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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

“Watching Their Souls Speak”: Interpreting the New Music Videos of Childish Gambino,
Kendrick Lamar, and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Music

by

Sarah Allison Lindmark

Thesis Committee:
Assistant Professor Nicole Grimes, Chair
Professor Nicole Mitchell
Assistant Professor Stephan Hammel

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“Watching Their Souls Speak”: Interpreting the New Music Videos of Childish Gambino, Kendrick Lamar, and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter

By

Sarah Allison Lindmark

Master of Fine Arts in Music

University of California, Irvine, 2019

Assistant Professor Nicole Grimes, Chair

The release of Childish Gambino’s music video “This is America” spurred a flurry of discourse among hip hop enthusiasts around the world. Many are comparing his work to that of Pulitzer Prize-winning artist Kendrick Lamar’s music video “HUMBLE.” and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter’s album *Lemonade*. In this thesis, I argue that recent releases from all three of these artists have ushered forth a new set of aesthetic standards starkly different from the promotional films of the past.

The videos under consideration in this thesis have distinctive political messages, signify upon the intergenerational trauma within the African American experience, and work to develop deeper meaning in tandem with the music – neither their audio nor visuals can stand alone. By holding current popular critiques in periodicals such as *Rolling Stone*, *The New York Times*, *Pitchfork*, and *The Guardian* against analytical techniques developed by hip hop scholars such as Cheryl Keyes and Tricia Rose, this thesis unveils new ways in which hip hop artists are disseminating ideologies to their audiences. Through complex webs of signification and pushing forward the stories of underrepresented peoples, these artists have ushered in a new era of meaningful popular media.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis concerns the emerging aesthetic shift among mainstream hip hop music videos released by Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, Kendrick Lamar, and Childish Gambino. In the three new hip hop music videos under consideration in this thesis, the visuals, audio, and lyrics cannot stand alone without sacrificing multiple layers of meaning. This aesthetic shift has resulted in music videos that have countless layers of meaning minable through interpreting their visual and aural signifiers. Holding these layers of meaning together is the relationship between the sound and visuals that ground aural events within the narrative world the video presents. Furthermore, these videos possess a distinct socio-political message despite their being heavily commercialized, blurring the line between culturally subversive and mainstream art.

The recent work of hip hop scholars has been dedicated to the creation and defense of overly generalized statements about the nature of the musical genre.¹ While these statements are undoubtedly helpful points from which we might begin to discuss motivic and thematic similarities, localization, and the genre's lasting effect on popular music, hip hop scholars such as Cheryl Keyes and Tricia Rose have developed enough analytical bedrock to accommodate other, more nuanced critiques. In this thesis I will argue against the modern scholarly trope that hip hop is protest music by design – a statement that can be found in the work of Griffith Rollefson and Justin Williams despite Rose and Keyes having already undermined it as early as 1994. To accomplish this goal, I will analyze three modern, mainstream hip hop music videos

¹ See, for example, Griffith Rollefson, "Hip Hop As Martial Art: A Political Economy of Violence in Rap Music," in the *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), in which he writes, "hip hop is, itself, a martial art premised on the political economy of 'words as weapons,'" in this quotation from page five of the online version that can be accessed at <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190281090.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190281090-e-11>.

that exemplify this claim, and simultaneously contextualize them within distinct traditions of black protest music. The three subjects of this thesis follow a set of aesthetic standards shared with only a select few works, many of which came well before hip hop's beginning in the 1970s.

The three works under consideration in this thesis are Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, Kendrick Lamar's "HUMBLE.," and Childish Gambino's "This Is America." They were chosen because they are representative of an emerging trend among commercial hip hop that has arisen in partial response to the new economic viability of being "woke" – a slang term that abbreviates "awoken" and serves as an identifier for people who are aware of the social justice issues ingrained into their cultural traditions – but also, and more importantly so, in response to the increasingly tumultuous political landscape of the United States since the 2016 presidential election. The conflict that arises when questioning the honesty of these mainstream artists' intentions underpins the critical interpretations that follow in this thesis. These three videos have intricately woven webs of signifiers that result in an infinite number of possible meanings. While the following chapters do propose specific interpretations of these works, my interpretations are to be understood as one possible lens through which one might begin to understand the multiple meanings embedded within these videos. As a result, this thesis calls for the need to develop new ways of understanding these works outside of reductionist statements of what hip hop as a whole is or is not.

This thesis builds upon the work of multiple scholars of black art, including but not limited to Henry Louis Gates, Angela Davis, Tricia Rose, and Cheryl Keyes. I have distilled their theories into the following three aesthetic criteria in order to show how Lamar, Beyoncé, and Gambino's works can be included in a lineage of African American protest music whilst not

being representative of hip hop writ large. These three criteria will be directly referred to in my discussion of various possible interpretations of the three music videos under consideration:

1. Each work has a distinct social justice-minded message;
2. Each work manipulates the anchoring of sound within the world it presents visually, and this has a profound effect on the work's many possible meanings as a cohesive whole; and
3. Each work is markedly historicist through layers of visual and aural signification and iconic memory.

This framework is in no way intended to reduce the artistic interest of the works under consideration here down to their adherence to these criteria. Rather, the framework demonstrates why these videos stand out from other commercialized hip hop music videos as is evident in popular critical reception. Certainly, these videos stand out in many ways that this framework does not touch on, forming fruitful avenues for further research, such as analyzing the videos through the lenses of other theories of black art such as Afrofuturism² and Afro-pessimism.³ However, the older theories of Gates, Keyes, and Rose are used here because their concepts of signification, iconic memory, and Rose's historicization of the commodification of rap are contained and definable when abstracted from these author's expansive writings. These concepts are not lenses through which we might try to analyze these videos, but tools or building blocks with which we can begin to build a new and diverse array of lenses. I will summarize and explain each of these concepts in turn in what follows below.

² For an introduction to Afrofuturism, see Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 179-222.

³ For an introduction to Afro-pessimism, see Frank Wilderson, *Icognegro: From Black Power to Apartheid and Back – A Memoir of Exile*, (Boston, MA: South End Press, 2008).

Henry Louis Gates's seminal text *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*⁴ defines another distinguishing characteristic of the long-form music video: historicist, politically relevant Signification. In the introduction to his book, Gates writes "the most prevalent manifestation of Signifying over the last four decades is to be found in the corpus of hip-hop music."⁵ In the long-form music videos to be analyzed later in this project, Signification is one of the primary vehicles through which the artist delivers their politically driven message. Gates distinguishes a new type of Signification from western signification in his book by spelling the word for his concept with a capital S and, in evoking Ebonics for the present-tense verb form of the word, places the letter g in parentheses resulting in Signifyin(g). Gates draws his concept of Signification from the Yoruba trickster god, thereby recognizing and outlining one of the many possible relationships between African American art and the African diaspora caused by the American slave trade. Unlike Keyes concept of iconic memory which deals with visual meaning, signification deals with linguistic meaning in the African American literary tradition. It is a rhetorical device that Beyoncé, Lamar, and Gambino use in their music and videos to re-define people, places, and things through wordplay. In Gates's words, Signification is, "the playful puns on a word that occupy the paradigmatic axis of a language and which a speaker draws on for figurative substitutions." Gates continues, "These substitutions in Signifyin(g) tend to be humorous, or function to name a person or a situation in a telling manner."⁶

For example, the final track of Beyoncé's album *Lemonade*, entitled "Formation," includes the (later heavily merchandized) lyric "I got hot sauce in my bag." In the context of

⁴ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁵ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxix.

⁶ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 55.

exclusively “Formation,” Beyoncé is referring to the edible condiment that typically comes in travel-size bottles. This line signifies, in the western definition of the word and thus with a lower-case s, upon the traditionally spicy cuisine of Louisiana, the location in which the music video for “Formation” is set. Through the strong statement that she carries hot sauce with her everywhere she goes, Beyoncé claiming her black identity, carrying her heritage with her both figuratively and literally. Earlier on in *Lemonade*, however, hot sauce returns in a different form. In the track entitled “Hold Up,” Beyoncé smashes parked cars with a baseball bat labeled Hot Sauce, repurposing and redefining the definition of the term made familiar to her audience in “Formation.”⁷ Thus, Beyoncé is Signifyin(g) upon both hot sauces in both tracks; in “Formation,” the hot sauce in her bag becomes a baseball bat, or a tool for violent retaliation, whereas in “Hold Up,” the baseball bat becomes a symbol of her identity as she weaponizes her heritage.

Gates explicitly states that his ultimate goal in developing his theory of Signification in African American literature is not to contribute to, “this highly specialized debate over whether or not speech act *x* is an example of this black trope or that.”⁸ In using the concept of Signifyin(g) throughout this thesis, my work contributes directly to the highly specialized debate that Gates avoids. This thesis works against Gates’ statement that Signifyin(g) is “the black trope of tropes, the figure for black rhetorical figures”⁹ through identifying Signification in a specific genre of mainstream black art that had forgone Signifyin(g) as a result of rapid commodification.

⁷ See Example 1. All of the following media examples are available at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

⁸ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 56.

⁹ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 57.

In her book entitled *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*,¹⁰ Cheryl Keyes developed the concept of “iconic memory” to describe visuals in rap music videos that reference a place or object that holds significance to specifically hip hop-loving audiences.¹¹ Keyes writes that, “while the viewers in whom iconic memory is evoked resonate with the deeper or “real” meanings of rap music videos, other viewers are transported outside their immediate world and introduced to the lore of street and hip hop culture.”¹² Although the dichotomy Keyes creates between those who are capable of understanding the “real” meaning of hip hop music videos and those who are introduced to hip hop culture accurately describes the considerably less homogenized hip hop videos during the time period in which she is writing, the videos to be discussed in this chapter operate along similar lines and thus contribute to a refreshing influx of aesthetic diversity. Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* demonstrates this phenomenon when compared to some of her work before the release of *Lemonade* and her self-titled album *Beyoncé*.

For example, the music video for the track entitled “Party ft. Andre 3000” from her 2011 album *4* (the music video cuts out Andre 3000’s verse, thus entitled “Party ft. J. Cole”) evokes Keyes’ iconic memory in its portrayal of a trailer park and small hotel room party in the members of its audience that might connect with Beyoncé’s portrayed experience.¹³ However, these memories do not facilitate a connection with deeper meanings in the video. There are other, more specific iconic memory-evoking moments that do operate within Keyes’s dichotomy, but iconic memory does not always split a hip hop music video’s audience into these two categories. The meaning of this video could be interpreted in many different ways and this is not to say that,

¹⁰ Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

¹¹ Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 211.

¹² Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 225.

¹³ See Example 2 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

for example, its representation of black women confidently voicing their sexual desires is not significant. However, the dissemination of this deeper meaning through the portrayal of trailer park and hotel room parties is not dependent on iconic memory and, as Keyes might argue, only recognizable to those who can relate to or have previously attended trailer park and hotel room parties.

In this thesis, I use the concept of iconic memory to describe moments that visually evoke meaningful places and events keeping in mind their billions-and-growing audience. In theory, instances of iconic memory in these videos must then to some extent be relatable or marketable to a massive number of people. Therefore, Beyoncé, Lamar, and Gambino's decisions to include globally relevant versus locally relevant iconic memory-evoking moments are deeply significant. Iconic memory frequently works alongside Signification as well, in that visual representations of a specific place or event that inspires iconic memory are then renamed and in turn redefined through lyrical Signification.

Tricia Rose is particularly crucial to my work analyzing the hip hop music videos in chapters two through four of this thesis. Her two books entitled *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*¹⁴ and *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop and Why It Matters*¹⁵ detail the commodification and resulting distortion of rap and the politics of sexuality intertwined within the work of black women rappers. In particular, her historicization of the commodification of rap and outlining of the ensuing gangsta-pimp-ho trinity frame my interpretations of "This Is America," "HUMBLE.," and *Lemonade*.

¹⁴ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994).

¹⁵ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

Rather than abstracting these works entirely from the intentions of their artists,¹⁶ I acknowledge the business models that function underneath these commercial works. With extremely high production values that produce relatively little profit, these music videos function simultaneously as advertisements and works of art. Therefore, their many possible meanings operate within this dual framework. Every moment that evokes iconic memory could be interpreted as a tool for gathering views on YouTube, but this does not need to take away from these moments' cultural significance.

Although the work of these Gates, Keyes, and Rose provides the theoretical foundation for my interpretations of the three videos under consideration in this thesis, I position my analyses against the critical discourse found within the popular media. Magazines and online blog platforms occupy the majority of the bibliography at the end of this thesis, and YouTube videos and Twitter posts are referenced throughout. The reason is that these videos have all been released within the last five years of the publication of this thesis. This in no way devalues the work of pop-culture writers. Instead, it allows us to consider these videos from a number of critical perspectives. As works that occupy the ever-fluctuating body of mainstream media, "This Is America," "HUMBLE.," and *Lemonade* are held up against standards not outlined by academics but by their audiences. Their audiences are in turn informed by the popular media, and therefore, the thoughts and opinions released by the popular media are among the ultimate cultural gatekeepers of this repertoire. In the chapters that follow, articles of the popular media are both productively criticized by way of informing my own interpretations.

¹⁶ Although I refer to Childish Gambino, Beyoncé, and Kendrick Lamar as individual artists throughout this thesis, it should be noted that their work is the product of their brand, and that therefore, their works are not necessarily reflections of the thoughts and opinions of the people themselves. The interviews and media profiles referred to are referenced under the condition that the information given is done so from exclusively their public personae as dictated by their brands' values.

The aim of this thesis is to challenge generalizing claims of what hip hop is or should be by demonstrating the differences lying within the three modern, mainstream hip hop videos under consideration in this thesis.

CHAPTER ONE

The hip hop music videos under consideration in this thesis were not produced in a cultural vacuum. The three aesthetic rules outlined in the introduction have individually existed in hip hop music videos from the beginning of the genre in the late 1970s but can be traced even farther back to other music by black artists, including those that existed long before the advent of the music video in general. This chapter further develops the three aesthetic criteria outlined in the introduction by citing and explaining examples of their presence in songs from three different black artists that belong to three different musical genres: Billie Holiday's song "Strange Fruit," first recorded and performed in 1939, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's music video for the song "The Message," of 1979, and Michael Jackson's short film for the song "Bad," released in 1987.

These three tracks, to some extent, manipulate the anchoring of sound within the narrative universes they present, signify upon important events in African-American history, and have distinct social justice-minded messages to varying degrees. Flash's track, "The Message," is used to illustrate how a work might possess a distinct and direct social justice-minded message intended to raise social awareness among its listeners. Michael Jackson's "Bad" adheres to all three of these aesthetic criteria, however, it is used in this chapter to illustrate the manipulation of the anchoring of sound within its fictional universe in a way that dramatically alters the meaning of the song's text. As Jackson's second musical short film, it is among his most politically direct and experimental works. Holiday's "Strange Fruit" is the oldest of the three examples in this chapter, and potently illustrates the concept of signification and iconic memory through its confrontation with the rise of lynching in the United States. Musical change on a grand scale is

fluid; this project is in no way intended to point out a single moment, artist, or song that gave rise to these types of hip hop music videos.

Iconic Memory and Signifyin(g)

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves, blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop.*

– Abel Meeropol¹⁷

Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” became an anthem for twentieth century anti-lynching campaigns after its initial recording and performance in 1939. Originally written by Abel Meeropol, a white English teacher at a school in the Bronx, Holiday took it up because she felt that it eloquently expressed the systemic racial violence that ultimately led to the death of her father.¹⁸ She became obsessed with recording and performing it despite Columbia Records’ refusal to distribute it under its name – they eventually allowed her to record it under a smaller

¹⁷ Poem taken from Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 181.

¹⁸ Meeropol’s racial identity is meaningful here because it shows a desire for the abolition of lynching among some members of the white population. David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights*, (Philadelphia, PA: Running Press, 2000), 31-33.

subsidiary called Commodore Records. Columbia insisted that no one would buy the record in the South, as its potent criticism of the practice of lynching that persisted in the American South through the latter half of the century was unmatched.¹⁹

Although the text of the song was originally written by Meeropol, it was Holiday's initial performance of it in Café Society in New York's Greenwich Village that gave the poem life and meaning among members of the black community and its few white allies. Café Society was a historically integrated club – this added yet another layer of tension to Billie Holiday's repeated performances of the song made Holiday a target for possibly violent retaliation. Meeropol's poem alone certainly signifies, in the white definition of the word according to Henry Louis Gates, upon the history of lynching as of 1939 and the “gallant South” most infamous for preventing anti-lynching legislation. However, Holiday's setting of the song to jazz, a black musical idiom, and subsequent performances of it in an integrated club in New York City Signifies, with a capital S according to Gates, upon the collective memory of both the performers, or those re-creating the song in real time, and the audience simultaneously. Each performance of the song would evoke a different series of collective traumas faced by those performing it and those listening to it. The original poem standing alone undoubtedly signifies upon history, but it also Signifies upon the collective conscious of one individual: the reader. Holiday's use of the poem in a live performance setting dramatically alters its meaning and impact. Its later status as an anthem for the anti-lynching and civil rights movements resulted not from Abel Meeropol's writing of the poem, but from Billie Holiday's performance of it as a jazz ballad for primarily black audiences.

¹⁹ Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 195.

The concept of iconic memory in rap music videos, as developed by Cheryl Keyes in her book entitled *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, deals exclusively with the visuals presented in a rap music video and their signification upon certain places or historical events.²⁰ This project builds upon Keyes's work by arguing that iconic memory can also operate within the lyrical content of not just hip hop or even black music, but music as a whole. Any music with associated text has the potential to employ iconic memory. In order to do so, the text that is set to music must describe a physical object or place with enough detail to be envisioned in the mind, and that object or place must then be significant to the music's audience. For example, the lines, "Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze/Strange Fruit hanging from the poplar trees" evoke images that would have been dreadfully familiar to Billie Holiday's audience, and are specific to a distinct time and place. Billie Holiday does not need to shoot a music video that includes this imagery in order for us to understand her song in relation to Keyes's concept. It is not only the specificity of the images described but the collective memory of her audience that are operating within Keyes's concept of iconic memory.

"Strange Fruit" is an important artistic precedent to the new hip hop music video because its immediate success came as a result of the first aesthetic standard listed in chapter one: the work must be markedly historicist through signification and iconic memory. Holiday's outcry against lynching would not have been nearly as powerful without signifying upon the shared traumatic experiences of its audience through descriptions of recognizable icons of the American south.

²⁰ Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 210-225.

A Distinct Social Justice-Minded Message

The target audience of Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, Childish Gambino's "This Is America," and Kendrick Lamar's "HUMBLE." is young people who are active on social media, online conversation, and blog platforms, and who are passionate supporters of social justice movements such as #BlackLivesMatter. The virtual gathering and communicating of the members of this audience has caused and supported protest movements like #BlackLivesMatter, which gathered such a following through music as to warrant an essay collection entitled *Black Lives Matter and Music: Protest, Intervention, Reflection*, edited by Fernando Orejuela and Stephanie Shonekan.²¹ By continuing to create these music videos, Beyoncé, Lamar, and Gambino have both pledged their allegiance to this movement and encouraged their fan followings to do so as well. Because being "woke" has become fashionable among young people, the 21st century has witnessed an increase in conversation on topics such as women's rights and social justice.

In response, pop culture critics have reflected an anxiety that this rise in progressive thought within youth culture is only temporary, despite its positive influence on the traditional gatekeeping institutions of American culture, such as the Grammys and Academy Awards. For example, In a short think-piece about the Grammy Award Show's feeble attempt at avoiding irrelevance, *The New Yorker* staff writer Amanda Petrusich wrote that, "it's also hard not to read meta-narratives into the display: to sniff out precisely what the Grammys think "woke" means, and how its executors are performing enlightenment."²² The phrase "performing enlightenment"

²¹ Fernando Orejuela and Stephanie Shonekan, ed, *Black Lives Matter and Music: Protest, Intervention, Reflection* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018).

²² Amanda Petrusich, "Lorde Help Us, Here Come the "Woke" Grammys," *The New Yorker* (January 27, 2018), <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/lorde-help-us-here-come-the-woke-grammys>.

indirectly expresses the widely shared fear that this movement towards socially conscious mainstream hip hop music videos is temporary. If being “woke” is the latest profitable fad, how do we know that these artists’ enlightened performances are genuinely impactful?

In order to analyze how the three music videos to be analyzed later are portraying a certain civil-rights-focused message, it must first be established that these videos are portraying a message in the first place. Musicologist Mark Katz has argued that earlier conversations on hip hop have painted a picture of the genre as being exclusively about social change, forcing artists into a position of weakness and ignoring the many works within the genre that are not touting a political statement. There is great significance to Katz’s uncovering these reductionist views. Here I endeavor to build upon that work by arguing that the videos under consideration in this thesis are an outgrowth of only a select group of earlier works. They all contain outcries for socio-political change, however, they are not reflective of the genre of hip hop as a whole. Instead, they belong to a category of hip hop music videos that have all become vehicles for positive change. The videos that make up this lineage are directed at a multi-racial, nationwide audience, and in some cases, they are able to cross over into the pop billboard charts. They defy the conservative business practices of record companies by achieving popularity despite having a specific political agenda, like Columbia Records and “Strange Fruit.” The first hip hop music video produced is one of the defining members of this lineage: Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” of 1982.

Many current hip hop artists who have released what have later been deemed protest songs have cited “The Message” as a defining influence. For example, in an article for *Rolling Stone*, rapper Chuck D of Public Enemy asked his interviewer, “Melle Mel wrote that shit more

than 30 years ago. How can you think that doesn't apply to right now?"²³ With the sad, pointed refrain of, "its like a jungle sometimes/it makes me wonder how I keep from going under," Flash and the Furious Five's track is unmistakably speaking out against the systemic racism that holds the black population beneath the poverty line. A decade after this song was voted as the best pop song of 1982, rap would gain its reputation as a promoter of violence, misogyny, and illiteracy as a result of the commercial popularity of the gangsta-pimp-ho trinity.²⁴ This song marks the moment in the 1980s in which hip hop that functioned as a vehicle for socio-political activism split from the type of rap that would become widely successful in the early 21st century. Further reinforcing what I define as a split within the genre, Rose writes that this early rap was following politically active predecessors such as The Last Poets, Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and the classic Blues women.²⁵

The music video for "The Message" depicts Flash and group member Duke Bootee walking through busy streets with a boombox and hanging out on the front steps of an old New York brownstone, until they are stopped and violently arrested by a police officer.²⁶ The video does not directly depict the scenarios and conversations included in the track's verses, but rather guides its audience through the impoverished urban landscape in which Flash raps that he is trapped. Although "The Message" was never played on MTV because of strict censorship policies largely motivated by racial discrimination, the pervasive effect of the channel's censorship policies on hip hop music videos has been noted by scholars such as Cheryl Keyes and Tricia Rose. According to Gina Harrell, an independent music video producer, MTV's

²³ Chuck D, "Inside Hip-Hop's New Activist Era," by David Peisner, *Rolling Stone* (July 28, 2016), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/inside-hip-hops-new-activist-era-100041/>.

²⁴ I borrow the phrase "voted best pop song of 1982" from Rose, *Black Noise*, 55, " and gangsta-pimp-ho trinity" from Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 4.

²⁵ Rose, *Black Noise*, 55.

²⁶ See Example 3 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

censorship policies had a lasting effect on content in hip hop music videos: “The cop issue has really affected rap music video. You can’t shoot anybody in a video, you can hold up a gun, but you can’t show who you’re pointing at.”²⁷ Indispensable to the hip hop music videos that follow are their politically active messages in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, a modern iteration of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 70s. Like “The Message,” these tracks are not subtle about their push for racial and, in the case of Beyoncé’s album *Lemonade*, gender equality and they are pushing the boundaries of what the recording industry deems commercially viable in doing so.

Manipulating the Anchoring of Sound within a Music Video

The music video popularized by The Beatles in the 1960s featured a simple relationship between the song’s sound and the visuals presented in the video. It was intended to replace live shows for a band that was exhausted and sick of giving massive stadium shows before amplification technology and crowd control strategies had caught up to the music industry’s lust for ticket sale revenue. Thus, it was at first no more than a video of the band pretending to play along to their own music. For example, in the promotional film for the song “Paperback Writer,” the band is half-heartedly performing the tune in a greenhouse, where the drummer Ringo Starr, without a drum set, sits dejectedly cross-legged in front of the camera.²⁸ In this example, although the audience is led to believe that they are watching the band create the song in front of their eyes with John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and George Harrison singing and playing their respective

²⁷ Rose, *Black Noise*, 14.

²⁸ See Example 4 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

guitars, the sound of the drum set is left without representation in the visuals. Starr's boredom combined with the entire band's apathetic stares and half-hearted lip-singing gives this example a comic edge that the song does not possess on its own. In this subtle but significant way, the promotional film for "Paperback Writer" gives its audience a glimpse into the band's personalities and plays into the previously established notion that they were all funny, quirky, and sarcastic. The increasingly experimental nature of The Beatles' promotional films expanded the modes of artistic expression possible with popular music.

In the music video analyses that follow, the visuals toy with the audience's perception of the origin of the track's audio in a fashion pioneered by the Beatles and later built upon by other artists. As a result, the distinct cry for social justice in these music videos does not exist in the audio track alone. There may be implied political themes in the lyrics or in the artist's choice of samples, but without the music video, the message of the work as a cohesive whole is lost or severely diluted. Black artists such as Michael Jackson, for example, have enhanced the cultural and political relevancy of a song through curating visuals that alter the meaning of the lyrics. Jackson's song "Bad" of 1987 was released with an accompanying short film directed by Martin Scorsese – a Hollywood veteran who, by that time, had already directed films such as *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*. The song was the title track and second single off Jackson's seventh full-length album. Because both he and his director had already established their careers, there was relatively little risk in producing a music video with loaded social commentary. The lyrics of the track alone convey little about the story line presented in the music video, further supporting the song's smooth crossover and eventual domination of the pop billboard charts at the time.

In “Bad,” Jackson sings about being angry and tough, threatening his audience with claims that they do not understand the acts of violence of which he is capable.²⁹ His lyrics are relatively vague when compared to the culturally potent visuals of the accompanying short film; in the video, Jackson plays a boy who has come home to his poor urban neighborhood while on break from The Duxton School. He is confronted by his old friends who then pressure him into mugging an innocent stranger walking through a subway station nearby in order to prove that he’s still tough. When Jackson’s frustration peaks, the song finally begins, and his lyrics can finally be understood as insisting that he is tough and able to fight back against the peer pressure of his friends, out of his objection to hurting innocent people. After the aggressive dancing that accompanies the track, the video concludes with Jackson’s friends accepting defeat and walking away.

The video’s story line was inspired by the murder of Edmund Perry in 1985 by an undercover police officer, according to user TheROCFfiles writing for Genius Lyrics.³⁰ However, a more perspicacious analysis of the video’s cultural commentary would avoid arguing for any direct artistic influence – the work makes no mention of the police or police violence, and no deaths occur. Jackson may very well have been commenting on the ever-increasing presence of violence in under-privileged communities in general, as the video’s peaceful conclusion was settled through artistic self-expression rather than a physical fight. Despite the fact that the video is not closely related to any one historical event, it drew upon larger cultural trends and artistic themes for its relevance. For example, Jackson had previously cited the influence of Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins’s 1961 film *West Side Story* on his choreographic style, and he and his

²⁹ See Appendices D and E for song lyrics.

³⁰ TheROCFfiles, “Bad: Michael Jackson,” *Genius Lyrics* (2012), <https://genius.com/Michael-jackson-bad-lyrics>.

dancers' moves in "Bad" bear a clear resemblance to Robbins's work.³¹ The video was released in the 1980s, a decade after the rise of blaxploitation films in the 1970s and the simultaneous outbreak and rapidly increased occurrence of building fires in the Bronx that resulted from landlord and government negligence, for example. Without the depiction of Jackson's character's impoverished neighborhood and his harrowing experience with his old friends in the video, the song alone does not comment on any of the influential cultural and historical phenomena of the time.

The film is over eighteen minutes in length, with the musical number appearing after nine minutes of short film devoid of any musical content. Just before the song begins, the video suddenly switches from black and white to full color, and Jackson jumps into the frame wearing a tight leather jacket and pants.³² Jackson's friends are not depicted at all over the course of the song, and the entirely synthesized backing track is never visually anchored in the world of the film – the source of the backing track is never visually represented. The audience is left to assume that all of the music is coming from Jackson as he pulses and thrusts to every beat, and lip syncs with such accuracy as to put the Beatles' half-hearted attempt to shame. Despite this, however, the relationship between the audio and visuals is far less complex than the later hip hop music videos upon which "Bad" would exert an influence. The short film and the track combined are the only method with which the audience can receive Jackson's anti-violent message, but the delivery of Jackson's message does not depend on the audio and visual's relationship. The message exists in full without the audio because it is abundantly clear that Jackson's dancing is proving his "badness" to his adversaries without the relatively vague lyrics.

³¹ Jeffrey Daniel, "Bad Choreographer Remembers Michael Jackson" by Melissa Block, *NPR Music* (June 26, 2009), <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=105986636>.

³² See Example 5 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

In this chapter I have made the case that Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message," and Michael Jackson's "Bad" all contributed new concepts that have been influential on the aesthetics of the black music video, particularly those that accompany songs of powerful social and political protest. In the analyses that follow in chapters three through five, the three aesthetic criteria outlined in the introduction and developed in this chapter will be put to practical use in an effort to elucidate their message of protest and how it is conveyed through signification, iconic memory, and the intricate relationship between the work's audio and visuals.

CHAPTER TWO

Introduction

Since its release on May 5th of 2018, Childish Gambino's (AKA Donald Glover) "This Is America" has proven polarizing among critics and fans alike. While many YouTube commenters, Twitter users, and writers for the popular press have praised the work for its network of interwoven pop culture references, a smaller but vocal minority speak out against it, claiming that it is "trauma porn" – a slang term for popular media that fetishizes realistic violence and traumatic situations. The first section of this chapter outlines the merits and limitations of arguments on both sides of this debate. In the section that follows, I will posit my own analysis of the video in an attempt to show what "This Is America" can teach its audience about the changing role of hip hop within the entertainment industry of the United States. Tracing these arguments back to Rose's book entitled *The Hip Hop Wars* reveals that both sides of this argument stem from older rhetoric on the claim that "Hip Hop Causes Violence," as outlined in Rose's "Top Ten Debates in Hip Hop."

Gambino has repeatedly refused to comment on his work in interviews, leaving many audience members and critics in the dark when discussing "This Is America." Further adding to the ambiguity of his artistic intent, Childish Gambino's interview presence is surprisingly soft-spoken given the jarring and direct commentary that comprises his 2018 music video titled "This Is America." During interviews, Gambino delivers sharp, intelligent responses that dissect the interviewer's questions more often than providing an answer. For example, in a 2014 interview for New York's Power 105.1 FM, Gambino arrived wearing an old knitted sweater with holes

and a colorfully patterned shirt, reflecting the easy-going nature of his public personality. However, when the interviewer asked him about his odd get-up, Gambino responded with unexpected intensity. After explaining that the decrepit sweater came from a friend whose father had recently passed away, he stated that he wears clothes that disguise his celebrity status in order to expose the subtleties of systemic racism. He jokingly acknowledged that he frequently looks like a homeless man, and then quickly brought the interview back into focus. “I’m doing this for *us*,” he said with stunning calm, simultaneously referring to and placing himself within the black population. “When I’m out on the street and I’m trying to get a taxi, I want people to come up be like, ‘aren’t you Donald Glover?’” He continued this hypothetical scene using a comically high-pitched voice mocking the white women that shield their children from him on the street. “Yeah,” he responded in his own voice, to himself. “Why are you out here?’ *I can’t get a taxi.*” After a brief moment of laughter, Gambino reignited the conversation a second time with, “I want people to know. I want people to understand that I’m wearing this for *them*.”³³ In this last statement, Gambino further reinforces his belonging to a group that is being discriminated against by othering white people, or those who discriminate against him.

Just as Gambino’s outfit disguised his wealth and fame, his calm demeanor similarly disguised his intense underlying response to the interviewer’s seemingly innocent question. He is commonly lauded for refusing to offer analytical perspectives on his work, or even give the slightest hint towards their meaning. Despite seeming so laid-back and aloof in person, Gambino’s work is harsh and confrontational. This severe juxtaposition between casual,

³³ Donald Glover, “The Breakfast Club Classic,” interview by Charlamagne Tha God, DJ Envy, and Angela Yee, *The Breakfast Club*, Power 105.1 FM (May 10, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28sTZge1Lyo>.

pleasant, and easy and intense, painful, and poignant lies at the heart of my analysis of “This Is America.”

Childish Gambino’s music video, titled “This Is America,” employs the bait-and-switch tactics illustrated above to the extreme. The video opens in an empty white warehouse with a contagious, upbeat repeated riff sung by a chorus off-screen. A black man dressed in loose white clothing walks into the frame, sits down, and plays a guitar along with the music. When the camera shifts over to Childish Gambino wearing only plain grey linen pants, the audience hears “We just want to party/Party just for you/We just want the money/Money just for you.” Gambino then begins slowly contorting his body to the music, although his rapidly shifting facial expression looks as though he is experiencing extreme pain. When the camera returns to include both Gambino and the seated guitarist on screen, the guitarist is still, without his instrument, with a sac over his head. Gambino turns, pulls a gun from the back of his pants, and fatally shoots the man in the back of the head. At the exact moment the gun is fired, the music becomes a dark, bass-heavy trap beat, and Gambino raps “This is America/Don’t catch you slippin’ up/Look what I’m whippin’ up.” The world of the video then immediately dissolves into chaos while Gambino dances and raps surrounded by happy, grey-and-white uniformed schoolchildren dancing along with him.³⁴ As the audience’s view follows Gambino around the warehouse, the track continues to shift jarringly from the familiar, catchy chorus riff back to trap, and at another point later on, Gambino guns down the entire chorus in one motion. As the background chaos builds, the video comes to a complete, silent stop when Gambino pauses to light a joint. The peppy chorus comes back in joined by the guitarist with a sack covering his head, and Gambino dances on top of a

³⁴ See Example 6 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

parked car. The video concludes with him running for his life from an angry mob to the sound of Young Thug singing “You just a black man in this world/You just a barcode, ayy.”³⁵

Reviews of the Video

Most critics who favor the video focus on dissecting and revealing the meaning behind the many pop culture references embedded in the video’s visuals. For example, articles written by Doreen St. Felix for *The New Yorker*, Frank Guan for *Vulture*, and user SorryMsJackson of *Genius Lyrics* focus intently on the video’s possible surface level signification to specific events of recent history, recalling a mass shooting at a church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015, and the “Shoot Dance” popularized by Blocboy JB on the American comedy series *Saturday Night Live*.³⁶ Frank Guan’s review of the music video for *Vulture* looks at it in comparison to Gambino’s TV show *Atlanta*, writing, “Much as *Atlanta* exists in the lacuna between *Atlanta* and *Atlanta*, ‘This Is America’ draws life from the unsolvable tension within a society whose bloody business is transmuted into cultural potency at relentless speed.”³⁷ Guan then acknowledges that the video is deeply indebted to the Southern rap scene to which *Atlanta* takes as its subject, but rather than bringing the point into a larger context and eventual conclusion, he sidesteps these larger ideas in favor of an emphasis on the contributions of other artists, many of which are unnoticeable to an inexperienced audience. He writes, “Ad-libs are chipped in by the likes of Young

³⁵ SorryMsJackson, “This Is America: Childish Gambino,” *Genius Lyrics* (April 2018), <https://genius.com/Childish-gambino-this-is-america-lyrics>; see Example 7 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

³⁶ Doreen St. Felix, “The Carnage and Chaos of Childish Gambino’s ‘This Is America,’” *The New Yorker*, (2018), Frank Guan, “What it Means When Childish Gambino Says ‘This Is America.’” *Vulture*, (2018), and SorryMsJackson, “This Is America.”

³⁷ Guan, “What it Means.”

Thug, Slim Jxmmi, Blocboy JB, 21 Savage, and Quavo; Thug performs an outro; Blocboy's dance is replicated in the video."³⁸ Guan's article is full of clickable names like these, perhaps because the online magazine platform for which he writes requires that his article attract web traffic.

Other reviews on similar online platforms such as *Pitchfork*, *The Guardian*, and *Genius Lyrics* demonstrate similar issues. In praising the video for its wealth of miniscule current-event references, they distract their readership from some of the more difficult real-world problems that, as I will argue later, the video critiques. In Tricia Rose's chapter on the argument that "Hip Hop Causes Violence," she states that "Without making overly blanket, ill-informed generalizations about the creativity in hip hop, we need to be alarmed about storytelling that offers little critique of violence against black people."³⁹ Authors like Guan point out that the video itself is offering a critique of our consumption of "bloody business," but the issue of what "bloody business" is and how it functions in society is buried in his article by the need to recruit hits and likes. Rose may have been referring to rappers when she warned her readership against one-sided storytelling, but in the case of "This Is America," critics themselves are the perpetrators, feeding in to the very culture machine that buries productive conversation.

The other side of the debate speaks out against the video by labeling it as "trauma porn," and in doing so, claims that the video has gained recognition through fetishizing acts of violence against black communities. One reviewer of the video, Tiffany Foster of the online blog *Black Girl in Maine*, wrote that "If images of Black bodies being abused was going to change society, violence against us would have come to a halt even before Emmet Till's life got cut short by

³⁸ Guan, "What it Means."

³⁹ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 57.

Carolyn Bryant, who is still living today. All the “This Is America” video did was give white folks some more violence to be entertained by. I get what he was trying to say, but he didn’t have to gun down the choir to do it.”⁴⁰

Foster’s claim that the gun violence in the video is gratuitous and solely for the entertainment of a white audience echoes other critics’ claims that Gambino raps for and, with his acting, screenwriting, and comedy, entertains a white audience. Furthermore, these critics justifiably point to Gambino’s past work to support claims that he profits from offensive content for purely its own sake; for example, as pointed out by Richey Collazo for *Affinity*, Gambino’s work as a rapper and comedian has shown, “him being called out for fetishizing Asian women, a heavy use of homophobic slurs in his lyrics, and his stand-up comedy routine in which he compares having kids to AIDs, makes confusing compliment/insult jabs at black women, and says being called the N-word by an Armenian girl made him have an intense orgasm.”⁴¹

Gambino has refused to apologize for, much less comment upon his work. Although using Gambino’s past works to devalue his current projects is reductionist, these critics’ communal plea to stop supporting an artist that profits from “devaluing himself and other people of color” in his work cannot be completely discounted. Furthermore, Tad Friend of *The New Yorker* has noted that Gambino has a particularly cynical outlook on his career as an artist. Friend writes that Gambino “thinks of reality as a program and his talent as hacking the code: [he

⁴⁰ Tiffany Foster, “‘This Is America’ Really IS America, and That’s a Shame,” *Black Girl in Maine Media* (May 10, 2018) <https://blackgirlinmaine.com/current-events/this-is-america-really-is-america-and-thats-a-shame/>.

⁴¹ Richey Collazo, “Why You Shouldn’t Be Supporting Atlanta, or Donald Glover,” *Affinity* (November 9, 2016), <http://affinitymagazine.us/2016/11/09/why-you-shouldnt-be-supporting-atlanta-or-donald-glover/>.

quotes Gambino as saying] ‘I learn fast—I figured out the algorithm.’”⁴² Yet although Gambino acknowledges that he plays the system, makes art for white people, and knows exactly how to profit from every seedy corner of the entertainment industry, he is not necessarily unconscious of the social realities to which his work is intricately linked.

Analysis

Unlike many hip hop music videos of the past, “This Is America” undermines the arguments mentioned earlier on both sides of this ongoing debate. Once again, the reviews in *The Guardian*, *Vulture*, *Genius Lyrics* and *The New Yorker* heavily emphasize, if not rely entirely upon the video’s many possible pop-culture references.⁴³ My analysis shows that “This Is America” comments on the nature of popular critical reception of hip hop and black culture writ large by anticipating pop culture writers’ focus on the video’s referential “Easter eggs.”⁴⁴ I will also argue that “This Is America” comments on its own identity as trauma porn in a deliberate self-critique of hip hop culture. Gambino’s music video plays with his audience’s understanding of musical genre, crime, and mass media by visually placing these concepts in the video’s foreground without including the concrete referential material the audience might expect from a

⁴² Tad Friend, “Donald Glover Can’t Save You: The Creator of *Atlanta* Wants TV to Tell Hard Truths. Is the Audience Ready?,” *The New Yorker* (March 5, 2018), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/05/donald-glover-cant-save-you>.

⁴³ See St. Felix, “The Carnage,” Guan, “What It Means,” SorryMsJackson, “This Is America,” and Ben Beaumont-Thomas, “This Is America: Theories Behind Childish Gambino’s Satirical Masterpiece,” *The Guardian* (May 9, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/may/07/this-is-america-theories-donald-glover-satirical-video-childish-gambino>.

⁴⁴ Brittany Spanos, “‘This Is America’ Actor Talks Donald Glover, Easter Eggs, and Trayvon Martin’s Dad,” *Rolling Stone* (May 10, 2018), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/this-is-america-actor-talks-donald-glover-easter-eggs-and-trayvon-martins-dad-628222/>.

hip hop music video. In doing so, he shows his audience that senseless gun violence, the distractions of social media, and the vacuity of popular music have become normalized aspects of our everyday lives.

For example, Childish Gambino's second act of gun violence in the video, in which he murders a black gospel chorus in a single move, has been understood as a reference to the mass shooting at a church in Charleston, North Carolina in 2015.⁴⁵ Aside from the act of killing a black church choir, the second act of violence in the video does not include anything that directly links the moment to the Charleston massacre. For example, Gambino uses an automatic weapon in the video presumably for the sake of his ability to kill the entire choir in one single motion, unlike the small handgun used by the real-life Charleston shooter.⁴⁶ With no warning for the audience or cultural context to frame this moment in the video, it does not pay tribute to the victims and survivors, and offers no remorse. The camera shifts its focus to a choir happily singing and dancing along to the familiar pop tune from the beginning of the track, who is then brutally, rapidly murdered. Whether or not this moment is in reference to a specific historical event is irrelevant. The disaster in North Carolina may be the most recent example, but the moment's potency comes from the familiarity of the larger concept of mass shootings. It is unfortunately representative of the racially-motivated gun violence that has witnessed a sharp increase worldwide over the past four years.

To further illustrate this point, the first act of gun violence at the start of the video is also a generalized version of an all-too-familiar type of gun violence. In this instance, a man sitting

⁴⁵ See Example 8 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

⁴⁶ Ralph Ellis, Ed Payne, Evan Perez and Dana Ford, "Shooting Suspect in Custody After Charleston Church Massacre," *CNN*, (2015).

on a chair, wearing plain, crumpled linen clothing and a burlap sack covering his head is fatally shot from behind with a single bullet. Unlike the choir massacre later on in the video, this moment is delivered with context; Gambino allows the audience to form a brief relationship with his victim. The audience is introduced to this character a few seconds beforehand, when he plays the guitar along to the opening pop tune. When the camera turns to Gambino and quickly back to the same figure, he has lost his guitar and gained a burlap hood, in possible reference to the increasingly prevalent terrorist videos posted to the internet. The video's initial killing foreshadows the later choir massacre on two levels: First, at the surface level, this video places unapologetic violence on display; Second, at a deeper level, this depiction of a single violent act makes reference to generic forms of violence that disadvantaged communities in the US face on a daily basis.

In "This Is America," Childish Gambino reveals the extent to which social media distracts people from the dark realities of life as a black person in the United States. He packages this reveal neatly within the moves of his school-uniform-clad backup dancers, who are the only characters in the video with cell phones. This is significant because one would think that if people were smashing and robbing cars, some of the people standing by would use their phones to call the police or check in with family members. However, when the school kids join Gambino as he dances through various chaotic scenes, the other people in the frame are smashing windows and running around with crowbars and other weapons. A second group of school kids eventually appear in the background, but they are equally uninterested in the crime that surrounds them as they laugh along with a boy dancing on top of a car, shooting money into the air out of a cash

gun.⁴⁷ Later on in the video, the camera shifts away from Gambino and his backup dancers to a group of kids sitting on a balcony above the chaos, absorbed in their phones.⁴⁸

Gambino again employs this dual perspective when he abstracts American society's obsession with social media from the distinct references that ground the video's moments in real-life events. For example, the interpretation on Genius Lyrics by user SorryMsJackson points out that the backup dancers are performing a version of Blocboy JB's dance from his music video for the track "Shoot."⁴⁹ However, the specific dance move in question is embedded in choreography, that exhibits the characteristics of viral dances in general throughout the video: short, angular movements of one or two body parts at a time in a repetitive pattern that emphasizes strong beats. The choreography for Gambino's backup dancers is referential because it looks like it could have originated from any number of recent viral dances. And, adding to this, the video was choreographed by Sherrie Silver, a dancer whose mission in life is to popularize modern dances from Rwanda.⁵⁰ Silver has stated that she was discovered when a member of Gambino's team showed him one of her Youtube videos, further underscoring "This Is America's" reliance on internet culture.

The kids' uniforms point to Gambino's generalization of youth culture as well, consisting of white and grey linen with no branding or particularly individual characteristics. Their outdated pleated skirts and plain button-down shirts point to common school uniforms, but they lack any individuality. It is unclear in the video if they are experiencing the same fear and pain that shows

⁴⁷ See Example 9 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E. Cash Guns are an increasingly common feature in hip hop music videos – See D.R.A.M.'s "Cash Machine," for example.

⁴⁸ See Example 10 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

⁴⁹ "Blocboy JB - Shoot @zaehd @ceodiamond @1freebandceo," Jae HD !, (2017).

⁵⁰ Sherrie Silver, "I Choreographed 'This Is America,' and This Is My Story," *BBC News* (July 1, 2018).

on Gambino's face; they take selfies, laugh at each other, and dance together while totally unaware of the chaos around them caused exclusively by adults.

The music of "This Is America" frames Gambino's generalizations of gun violence and youth culture in the context of white perceptions of black art. The track consists of two truncated songs juxtaposed against one another – both of which are generalizations of a genre of black music. The first song in the track shares certain characteristics with afro-pop, with its two-over-three poly rhythms, shaker, and the sounds of people yipping outdoors in the background. However, these few afro-pop characteristics are smothered by the melody's gospel-like descending F-major scale, grounding the music in a distinctly happy, American pop sound akin to Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry Be Happy" and Pharrell Williams's "Happy." Coupled with the lyrics "We just want to party/party just for you/we just want the money/money just for you" at the end of the phrase, the lyrics of the pop tune half of "This Is America" capture Gambino's generalization of popular music in a fashion similar to that of his visual representations of violence and young peoples' relationships with social media.⁵¹

If one takes Gambino's personal reverence for drill rap, a Chicago-based sub-genre within trap, into account, the second song within "This Is America" becomes the most critically important of the two. In the interview with DJ Envy mentioned previously, Gambino responded to the question, "What was hip hop originally set up to do?" with the blunt statement that it was "To help young blacks get money, man."⁵² [PLAY CLIP] His words imply here that artists making drill rap are among the few left still creating real rap. With this in mind, it makes sense that Gambino would make the second opposing song within "This Is America" fit neatly among

⁵¹ See Example 11 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

⁵² Donald Glover, "The Breakfast Club Classic."

the works from other drill rappers. With its violent and nihilistic lyrics, bass-heavy beat, and rolled hi-hat hits, Gambino is showing his audience that real black music is that which calls out the violence black people experience every day; real black music is drill.⁵³ *Vulture* music critic Frank Guan has noted the significance of the drill track to the meaning of “This Is America,” writing that, “The incongruousness of Glover, raised middle-class and a NYU graduate, bragging about his Mexican drug supplier and threatening to have you gunned down, is intentional.”⁵⁴ However, Guan focuses on comparing the violent lyrics to Gambino’s personal life rather than acknowledging the track’s nod to drill’s distinct musical style and lyrical content.

Unlike Gambino’s representations of violence, social media, and popular music, the drill half of “This Is America” could not be labeled a generalization of drill, trap, or hip hop. In its grounding within a deeply localized genre of hip hop, the drill track makes up the backbone of the work as a whole. Without the sonic grounding the drill track provides within a grass-roots Chicago-based tradition of black music making, the entire track would fade into the background noise of songs that sound similar to “This Is America’s” pop half. In presenting a style of music that Gambino himself has (admittedly indirectly) labeled as rooted in “what hip hop was set up to do,” and that is also, as Gambino stated later in the same interview, not actually making young blacks the money it should be, he shows his audience the message that the pop track attempts to hide. This video’s message is not, as critics from both sides of the debate surrounding it would have their readers believe, simply that life in impoverished black communities is difficult. “This Is America” reveals that emotionally vacuous popular music, distraction on a massive scale by

⁵³ See Example 12 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

⁵⁴ Guan, “What It Means.”

social media platforms, and horrendous acts of mass violence have become the new normal. America has become desensitized to these evils.

Rose concludes *The Hip Hop Wars* on a positive note by listing six guiding principles for hip hop that could help lead it down a path of righteousness. One of these principles is that hip hop should, “Represent what you want, not just what is.”⁵⁵ If popular critics and social media commenters have missed the point that “This Is America” is revealing our mass contentment with the horrors of life in the U.S., what good is the video doing? It is both trauma porn and a critique of trauma porn simultaneously, and yet it won Gambino four Grammys. Is there a way to write hip hop that actively works toward solutions rather than simply stating our problems? And if there is, would it be economically viable? The issue at hand is no longer whether or not hip hop causes violence as Rose points out, but rather that hip hop videos like “This Is America” are saturating the lives of its audience with traumatic imagery rather than engaging with these types of traumas’s known causes in underprivileged communities. “This Is America” is sadly representative of the kind of mainstream hip hop that has grown out of the commercialization of the genre. Gambino has created a work that perfectly reflects Rose’s final warning: “cynicism takes root where hope has begun to wane.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 268.

⁵⁶ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 269.

CHAPTER THREE

Introduction

In April of 2018, rapper Kendrick Lamar won the Pulitzer Prize in music for his fourth studio album, *DAMN*. He was the first musician outside of either the jazz or classical genre to take home the prize.⁵⁷ Lamar is widely known for the complexity of his concept albums, where he will portray multiple different characters by dramatically altering his vocal timbre, weave short textual refrains into multiple tracks for narrative continuity, and use a variety of extra-musical sound effects in order to give his listeners a cinematic listening experience. In an interview by R+B, pop, and hip hop producer Rick Rubin for *GQ* in October of 2016, six months before Lamar released *DAMN*., Rubin asked Lamar to comment on his vocal manipulations in *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) and *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012), saying, “When I hear you, I don’t always know it’s you, because you seem to inhabit so many different characters with your voice that it’s not always clear that it’s you.” Lamar’s cited the influence of Prince in his response, both acknowledging the importance of these characters in his music and placing his work within a lineage of influential black artists, stating that,

That come from my personality, DNA, and it also just come from being a complete, huge fan of Prince. My father was a heavy, heavy still to this day Prince fan. [...] I could never tell when it was Prince, for me. You know, he had a falsetto, you know, he had this baritone, he just gave you so many different emotions. But I seen the way my father always connected with him and I’ve studied it. Alongside lyricists, I’ve studied R&B,

⁵⁷A full list of past Pulitzer Prize winners is available at www.pulitzer.org.

I've studied soul, even pop. Eventually all these things added up to how I connect and approach music.⁵⁸

Lamar cites his musical influences as being part of his DNA, foreshadowing the second track to come on *DAMN.*, entitled "DNA.," that begins with the lyric "I got royalty, got loyalty inside my DNA."

As a result of the layers of complexity mentioned above, music critics and journalists flock to Lamar's work, picking apart individual references and following the narrative threads through each track. *DAMN.* is Lamar's most complex work thus far, and along with his other studio albums, has also been subjected to reductive critical discourse in *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*.⁵⁹ However, unlike my analysis of Childish Gambino's track "This Is America" in the previous chapter, my analysis here of the track "HUMBLE." from *DAMN.* is not revealing a previously-glossed-over theme within the work. Critics and reviewers are not "missing the point" of Lamar's multiple indictments of racially-motivated police brutality as I argued they were in the previous chapter on Gambino's track. In fact, Lamar's *DAMN.* directly engages with critiques of *To Pimp a Butterfly* by, for example, sampling the voices of Fox News anchors Geraldo Rivera, Kimberly Guilfoyle, and Eric Bolling as they commented on Lamar's 2015 B.E.T. Awards performance of the track "Alright."⁶⁰ Lamar's work has a

⁵⁸ Kendrick Lamar, "Kendrick Lamar Meets Rick Rubin and They Have an Epic Conversation | GQ," by Rick Rubin, *GQ* (October 20, 2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IPD5PtqMiE&t=230s>.

⁵⁹ See Elias Leight, Mosi Reeves, and Christina Lee, "Kendrick Lamar's 'Damn.': A Track-by-Track Guide," *Rolling Stone* (April 14, 2017), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/kendrick-lamars-damn-a-track-by-track-guide-114407/>, Sheldon Pearce, "HUMBLE.: Kendrick Lamar," *Pitchfork* (March 31, 2017), <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/tracks/18947-kendrick-lamar-humble/>, Harriet Gibsone, "Watch Kendrick Lamar's Video for His New Single Humble," *The Guardian* (March 31, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2017/mar/31/watch-kendrick-lamar-video-for-his-new-single-humble>, and Jon Caramanica, "Review: Kendrick Lamar's Anxiety Leads to Joy and Jabs on New Album," *The New York Times* (April 16, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/16/arts/music/kendrick-lamar-damn-review.html>.

⁶⁰ ReverseGiraffe, "HUMBLE.: Kendrick Lamar," *Genius Lyrics* (April 2017), <https://genius.com/11665443>.

polarizing effect; critics either “don’t like it,” as Guilfoyle stated alongside the enthusiastic agreement of her Fox News co-anchors, or they have little to add aside from mentioning Lamar’s commentary on racially-motivated police brutality as in Leight, Reeves, and Lee’s “Track-by-Track Guide” for *The New York Times*.⁶¹

This chapter focuses on one track of Lamar’s full-length album because of the distinct message that it contains only when joined by its music video and the track that follows it on the album. Through the analysis that follows, I argue that, when viewed as a music video and within the context of *DAMN.*, “HUMBLE.” challenges its audience to hear the track as a representation of white-producer-controlled, profit-driven hip hop. Scholars like Tricia Rose and Bakari Kitwana have detailed the shift from gangsta rap’s beginnings on the west coast in the 1980s through its eventual takeover by media conglomerates which monetize upon what Rose calls “the trinity of commercial hip hop – the black gangsta, pimp, and ho.”⁶² In the introduction to her book entitled *The Hip Hop Wars*, Rose writes that,

Some early West Coast gangsta rappers – N.W.A., and W.C. and the Maad Circle, for example – featured stories that emphasized being trapped by gang life and spoke about why street crime had become a ‘line of work’ in the context of chronic black joblessness. Thwarted desires for safe communities and meaningful work were often embedded in street hustling tales. Eventually, though, the occasional featuring of complicated gangstas, hustlers, and hoes gave way to a tidal wave of far more simplistic, disproportionately celebratory, and destructive renderings of these characters. Hip hop has become buried by these figures and ‘the life’ associated with them.⁶³

⁶¹ ReverseGiraffe, “HUMBLE.” and Leight, Reeves, and Lee, “Kendrick Lamar’s ‘Damn.’”

⁶² Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 4.

⁶³ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 2-3.

Kitwana's short monograph entitled *The Rap on Gangsta Rap* describes the same slow destruction of nuance in hip hop as resulting from a capitalist economic system where, "the ultimate objective is profit and because of this lack of sensitivity, [black] culture becomes distorted."⁶⁴ The work of these two scholars forms the backbone of my analysis of Lamar's "HUMBLE." – the downfall of gangsta rap they outline is what I suggest is the subject of Lamar's critique within "HUMBLE."

Just as Childish Gambino thinks that hip hop has lost its way as a result of profit-driven music industry, so too does Kendrick Lamar.⁶⁵ "HUMBLE." is a musical representation of the kind of rap that results from the profit-driven music industry's control over the genre, and Lamar's grappling with this concept in his interview with Rick Rubin supports this hypothesis. In response to Rubin's question of whether Lamar considers the listener when he writes or if his music is purely self-expression, Lamar stated that he used to consider the listener, but that now, at the height of his career, he can no longer write for anyone other than himself. Their conversation heavily implies that when Lamar was still trying to get signed to a major record label, he was forced to write singles that would make record companies money, possibly even feeding into Rose's gangsta-pimp-ho trinity. However, after skyrocketing to success with thirteen Grammy Award wins and a Pulitzer Prize, he no longer needs to cater to his audience. In the interview, Lamar states that when he writes, he has "to block out a lot of different needs and wants, you know. Just for my own selfish reasons. But at the end of the day, it comes out where, whether you like it or not, you know it comes from a real place, and it's gonna feel unapologetic. I'm not compromising, and it's gonna feel me."⁶⁶ Lamar's dedication to "realness" is a featured

⁶⁴ Bakari Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994), 13.

⁶⁵ Lamar, "Kendrick Lamar Meets Rick Rubin."

⁶⁶ Lamar, "Kendrick Lamar Meets Rick Rubin."

theme throughout *DAMN.*, and this interview highlights that his devotion to truth is, in part, a reaction against the commercialization of hip hop.

Analysis

“HUMBLE.,” the first single released from *DAMN.*, was met with great critical acclaim, climbing to No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart less than a month after its initial release on March 30th 2017.⁶⁷ As the analysis below discusses in further detail, the music video for the track, released on the same day, reveals that the track is a message that Lamar is trying to preach to the world. At the video’s close, Lamar stands unmoving, staring out at the audience as if to ask, “were you listening?” Unlike the detailed, self-reflective and pain-filled lyrical content Lamar is known for, the track’s message initially appeared to be the simplistic and direct command in the chorus: “Bitch, sit down, be humble.” Unpacking its complexities in the context of *DAMN.* reveals that “HUMBLE.” is, in actuality, an ironic version of a stereotypical, commercialized hip hop single; the lyrics of the chorus are working on multiple levels. They are both a command for Lamar’s audience *and* a command for the type of hip hop artist Lamar represents during the track’s two verses.

In order to reveal the embedded irony in Lamar’s work, the analysis that follows unfolds in two different sections. The first section discusses the music video released for “HUMBLE.,” and how the purpose of the track changes when paired with the video’s visuals from a money-

⁶⁷ Gary Trust, “Kendrick Lamar’s ‘Humble.’ Hits No. 1 on Billboard Hot 100,” *Billboard* (April 24, 2017), <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/7768186/kendrick-lamar-humble-number-one-billboard-hot-100>.

making number one hit single to delivering a strong, critical message about the state of hip hop at large. The second section discusses the musical characteristics of “HUMBLE.” that set it apart from the other tracks on *DAMN*. This section explains its position as a representation of a typical commercialized hip hop single by comparison to the other tracks on the album, with further evidence from Rick Rubin’s interview of Lamar detailing Lamar’s artistic process in order to contrast it with the developmental process that gave way to “HUMBLE.”

Part One: “HUMBLE.” and its Music Video

With its chorus consisting of a single repeated line, at first glance, the meaning of “HUMBLE.” would simply be that Lamar is imploring his audience to “sit down” and “be humble.” The music video seems to endorse this initial impression, and unlike the other music videos under consideration in this thesis, much of the imagery in the music video simply illustrates the lyrics of the verses. The following analysis proposes that the meaning of “HUMBLE.” along with its music video unfolds in a series of layers, in the first of which Lamar simply tells the world to be humble. On further consideration, it becomes clear that with all of the religious imagery and moments that do not exclusively depict the lyrical content of a verse, Lamar is disseminating his message from an exalted position. Throughout the video, he is depicted alternately as a gang leader, the pope, a political figure, and the biggest man on Earth. A deeper analysis carried out in conjunction with the audio-only track and “LUST.,” however, reveals that the video is challenging its audience to ask themselves who and what they are listening to, both ironically appealing to the audience’s expectations while simultaneously questioning them.

The first image in the music video for “HUMBLE.” positions Kendrick as a religious figure; standing under a beam of light shining through a window high above head, he wears a robe reminiscent to that of the pope. Another scene repeated throughout the video shows Kendrick and his friends positioned in a mock image of the last supper, with Kendrick in the middle of the table as Jesus.⁶⁸ Unlike other tracks on the album which deal directly with Lamar’s religious beliefs, as in “GOD.,” for example, “HUMBLE.’s” lyrics and music have nothing to do with religion, with one exception. In the audio-only track, the seven-second-long introduction intones the words “Nobody pray for me/It’s been that day for me.” In the introduction to the music video, however, Kendrick raps, “Wicked or weakness? You gotta see this,” while dressed, in the video, as the pope.⁶⁹ These lines would hardly come from the mouth of a religious figure. The audio-only introduction presents Lamar as an unreliable narrator, whining to his audience and then catapulting the track into three minutes of boasting. The video’s introduction refers back to the lyric, “Is it wickedness? Or is it weakness? You decide,” from the very start of the album – imploring his audience to listen to the entire album from the start, rather than listen to only the hit single, “HUMBLE.” Right after Lamar’s “Wicked or weakness/You gotta see this,” the video shows Lamar laying on a table covered in money, surrounded by black women in their underwear presumably “counting the counterfeits” from the lyrics of the first verse, and visibly silenced with plastic hairnets and surgical face-masks.⁷⁰ Within these first thirty seconds of the video, Lamar projects two symbolic falsehoods: the first, that he is the pope, and the second, his counterfeit money. Each not only comments on the nature of hip hop, but makes a caricature of what has resulted from the genre’s commercialization as noted by Rose: the gangsta-pimp-ho

⁶⁸ See Example 13 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

⁶⁹ See Example 14 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

⁷⁰ See Example 15 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

trinity. Lamar brags about making loads of money in a rendition of the familiar rags-to-riches trope of the hip hop gangsta. However, when considering Lamar's self-reflective lyrics that frame that album, asking "wicked or weakness? You decide," the track loses its sincerity. The religious imagery is then referred back to at later points in the video when Kendrick appears as Jesus at a mock version of Da Vinci's *Last Supper*, surrounded by his friends who appear unhappy, ungrateful, and not singing or rapping along with Lamar.

There are key characters present in the music video for "HUMBLE." who are not present in the audio-only track – his friends (or in the case of Lamar's version of the *Last Supper*, his disciples) and his audience within the video's world. Their interactions with Lamar (or lack-there-of) continue to paint a parodic image of a hip hop video populated by men who seem completely unaware of the presence of music as Lamar lip-syncs to each verse and chorus. Lamar's friends at the *Last Supper*, the women counting money and the woman that walks across the frame illustrating the line, "I'm so fuckin' sick and tired of the photoshop," the men in black suits that surround Kendrick at the end of the video, and the men that surround him underneath a freeway overpass are all completely ignorant of the music and the fact that Lamar is rapping.⁷¹ It would seem that only a select few people in the video are able to hear Lamar's rap, a phenomenon that is unlike most hip hop music videos, in which the main rapper and all of his friends stand around nodding and rapping along to the track. In some of these moments where Lamar is seemingly being ignored, he is wearing all white, surrounded by men wearing all black – loosely referencing the image of Lamar dressed as the pope at the start of the video.⁷² In many hip hop music videos, rappers set the track either in their hometown or in a large mansion, showing where they came from and how far they have managed to climb up the economic

⁷¹ See Example 16 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

⁷² See Example 17 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

ladder. According to Tricia Rose, “rap video themes have repeatedly converged around the depiction of the local neighborhood and the local posse, crew, or support system,” – in “HUMBLE,” Lamar’s local neighborhood is underneath a freeway overpass, and his support system is his crew standing around piles of trash and refuse.⁷³

For a very short time, Lamar is shown once again wearing all white, but rather than being surrounded by men in all black, he is rapping from the inside of a dark house, behind a clear glass window. The audience is positioned outside and seems to be aiming at Lamar with the red laser sights of snipers. The familiar red, white and blue flashes of police lights reflect off of the brick wall framing the window.⁷⁴ Lamar is silenced by his window, angrily yelling the verse while holding his crotch to an audience that can’t possibly hear him. Rather than showing Lamar being physically arrested on the streets, yelling and cursing at the blatant racial discrimination on the part of the police, Lamar’s version is exaggerated. “HUMBLE.” demands that a group of police come to his house in the middle of the night for what must be a particularly evil set of crimes to not arrest Lamar, but kill him in cold blood.

At the end of the video, all of the men in black leave the frame, with Kendrick standing alone to stare out at the audience as if to ask the implied question, “were you listening?”⁷⁵ The video in conjunction with the track is a characterization of a typical hip hop music video – both critiquing the lie that most rappers spin about their own “realness,” and the “realness” of the genre as a whole. Lamar tells the audience from the start that they “gotta see this,” and then proceeds to set some of the most widespread hip hop stereotypes on fire by presenting them in

⁷³ Rose, “Black Noise,” 10.

⁷⁴ See Example 18 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

⁷⁵ See Example 19 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

extremely exaggerated forms. As Lamar states in the last line of the first verse, “there’s levels to it, you and I know.”

Part Two: “HUMBLE.’s” Form, Beat, and Lyrics

“HUMBLE.” is musically very different from any of the other thirteen tracks on *DAMN*. Its form is simple and short, with two verses of the same length with similar rhyme schemes and rhythmic patterns. The beat is repetitive and unchanging, bass-heavy, and marked by the familiar trap hi-hat pattern in eighth notes with the occasional added sixteenth or sixteenth-note triplet. The beat is in g-sharp minor, revolving around scale degrees six, five, and one, unwavering and three octaves below middle c. If a listener approached *DAMN*. expecting the complex rhyme schemes and bizarre backing tracks Lamar is known for, they would be shocked and bored by “HUMBLE.” And yet, it is the album’s number one single, far more successful than, for example, “King Kunta” of *To Pimp a Butterfly* – a bizarre, sound-effect filled, loosely funk-inspired track with an extended three-verse form and an outro equipped with a few lines of cryptic poetry that recur on many of the album’s other tracks. The track’s instant rise to fame compared to the rest of the album even before the Pulitzer was awarded is further evidence of its commercial appeal, despite Lamar’s insistence that commercial viability plays no part in his writing process. The following analytical section argues that musically, “HUMBLE.” is a stereotypical trap-rap single to the extent that it is ironically mimicking the cookie-cutter form, rhyme-scheme, syllabic rhythm, and backing beat that has become the war horse of the profit driven hip hop industry.

In an interview with NPR Music one day after “HUMBLE.” hit No. 1 on the Hot 100 Billboard chart, the track’s producer, Mike WiLL Made-It, explained its conception to his eager interviewer. His reflection frames and defines the following section, revealing that the track was conceived as a single from the beginning, through a process markedly different than that which Lamar described for the rest of the album in the Rick Rubin interview mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter. In the Rubin interview, Lamar describes being present for every step of the musical writing and production process, stating that, “I have to be there for everything. From the snare, to the hi hat, to, ‘we gotta gang up these two more DVs,’ ‘we gotta snatch this out and let this part of the section breathe,’ you know. I’m there.”⁷⁶ Lamar is clearly describing the process of producing the backing beat to a track, after having already explained that he typically begins the writing process with a verse, and has his team create a beat to match his pre-written verse to his exact specifications. According to Mike WiLL Made-It, however, the writing process for “HUMBLE.” specifically progressed differently. Made-It had already created the beat for the track for Gucci Mane, a trap hip hop artist, but had yet to let Mane hear it before Lamar had told him he was looking for a beat for his two pre-written verses to “HUMBLE.” Lamar was apparently also considering giving “HUMBLE.” to Made-It for his next studio album, *Ransom 2*, set to be released six days before the release of “HUMBLE.” Made-It was excited to have Lamar use the beat because it was so different from the beats on Lamar’s last three albums – Lamar is not a trap rapper, having famously rapped over free jazz, for example, on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. In his interview with NPR after the track’s release, Made-It stated that,

HUMBLE. was one of the first ones. [...] I made that beat [last year] when Gucci Mane was getting out of jail; I made it with him in mind. [...] I ended up not doing it with

⁷⁶ Lamar, “Kendrick Lamar Meets Rick Rubin.”

Gucci and I let Kendrick hear it. I was thinking, if Dot gets on this it'll be his first time being heard on some[thing] like this. [...] And he heard the beat and he liked it. But he was about to give me "HUMBLE." for *Ransom 2*. I love that song, so I was like, 'Man, hell yeah.' Then he told me that his team was saying he should keep it. And I told him, 'Bruh, you definitely should keep it, and you should use it as your single.'⁷⁷

Having been originally conceived, then, as a commercially viable single, the discussion that follows details the musical characteristics that serve as further evidence of its conception as different from that of Lamar's oeuvre.

In *DAMN.*, Lamar uses a wide variety of song structures, and only "HUMBLE." adheres to the intro-verse-chorus-verse-chorus form typical in hip hop. In general, Lamar's tracks have multiple verses framed by a repeated chorus; however, the number of verses, length of the verses, and complexity and length of the chorus vary. For example, another of the four singles from *DAMN.*, entitled "LOYALTY. FEAT. RIHANNA.," extends the form with a pre-chorus, intro, outro, and five different verses. Another track from *DAMN.*, entitled "DNA.," was not released as a single but has nonetheless achieved relative popularity; it has two especially long verses separated by a bridge, but no chorus or intro. "HUMBLE." is also the only track on the album in whose two verses are of equal length of sixteen lines, with similar rhyme schemes (albeit rhyming different vowel-sounds). In terms of lines that end with similar vowel sounds, the first verse contains rhymed lines grouped in four (i), four (ʌ), four (e) (with rhymed vowels occurring both half-way through the line and at the end of the line), two (a:), and two (əʊ). The

⁷⁷ Rodney Carmichael, "How Mike WiLL Made-It and Kendrick Lamar Created the Year's Most Urgent Music," *The Record: Music News From NPR* (April 25, 2017), <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2017/04/25/525450544/how-mike-will-made-it-and-kendrick-lamar-created-the-years-most-urgent-music-yet>.

second verse is grouped similarly with each cluster of lines divisible by two, with line groupings of two (æ), two (ai), four (a:), two (i:), two (ɪ) (both of these last two groupings of two lines with rhymed vowels occurring both half-way through the line and at the end of the line), and four (ɔ:).⁷⁸ Lamar's vowel rhyme scheme for both of these verses is shown on the Table in Appendix A, along with comparisons to a few of the other tracks on the album in order to illustrate the relative simplicity of "HUMBLE.'s" two verses.

The lyrics of "HUMBLE." reveal yet another layer of self-conscious hip hop stereotypes. The now-famous chorus consists of the striking commands to "sit down," "be humble," and "hold up," and, curiously, it's never made explicitly clear who stands at the receiving end. Lamar has stated that he's talking to both himself and his audience, but little in the track's lyrics provide evidence for this claim. In an interview with staff writer Brian Hiatt for *Rolling Stone*, Lamar stated that "HUMBLE." is his ego, and that "I did a song like that, where I just don't give a fuck, or I'm telling the listener, 'You can't fuck with me.' But ultimately, I'm looking in the mirror."⁷⁹ Although the nature or identity of his audience is never made clear, the lyrics of the verse blatantly show Lamar bragging about his exalted status among rappers, with lines like, "Get the fuck off my stage, I'm the Sandman," and "I don't fabricate it, ayy, most of y'all be fakin' ayy." However, bragging about being the best rapper has a long history in hip hop. The lines that state, for example, "This that Grey Poupon, that Evian, that TED Talk," would seem to simultaneously place Lamar among storied hip hop traditions and among luxuries commonly associated with white people. Lamar's reference to Grey Poupon has a storied history in hip hop and has been commented upon by multiple popculture writers, but combining this reference with the

⁷⁸ See Appendix A for a list of the vowel rhyme schemes in both verses of Lamar's "HUMBLE."

⁷⁹ Kendrick Lamar, "Kendrick Lamar: The Rolling Stone Interview," by Brian Hiatt, *Rolling Stone* (August 9, 2017), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/kendrick-lamar-the-rolling-stone-interview-199817/>.

expensive, French bottled water Evian and the TED conference which serves as a forum for popular intellectuals to give short lectures simplifying complicated social and scientific concepts, would seem to place Lamar less in an exalted position among rappers and more within a false, white-centered, negatively materialistic, and thus lower position.⁸⁰

Overall, the lyrics in the two verses of “HUMBLE.” are, content-wise, fairly stereotypical. They, like countless other hip hop tracks, heavily emphasize Lamar’s “realness,” with the second verse ending on the line, “I’m the realest nigga after all,” for example. The chorus complicates this apparent simplicity, however, because its repeated assertion to “sit down” and “be humble” could be in response to any number of typical hip hop boasts, including how much money Lamar makes (touched on in the first verse but largely left out of the second), how easy it is for Lamar to meet and seduce women, or how much time he has spent in the trap (“the trap,” along with the name of a sub-genre of hip hop, is slang for any place in which someone makes money).⁸¹ This now raises the question, why is Lamar telling presumably both himself and his audience to “be humble?”

The lyrics to the two verses are clearly bragging, and this could be the answer to that question. However, Lamar’s lyrics are so typical of hip hop writ large, and as such, so different from the rest of the album. When taking the track’s beat production into account in conjunction with the lyrics of the verses, it would seem that Lamar is telling not just himself and his audience to be humble, but the entire genre of hip hop as well, ironically reminding his fans that hip hop is

⁸⁰ For an explanation of Grey Poupon’s relationship with hip hop see, for example, Estelle Caswell and Sarah Frostenson, “How Grey Poupon Became Hip Hop’s Favorite Condiment,” *Vox* (October 12, 2016), <https://www.vox.com/videos/2016/10/12/13250360/grey-poupon-in-hip-hop>.

⁸¹ For further reading on the slang term, “the trap,” and how it developed into a sub-genre of hip hop see, for example, David Drake, “Real Trap Sh*t? The Commodification of Southern Rap’s Drug-Fueled Subgenre,” *ComplexMusic* (October 9, 2012), <https://web.archive.org/web/20121011162616/http://www.complex.com/music/2012/10/real-trap-sht-the-commodification-of-southern-raps-drug-fueled-subgenre>.

just as susceptible to generic, tried-and-true, and lackluster forms, lyrics, and backing tracks as any other genre. As Childish Gambino boldly stated in his interview with the New York-based radio station Power 105.1 FM, owned and operated by iHeartMedia, Inc., which is then owned by two other venture capital firms, Bain Capital and Thomas H. Lee Partners, who both have partial ownership over Warner Music Group (one of the three largest media conglomerates in the U.S.), “Hip hop’s not doing the thing it was originally set up to do.”⁸² Kendrick Lamar’s “HUMBLE.” is ironically critiquing hip hop and its purported “realness” by presenting the now-standard trap-rap single that *would* immediately skyrocket to No. 1 on the Billboard Top 100 Chart within a few weeks of its release.

Conclusion

In critiquing the distorted version of hip hop that has developed as a result of its commercial takeover in the 1990s, Kendrick Lamar has shown an awareness of his trade unlike most of the artists that benefit socially and financially from its popularity. The analysis above, enhanced and supported by the track’s music video, details Lamar’s critique in order to support both his and Gambino’s assertion that the music industry is, to this day, keeping black music in the shadows. The trends that Rose and Kitwana outlined for gangsta rap in the late 1990s have only grown worse, with space for black artists and black music on the Billboard charts and on radio stations shrinking despite their continued popularity growth on streaming websites. On a popular online forum for discussing trends in the arts, music blogger dyl wrote that, “when it comes to closing the gap between what gets good radio audience feedback and what actually streams, the industry

⁸² Glover, “Breakfast Club Classic.”

knows radio's sound is going to have to inch closer to the black idiom. But so far it seems they would much prefer that its olive-skinned, racially ambiguous white stars be doing that work. black artists? thank u, next!”⁸³ Although radio play and the Billboard charts could arguably be losing relevance in an increasingly digital age, it has become increasingly difficult to ignore the type of systemic silencing of black artists dyl describes. In a cultural climate that is now dissolving the work of the civil rights activists of the last century by choosing to ignore the voices of black artists, taking a closer look at Kendrick Lamar’s critique of the music industry through the steadily growing medium of the music video becomes an imperative.

⁸³ dyl, “Itunes, Billboard, and the Marginalization of Black Music and Black Audiences in America,” *ILX* (December 16, 2018), <https://www.ilxor.com/ILX/ThreadSelectedControllerServlet?showall=true&bookmarkedmessageid=6991607&boardid=41&threadid=94009>.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rainey: Everybody cryin' mercy, tell me what mercy means.

Man: Now, ain't that one evil woman?

Rainey: Everybody cryin' mercy, tell me what mercy means.

Man: Mm, mm, mm, mm!

Rainey: If it means feelin' good, Lord, have mercy on me.

Man: Aw, that's what I thought.

Rainey: When your man start to quit you, you know there's somethin' goin' on wrong.

Man: That's it? That's it! Got one of them things in the bag.

Rainey: When your man start to quit you, somethin' goin' on wrong.

Man: Ought to take that graveyard dust out your pocket!

Rainey: Lay down in your bed, can't sleep all night long.⁸⁴

Massive stadium shows had become a standard feature of Beyoncé's career at the time of her 2016 Super Bowl performance. She had already performed for the Super Bowl Half Time Show in 2013 to great critical acclaim⁸⁵ and had spent years touring stadiums around the globe performing songs from her previous albums. Her second Super Bowl performance, however, was far more subversive than the last. The day before the show she posted a music video on YouTube of an entirely new song, what the *New York Times* described as being "among the most politically direct work she's done in her career."⁸⁶ Entitled "Formation," the video samples footage from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, makes a strong statement about police brutality, and concludes with Beyoncé lying on top of a New Orleans police cruiser while it slowly sinks into the flooded city.⁸⁷ Clad in black leather, berets, studs and strings of bullets, the artist nodded

⁸⁴ Excerpt from "The Blues the World Forgot pt. 2," in Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, (New York: Random House, 1998).

⁸⁵ See, for instance, Caramanica, "Beyoncé Silences Doubters with Intensity at Halftime" and Makarechi, "Beyoncé Super Bowl Halftime Show: Singer Stuns with All-Out Display."

⁸⁶ Caramanica, Jon et al. (2016), "Beyoncé in 'Formation': Entertainer, Activist, Both?" See also Pinkard, "The Formation to Lemonade."

⁸⁷ See Example 20 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

to both Michael Jackson's 1993 Super Bowl Half Time performance and the Black Panther Party at her own Super Bowl performance,⁸⁸ and it inspired national controversy. The live performance of formation at Super Bowl L caused enough social uproar to warrant the attention of "Saturday Night Live," an American variety show known for crude political satire, with the skit entitled "The Day Beyoncé Turned Black."⁸⁹ The police refused to provide security for Beyoncé's performance because of its anticipated connections with the Black Panther Party and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. A flurry of protests ensued when she announced her following world tour, including boycotts called for by various police forces across the country.⁹⁰

Almost three months after the release and subsequent performance of "Formation," the track appeared as the final cut on Beyoncé's album *Lemonade*. Apart from "Formation," *Lemonade* struck most critics as lacking the strong political lyrics and imagery that is so evident in "Formation." Some pigeonholed the work, calling it a "an album about male-pattern infidelity and female self-examination,"⁹¹ "a sobbing self-portrait,"⁹² and "an entire album of emotional discord and marital meltdown."⁹³ These critiques of the album ignore much of *Lemonade*'s content and the relevance the album has to current social issues in America. "Formation's" placement at the end of *Lemonade* invites the audience to watch the album with "Formation's" strong political lyrics and imagery in mind. Interpreting "Formation" as nothing more than a

⁸⁸ See Example 21 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

⁸⁹ Saturday Night Live, "'The Day Beyoncé Turned Black' – SNL," (February 14, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ociMBfkDG1w>.

⁹⁰ Carma Hassan, Gregory Krieg and Melonyce McAfee, "Police Union Calls for Law Enforcement Labor to Boycott Beyoncé's World Tour," *CNN* (February 20, 2016) <https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/19/us/beyonce-police-boycott/index.html>.

⁹¹ Petridis, "Beyoncé is not a woman to be messed with' – *Lemonade* review" *Empire*, "Beyoncé: *Lemonade* review – furious glory of a woman scorned."

⁹² Mapes, "Beyoncé: *Lemonade*."

⁹³ Sheffield, "Beyoncé: *Lemonade*."

“postscript”⁹⁴ to *Lemonade* feeds into the perpetual silencing and commodification of black women’s anger and the popular mythology of a post-racial America.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, it sits at the end of the album as the ultimate culmination of lyrical, visual, and aural references to the collective intergenerational trauma of an entire race at the heart of the African diaspora.

In speaking to particularly shallow critiques of *Lemonade*, this analysis leans heavily on the interaction between the superficial infidelity narrative and the album’s place in the current nation-wide dialogue on modern civil rights in the U.S. Some reviews heavily focus on the album’s superficial infidelity narrative, while others place it within a nation-wide conversation on the push for modern civil rights. In the third track on the album, titled “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” Beyoncé sings “Motivate your ass/Call me Malcolm X,” and follows the line with a sample from one of the activist’s speeches: “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.”⁹⁶ Each track on *Lemonade* is placed within its own section, and each section has its own title; the track and Malcolm X quote used as an example here is placed within the section titled “Anger.” The track “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” when taken out of *Lemonade*’s context, is a breakup song. Within *Lemonade*’s context, the song is referring to anger on a much larger scale – every track on *Lemonade* serves this double purpose. What I call a double-purpose, here, is actually a form of “signifying,” a term used to explicate meaning in African American literature by Henry Louis Gates in the book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. This seminal text, along with the work of Cheryl Keyes

⁹⁴ Pareles, “Review: Beyoncé Makes ‘Lemonade’ Out of Marital Strife,” and Petridis, “Beyoncé is not a woman to be messed with’ – Lemonade review.”

⁹⁵ The phrase “the mythology of a post-racial America” is borrowed from a key note presentation given by Dr. Tammy Kernodle at the 2018 Case Western Graduate Music Conference.

⁹⁶ See Example 22 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

and Angela Davis, provides the scholarly and analytical backdrop against which I conduct my analysis of *Lemonade*. In drawing on the work of these three scholars, I interpret black art by pointing out potential thematic lineages that reach back through the African diaspora rather than the western canon.

The lyrics to “Forward,” the ninth track on *Lemonade*, are ambiguous when taken out of context: “Best foot forward just in case/When we made our way to now/It’s time to listen/It’s time to fight/Forward.” However, Beyoncé pairs this moment with visuals of seven different black women holding up pictures of their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons killed by police.⁹⁷ When removed from the context of the album, as was the case with “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” the subject matter of the lyrics to “Forward” seem to speak to Beyoncé’s issues with her lover. However, the combined lyrics and visuals at this moment in *Lemonade* are actually signifying upon current issues of police violence in the United States.

The tenth track of *Lemonade*, titled “Freedom (featuring Kendrick Lamar),” is a complex web of layered samples, including most prominently a record from the 1960’s psychedelic funk band Kaleidoscope titled “Let Me Try.” When listening closely, two of Alan Lomax’s recordings can be heard as well, and the combination of these three samples comprises almost all of the track. The only two other sounds that are not samples are Beyoncé’s vocals and a synthesized melody that appears at the end of each chorus.⁹⁸ This melody is strongly reminiscent of the chorus of Wilson Pickett’s “Land of 1,000 Dances” and, as shown in *The Black Power Mixtape*, the Black Panther party would members and followers to sing Pickett’s chorus, but with the repeated “Nah” syllable replaced by the lyrics “Guns, pick up the guns, pick up the guns, put the

⁹⁷ See Example 23 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

⁹⁸ See David Drake, “Beyoncé’s ‘Lemonade’: A Guide to Samples and Interpolations,” *Rolling Stone* (April 26, 2016), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/beyonces-lemonade-a-guide-to-the-samples-and-interpolations-20160426>, and the liner notes of *Lemonade*.

pigs on the run, pick up the guns.” Freedom, then, is signifying upon both the track “Land of 1,000 Dances” and the Black Panther Party’s work with children in underprivileged communities.⁹⁹

The “Queen Bey”

According to Davis, the blues queens “forged and memorialized images of tough, resilient, and independent women who were afraid neither of their own vulnerability nor of defending their right to be respected as autonomous human beings.”¹⁰⁰ Such images, while present throughout the entirety of Beyoncé’s career, are especially present in *Lemonade*. For example, the seething track “Don’t Hurt Yourself” creates a scene reminiscent of an amateur gang fight video set in a parking garage, and shows Beyoncé thrusting her torso at the camera and egging on her adulterous lover by singing: “You can watch my fat ass twist boy/As I bounce to the next dick boy.”¹⁰¹ In “Hold Up,” Beyoncé’s lyrics similarly remind her adulterous lover of her sexual prowess and how careless he is for violating her trust.¹⁰² Even while seemingly vulnerable in the track entitled “Sandcastles,” wearing natural-looking makeup and hair and singing solo over her own piano accompaniment, Beyoncé gives her lover a strong ultimatum in the third verse: “We built sandcastles/that washed away/show me your scars/and I won’t walk away.”¹⁰³

⁹⁹ See Example 24 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

¹⁰⁰ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 41.

¹⁰¹ See Example 25 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

¹⁰² She sings, “Never had the baddest woman in the game up in your sheets,” and “But y’all know we were made for each other so I find you and hold you down,” see Example 26 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

¹⁰³ See Example 27 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

Cheryl Keyes has identified four distinct categories of woman rappers: the “Queen Mother,” the “Fly Girl,” the “Sista with an Attitude,” and the “Lesbian.”¹⁰⁴ This categorization, while limited in its depth and scope as noted by Keyes herself, is a useful tool for recognizing some of the histories that Beyoncé signifies upon in *Lemonade*. And, as Reiland Rabaka writes in his book *Hip-Hop’s Amnesia: From Blues and the Black Women’s Club Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Movement*, “Each of these contemporary conceptions of women rappers coincides, admittedly often incongruently,¹⁰⁵ with an archetype offered up by classic blues women.” Throughout *Lemonade*, as I will show, Beyoncé creates an atmosphere steeped in a wide variety of black popular music by weaving in and out of three of those four categories – the Queen Mother, the Fly Girl, the Sista with an Attitude.

According to Keyes, the “Fly Girl” identity is characterized by women who wear fashionable clothing and makeup, accent their curves and show off their bodies, and position themselves as “an erotic subject rather than an objectified one.”¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Angela Davis writes that “Blues women had no qualms about announcing female desire. Their songs express women’s intention to ‘get their loving.’”¹⁰⁷ This particularly fashionable, sexual identity is apparent in “Hold Up,” in which Beyoncé wears a Roberto Cavalli¹⁰⁸ dress and studded chunky heels, and in “Sorry,” where she is shown wearing only a bra and earrings.¹⁰⁹ Within the spoken word poetry that directly follows “Sorry,” lines that exemplify this include “Sometimes, when

¹⁰⁴ Keyes, Cheryl L. “Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance.” *Journal of American Folklore* 113 (2000): 255-69 (449).

¹⁰⁵ Rabaka’s modifier, “admittedly often incongruently,” is well warranted; arguing for a direct historical lineage from the blues queens straight to woman rappers of the 1990s is nonsensical. However, I have found value in his idea when applying it to a hermeneutic analysis of *Lemonade*.

¹⁰⁶ Keyes, “Empowering Self.”

¹⁰⁷ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 24.

¹⁰⁸ Downs and Roberts, “What Beyoncé teaches us about the African Diaspora in ‘Lemonade.’”

¹⁰⁹ See Example 28 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

he'd have her nipple in his mouth, she'd whisper 'Oh my God,' 'Grief sedated by orgasm, orgasm heightened by grief,' and 'Her hips grind pestle and mortar, cinnamon and cloves whenever he pulls out.' These lines are heavily weighted with both sexual and political content; 'having her nipple in his mouth' can be read along with the album's re-framing of black motherhood, and the grief mentioned in relation to orgasm can be thought of as both personal and collective grief.¹¹⁰ Henry Louis Gates argues that black literature signifies elements from the art that came before it, and that those elements can be traced with relative simplicity back across the Atlantic. The blues women may have forged 'Fly Girl' identity long before modern-day femme rappers took it on, but the blues women could be said to have taken their elements from those of their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers.

Keyes' 'Sista with an Attitude' identity is the most violent of the three and is most clearly apparent in 'Don't Hurt Yourself.' Turning back to the work of Angela Davis reveals that this identity, too, originated from the blues women. Davis writes that 'the protagonists in Ma Rainey's blues often abandon their men and routinely and cavalierly threaten them, even to the point of violence.'¹¹¹ The title of this paper exemplifies this element of women's blues, and is taken from the song 'The Blues the World Forgot pt. 2' by Ma Rainey, in which the protagonist laments being thrown in jail with her cell-mate. During the call-and-response conversation between her and her cell-mate, she sings, 'When your man start to quit you, somethin' goin' on wrong,' and her partner responds with, 'Ought to take that graveyard dust out your pocket!' implying that she may be guilty of murder. Rather than confirm or deny the subtle accusation, Ma Rainey sings about being unable to sleep presumably because her man is leaving her.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ See Example 29 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

¹¹¹ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 21.

¹¹² See Example 30 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

In “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” Beyoncé is at her most volatile because of the actions of her lover, thrusting her chest forward at the camera as if to replicate a gang fight video. Here Beyoncé, through both lyrics of her own and poetry written by Warsan Shire (to whom we will return later), presents both physical and psychological threats to her lover. The “Sista with an Attitude” identity is also apparent in the spoken word poetry section directly preceding “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” when Beyoncé says “If it’s what you truly want, I can wear her skin over mine. Her hair over mine. Her hands as gloves. Her teeth as confetti. Her scalp, a cap.”¹¹³ This is in keeping with Davis’ point about the threat of violence, and increasingly so when she sings “tonight I’m fucking up all your shit boy” at the climax of “Don’t Hurt Yourself.”¹¹⁴

Daphne Duval Harrison, Keyes, and Rabaka have all discussed the application of the “Queen Mother” identity to some of the various personas of the classic blues women¹¹⁵. In particular, Keyes writes:

It is certainly possible that female rap artists may know of the historical significance of African queens; women in this category adorn their bodies with royal or Kente cloth strips, African headdresses, goddess braid styles, and ankh-stylized jewelry. Their rhymes embrace Black female empowerment and spirituality, making clear their self-identification as African, woman, warrior, priestess, and queen.¹¹⁶

Here, Keyes’s work resides within a dominant strain of discourse that reduces the cultural history of an entire continent to a few specific style elements by equating them with the image of all “African Queens.” However, while this gross generalization of Africa and its political rulers is

¹¹³ See Example 31 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

¹¹⁴ See Example 32 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

¹¹⁵ Harrison, Daphne Duval. *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920’s*. London: Rutgers University Press, 1988., Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, and Reiland Rabaka, *From Blues and the Black Women’s Club Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Movement*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

¹¹⁶ Keyes (2002), *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 257.

clearly problematic, Keyes's model nonetheless proves useful for uncovering Beyoncé's unique web of signification. In *Lemonade*, Beyoncé embraces religion and spirituality particularly at moments of perceived visual rebirth. For example, through her emergence from two massive golden doors backed by a small flood in "Hold Up," Beyoncé is reborn as the Yoruba goddess of love and sweetness, Oshun.¹¹⁷ Keyes's specific style elements are worn by Beyoncé throughout *Lemonade*. For example, she wears an Ankh necklace in "Don't Hurt Yourself," an African-style headdress in "Pray You Catch Me," a goddess braid hair style in "Formation," and a Nefertiti-inspired hairstyle in "Sorry."¹¹⁸

According to Davis, the blues women intentionally subverted cultural norms throughout their careers by freely expressing their personal problems in their music. "Sexuality is not privatized in the blues," she writes. "Rather it is represented as shared experience that is socially produced." She continues:

This intermingling of the private and public, the personal and political, is present in the many thousands of blues songs about abandonment, disloyalty, and cruelty, as well as those that give expression to sexual desire and love's hopefulness. There is also a significant number of women's blues songs on work, jail, prostitution, natural disasters, and other issues that, when taken together, constitute a patchwork social history of black Americans during the decades following emancipation. Most often such themes are intertwined with themes of love and sexuality.¹¹⁹

The "intermingling of the personal and political" and the intertwining of love and sexuality with themes of abandonment, disloyalty, and cruelty is evident throughout *Lemonade*. In the lyrics

¹¹⁷ Downs and Roberts, "What Beyoncé teaches us about the African Diaspora in 'Lemonade,'" see Example 33 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

¹¹⁸ See Example 34 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

¹¹⁹ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 91.

quoted at the start of this chapter, famed blues queen Ma Rainey sings to a fellow inmate in the local county jail she has just been thrown in for what could be any of the multiple reasons she sings of throughout “The Blues the World Forgot, Part Two.” In this particular excerpt, the pain of heartbreak with the pain of incarceration are juxtaposed when the man asks the audience to confirm with him that she is one evil woman, and later suggests that she is guilty of murdering the man that left her. Here, Rainey explicitly intermingles love and sexuality with themes of incarceration and abandonment, passively ignoring the man’s claims that she’s evil for her alleged wrongdoings. Beyoncé, among many other women hip hop and R&B artists such as Lauryn Hill, Janelle Monáe, and Lil’ Kim, intermingle these themes in a fashion that recalls the work of the blues women as illustrated by Ma Rainey’s “The Blues the World Forgot, Part Two.”

Because confident displays of Beyoncé’s own sexuality are prevalent throughout her oeuvre, the presence of sexual lyrics is not enough to set *Lemonade* apart. Beyoncé’s earlier songs such as “Ego” and “Rocket” contain explicitly sexual moments. In contrast to this, the importance of this album’s relatively few outwardly sexual moments, as compared to the rest of Beyoncé’s career, with records such as “Ego” and “Rocket,” lies in their placement within spoken word poetry written by Warsan Shire. The reasons for Beyoncé’s choice to collaborate with Shire reveal more about the political context of *Lemonade*. The work of Shire and Beyoncé in *Lemonade* share themes like open sexuality, intergenerational trauma, and both past and current African diasporas. As such, they are external to Beyoncé’s biography and any personal issues of marital breakdown, and instead speak to larger issues of gender and race. In an article about one of Shire’s poetry readings, culture critic Milisuthando Bongela noted how Shire “reads like Nina Simone sounds... Everyone in the audience started reciting with her as she read, as if we were fans at a music concert singing along to our favorite songs.” She reads aloud in a soft

but still raw, intimate tone with genuine emotion. Her album available online titled *warsan versus melancholy (the seven stages of lonely)* is performed in a tone somewhere between speaking and a whisper.¹²⁰ Overwhelmingly positive responses to Shire's work have been common over the course of her fairly short career, but because she is still relatively unknown in the U.S., her *Lemonade* collaboration came as a surprise to her fans, publishers, and critics.¹²¹

Conclusion

The intertwining of the personal and political seems obvious in *Lemonade*, a superficial reading of which sees Beyoncé publicly uncovering issues with an adulterous lover. Critics have claimed that the album is focused primarily – in some cases even solely – on marital strife.¹²² They support this claim by asserting that “Formation” is a postscript to the work and, in some cases, not involved with the rest of the album.¹²³ However, a closer look at “Formation’s” relationship to the rest of the album reveals that there is far more to *Lemonade* than meets the eye. In fact, “Formation” includes visual references to almost every other track on *Lemonade*. For example, the floor length braids Beyoncé wears in “Formation” can be found in “Sorry,” and her wide-brimmed black hat can be found in “Six Inch Heels.”¹²⁴ These visual allusions to the album’s previous tracks reveal the crucial role “Formation” plays within *Lemonade*’s discourse, showing it to be no less integral to the album than any other track.

¹²⁰ See Example 35 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

¹²¹ Hess, “Warsan Shire, the Woman Who Gave Poetry to Beyoncé’s ‘Lemonade.’”

¹²² See Petridis, Empire, Mapes, and Sheffield.

¹²³ See Pareles, “Review: Beyoncé Makes Lemonade out of Marital Strife.”

¹²⁴ See Example 36 at www.sarahlindmark.com. For more information, see Appendix E.

The roles played by each *Lemonade* track in “Formation” suggest that the prevalent lyrical and visual subject matter of each song referenced in “Formation” is meant to be thought of within the context of “Formation’s” subject. Each section of *Lemonade*, their titles being “Intuition, Denial, Anger, Apathy, Emptiness, Loss, Accountability, Reformation, Forgiveness, Resurrection, Hope, Redemption,” and finally “Lemonade” (as shown on the table in Appendix B), frame the tracks and spoken word poetry within them in a larger socio-political context. If the larger thematic arc of the album before “Formation” is that of internal struggle, external strife, hope for a better future, and the ability to recover and create that better future, then the message of *Lemonade* as a whole, including the track that forms its expressive culmination, is precisely that saga that is outlined within the context of “Formation’s” subject matter – a cry for change.

CONCLUSION

As discussed in the introductory chapter, there are many theoretical angles through which one might look at the three videos that are not mentioned in this thesis. Theories of black artistic discourse such as Afrofuturism and Afro-pessimism in particular were cited as possible examples earlier, but there are also much larger theories regarding black culture as a whole that are left out of this project. A particularly fruitful path for further research would be representations of black women in Gambino's "This Is America" and Lamar's "HUMBLE.," both of which may prove considerably less progressive when analyzed through a black feminist lens. These works' markedly historicist aesthetics could also be interpreted with the concept of Sankofa, through which one might interpret historicism of these videos as reaching back into the past in order to imagine possible futures.¹²⁵ New, mainstream hip hop music videos continue to provide a wealth of cultural and social commentary, and will hopefully remain a prominent feature in academic musicological discourse.

Throughout the videos under consideration in this thesis there exists underlying tension between that which is artistically progressive and commercially viable. The line between these two seemingly unreconcilable artistic categories has always been more opaque than critics and fans alike will readily admit. For example, the music video for Beyoncé and her husband's aptly named duo The Carters's first single entitled "APESHIT" from their album *Everything Is Love* inspired a conference talk by musicologist Seth Brodsky, in which he mused about the two simultaneous positions it put him in on the "forking interpretive path." On the one hand, the video has been lauded by critics and fans for its display of black bodies in the Louvre, an

¹²⁵ Christel N. Tempel, "The Emergence of *Sankofa* Practice in the United States," *Journal of Black Studies* 41, no. 1 (2010): 127-50.

institution historically lacking representations of people of color. On the other hand, critics and fans spoke out against it with, for example, the podcast Run the Means saying “#EverythingIsLove but we hella poor.”¹²⁶ This video, along with the three videos discussed previously in this thesis, flaunt their re-shaping of the norms of commercial art whilst inhabiting its creatively limited world.

However, hip hop music videos writ large do not always re-shape aesthetic standards. As I have argued, *Lemonade*, “This Is America,” and “HUMBLE.” represent an artistic awakening among their three respective mainstream hip hop artists. While not devoid of serious issues, they nonetheless have the potential to reveal slow changes in their audience’s perception of race in the United States. Visual accompaniments to hip hop have the potential to intensify artists’ representations of race and class and can powerfully reinforce both positive and negative stereotypes in a way that is incomparable to the music alone. Cheryl Keyes has noted that the, “rap music video becomes a lens by which rap artists can add layers of meaning through the employment of illustration, amplification, and disjuncture.” She continues by stating that, “in doing so, video becomes a means by which rap artists illustrate their deepest sentiments and desires.”¹²⁷ The continued exploration of these limitless and diverse layers of meaning is critical to an understanding of art, and therefore, an understanding of ourselves.

¹²⁶ Quoted from Seth Brodsky’s presentation at the Musicology and the Present Conference at Smith College from September 22-23rd, 2018, given during a panel entitled “The Idea of Canon in the 21st Century.”

¹²⁷ Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 225.

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APPENDIX A

Vowel Rhyme Scheme in Kendrick Lamar's "HUMBLE."

Line Number	Verse 1	Phonetic Vowel Sound	Verse 2	Phonetic Vowel Sound
1	Ayy, I remember syrup snadwiches and crime allowances	ɪ	Who dat nigga thinkin' that he frontin' on Man-Man?	æ
2	Finesse a nigga with some counterfeits, but now I'm countin' this	ɪ	Get the fuck off my stage, I'm the Sandman	æ
3	Parnesan where my accountant lives, in fact I'm downin' this	ɪ	Get the fuck off my dick, that ain't right	aɪ
4	D'USSÉ with my boo bae tastes like Kool-Aid for the analysts	ɪ	I make a play, fucking up your whole life	aɪ
5	Girl, I can buy yo' as the world with my paystub	ʌ	I'm so fucking sick and tired of the photoshop	ə
6	Ooh, that pussy good, won't you sit it on my taste bloods?	ʌ	So me somethin' natural like afro on Richard Pryor	ə
7	I get way too petty once you let me do the extras	ʌ	Show me somethin' natural like ass with some stretch marks	ə
8	Pull up on your block, then break it down: we playin' Tetris	ʌ	Still will take you down right now on your mama's couch in Polo socks	ə
9	A.M. to the P.M., P.M. to the A.M., funk	e	Ayy, this shit way too crazy, ayy, you do not amaze me, ayy	i
10	Piss out your per diem, you just gotta hate 'em, funk	e	I blew cool from AC, ayy, Obama just paged me, ayy	i
11	If I quit you BM, I still ride Mercedes, funk	e	I don't fabricate it, ayy, most of y'all be fakin', ayy	ɪ
12	If I quit this season, I still be the greatest, funk	e	I stay modest 'bout it, ayy, she elaborate it, ayy	ɪ
13	My left stroke just went viral	ə	This that Grey Poupon, that Evian, that TED Talk, ayy	ə
14	Right stroke put lil' baby in a spiral	ə	Watch my soul speak, you let the meds talk, ayy	ə
15	Soprano c, we like to keep it on a high note	əʊ	If I kill a nigga, it won't be the alcohol, ayy	ə
16	It's levels to it, you and I know	əʊ	I'm the realest nigga after all	ə

APPENDIX B

The Structure of *Lemonade*

Title Card	Track #	Sections
Intuition	1	“Pray You Catch Me” 1 st verse and chorus
		<i>Poetry</i>
		“Pray you Catch Me” 2 nd verse and chorus
Denial		<i>Poetry</i>
Anger	2	“Hold Up”
		<i>Poetry</i>
	3	“Don’t Hurt Yourself” 1 st verse and pre-chorus
		<i>Interlude with Malcolm X speech sample</i>
Apathy		“Don’t Hurt Yourself” latter half of track
		<i>Poetry</i>
	4	“Sorry”
Emptiness		<i>Poetry</i>
Loss		<i>Poetry</i>
	5	“6 Inch” intro
		<i>Poetry</i>
Accountability		“6 Inch” remainder
		<i>Poetry</i>
		<i>Clip</i>
		<i>Poetry</i>
	6	“Daddy Lessons” 1 st verse, pre-chorus, chorus, 2 nd verse
		<i>Clip</i>
Reformation		“Daddy Lessons” chorus, pre-chorus, chorus
		<i>Poetry</i>
	7	“Love Drought”
Forgiveness		<i>Poetry</i>
	8	“Sandcastles”
		<i>Clip</i>
Resurrection		<i>Poetry</i>
	9	“Forward” <i>with photos of mothers</i>
		<i>Interlude</i>
	10	“Freedom” intro
Hope		<i>Poetry</i>
		“Freedom”
		<i>Poetry</i>
Redemption		<i>Clip</i>
		<i>Poetry</i>
	11	“All Night”
Lemonade	12	“Formation”

APPENDIX C

Lyrics to Songs in Chapters One Through Four

Abel Meeropol's "Strange Fruit," recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves, blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" (1979)

It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under

Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away but I couldn't get far
'Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car

Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under

Standing on the front stoop, hanging out the window
Watching all the cars go by, roaring as the breezes blow
Crazy lady, living in a bag

Eating out of garbage pails, used to be a fag hag
Said she'll dance the tango, skip the light fandango
A Zircon princess seemed to lost her senses
Down at the peep show watching all the creeps
So she can tell her stories to the girls back home
She went to the city and got so so saditty
She had to get a pimp, she couldn't make it on her own

Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under

My brother's doing bad, stole my mother's TV
Says she watches too much, it's just not healthy
All My Children in the daytime, Dallas at night
Can't even see the game or the Sugar Ray fight
The bill collectors, they ring my phone
And scare my wife when I'm not home
Got a bum education, double-digit inflation
Can't take the train to the job, there's a strike at the station
Neon King Kong standing on my back
Can't stop to turn around, broke my sacroiliac
A mid-range migraine, cancered membrane
Sometimes I think I'm going insane
I swear I might hijack a plane!

Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under

My son said, Daddy, I don't wanna go to school
'Cause the teacher's a jerk, he must think I'm a fool
And all the kids smoke reefer, I think it'd be cheaper
If I just got a job, learned to be a street sweeper
Or dance to the beat, shuffle my feet
Wear a shirt and tie and run with the creeps
'Cause it's all about money; ain't a damn thing funny
You got to have a con in this land of milk and honey
They pushed that girl in front of the train
Took her to the doctor, sewed her arm on again
Stabbed that man right in his heart

Gave him a transplant for a brand new start
I can't walk through the park, 'cause it's crazy after dark
Keep my hand on my gun, 'cause they got me on the run
I feel like a outlaw, broke my last glass jaw
Hear them say "You want some more?", living on a see-saw

Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under

A child is born with no state of mind
Blind to the ways of mankind
God is smiling on you, but he's frowning too
Because only God knows what you'll go through
You'll grow in the ghetto living second-rate
And your eyes will sing a song called deep hate
The places you play and where you stay
Looks like one great big alleyway
You'll admire all the number-book takers
Thugs, pimps and pushers and the big money-makers
Driving big cars, spending twenties and tens
And you'll wanna grow up to be just like them, huh
Smugglers, scramblers, burglars, gamblers
Pickpocket peddlers, even panhandlers
You say "I'm cool, huh, I'm no fool."
But then you wind up dropping outta high school
Now you're unemployed, all null and void
Walking 'round like you're Pretty Boy Floyd
Turned stick-up kid, but look what you done did
Got sent up for a eight-year bid
Now your manhood is took and you're a Maytag
Spend the next two years as a undercover fag
Being used and abused to serve like hell
'Til one day you was found hung dead in the cell
It was plain to see that your life was lost
You was cold and your body swung back and forth
But now your eyes sing the sad, sad song
Of how you lived so fast and died so young, so...

Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes

It makes me wonder how I keep from going under

Yo Mell, you see that girl there?
Yo, that sounded like Cowboy man
Cool
Yo, what's up Money?
Yo, where's Cooly an Raheim?
They is downstairs cooling out
So what's up for tonight y'all?
We could go down to Phoenix
We could go check out "Junebug" man
Hey yo, you know that girl Betty?
Yeah man
Come on, come all man
Not like it
That's what I heard man
What's this happening, what's this?
What's goin' on?
Freeze
Don't nobody move or nothin'
Y'all know what this is (What's happend?)
Get 'em up, get 'em up (What?)
Oh man, we're (Right in there) Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five
What is that, a gang?
No
Shut up
I don't wanna hear your mouth
Shut up
Officer, officer, what is the problem?
You the problem
Hey, you ain't gotta push me man
Get in the car, get in the car
Get in the god...
I said, "Get in the car"
Why is he?

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Michael Jackson's "Bad" (1987)

Your butt is mine
Gonna tell you right
Just show your face

In broad daylight
I'm telling you
On how I feel
Gonna hurt your mind
Don't shoot to kill
Come on

Come on
Lay it on me
All right

I'm giving you
On count of three
To show your stuff
Or let it be
I'm telling you
Just watch your mouth
I know your game
What you're about

Well they say the sky's the limit
And to me that's really true
But my friend you have seen nothin'
Just wait 'til I get through

Because I'm bad, I'm bad come on
You know I'm bad, I'm bad come on, you know
You know I'm bad, I'm bad come on, you know
And the whole world has to
Answer right now
Just to tell you once again
Who's bad

The word is out
You're doin' wrong
Gonna lock you up
Before too long
Your lyin' eyes
Gonna tell you right
So listen up
Don't make a fight
Your talk is cheap
You're not a man
You're throwin' stones
To hide your hands

But they say the sky's the limit
And to me that's really true

And my friends you have seen nothin'
Just wait 'til I get through

Because I'm bad, I'm bad come on
You know I'm bad, I'm bad come on, you know
You know I'm bad, I'm bad come on, you know
And the whole world has to
Answer right now
Just to tell you once again
Who's bad

We can change the world tomorrow
This could be a better place
If you don't like what I'm sayin'
Then won't you slap my face

Because I'm bad, I'm bad come on
You know I'm bad, I'm bad come on, you know
You know I'm bad, I'm bad come on, you know
And the whole world has to
Answer right now
Just to tell you once again
Who's bad

Because I'm bad, I'm bad come on
You know I'm bad, I'm bad come on, you know
You know I'm bad, I'm bad come on, you know
And the whole world has to
Answer right now
Just to tell you once again
Who's bad

Who's bad?

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Childish Gambino's "This Is America" (2018)

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
Yeah, yeah, yeah, go, go away
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
Yeah, yeah, yeah, go, go away
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
Yeah, yeah, yeah, go, go away
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
Yeah, yeah, yeah, go, go away

We just wanna party
Party just for you
We just want the money
Money just for you
I know you wanna party
Party just for me
Girl, you got me dancin' (yeah, girl, you got me dancin')
Dance and shake the frame
We just wanna party (yeah)
Party just for you (yeah)
We just want the money (yeah)
Money just for you (you)
I know you wanna party (yeah)
Party just for me (yeah)
Girl, you got me dancin' (yeah, girl, you got me dancin')
Dance and shake the frame (you)

This is America
Don't catch you slippin' up
Don't catch you slippin' up
Look what I'm whippin' up
This is America (woo)
Don't catch you slippin' up
Don't catch you slippin' up
Look what I'm whippin' up

This is America (skrrt, skrrt, woo)
Don't catch you slippin' up (ayy)
Look at how I'm livin' now
Police be trippin' now (woo)
Yeah, this is America (woo, ayy)
Guns in my area (word, my area)
I got the strap (ayy, ayy)
I gotta carry 'em
Yeah, yeah, I'ma go into this (ugh)
Yeah, yeah, this is guerilla (woo)
Yeah, yeah, I'ma go get the bag
Yeah, yeah, or I'ma get the pad
Yeah, yeah, I'm so cold like yeah (yeah)
I'm so dope like yeah (woo)
We gon' blow like yeah (straight up, uh)

Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh, tell somebody
You go tell somebody
Grandma told me
Get your money, black man (get your money)
Get your money, black man (get your money)
Get your money, black man (get your, black man)

Get your money, black man (get your, black man)
Black man

This is America (woo, ayy)
Don't catch you slippin' up (woo, woo, don't catch you slippin', now)
Don't catch you slippin' up (ayy, woah)
Look what I'm whippin' up (Slime!)
This is America (yeah, yeah)
Don't catch you slippin' up (woah, ayy)
Don't catch you slippin' up (ayy, woo)
Look what I'm whippin' up (ayy)

Look how I'm geekin' out (hey)
I'm so fitted (I'm so fitted, woo)
I'm on Gucci (I'm on Gucci)
I'm so pretty (yeah, yeah)
I'm gon' get it (ayy, I'm gon' get it)
Watch me move (blaow)
This a celly (ha)
That's a tool (yeah)
On my Kodak (woo, Black)
Ooh, know that (yeah, know that, hold on)
Get it (get it, get it)
Ooh, work it (21)
Hunnid bands, hunnid bands, hunnid bands (hunnid bands)
Contraband, contraband, contraband (contraband)
I got the plug on Oaxaca (woah)
They gonna find you like blocka (blaow)

Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh, tell somebody
America, I just checked my following list and
You go tell somebody
You mothafuckas owe me
Grandma told me
Get your money, black man (black man)
Get your money, black man (black man)
Get your money, black man (black man)
Get your money, black man (black man)
Black man (one, two, three, get down)

Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh, tell somebody
You go tell somebody
Grandma told me, "Get your money, " black man
Get your money, black man (black man)
Get your money, black man (black man)
Get your money, black man (black man)
Black man

You just a black man in this world
You just a barcode, ayy
You just a black man in this world
Drivin' expensive foreigners, ayy
You just a big dawg, yeah
I kenneled him in the backyard
No proper life to a dog
For a big dog

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Kendrick Lamar's "HUMBLE." (2016)

Nobody pray for me
It's been that day for me
Waaaaay (Yeah, yeah!)

Ayy, I remember syrup sandwiches and crime allowances
Finesse a nigga with some counterfeits, but now I'm countin' this
Parmesan where my accountant lives, in fact I'm downin' this
D'USSÉ with my boo bae tastes like Kool-Aid for the analysts
Girl, I can buy yo' ass the world with my paystub
Ooh, that pussy good, won't you sit it on my taste bloods?
I get way too petty once you let me do the extras
Pull up on your block, then break it down: we playin' Tetris
A.M. to the P.M., P.M. to the A.M., funk
Piss out your per diem, you just gotta hate 'em, funk
If I quit your BM, I still ride Mercedes, funk
If I quit this season, I still be the greatest, funk
My left stroke just went viral
Right stroke put lil' baby in a spiral
Soprano C, we like to keep it on a high note
It's levels to it, you and I know

Bitch, be humble (Hol' up, bitch)
Sit down (Hol' up, lil', hol' up, lil' bitch)
Be humble (Hol' up, bitch)
Sit down (Hol' up, sit down, lil', sit down, lil' bitch)
Be humble (Hol' up, hol' up)
Bitch, sit down (Hol' up, hol' up, lil' bitch)
Be humble (Lil' bitch, hol' up, bitch)
Sit down (Hol' up, hol' up, hol' up, hol' up)
Be humble (Hol' up, hol' up)

Sit down (Hol' up, hol' up, lil', hol' up, lil' bitch)
Be humble (Hol' up, bitch)
Sit down (Hol' up, sit down, lil', sit down, lil' bitch)
Be humble (Hol' up, hol' up)
Bitch, sit down (Hol' up, hol' up, lil' bitch)
Be humble (Lil' bitch, hol' up, bitch)
Sit down (Hol' up, hol' up, hol' up, hol' up)

Who dat nigga thinkin' that he frontin' on Man-Man? (Man-Man)
Get the fuck off my stage, I'm the Sandman (Sandman)
Get the fuck off my dick, that ain't right
I make a play fucking up your whole life
I'm so fuckin' sick and tired of the Photoshop
Show me somethin' natural like afro on Richard Pryor
Show me somethin' natural like ass with some stretch marks
Still will take you down right on your mama's couch in Polo socks
Ayy, this shit way too crazy, ayy, you do not amaze me, ayy
I blew cool from AC, ayy, Obama just paged me, ayy
I don't fabricate it, ayy, most of y'all be fakin', ayy
I stay modest 'bout it, ayy, she elaborate it, ayy
This that Grey Poupon, that Evian, that TED Talk, ayy
Watch my soul speak, you let the meds talk, ayy
If I kill a nigga, it won't be the alcohol, ayy
I'm the realest nigga after all

Bitch, be humble (Hol' up, bitch)
Sit down (Hol' up, lil', hol' up, lil' bitch)
Be humble (Hol' up, bitch)
Sit down (Hol' up, sit down, lil', sit down, lil' bitch)
Be humble (Hol' up, hol' up)
Bitch, sit down (Hol' up, hol' up, lil' bitch)
Be humble (Lil' bitch, hol' up, bitch)
Sit down (Hol' up, hol' up, hol' up, hol' up)
Be humble (Hol' up, hol' up)
Sit down (Hol' up, hol' up, lil', hol' up, lil' bitch)
Be humble (Hol' up, bitch)
Sit down (Hol' up, sit down, lil', sit down, lil' bitch)
Be humble (Hol' up, hol' up)
Bitch, sit down (Hol' up, hol' up, lil' bitch)
Be humble (Lil' bitch, hol' up, bitch)
Sit down (Hol' up, hol' up, hol' up, hol' up)

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APPENDIX D

Transcription of Beyoncé's *Lemonade*¹²⁸

You can taste the dishonesty, it's all over your breath
As you pass it off so cavalier, but even that's a test
Constantly aware of it all, my lonely ear
pressed against the walls of your world

Pray to catch you whispering
I pray you catch me listening
I'm praying to catch you whispering
I pray you catch me

I'm praying to catch you whispering
I pray you catch me listening
I pray you catch me

[Intuition]

*I tried to make a home out of you
But doors lead to trap doors
A stairway leads to nothing
Unknown women wander the hallways at night
Where do you go when you go quiet
You remind me of my father, a magician
Able to exist in two places at once
In the tradition of men and my blood
You come home at 3am and lie to me
What are you hiding?
The past and the future merge to meet us here
What luck
What a fucking curse*

Nothing else ever seems to hurt like the smile on your face
When it's only in my memory, it don't hit me quite the same
Maybe it's a cause for concern, but I'm not at ease
Keeping my head to the curb

¹²⁸ Throughout the following appendix, the use of square brackets indicate the presence of a visual title in the album, the use of italics indicate spoken word poetry or other spoken text, and the lyrics to songs (copied from the album's published liner notes) are written in regular typeface.

Pray to catch you whispering
I pray you catch me listening
I pray to catch you whispering
I pray you catch me
I pray you catch me
I pray you catch me
I'm praying you catch me

[Denial]

*I tried to change
Closed my mouth more
Tried to be softer, prettier, less awake
Fasted for 60 days
Wore white
Abstained from mirrors
Abstained from sex
Slowly did not speak another word
In that time my hair I grew past my ankles
I slept on a mat on a floor, I swallowed a sword
I levitated to the basement
Confessed my sins and was baptized in a river
Got on my knees and said amen I mean
I whipped my own back and asked for dominion at your feet
I threw myself into a volcano
I drank the blood and drank the wine
I sat alone and begged and bent at the waist for God
I crossed myself and thought I saw the Devil
I grew thickened skin on my feet
I bathed in bleach and plugged my menses with pages from the Holy Book
But still inside me coiled deep was the need to know
Are you cheating on me*

Hold up, they don't love you like I love you
Slow down, they don't love you like I love you
Back up, they don't love you like I love you
Step down, they don't love you like I love you
Can't you see there's no other man above you
What a wicked way to treat the girl that loves you
Hold up, they don't love you like I love you
Slow down, they don't love you like I love you

Something don't feel right
Because it ain't right
especially coming up after midnight
I smell your secrets
And I'm not too perfect
To ever feel this worthless
How did it come down to this
Scrolling thru your call list
I don't want to love my pride but I'ma fuck my up a bitch
Know that I kept it sexy
You know I kept it fun
Is there something that I'm missing? Maybe my head for one
What's worse looking jealous and crazy, jealous and crazy
Or like being walked all over lately, walked all over lately
I'd rather be crazy

Hold up, they don't love you like I love you
Slow down, they don't love you like I love you
Back up, they don't love you like I love you
Step down, they don't love you like I love you
Can't you see there's no other man above you
What a wicked way to treat the girl that loves you
Hold up, they don't love you like I love you
Slow down, they don't love you like I love you

Let's imagine for a moment
That you never made a name
For yourself master wealth they had you labeled as a king
Never made it out the case
Still out there moving in them streets
Never had the baddest women in the game up in your sheets
Would they be down to ride, no
They used to hide from lie to ya
But y'all know we were made for each other
So I find you and hold you down

Me sing se

Hold up, they don't love you like I love you
Slow down, they don't love you like I love you
Back up, they don't love you like I love you
Step down, they don't love you like I love you

Can't you see there's no other man above you
What a wicked way to treat the girl that loves you
Hold up, they don't love you like I love you
Slow down, they don't love you like I love you

Babe it's such a shame
You let this good love go to waste
I always give that top tier 5 star
Back seat lovin in the car
Like make that wood holly like a boulevard

What's worse looking jealous and crazy, jealous and crazy
Or like being walked all over lately, walked all over lately
I'd rather be crazy

Hold up, they don't love you like I love you
Slow down, they don't love you like I love you
Back up, they don't love you like I love you
Step down, they don't love you like I love you
Can't you see there's no other man above you
What a wicked way to treat the girl that loves you
Hold up, they don't love you like I love you
Slow down, they don't love you like I love you

I hop up off my bed
And get my swag on
I look in the mirror say wassup
wassup wassup wassup

[Anger]

*If it's what you truly want
I can wear her skin over mine
Her hair over mine
Her hands as gloves
Her teeth as confetti
Her scalp a cap
Her sternum my bedazzled cane
We can pose for a photograph
All three of us
Immortalized
You and your perfect girl
I don't know when love became illusive*

*What I know is no-one I know has it
My father's arms around my mother's neck
Fruit too ripe to eat
I think of lovers as trees
Growing to and from one another
Searching for the same light
Why can't you see me
Everyone else can*

Don't hurt yourself
Don't hurt yourself

Who the f--- do you think are ya
You ain't married to no average b---- boy
You can watch my fat ass twist boy
As I bounce to the next d--- boy

And keep your money
I got my own
Keep a bigger smile on my face
Being alone
Bad mutha f----er
God complex
Motivate your ass
Call me malcolm x

[Malcolm X Speech]

*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*

I am the dragon breathing fire
Beautiful mane I'm the lion
Beautiful man I know you're lying
I am not broke and I'm not crying
I'm not crying, you ain't trying hard enough
You ain't loving hard enough
You don't love me deep enough
We not reaching peaks enough

Blindly in love
I fucks with you, till I realize
I'm just too much for you

I'm just too much for you

You just gotta let it be
Let it be
Let it be
Let it be baby

Hey baby
Who the fuck do you think I is
I smell that fragrance on your louis knit boy
Just give my fat ass a big kiss boy
Tonight I'm fucking up all your shit boy

When you hurt me
You hurt yourself
Try not to hurt yourself
When you play me, you play yourself
Don't play yourself
When you lie to me, you lie to yourself
You only lying to yourself
When you love me, you love yourself
Love god herself

[god is god and i am not]

We just gotta let it be
Let it be
Let it be
Let it be
Let it be baby

This is your final warning
You know i give you life
If you try this shit again
You gonna lose your wife

[Apathy]

*So what are you gonna say at my funeral now that you've killed me?
Here lies the body of the love of my life who's heart I broke
Without a gun to my head
Here lies the mother of my children both living and dead
Rest in peace my true love*

*Who I took for granted
Most bomb pussy
Who because of me, sleep evaded
Her shroud is loneliness
Her god is listening
Her heaven will be a love without betrayal
Ashes to ashes, dust to side chicks*

I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry
N---- nah
I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry

He trying to roll me up (I ain't sorry)
I ain't picking up (I ain't sorry)
Headed to the club (I ain't sorry)
I ain't thinking 'bout you (I ain't sorry)

Me and my ladies sip my d'ussé cups
I don't give a f--- chucking my deuces up
Suck on my balls pause
I had enough
I ain't thinking 'bout you
I ain't thinking 'bout

Middle fingers up
Put them hands high
Wave it in his face
Tell 'em boy bye
Tell 'em boy bye
Boy bye
Middle fingers up
I ain't thinking 'bout you

I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry
N---- nah
I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry

I ain't sorry
No no hell nah

Now you want to say you're sorry
Now you want to call me crying
Now you gotta see me wildin'
Now i'm the one that's lying
And i don't feel bad about it
It's exactly what you get
Stop indirecting my grinding

I ain't thinking bout you
I ain't thinking bout you
I ain't thinking bout you
I ain't thinking bout you
I ain't thinking bout you

Middle fingers up
Put them hands high
Wave it in his face
Tell 'em boy bye
Tell 'em boy bye
Boy bye
Middle fingers up
I ain't thinking bout you

I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry
N---- nah
I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry
No no hell nah

Looking at my watch he should've been home
Today I regret the night I put that ring on
He always got them fucking excuses
I pray to the lord you reveal what his truth is

I left a note in the hallway
By the time you read it I'll be far away
I'm far away

But I ain't fucking with nobody
Let's have a toast to the good life
Suicide before you see this tear fall down my eyes
Me and my baby we gone be alright
We gon' live a good life
Big homie better grow up
Me and my whoadies 'bout to stroll up
I see them boppers in the corner
They sneaking out the back door
He only want me when I'm not there
He better call Becky with the good hair
He better call Becky with the good hair

[Emptiness]

*She sleeps all day
Dreams of you in both worlds
Tills the blood in and out of uterus
Wakes up smelling of zinc
Grief sedated by orgasm
Orgasm heightened by grief
God was in the room when the man said to the woman
"I love you so much wrap your legs around me pull me in"
Sometimes, when he had her nipple in his mouth she'd whisper
"oh my god"
That, too, is a form of worship
Her hips grind pestle and mortar
Cinnamon and cloves
Whenever he pulls out*

[Loss]

*Dear moon,
We blame you for floods
For the flesh of blood
For men who are also wolves
We blame you for the night
For the dark
For the ghosts*

6 inch heels
She walked in the club
Like nobody's business

Got damn
She murdered everybody and i was her witness

(The Weeknd)
Stackin' money money everywhere she go... (where she go)
You-know...
Pesos out of mexico... (mexico)
Them unos... commas

Every fear
Every nightmare
Anyone has ever had

Stackin' money money everywhere she go... (where she go)
You-know...
Pesos out of mexico... (mexico)
Them unos... commas and them decimals... (decimals)
She don't gotta give it up she professional... oh

[Loss]

She stack her money money everywhere she go
Her yamazaki straight from tokyo
She got them commas and them decimals
She don't gotta give it up cuz she professional

6 inch heels
She walked in the club
Like nobody's business
Got damn
She murdered everybody and I was her witness
She works for the money
She work for the money
From the start to finish
And she worth every dollar
She worth every dollar
And she worth every minute

Stars in her eyes
She fights for the power
Keep in time
She grinds

Day and night
She grinds from Monday to Friday
Work from Friday to Sunday
She gone slay
She's too smart to crave material things
She pushing herself
Day and night
She grinds from Monday to Friday
Work from Friday to Sunday
Stars in her eyes
She fights and she sweats thru sleepless nights
But she don't mind
She loves the grind
She grinds from monday to friday
Works from Friday to Sunday
She gone slay
Too smart to crave material things
Stacking her paper
Stacking her paper
She grinds from Monday to Friday
Work from Friday to Sunday

6 inch heels
She walked in the club
Like nobody's business
Got damn
She murdered everybody and I was her witness
She works for the money
She work for the money (know just what to do)
From the start to finish (to make you love me)
And she worth every dollar (love me)
She worth every dollar (love me)
And she worth every minute

Now you know I make you feel you'll always come back to me.....

Come back
Come back
Come back
Come back
Come back

[Accountability]

*You find the black tube inside her beauty case
Where she keeps your father's old prison letters
You desperately want to look like her
You look nothing like your mother
You look everything like your mother
Film star beauty
How to wear your mother's lipstick
You go to the bathroom to apply her lipstick
Somewhere no one can find you
You must wear it like she wears disappointment on her face
Your mother is a woman
And women like her cannot be contained*

*"I even met the president once... mmhmm...
Did I ever tell you that?
Yeah, I met the president once
Before I met him, I ain't really seen myself goin' nowhere really
No, I ain't really cared about nothing.
Now I feel like I gotta live, man, for my kids and stuff.
Hey, he from the hood just like me. He from Chi-raq, you know?
I'm from New Orleans.
You know, that gives me inspiration that I can be whatever I wanna be, like
Whatever I wanna be.
I could probably be the next Spike Lee and shit, or something."*

*Mother Dearest
Let me inherit the Earth
Teach me how to make him beg
Let me make up for the years he made you wait
Did he bend your reflection?
Did he make you forget your own name?
Did he convince you he was a god?
Did you get on your knees daily?
Do his eyes close like doors?
Are you a slave to the back of his head?
Am I talking about your husband?
Or your father?*

*Texas, Texas (Texas)
Came into this world
Daddy's little girl
Daddy made a solider out of me*

Daddy made me dance
Daddy held my hand
Daddy liked his whiskey with his tea

We rode motorcycles
Black jack, classic vinyl
Tough girl is what I had to be
He said take care of your mother
Watch out for your sister
Oh, that's what he gave to me

With his gun and his head held high
He told me not to cry
Oh, my daddy said shoot
Oh, my daddy said shoot
With his right hand on his rifle
He swore it on the bible
My daddy said shoot
Oh, my daddy said shoot

He held me in his arms
And he taught me to be strong
He told me when he's gone, here's what to do
When trouble comes in town
And men like me come around
Oh, my daddy said shoot
Oh, my daddy said shoot

Daddy made me fight
It wasn't always right
But he said, girl it's your second amendment

*"You wish your grandmother and grandfather was here with us?
Yes.
Tell them!
I wish she was here with us.
Why? What would you do? What would we do if they were here with us?
Have fun.
Have fun?
Yes.
What would we do to have fun?
I love you.
I love you too."*

My daddy warned me about men like you
He said baby girl he's playin' you
He's playin' you
My daddy warned me about men like you
He said baby girl he's playin' you
He's playin' you
'Cause when trouble comes in town
And men like me come around
Oh, my daddy said shoot
Oh, my daddy said shoot
'Cause when trouble comes in town
And men like me come around
Oh, my daddy said shoot
Oh, my daddy said shoot

[Reformation]

*He bathes me until I forget their names and faces
I ask him to look me in the eye when I come
Home
Why do you deny yourself heaven?
Why do you consider yourself undeserving?
Why are you afraid of love?
You think its not possible for someone like you
But you are the love of my life*

10 times out of 9 I know you lyin'
But 9 times outta 10 I know you trying
So I'm trying to be fair
And you're trying to be there
And to care
But you're caught up in your permanent emotions
And all the love I'm giving is unnoticed
Just floating in the air
Lookie there...
Are you aware?
You're my lifeline, are you tryna kill me?
If I wasn't me would you still feel me?
Like on my worst day?
Or am I not thirsty?
Enough...
I don't care about the lights or the beam

I'd spend my life in the dark
For the sake of you and me
The only way to go is up
Skin thick
Too tough

You you you you and me could move a mountain
You you you you and me could calm a war down
You you you you and me could make it rain now
You you you and me could stop this love drought

[Forgiveness]

*Baptize me, now that reconciliation is possible
If we're gonna heal, let it be glorious
One thousand girls raise their arms
Do you remember being born?
Are you thankful?
Are the hips that cracked
The deep velvet of your mother
And her mother, and her mother
There is a curse that will be broken*

We build sand castles
That washed away
I made you cry
When i walked away
And although I promised
That I couldn't stay
Every promise don't work out that way
Every promise don't work out that way

Dishes smashed on my counter
From our last encounter
Pictures snatched out the frame
Bitch I scratched out your name
And your face
What is it about you?
That I can't erase baby
When every promise don't work out that way
No no baby
When every promise don't work out that way

And your heart is broken
Cause I walked away
Show me your scars
And I won't walk away
And I know I promised that I couldn't stay
Every promise don't work out that way
Every promise don't work out that way

[Resurrection]

*"I never seen this in my life
So many young women.
They take out with men huh?
Child it can make me feel better than you.
So how we supposed to lead our children to the future?
What do we do?
How do we lead them?
Love.
L-O-V-E love. Mmm hallelujah thank you Jesus.
Lord, I'm sorry brother, I love the lord that's all I got.
Get's against the wall and the wall against ya back who ya call?
Hey!
Who ya call?
Who ya call?
Ya gotta call him. Ya gotta call Jesus.
Ya gotta call him 'cause you ain't got another hope."*

*You are terrifying
And strange
And beautiful*

Forward
Best foot forward just in case
When we made our way to now
It's time to listen
It's time to fight
Forward
Now we're going to hold doors open for a while
Now we can be open for a while
Forward
I love you more than this job please don't work for me
Forward

Go back to your sleep in your favorite spot just next to me
Forward

Magic

[Hope]

*The nail technician pushes my cuticles back
Turns my hand over
Stretches the skin on my palm and says
“I see your daughters, and their daughters”
That night in a dream the first girl emerges from a slit in my stomach
The scar heals into a smile
The man I love pulls the stitches out with his fingernails
We leave black sutures curling on the side of the bath
I wake as the second girl crawls head first up my throat
A flower blossoming out of the hole in my face*

Trying to reign
Trying to rain on the thunder
Tell the storm i'm new
I'ma walk
I'ma march
On the regular
Painting white flags blue
Love forgive me I've been running
Running blind in truth
I'ma rain
I'ma reign
On this bitter love
Tell the sweet I'm new

I'm telling these tears gonna fall away fall away... oooh
May the last one burn into flames

Freedom
Freedom
I can't move
Freedom cut me loose
Freedom
Freedom
Where are you?
Cause I need freedom too

I break chains all by myself
Won't let my freedom rot in hell
I'ma keep running cause a winner don't quit on themselves

I'm a wade
I'm a wave through the waters
Til the tide don't move
I'm a riot I'm a riot through your borders
Call me bullet proof
Love forgive me I've been running, running blind in truth
I'm a wade
I'm a wave through your shallow love
Tell the deep I'm new

I'm telling these tears gonna fall away fall away... oooh
May the last one burn into flames

Freedom
Freedom
I can't move
Freedom cut me loose
Freedom
Freedom
Where are you?
Cause I need freedom too
I break chains all by myself
Won't let my freedom rot in hell hey
I'ma keep running cause a winner don't quit on themselves

Huh what you want from me is it true you see uh oh father can you hear me?
Huh what you want from me is it true you see uh oh father can you hear me?
Hear me?

[Redemption]

*Take one pint of water
Add a half pound of sugar
The juice of eight lemons
The zest of half-lemon
Pour the water from one jug, then into the other, several times
Strain through a clean napkin
Grandmother, the alchemist*

*You spun gold out of this hard life
Conjured beauty from the things left behind
Found healing where it did not live
Discovered the antidote in your own kitchen
Broke the curse with your own two hands
You passed these instructions down to your daughter
Who then passed it down to her daughter*

*“I had my ups and downs
But I always find the inner strength to pull myself up
I was served lemons but I made lemonade”*

*My grandma said nothing real can be threatened
True love brought salvation back into me
With every tear came redemption
And my torturer became my remedy*

*So we're gonna heal
We're gonna start again
You've brought the orchestra
Synchronized swimmers
You're the magician
Pull me back together again the way you cut me in half
Make the woman in doubt disappear
Pull the sorrow from between my legs like silk
Knot after knot after knot
The audience applauds
But we can't hear them*

*I found the truth beneath your lies
And true love never has to hide
Trade your broken wings for mine
I've seen your scars and kissed your crimes*

*So many people i know that they just trying to touch you
Kiss up and rub up and feel up
Kiss up and rub up and feel up on ya
Give you some time to prove that I can trust ya again
I'm gonna kiss up and rub up and feel up
Kiss up and rub up and feel up on ya*

*All night long....
(all night yeah)*

Good love
All night long.....
(all night yeah)

Sweet love
All night long.....
(all night yeah)

All I wanna
Be no other
Be together
I remember
Sweet love
All night long...

My love was stronger than your pride
Beyond your darkness I'm your light
You get deep you touch my mind
Baptize your tears and dry your eyes

So many people I know that they just trying to touch you
Kiss up and rub up and feel up
Kiss up and rub up and feel up on ya
Give you some time to prove that I can trust ya again
I'm gonna kiss up and rub up and feel up
Kiss up and rub up and feel up on ya

All night long....
(all night yeah)

Good love
All night long.....
(all night yeah)

Sweet love
All night long.....
(all night yeah)

All I wanna
Be no other
Be together
I remember

Sweet love
All night long...

[Lemonade]

Ya'll haters corny with that illuminati mess
Paparazzi catch my fly and my cocky fresh
I'm so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress
I'm so possessive so I rock his Roc necklaces

My daddy Alabama
My mama Louisiana
You mix that negro with that creole make a Texas-bama

I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros
I like my negro nose with Jackson 5 nostrils
I earned all this money but they never take the country out me
I got hot sauce in my bag... swag

I see it I want it
I stunt yellow hornet
I dream it I work hard I grind till I own it
I twirl on them haters
Albino alligators
El Camino with the seat low sipping Cuervo with no chaser

Sometimes I go off
I go hard
Get what's mine
I'm a star
Cause I slay... I slay I slay I slay
I slay I slay I slay I slay
I'm gon' slay I slay I slay I slay
All day I slay I slay okay okay

Ok ladies now let's get in formation
Ok ladies now let's get in formation
Prove to me you got some co-ordination
Slay trick or you get eliminated

When he fuck me good I take his ass to red lobster
When he fuck me good I take his ass to red lobster
If he hit it right I might take him on a flight on my chopper

Drop him off at the mall let him buy some J's let him shoppa

I might get your song played on the radio station
I might get your song played on the radio station
You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making
I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making

I see it I want it
I stunt yellow hornet
I dream it I work hard I grind till I own it
I twirl on my haters
albino alligators
El Camino with the seat low sipping Cuervo with no chaser

Sometimes I go off
I go hard
Take whats mine
I'm a star
Cause I slay... I slay I slay I slay
I slay I slay I slay I slay
We gon' slay gon' slay we slay I slay
I slay okay I slay okay okay okay

Ok ladies now lets get in formation
Ok ladies now lets get in formation
Prove to me you got some co-ordination
Slay trick or you get eliminated

Ok ladies now lets get in formation
Ok ladies now lets get in formation
You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation
Always stay gracious
Best revenge is your paper

APPENDIX E

Accessing Media Examples

The media examples referred to in footnotes throughout this document are central to this paper. They can be accessed at www.sarahlindmark.com under the page entitled “Watch and Listen.” They are password protected to preserve the author’s rights to use the material under “fair use” copyright law (17 U.S.C. §107). To access them, click on the link for the media examples pertaining to “Watching Their Souls Speak,” and enter the password sarahlindmark2019.