too”.

I interpret this line as a critique of the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency, “We don’t need another ruler, we don’t need another fool”. Which is then followed by “I am not the American nightmare / I am the American cool”, speaking to the ways in which mainstream American society has historically undervalued the Black queer femme community while simultaneously appropriating their culture.

In the second half of the song, she is more confrontational on the subject matter she is alluding to throughout the lyrics. She speaks to the disparities of opportunities that occur on the basis of class, race, sexuality, and gender, different kinds of ‘bugs’ that could make one ‘dirty’, “Me and you was friends, but to them, we the opposite / The same mistake, I’m in jail, you on top of shit / You living life while I’m walking around moppin’ shit”. In this line in particular, she is specifically calling attention to the disproportionate rates at which Black people are incarcerated compared to other races for the same crimes as described by Michelle Alexander. While her friend is able to advance and be “on top of shit”, she is confronted by institutional barriers that confine her to the working class.

\textsuperscript{142} Malcolm X. “I Have A Nightmare (I Charge The White Man)”. 1964.
Monáe raps, “no matter where it was I always stood out / Black Waldo
dancing with the thick brows” and asks us, “remember when they told you I was
too Black for ya? And now my Black poppin’ like a bra-strap on ya”. Continuing
the theme of celebrating her Blackness, “but all I ever really felt was stressed out
/ Kinda like my Afro when it’s pressed out”.

In “Screwed”, Janelle Monáe is joined by Zoë Kravitz for a nihilistic
anthem that in true millennial fashion masks the current collective feeling of
hopelessness behind layers of satire that transforms it from a pessimistic song
lamenting the state of the nation to a song that can be danced to at parties. She
begins the song by painting a scene of her experience existing in the public eye,
she sings - “I live my life in a magazine / I live my life on a TV screen”.

In this track the term screwed is used as a double entendre,
representative of both the way Monáe feels about the current political climate, as
well as a sexual innuendo that allows her an escape the state of things through
freedom of sexual expression, an act of liberation for a queer Black woman. The
juxtaposition between the double meaning of the word screwed is best
encapsulated in the pre-chorus as she sings, “I hear the sirens calling / And the
bombs are falling in the streets / We’re all screwed / And ah, ah, ah, it’s not
perfect, baby, But I go sex crazy / But I feel so screwed”.

In the chorus, she speaks to the effects of a corrupt state and
administration, “You fucked the world up now, we’ll fuck it all back down / Let’s
get, let’s get screwed / I, I don’t care / We’ll put water in your guns / We’ll do it
all for fun”. The last part of this line is a great example of the tongue in cheek,
ironic humor that is characteristic of millennials\textsuperscript{143}. This line a scathing commentary on the fact that the most gun control that has taken place in the last 20 years has been Apple switching the gun emoji to a water pistol in their iOS 10 update.\textsuperscript{144}

This use of double entendre extends even further, in the lines, “Wanna get screwed on a holiday / Wanna get screwed in a matinee / Wanna get screwed at a festival / wanna get screwed like an animal”, sung by Zoë Kravitz, serve as commentary on the surge of mass shootings in America since the Columbine High School massacre of 1999. The locations she pinpoints as places where she wants to “get screwed”, on a holiday\textsuperscript{145}, in a matinee\textsuperscript{146}, and at a festival\textsuperscript{147}, all coincide with the locations of recent mass shootings.

In the bridge, Monáe sings, “See, if everything is sex / Except sex, which is power / You know power is just sex / You screw me and I’ll screw you too”, voicing her interpretation of the power that can be gained or maintained through sexuality. The song then breaks into a rap that then transitions perfectly

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into the next song, “Django Jane”. Here she once again chooses rap as a medium to directly confront what it is that has her feeling disillusioned.

She raps, “Hundred men telling me cover up my areolas / While they blocking equal pay sippin on they Coca Colas”. Targeting other contemporary issues in the country, “Fake news, fake boobs, fake food – what’s real?” She says that we are “still in the matrix eating on the blue pills”, which represents forgetting and ignorance in the movie The Matrix. She calls out Trump’s meeting with Putin, “The devil met with Russia and they just made a deal / We was marching through the street, they were blocking every bill”148.

She warns, “we gon’ start a motherfuckin’ pussy riot / Or we gon’ have to put ‘em on a pussy diet / Look at that, I guarantee I got ‘em quiet / Look at that, I guarantee they all inspired”. On these lines, Monáe explains;

“and the pussy diet ... it can mean a couple things. Pussy diet could also mean, it’s time for you to let women create. Let us work. Let us have opportunities.” She continues, “It’s like, get on a women’s diet. Stop listening to just your bros all the time. We have a lot to contribute, and I think that progress is happening, but it’s a little too slow for my pace.”

On this track she once again pays tribute to her working-class background, and embraces her multitudes, “sassy, classy, Kool-Aid with the kale / Mama was a G, she was cleaning hotels / Papa was a driver, I was working retail”. Paying homage to the movies she has starred in, Moonlight (2016) and Hidden Figures (2016), she raps, “kept us in the back of the store / We ain’t hidden no more, moonlit”. She toys with the ways she has been criticized for her

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appearances by audiences\textsuperscript{149} and the media since stepping into the spotlight, she asks us, “remember when they used to say I look too mannish? Black girl magic, y’all can’t stand it!”

Playing into themes found in science fiction such as repopulating a new planet, Monáe raps, “y’all can’t ban it, made out like a bandit / They been tryin’ hard just to make us all vanish / I suggest they put a flag on a whole ‘nother planet.” Tying her feminist grassroots organization Fem the Future, centered around goals of uplifting women in the entertainment industry and aims to “[develop] solutions for sustainability and impact in 21st century feminism”\textsuperscript{150} to broader misogyny within society, she warns, “we gave you life, we gave you birth / We gave you God, we gave you Earth / We fem the future, don’t make it worse”.

Speaking to corrupt individuals in positions of power, comparing them to monsters directly from the plot of a sci-fi film, she continues, “Emoticons, Decepticons, and Autobots, who twist the plot?”

Followed with a nod to key historical figures she has been influenced by she raps, “who shot the sheriff, then fled to Paris / In the darkest hour, spoke truth to power?” This line being a reference to James Baldwin, and Saul Williams, and Josephine Baker, all of whom activists who were or are vocal on issues of racism in American society and relocated to Paris, France as a result of it being a more accepting society. On this line, Monáe has said,


\textsuperscript{150} About. \#Femfuture, www.femfuture.com/about/.
Those are my heroes. James Baldwin. Mos Def also went to Paris. Saul Williams, who was on my first album, *The ArchAndroid*. Mos and Saul, two of the greatest lyricists of our time. Josephine Baker. So many people who were just devalued, in my opinion. Didn't get the love, the respect, the credit that they deserved in America. Went over to Paris, and they escaped also a very tough political climate. Segregation, the racism. They lost their friends. They lost Martin Luther King Jr. They lost Malcolm X. I mean, I couldn't imagine being alive at that time.” She continues to speak on the impact their legacies have had on her personally, “The writing of James Baldwin is just in my body. I feel lighter after I read his work, and when I watched Josephine Baker movies and I see her. When I’m listening to Saul Williams. I’m happy they got a clear mind. I’m happy they went to Paris. And Bob Marley, who “shot the sheriff.” I wanted to pay homage to all my heroes.”

“Django Jane” is then followed by “PYNK”, a dreamy pop song that completely goes against the grain of what one would expect from the more typically edgy Monáe. Explaining the significance of the track Monáe has stated that said, “PYNK is a brash celebration of creation, self love, sexuality, and pussy power! PYNK is the color that unites us all, for pink is the color found in the deepest and darkest nooks and crannies of humans everywhere. PYNK is where the future is born.” The accompanying video also serves as a testament to love, friendship, and the power of sexuality, which continues into the next track, “Make Me Feel”.

“Make Me Feel” was the lead single off of the album and received a considerable amount of praise among music critics especially for embracing her
fluid sexuality,¹⁵¹ even being named the best new track by Pitchfork.¹⁵² Former President Barack Obama even listed the track among his favorites of 2018 in his annual list of his favorite books, movies, and music.¹⁵³ This song is also a standout in that it is where the spirit of her mentor, Prince – who worked on the project prior to his death,¹⁵⁴ is most strongly felt with a strong synth line reminiscent of Prince’s 1990 track, “Kiss”.

In the next song, “I Got the Juice”, Monáe joins forces with producer and artist Pharrell Williams. This track, following the tone of “Make Me Feel” is all about the celebration and embrace of self. She asks us, “How many damn times got to tell ya? I got the juice!” Following the motifs of “pussy power” that recur throughout the album, she powerfully declares, “If you try to grab my pussy cat, this pussy grab you back”. This line serves as a declaration of the power of women as well as a direct reference to footage that was recently released of sitting President Donald Trump bragging about sexually assaulting women in 2005. He is heard on the tape as saying, “You can do anything... Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything.” ¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ “Radio 1’s Future Sounds with Annie Mac, Janelle Monae Hottest Record plus New Raye, Mabel and Stefflon Don, Janelle Monae Is Back! She Tells Annie Mac about Prince, the GRAMMYs and Releasing New Music.” BBC Radio 1, BBC, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05z205r.
In “I Like That”, Monáe describes herself as “a little crazy, little sexy, little cool”, speaking on the multiplicities that make up who she is while paying respect to the iconic girl group TLC whose second studio album was titled *Crazy, Sexy Cool* (1994). She continues, “I’m always left of center and that’s right where I belong / I’m the random minor note you hear in major songs / And I like that”. Here she directly reminds us that she is not afraid to go against what is expected from her within her industry. She sings, “told the world, I’m the venom and the antidote / Take a different type of girl to keep the whole world afloat”. In describing herself as both the ‘venom’ and the ‘antidote’ she alludes to the ways in which Black queer femmes revitalize American culture while being seen as the ‘venom’ within society.

Infusing personal narratives, she recalls a time when she was bullied by a classmate as a result of her socioeconomic status singing, “cause my mama couldn’t afford new J’s / Polos, thrift store, thrift clothes that was all I knew / Do you remember?” She continues reflecting on her past, “I remember when you laughed when I cut my perm off and you rated me a six / I was like, ‘Damn’ / But even back then with the tears in my eyes / I always knew I was the shit”.

On the track that follows, “Stevie’s Dream”, Stevie Wonder reminds the listener, and presumably Janelle, “even when you’re upset, use words of love. Cause God is love. Allah is love. Jehovah is love. So, don’t let your expressions, even of anger be confused or misconstrued. Turn them into words of expression that can be understood by using words of love.” This emphasizes this idea – and I
would make the case for it being her overall argument – that love of self and others is essential for liberation, a concept that continues into the final track.

The final track “Americans” is perhaps the most explicitly political track on the album. Toying with the superiority complex and egos of those in positions of power, she sings, “let’s play God, you go next”. She begins by introducing the problems in society, “hands go up, men go down, try my luck, stand my ground. Die in church, live in jail, say her name, twice in hell”. Within this single line, Monáe addresses police brutality, mass incarceration, the Say Her Name movement and the Charleston church shooting of 2015. Then, as a way of distorting these issues within American culture, “Uncle Sam kissed a man, Jim Crow Jesus rose again”.

In an effort to represent the multiplicity of voices that make up the American body politics, Monáe takes on a number of roles within the song meant to represent differing identities. Harking to more conservative American values, she sings, “I like my woman in the kitchen ... I keep my two guns on my blue nightstand / A pretty young thang, she can wash my clothes / But she’ll never ever wear my pants”. She continues by going into the ways in which we may blindly accept what we are told to do by authority figures and ideals of nationalism - “I pledge allegiance to the flag / Learned the words from my mom and dad / Cross my hears and I hope to die / with a big old piece of American pie”.

In the chorus, singing as herself, she proclaims - “Don’t try to take my country, I will defend my land / I’m not crazy, baby, naw, I’m American!” In the
following lines, she goes against the more conservative values presented earlier in the song and sings from her perspective, calling out gendered income inequality as well as racism, “Seventy-nine cent to your dollar / All that bullshit from white-collars / you see my color before my vision”. She asks, “sometimes I wonder if you were blind / would it help you make a better decision?”

At this point in the song, we hear more from the Dr. Sean McMillan sermon we heard parts of in “Crazy, Classic, Life”. McMillan declares, “until women can get equal pay for equal work / This is not my America / Until same-gender loving people can be who they are / This is not my America / Until Black people can come home from a police stop without being shot in the head / This is not my America / Until poor whites can get a shot at being successful / This is not my America.” Continuing, painting a picture of the America Monáe wishes to see - “until Latinos and Latinas don’t have to run from walls / This is not my America / But I tell you today that the devil is a liar / Because it’s gon be my America before it’s all over”.

The final line of the album, “please sign your name on the dotted line”, stays with the listener. We are being asked to make a choice – do we agree with the terms and conditions we are being presented with? Will we choose to join this new and more perfect union as Monáe has defined it?
Conclusions

Throughout this study, I have argued that the development of key social factors in conjunction with the rising prevalence of technologically mediated public spheres, has allowed for a new wave of politically active musicians and artists in the broader legacy of Black Nationalist thought in America. Though there is a lineage of music and activism being intimately linked in American history, the rise of the Digital Age has given artists unprecedented platforms on which political acts or statements stand to be distributed and discussed instantaneously.

I have highlighted the careers of three key artists, Beyoncé Knowles, Kendrick Lamar, and Janelle Monáe, who all fall into the category of ‘artist as political actor’, which refers to an individual who explicitly seeks to bring about political change through the use of their platform. Through using these artists as case studies I have laid out the key messages they offer as means of making sense of their current lives and where they fit into society through the lens of the current political moment of what I have referred to as the Age of Black Lives Matter.

Ultimately, what I sought to understand is the way in which these three distinct narratives, while offering clashing ideals of what paths can be taken towards liberation, exist very much in conversation with each other. The problem is overarching – that of the unfulfilled promise of American democracy as is defined in the Constitution, though their different ways of tackling this issue
diverge radically, resulting in a broader conversation on the way differing relations and proximities to power impact how one would conceive of the modern American political landscape. Additionally, I have argued that social factors surrounding the current historical moment have led to conditions in which artists have an important role in consciousness building, sparking dialogue and encouraging these dialectic processes on a grand scale, and above all, allowing audiences to process grievances and find healing through the collective consumption of their art.

In utilizing the discographies of the three artists I studied as my primary sources throughout this work, I hope to see the practice of incorporating texts lifted directly from popular culture in conversation through a social analytical lens become more widespread in academia. Given that I studied artists that are considered political in the traditional sense, meaning vocal on electoral politics, using artists that are not typically assigned the “activist” label, such as Cardi B. could serve to further legitimize the equally political messages these artists spread through their cultural presence.

I have also argued that the use of celebrities using their platforms to speak to electoral politics has increased following the rise of both the Black Lives Matter Movement and the 2016 presidential election culminating in a rejuvenated white-nationalist movement within the United States. Since the undertaking of this project, songs such as Childish Gambino’s “This Is America” (2018) and Anderson Paak’s “6 Summers” (2018) have gained critical acclaim for their critiques of the current political climate and administration. More
generally, these political statements have become more commonplace within the public sphere to the point that they are completely normalized in even newer tracks, particularly among the new wave of female rappers gaining popularity in 2019.

On “Bitch I’m Nasty” (2018), Rico Nasty raps, “I’m screaming fuck Trump / Black girls / Stand up!” Megan Thee Stallion uses his name as a euphemism being synonymous with sexual assault, rapping, “reaching for my pussy / tryna Donald Trump me” on her 2017 track “Geekin’”. More recently, Arianna Grande’s 2019 track “Monopoly” features Trump as being one of the sources of “fuckery” that she wants to rid from her life in the accompanying video. Solange sings that she is “weary of the ways of the world” and Anderson Paak laments that “reform should have come sooner”, and through this cacophony of conversations and differing insights listeners are able to arrive to their own sense of understanding of the present historical and political moment.
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