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Meet Me at the Margins: Performing Resistance to Police Brutality

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Meet Me at the Margins: Performing Resistance to Police Brutality

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An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

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By Jumonke Ekunseitan

After a surge of racially-charged killings of unarmed Black citizens, artists D'Angelo, Beyoncé, and Kendrick Lamar have used their platforms and artistry to speak out against police brutality. Protest music and performance is not a new convention, and the aforementioned artists sit on the shoulders of many who went before them. However, the performances I examine in my thesis are special cases in their use of counter-language, place, and subversion of the normative gaze. Applying the theories of bell hooks, Stuart Hall, Cornel West, and Michel Foucault, I examine the politics of protest performance in sanctioned spaces and their potential as catalysts for change.

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"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect."
1 Corinthians 15:10

By God's grace, I am now Jumoke Ekunseitan, M.A.!

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Table of Contents

Introduction

An epidemic of racially-charged killings, political tension and rampant social disarray has given black musicians of the 2010s plenty to discuss. But despite a sea of inspiration, few musicians have ridden the waves. The motivations of today's music industry are predominantly financial and hardly ethical. Resorting to formulas which push frivolous content for mass consumption to a mainstream audience, record companies box their artists into what 'works.' For those artists who choose to break the mold, there are potential consequences. The economy of music can dissuade an artist from espousing their personal views on current events, as it disrupts the hegemonic modes that sustain mainstream content. Additionally, their social critiques can verge on proselytizing. Despite such hazards, D'Angelo, Beyoncé, and Kendrick Lamar belong to a small number of artists who merge unapologetic commentary with musical genius, crossing the narrow line in the name of advocacy and visibility.

The Lineage of Creative Resistance

Of course, the aforementioned talent are not the first Black artists to merge performance with protest. Instead, they are descendants of such creative resistance. It is the spirit of resilience and action that flowed in slave songs, which were used as a means of translating sorrow, hope and oftentimes plans for escape. Slaves used code songs such as "When the Train Comes Along" and "Wade in the Water" to exchange directions and tips for survival. Similar messages found their way into spirituals like "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and "No More Auction Block for Me," songs heavy with weariness and a will to rely on faith to continue fighting for life. Black people comforted themselves with songs of what Ian Michie delineates as "redemption, salvation,

independence, justice, exoneration, and vindication" (8). As time removed the chains, remnants of slave songs and spirituals found their way into more contemporary gospel and freedom songs.

The days of singing for physical freedom passed—at least for most—but justice and equality were still hard-fought battles. In this era, songs strengthened "a community that maintained its solidarity and resistance through strong conviction, unified expressions of hope, and continuity of community tradition" (9). Music nurtured collectivity through protest songs and concert rallies, both important tools in the Civil Rights Movement. As Aaron Bryant explains, "social movements. . . as a discursive space, are cultural arenas in which narratives are expressed through engagement" (128). Songs including "We Shall Overcome," "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," and Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come" carried the spirit of the Movement and brought hope to those in the struggle for equal rights. Other songs and performances were meant to call out the terrorism that wreaked havoc on African American communities. In 1964, Nina Simone sang "Mississippi Goddamn" before a majority white crowd at Carnegie Hall. The song was largely in response to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing and the assassination of civil rights activist Medgar Evers, both occurring just a year prior. Telling the crowd in her introduction to the never-before-heard song that she meant "every word of it," she went on to deliver a scathing deposition on America's transgressions. She referenced Alabama and Tennessee, the former being the site of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, and the latter being the site of numerous sit-ins in protest of Jim Crow laws. The country was "full of lies," Simone insisted, and would never achieve progress in civil rights at the pace it was going. Though she ended the song to cheers and whistles, her career would never be the same in the United States. Her activism lied in stark contrast to her popular tunes that had drawn white audiences to her. Across the country, "Mississippi Goddamn" was banned; in some cases, her records were

destroyed (Chandler). But William C. Anderson explains, Simone was a "cultural kamikaze, willing to destroy her career and the freedom that it brought her, in order to share the truth—in order to put the truth into the light and make it *undeniable*."

Simone was not the only one caught in the crossfire of protest performance. In 1969, Jimi Hendrix stood before a predominantly white crowd at Woodstock and performed a rendition of the national anthem. His adaptation began as the original, but around the point of "the bombs bursting in air," Hendrix departed from the melody**.** For nearly two minutes, the song was captivating in its abnormality. It was immediately defined as a protest, and thus created a storm of debate and criticism. But when asked about the controversy by late night show host Dick Cavett a year later, Hendrix did not see his performance as a demonstration, telling Cavett, "All I did was play it. I'm American, so I played it…I used to sing it in school. They made me sing it in school, so it was a flashback." Cavett pointed out that Hendrix was a veteran, and those sending hate mail to him should take that into consideration, before suggesting to Hendrix that he should understand the response to his "unorthodox" rendition. It was here that Hendrix calmly but firmly disagreed. "I didn't think it was unorthodox… I thought it was beautiful." As his performance was labeled either a brilliant protest or a disrespectful adaptation of a sacred anthem, Hendrix's explanation maintained that his interpretation reflected his personal history with the anthem, one that consequently encompassed his Blackness, artistry, and sentiment towards his nation.

By the 1970s, the peaceful crusade led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and others had fallen from grace with black youth, and their growing impatience inspired a bolder rhetoric. Gil Scott-Heron's 1971 song "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" warned listeners that the time had come for accountability: "the revolution will put you in the driver's seat." American youth took

the groove and messages of soul, jazz, and funk and created a new genre of music—hip hop. Instead of asking for inclusion, black and brown youth created a language and style unique to them. They no longer asked for equality and justice—they demanded it. The genre did not forsake its ancestors, but instead employed the art of sampling to include elements of blues, jazz, and funk.

But hip hop did depart from an ingestible message to more forceful speech, one which also required effort and cultural proximity to fully understand. Michael P. Jeffries delineates a theory of "public" versus "hidden" transcripts provided by writer Tricia Rose:

> Public transcripts are the accepted discourses of social order and propriety; the rules broadcast in the public sphere for everyone to hear and abide by. Hidden transcripts are produced by the disempowered, and often coded in language that prevents oppressors from grasping the full meaning of the message. Rose argues that hip hop artists collectively produce hidden transcripts, as rap music's social criticism challenges the police, government and media. (185)

Before examining the three examples of hidden transcripts in performance that are the primary focus of this article, we should briefly discuss Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing* and in particular its use of the Public Enemy song "Fight the Power," an ode to revolutionary thought and action. Lee's film exemplifies the kind of cinematic protest analogous to the musical tradition of resistance I have discussed thus far and directs our attention to the phenomenon of police brutality that occupies the hip hop artists whose work I analyze below. The "powers that be" of Public Enemy's song overtake character Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn), who throughout the film walks around with a boom box blaring "Fight the Power." Through Raheem's fatal moment with police, Spike Lee brings the issue of police brutality to moviegoers and eerily anticipates what will come many years later in the death of Eric Garner in 2014. The film's climactic sequence begins with confrontation. Pizzeria owner Sal (Danny Aiello) had been embroiled in a

dispute with long-time customer Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito). The latter felt slighted by the 'Wall of Fame' in Sal's restaurant, which only boasted White—and particularly Italian—faces. Seeking inclusion, while arguing that Sal served primarily Black customers and should thus showcase famed African-Americans, Buggin' Out refuses to back down and rallies Radio Raheem to his cause to boycott the restaurant. As the two men later confront him, Sal grows weary of the "jungle music" Radio Raheem has then turned to maximum volume on his radio, and takes a bat to the machine. The music ceases, and there is no dialogue to fill its void, only the sounds of the crushed boom box. The imagery of Sal's bat raining blows on a black radio bears similarity to the beating of a black body. When he has exhausted himself, Sal tells Radio Raheem with no hint of remorse, "I just killed your fucking radio."

It takes several policemen to pull Radio Raheem off Sal. But as officers Long (Rick Aiello) and Ponte (Miguel Sandoval) apprehend him, Long does not release his tight grip around Radio Raheem's neck. In the nearly two-minute ordeal, Long's use of force is deemed excessive by bystanders who demand that he release his grip, and even by his partner Ponte, who repeats, "that's enough." The camera cuts to Radio Raheem's feet which are slightly lifted off the ground. In this fragmented shot, viewers witness a lynching. Long drops Radio Raheem's motionless body to the ground and a fiery riot ensues that burns down Sal's pizzeria.

Lee's film was inspired by several headlines of police shooting and hate crimes leading up to 1989. Moreover, films such as John Singleton's 1991 film *Boyz n the* Hood and Ryan Coogler's 2013 film *Fruitvale Station,* which told the story Oscar Grant's death in 2006, followed in Lee's footsteps in depicting police brutality against young black men via audio-visual transcripts. In this era, however, and ever since, hip hop has been the main vehicle to convey the frustrations of African American communities. In the aftermath of Reaganomics,

militarization of police departments across the country, the Rodney King beating, and the LA Riots, artists including N.W.A, KRS-One, and 2Pac contested the normalization of police brutality in America. Many years later, after the deaths of Eric Garner, Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, and many others at the hands of police, D'Angelo, Kendrick Lamar, and Beyoncé chose to respond through their music, and more specifically, the performances thereof. I contend that with such performances, Black artists engage predominately White and/or apolitical spaces to emphasize that police brutality is a profound American problem. Unlike other demonstrations, music performance has a timbre of de-escalation despite its latent nature, and it has the potential for carrying pertinent messages to a broad audience.

Each of the sanctioned performances I explore serve to subvert the normative gaze and bring marginal issues to spaces otherwise resistant to social commentary on the undervaluation of Black lives. As audiences are confronted in these arenas of live entertainment deemed safe from discussions of police brutality and Black trauma, they are prompted to respond, and possibly, charged to effect change. Even in the present day, the abovementioned artists are not alone in their protest. In 2016, Lauryn Hill appeared on the Charlie Rose show and performed "Rebel/ I Find It Hard to Say," a song originally released on her album *MTV Unplugged 2.0*. The song was in response to Amadou Diallo, a 22- year old immigrant from Guinea who was unarmed when NYPD police fired forty-one shots and killed him in 1999 (Cooper). Nearly two decades later, the song was still poignant, with lyrics addressing the undervaluation of Black lives:

> You think our lives are cheap and easy to be wasted
> As history repeats, so foul you can taste it
> And while the people sleep, too comfortable to face it
> His life so incomplete, and nothing can replace it
> And while the people sleep, too comfortable to face it
> Your lives so incomplete, and nothing can replace it

In 2017, just hours after the 58th Presidential Inauguration, thousands descended on the capitol for the Women's March on Washington. Artist Janelle Monae was a featured guest and sang her protest song "Hell You Talmbout," an ode to the Black Lives Matter movement with lyrics which urge listeners to say and remember the lives lost to police brutality and White supremacy. The trinity of artists I have chosen to closely analyze is thus entering an ongoing discussion on protest and performance; but studying them together, in particular, grounds this examination of how place, spectatorship, authorial intention, and reception shape the staging and impact of protest performance.

Disrupting the Normative Gaze

While the work of resistance will often be condemned and depreciated, it is essential in effecting any lasting transformation in consciousness and evading the trap of representation for the sake of disproving stereotypes. I turn to the works of bell hooks, Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault, and Cornel West, whose theories converse with one another on the grounds of spectatorship, interrogation, and resistance. In *Black Looks*, hooks speaks of the gaze as the site of contention. "[T]here is power in looking" (114) hooks has famously written, and "the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (115). Furthermore, she notes, considering the struggle of the gaze in turn helps shape how one engages performance: "in resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating awareness politicizes 'looking' relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist" (116). In performance, this notion of spectatorship might operate dually as an action and a way of appearance; performers are

careful to craft the visual element of their performance to convey their message as clearly as possible. Yet as spectators, we can resist certain images. This cognizance is what I examine in my analysis of these artists—artists who craft performance with the struggle of the gaze in mind.

As spectators, we assign meaning to the images we see. In his work on representation and interrogation of the image, Stuart Hall discusses the idea of fixed meaning, which he asserts is false. It is the shift of meaning that is certain:

> Of course, we *do* make strenuous efforts to fix meaning—that is precisely what the strategies of stereotyping are aspiring to do, often with considerable success, for a time. But ultimately meaning begins to slip and slide; it begins to drift, or be wrenched, or inflected into new directions. New meanings are grafted on to old ones. Words, and images carry connotations over which no one has complete control, and these marginal or submerged meanings come to the surface, allowing different meanings to be constructed, different things to be shown and said. (270)

Marginal problems also find visibility as performers employ their bodies to create a visual text that protests the plight of Black citizens, police brutality in particular. The fluidity of meaning and visibility also assumes the fluidity of power. Foucault speaks to the binary of power and resistance, suggesting that the latter predicates the former; "there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance — of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation — there would be no relations of power" (12). If performance is a mode of resistance, what are we to gain from its subversive messages?

Cornel West tells us that in order to authentically interrogate the modes that subject one's self to being 'Othered,' we must defy the "White normative gaze" (105) that sanctions the othering. Through this resistance, Black artists and thinkers are liberated "both to interrogate the ways in which they are bound by certain conventions and to learn from and build on these very norms and models" (105). I argue that performance makes this process permeable and accessible to spectators, who by looking and responding, join in this labor of defiance and interrogation as

active participants of resistance.

West later posits that as one resists and aims to "re-present" (107) themselves, they often take one of four avenues. There is the "Booker T. Temptation… the individual preoccupation with the mainstream and its legitimizing power," the "Talented Tenth Seduction, namely, a move toward arrogant group insularity," the "Go-It-Alone option… an extreme rejectionist perspective that shuns the mainstream and group insularity," and the last option being what West prefers all resisters to choose— the "Critical Organic Catalyst… a person who stays attuned to the best of what the mainstream has to offer—its paradigms, viewpoints, and methods—yet maintains a grounding in affirming and enabling subcultures of criticism." (107). It can be argued which category the artists I assess fall into, but I would say that their evolution as artists, engagement of political and social commentary, and insertion of individual criticism, make them catalysts of both criticism and cultural advancement.

Politics of Performance

As I speak of performance, I am not exclusively assessing the delivery and staging of artistic expression. There is a duality in these performances where artists express their creativity and their identity, thus contributing to a greater culture of art overall. E. Patrick Johnson writes in *Appropriating Blackness* that "the mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness is the very thing that constitutes ''black'' culture" (2). But as Johnson posits, there are "cultural, social, and political consequences" to the embodiment of blackness. On one hand, one can argue that what Beyoncé, D'Angelo, Kendrick Lamar, and countless Black artists have done and continue to do to protest injustices could not be done by their white counterparts. The message varies by the

carrier; beyond precise choreography and memorized lyrics, their blackness informs the way in which they interrogate and disrupt predominantly white and/or apolitical spaces. However, once the performance is delivered and the message is transferred, the audience is left to resolve its purpose and impact. At this juncture, notions of blackness are used to discern and contest authorial intention and cultural impact. While this methodology can give way to divisive dialogue, it also "offers a way to rethink performance theory by forcing it to ground itself in praxis, especially within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic society" (9). In each of the performances I examine, there is no separation between performance and identity; though these artists have achieved mainstream success, their performances on marginal issues trade conformity for anomalous thought.

Place, Counter-Language and Sanctioned Resistance

The speech of the artist is the primary opportunity for challenge. Through their lyrics, artists espouse their philosophies, respond to cultural moments, and speak to their listeners. As self-and/or communally referential texts are mediated through performance, they are often contested on the grounds of place, legibility and value. bell hooks asserts in her work *Yearning* that "language is a place of struggle." In the four performances I examine, both place and language are sanctioned, which carries both limitations and benefits. These performances assume a great deal of foreknowledge or an audience willing to do the work needed to understand the audiovisual counter-language provided. Performance only shocks the viewers. Without this active participation, the sum of the spectator's engagement might amount to nothing more than amazement. Additionally, the notion that these acts of protest are invited, approved, and often censored by authorities of the given space posits the scope of impact. What is left after original

language has been stripped, ideas rejected, limits imposed? Perhaps sanctioned performance is just 'passing' for protest. A resonance of defiance is left intact, but the exhibition can only ruffle so many feathers before the fowl is plucked bare for all to see. Such a demonstration of naked truth is nearly impossible under sanctioned performance. Those who govern these sites of entertainment— the Recording Academy, Lorne Michaels at *SNL*, and Hamish Hamilton and Ricky Krishner, director and producer of the Super Bowl Halftime Show, respectively—wager how much controversy they can vouch for without permanently upsetting a sizeable market of their audience. Most of the time, less is more.

Despite the limitations of 'allowed' resistance, these performances have helped to drive the conversation on marginal issues including police brutality. On visible platforms including television shows, streaming services, and more, artists have the opportunity to both entertain and enlighten viewers and are given a plethora of resources to bring their lyrics to life in spectacular fashion. Their heightened visibility offers the possibility of broadened resistance through industrial, public, and critical reception. For the purpose of this study, the reception was gathered with variance in mind, from established and 'trusted' sources for news, to publications known for their subjectivity, and others in between whose political and/or socioeconomic alignments are bold or unclear.

The Charade

In 2015, D'Angelo made his *Saturday Night Live* debut after releasing the surprise album *Black Messiah,* a work profusely political and cognizant of current issues that followed a nearly fourteen-year hiatus. In 2016, Beyoncé gave a socio-politically charged performance at Super Bowl 50, and the following week, Kendrick Lamar took the stage at the Grammys. Lamar would return to the awards show in 2018 to present another powerful piece on state power and Black

lives. Of these three arenas, *SNL* is most permeable in addressing societal issues, as viewers expect such commentary. Parody and satire define *SNL*, where sketches and monologues address matters that in actuality are far from amusing but necessary to unravel. Yet, *SNL* has its own problems with race.

As reported by *Slate*, as recently as 2013, the show had no Black female cast member. Drawing criticism for this willful blind spot (SNL had hired six new actors, all of them White), the show addressed its skeletons in an episode hosted by Kerry Washington. In one sketch, Washington struggles to change quickly enough to fill all the black female roles throughout the show. As she changes from Michelle Obama to Oprah, a scroll on-screen message apologizes to Washington, remarking that the lack of black women in the *SNL* cast "is not an ideal situation and [we] look forward to rectifying it in the future … unless, of course, we fall in love with another white guy first." As *Slate's* Willa Paskin wrote in her review of the episode, "there's nothing wrong with being self-aware, but there is nothing particularly *right* with it either." *SNL's* critique of its internal issue is a funny but hollow gesture. This shortcoming coupled with the fact that in its 43-year history, the show has produced only a handful of sketches on police brutality and racial profiling, makes D'Angelo's performance on the *SNL* stage ever more poignant and justifiably resistant.

D'Angelo had been working on music during this period and planned on releasing *Black Messiah* at the top of 2015, but a series of events led him to bump the release date up to December 2014. *New York Times* writer Joe Coscarelli explains the musician's reasoning behind the accelerated release:

> After a grand jury didn't indict a Ferguson, Mo., police officer last month in the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, D'Angelo called his co-manager Kevin Liles. [D'Angelo] said: 'Do you believe this? Do you believe it?' Mr. Liles said, 'And then we just sat there in silence. That is when I knew [D'Angelo] wanted to say something.' . . . 'The one way I

> do speak out is through music,' D'Angelo told his tour manager, Alan Leeds. 'I want to speak out.'

On January 31, 2015, D'Angelo made his *SNL* debut with the band *The Vanguard* and performed two songs from his new album. The first was the divinely melodic "Really Love," which features an introduction in Spanish over orchestral strings; translated, it tells of a lover who feels controlled by their partner despite the intense love they share. The song is easygoing and jazzy, a stark contrast to his second selection, the protest song "The Charade." For this latter performance, D'Angelo donned a hooded jacket and a scarf printed with the American flag. Members of his band donned t-shirts with the messages "Black Lives Matter" and "I Can't Breathe," the first a reference to the movement inspired by the slew of police killings and the latter being the last words of Eric Garner who was choked to death by NYPD policemen in 2014. The stage floor featured a glowing outline of a body similar to chalk lines drawn at crime scenes. The tone on the stage, assisted by the dim lighting, reflected a darker narrative. Known for his crooning which is dually captivating but often indiscernible, D'Angelo sang the chorus clear for everyone to hear:

> All we wanted was a chance to talk
> 'Stead we only got outlined in chalk
> Feet have bled a million miles we've walked
> Revealing at the end of the day, the charade

During several repetitions of the chorus, the band members repeated several gestures, gradually raising their hands in reference to the 'Hands Up, Don't Shoot' chants of protestors and lifting their fists before gesturing the aim of a gun. The song concluded in a burst of guitar screams. The band lifted their fists in a final act of resistance and solidarity with D'Angelo walking to the rear of the stage to stand alongside them in this declaration.

Reviews of D'Angelo's performance were a mix of largely positive, neutral, and off-topic assessments. *Essence* commended him for "reminding viewers of our ongoing conversation," with 'our' alluding to the dialogue that Black Americans were having in regards to the Black Lives Matter movement in various forums. *Slate* called it a "masterclass in escalation" and "one of the more stirring, virtuosic *SNL* performances in recent memory." Other publications, including *Fader* and *Billboard*, avoided any commentary in their article other than acknowledging the performance and including a link for readers to watch. *Jezebel* referenced D'Angelo's status as a sex symbol in a headline titled "D'Angelo Plays *SNL*, Panties Cream All Over America." Contrary to his videography over the years in which he engages the eroticization of his body, D'Angelo makes no place for such a gaze in this performance, making it more astounding that his body, and not his protest, was still the take away for some viewers. Most striking of the reactions to D'Angelo's performance is that of Eric Garner's family who spoke out in support of his tribute. They told *Yahoo News*, "as a family, we need everyone to participate to help get justice. At the same time, it's just not our struggle. It's for everybody." In his music and performance, D'Angelo brought an issue of the margins to a proximal space, advocating for a community that is often not visible on the *SNL* stage. When black and brown bodies are seen, the gravity of their issues are not the priority. While audiences flock to SNL for social commentary, they are essentially there to find the humor in them.

While D'Angelo used his artistry to subvert the expectations of this platform and speak out, there is more rage than hope in his delivery. Claudia Rankine addresses this rage in *Citizen*:

> It responds to insult and attempted erasure simply by asserting a presence, and the energy required to present, to react, to assert is accompanied by visceral disappointment: a disappointment in the sense that no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived. (24)

Underneath the artist's desire to be heard is the possibility that their effort may not reap any change. Months after his performance, D'Angelo expressed his concern over the progression of the Black Lives Matter movement in a joint interview with Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale. As D'Angelo explains, in order for a movement to be sustained, the message had to be legible, the burden collectively carried, the counter-language commanding enough to overthrow the "systematic maze of demise" he referenced in his lyrics. D'Angelo calls for more creative resistance from Black musicians:

> Now more than ever is the need to sing about it and to write songs about it. And no one's doing it. There's only a chosen couple of people. I think it just takes one little snowflake to start a snowball to go down the hill. My contribution and say, Kendrick Lamar's and some chosen others' start the snowball. That's all I can hope for… We have power to influence minds and influence lives. So I respect that power. (Hyman)

In acknowledging and employing this power, D'Angelo's performance symbolized the resurgence of protest performed by Black artists. Just a year later, Beyoncé would be the next to push towards interrogating police brutality in America on an even grander stage.

Towards a New Formation

Before the release of her album *Lemonade* and her Super Bowl Performance, Beyoncé was facing growing criticism on her silence both as an artist and Black woman in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement. She is known as an immensely private woman and is not one to give many interviews. But the press she did participate in was absent of any criticism or commentary on the recent police killings. As Shannon M. Houston wrote in 2015 for *Salon*:

> It's true that Beyoncé and Jay Z were said to have donated thousands of dollars to bail out Ferguson protestors. And it's true that, two years ago, they appeared at a Justice for Trayvon Martin march. But where are they now, when their voices could be even more useful as the movement continues to pick up political and cultural momentum?

Houston also noted that Beyoncé and husband Jay-Z put on a concert that raised $1.5 million money for Black Lives Matter and other charitable groups. But more than financial power, what Houston and others were seeking to know was whether these artists were willing to risk their livelihood and mainstream standing to align with such political causes. Beyoncé is one of few artists who has earned the privilege of silence and privacy. But with *Lemonade*, she submitted her commentary on police brutality and the intersections of Black womanhood.

Beyoncé's "Formation" video, released the day before her Super Bowl performance, served as a preface to a transformative period in her career. Already a trailblazing artist, she had recently challenged traditional methods in the record industry with the surprise release of her self-titled album in 2013. But her return in 2016 with "Formation" and the audiovisual project accompanying *Lemonade* revealed an artist who was critically examining the politics of Black womanhood, space, and organized resistance. In addition to notable tones of feminism and inclusivity, the "Formation" video also delivers a critique of police brutality. Audiences witness scenes of a young boy in a hoodie dancing before a line of police officers in riot gear, a brief shot of a large sign that reads 'Stop Shooting Us,' and frequent shots of Beyoncé sitting atop a New Orleans police patrol car that is half-submerged in flood waters. In the video's last scene, Beyoncé and the car are fully sunken, the sounds of a gunshot and sirens faintly audible.

The song and video are consumed with counter-language including a number of cultural references that, without assistance from the internet, render the song illegible to some listeners. Thus, Beyoncé exerts agency in necessitating an active participation; listeners need be mindful of the particularity of her language and its labor in esteeming visibility to a culture and conversation of the margins. There is much to unpack between the lyrics and their visual interpretation—including commentary on Black pride, police brutality, and trauma. In the song's refrain,

Beyoncé references the heritage of her parents who are from Alabama and Louisiana respectively, and declares herself to be an amalgamation of "Negro" and "Creole." With pride, she examines how lineage is manifest in her features while tacitly addressing criticism of her husband's appearance, and rumors that she altered her appearance in favor of Eurocentric standards; a "negro nose with Jackson-5 nostrils" is to be embraced, not shamed. Colloquially, the video is especially cognizant of New Orleans culture, and the Melina Matsoukis-directed video is filmed in the city. With visual references to Hurricane Katrina, Creole traditions, and queer culture, "Formation" is what *The Advocate* describes as a "meditation on the intersections of place, class, and gender identity, past and present." As the song and video participates in this cultural resonance, Zandria F. Robinson posits the intent in *New South Negress*:

> Formation, is a different kind of resistance practice, one rooted in the epistemology of (and sometimes only visible/detectable to) folks on the margins of blackness… Formation, then, is a metaphor, a black feminist, black queer, and black queer feminist theory of community organizing and resistance.

The resistance within "Formation" carries the resonance of Janet Jackson's song and video "Rhythm Nation." In her 1989 single, Jackson asked "people of the world" to unify and combat social ills:

> With music by our side to break the color lines
> Let's work together to improve our way of life
> Join voices in protest to social injustice
> A generation full of courage, come forth with me

Everyone has a place in rhythm nation, regardless of gender, race, class, ethnicity, or orientation. This utilitarian approach is assisted by the accompanying video. Set in a power plant and filmed in black-and-white, the video also features frequent images of 'X's', encompassing the charge to rage against the systems and powers that be. Jackson and her dancers perform a routine provocative in its rigidity, their sharp synchronization an exercise of power and unanimity.

Conversely, while "Formation" performance bears similarity to the militancy of "Rhythm Nation," the song and video are more meticulous in their time-place political timbre and target audience. Beyoncé is talking to women—Black women in particular. However, in performing Formation, Beyoncé channels both Janet and Michael Jackson, as well as the Black Panther Party in a display of cross-reference and counter language. It could also be important to reference Janet Jackson due to her controversial Super Bowl performance in 2003. Seemingly blacklisted from both the Super Bowl and the industry at-large following the incident, as Beyoncé's text affirms Black women, she is perhaps paying homage to a woman whose progressive artistry made room for a song like "Formation" to be received in American music.

Throughout the history of the Super Bowl, Black entertainment has been commissioned for performance. In the late 1960's and early seventies, marching bands from historically Black colleges including Grambling State University and Florida A&M University performed during the show. There were no other Black acts from 1971 to 1978. Super Bowl XIII's "Salute to the Caribbean" halftime show in 1979 featured various bands from the region. From the early 1980's onward, there were frequent performances from Black artists. Often, they were paired or grouped with other acts which resulted in a broader targeted audience. While Michael Jackson performed solo in 1993, Patti LaBelle, James Brown, Stevie Wonder, and others were featured alongside artists who were often White. There were also odes to institutions of Black culture including The 40th anniversary of Motown in 1998, Celebration of Soul in 1999, and the Kings of Rock and Pop in 2001, which featured Mary J. Blige and Nelly. While the Black voices commissioned for the Halftime Show represented the broad spectrum of Black artistry, they all had one thing in common: mainstream content that would not pose any controversy.

Beyoncé's first Super Bowl appearance came in 2013, where she was commissioned as the Halftime Show artist. By this time, Beyoncé had reached pinnacles no other female artist had. Thus, her performance was a testament to her artistry and commanding presence in American pop culture for nearly two decades. She covered classics in her catalog including "Crazy in Love" and "Baby Boy" and recent hits like "Love on Top" and "End of Time." Her band was intentionally comprised of all women, and they were given screen time throughout the show. It was a radiant display of feminine energy. The visuals and choreography were all about the voluptuousness, multiplicity, and power of a woman's body.

Beyoncé also played on nostalgia by bringing former group members Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams together for a Destiny's Child reunion. Standing in front of a line of fiery pyrotechnics, the trio sang hits "Bootylicious" and "Independent Woman," both songs empowering women to walk in their truths and exert agency in the various aspects of their lives. As Rowland and Williams departed the stage, Beyoncé sings her smash single, "Single Ladies." As she dances in the foreground, a mass of dancers performs the routine behind and around her. For her final song, Beyoncé performs the ballad "Halo." There is no dance routine to this song; instead, Beyoncé enchanted the audience with her vocal ability. In this Halftime Show, there was no semblance of protest or subversive messages. Thus, her next Halftime Show appearance marked a major shift in her demeanor as a performer.

The British band Coldplay was selected as the headliner for Super Bowl 50's Halftime Show in 2016. Their set was a frenzied display of peace and harmony with a Technicolored stage, rainbows galore, and songs with optimistic undertones. At one point in his performance, lead singer Chris Martin looked into the camera and said to the audience-at-large, "whoever you are, wherever you are, we're in this together." With assistance from the camerawork, which

focused on the unified crowd, the flamboyant stage effects, and the dancers on-field who twirled giant colorful flowers, Coldplay delivered a message that was void of race, gender and class partitions.

The Halftime Show of just under fourteen minutes featured two special guests—Bruno Mars and Beyoncé. Like Coldplay, Bruno Mars has a barrage of mainstream hits with neutral messages, the difference being his music's proximity to the genres of R&B, rap and funk. He begins with his smash hit "Uptown Funk," much to the crowd's approval. The camera hardly diverts from Mars and his dancers but as he concludes, the camera zooms out to a long shot of the field where a band of black women stand in formation. Beyoncé was revealed wearing an ensemble reminiscent of Michael Jackson's Super Bowl attire, specifically his military-esque jacket with a large gold 'X' across the front. Her dancers, who donned leather and afros under black berets, resembled members of the Black Panther Party. Beyoncé began with the chorus to "Formation," truncating the lyrics to add a later line: "prove to me you got some coordination / you just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making." She posed in a domineering stance against the backdrop of fiery pyrotechnics, the camera moving in to catch a sly grin on her face before she continued the rest of her set. Her performance was every bit a display of Black power. Her movement was sharp and provocative, her lyrics unabashedly Black. At one point, her dancers formed an 'X' on the field. The camera moved in once more as Beyoncé concluded, "Okay ladies, now let's get in formation."

The show then became a feel-good intermix of the three artists' work. Beyoncé and Bruno Mars were pitted against each other in a dance battle before Chris Martin joined the two on stage for a joint rendition of "Uptown Funk." This playful bit was then replaced by a tribute to past and present Halftime shows with a montage projected onto the stage juxtaposing the

variance of genre and race represented over the years. Finally, the trio came together to sing Coldplay's song "Up & Up" with lyrics that espoused unity and progress:

> We're gonna get it, get it together right now
> Gonna get it, get it together somehow
> Gonna get it, get it together and flower

The stage was flooded with performers and fans alike. Literally and figuratively, this final act was a united front. "So believe, and love!" Chris Martin concluded to the stadium of cheers. Despite the Halftime Show's assortment of entertainment, it was as if Coldplay and Bruno Mars were never there as Beyoncé was the dominant presence on stage in terms of height, position on the stage, and the way both artists constantly look at her, perhaps to stay in sync. Much of the response fell on critiquing Beyoncé's set, and moreover, figuring out who she was talking about, who she was talking to, and why. Seemingly, Beyoncé had disrupted many viewers' notions of post-racial America, forcing them to see that she was indeed a Black woman.

SNL took on this perspective in a sketch about the "Formation" video and Super Bowl performance. "The Day Beyoncé Turned Black," or as the voiceover asserts, "the day White people lost their Beyoncé," depicted the mass confusion of White viewers and listeners who are left to grapple with this 'new' Beyoncé they did not recognize. At their office, White employees expressed an inability to discern the meaning of the song's lyrics, with one man supposing that "maybe the song isn't for us." His co-worker replied, "but usually, everything is!" Simultaneously, White citizens across America came to realize that Beyoncé is not the only black person they did not 'see' before; in a breaking news segment, *Scandal* star Kerry Washington was also confirmed to be Black. One woman relented, "no, it can't be… she's on ABC." As two men cowered under a desk, their office by then a mass of chaos, they debated on

just *what* Beyoncé and Washington were, their dialogue suggesting White males to be the normative spectator:

> "I don't understand; how can they be Black?" They're women!"
>
> "I think they might be both!"

While *SNL* poked fun at the mass confusion Beyoncé had spurred, conservative media unleashed their wrath on the performance's political themes. Rush Limbaugh found dissonance between the "patriotic" pregame show where Lady Gaga sang the national anthem, and the Halftime Show, which to him epitomized "the cultural decay and the political decay and the social rot that is befalling" America. Between the two performances was "an entirely different country that's on the stage… an entirely different portrayal, an exhibition, if you will, of American culture." Stuart Varney at Fox Business' *Varney & Co.* took issue with the performance as it brought problems of race and politics to the medium of sports, something that has frequently happened before. He pondered whether there existed "anything in America that can exclude race," later dismissing the performance as a marketing gimmick disguised as protest: "it's about capitalism for them, while they push something that started as a farce, that still continues to go out there and push an agenda but comes up with very little, if any, solutions within the black community." Remarkably, this critique bears similarity to that of bell hooks who while commending the range of Beyoncé's project, speculated on the limitations of her feminist agency:

> It is the broad scope of *Lemonade's* visual landscape that makes it so distinctive—the construction of a powerfully symbolic black female sisterhood that resists invisibility, that refuses to be silent. This in and of itself is no small feat—it shifts the gaze of white mainstream culture. It challenges us all to look anew, to radically revision how we see the black female body. However, this radical repositioning of black female images does not truly overshadow or change conventional sexist constructions of black female identity.

To hooks, Beyoncé's work and its potential to disrupt the normative gaze is an exciting cultural moment, but a moment that is not sustained. It is one thing to disrupt the patterns, but something more is needed to destroy them. This assessment carries some weight, and Beyoncé was possibly cognizant of this perspective as there are stark contrasts between her video and the Halftime Show. She forgoes the exploration of New Orleans culture and police brutality, opting for a more accessible reference in the Black Panther Party; while it would be difficult to recreate such a display in a stadium, Beyoncé is known for her intricate staging and could have done it if she desired. As hooks notes in earlier work, "often when the radical voice speaks about domination we are speaking to those who dominate. Their presence changes the nature and distinction of our words" (146). Beyoncé's performance is authoritative, but it is also sexy. Her economy in this performance is her body and though it labors in this context to bring awareness to a pertinent struggle, it is also sanctioned to entertain. Thus, the counter-language in the "Formation" visual arguably does not translate in the Halftime Show. What it accomplishes though is engagement—viewers have the liberty to take the two moments and draw conclusions on just what Beyoncé is saying about past and present, which is ultimately, by and large, not much has changed for Black folks.

Some critics inevitably focused on "Formation's' examination of police brutality, labeling the video and performance as "anti-cop." Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani found the show to be the opposite of "decent, wholesome entertainment" and accused Beyoncé of using the Halftime Show "as a platform to attack police officers who are the people who protect her and protect us and keep us alive." Despite the variant responses to "Formation," it was here where Beyoncé drew the line and gave a rare explanation of her work:

> "I mean, I'm an artist and I think the most powerful art is usually misunderstood. But anyone who perceives my message as anti-police is completely mistaken. I have so much

> admiration and respect for officers and the families of the officers who sacrifice themselves to keeps us safe. But let's be clear: I am against police brutality and injustice. Those are two separate things. If celebrating my roots and culture during Black History Month made anyone uncomfortable, those feelings were there long before a video and long before me. I'm proud of what we created and I'm proud to be part of a conversation that is pushing things forward in a positive way."

Indeed, "Formation" did and continues to spur discussion on the potential of resistance through music. Its reverberations were further assisted by another powerful performance a week later at the 58th annual Grammy Awards. This would be Kendrick Lamar's second time performing at the show. Unlike Beyoncé, Lamar needed no disclaimer for his politically-charged music, but his resistance at the Grammys is a political act in itself, as the awards show has a tumultuous history of acknowledging and awarding Black artists, particularly ones who address the marginalization of Black people. Hip-hop was not recognized as a category until 1989, many years after the genre had begun in New York and spread across the country. As Sesali Bowen explains in *Refinery 29*, although the Recording Academy had created Best Rap Performance to honor the new genre, they would not televise this segment of this show. This dismissive approach led artists who were honored as the first nominees, including Will Smith and DJ Jazzy Jeff, Public Enemy, and LL Cool J to boycott the ceremony. Throughout the 1990s, many hip hop artists would join in this protest by refusing to attend the Grammys to accept their award. While the categories for rap have since expanded to Best Rap Album (1996), Best Rap/Sung Performance (2002), and Best Rap Song (2004), there has been dissonance at times between the public's choice and that of the Recording Academy. In 2014, Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, two white hip hop artists, won Best Rap Album over Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*, which was heralded by critics as a masterpiece. In the Album of the Year category, only two hip hop

albums, Lauryn Hill's *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1999) and OutKast's *Speakerboxx/The Love Below* (2003) have won, while no rap song has yet won Song of the Year.

This lineage of slighting extends to other genres including R&B. Before the late artist Prince announced the winner for Album of the Year winner in 2015, he voiced to the audience that "like books and Black lives, albums matter." He then read the envelope that announced Beck as the winner over Beyoncé. As Beck made his way to the stage, Kanye West, an artist with a rocky history with the Grammys of his own, momentarily crashed Beck's award speech. In the audience, Beyoncé and others looked on in horror as West motioned to grab the mic before he seemingly changed his mind and returned to his seat. The audience erupted in laughter, and many Black artists seemed especially amused and relieved. This moment was of course a reference to the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards where West crashed the stage and mic on Beyoncé's behalf from Taylor Swift, who had just won Best Music Video. First congratulating Swift and promising to let her finish, West went on to reason that Beyoncé's video for Single Ladies was "one of the best videos of all time." From her front-seat view, Beyoncé looked on in disbelief. Beyond the incident being framed as a black man bullying a young white woman, it did not help matters that West was also wearing black, in contrast to Swift's silver-almost-white gown. As West said in response to his actions in 2015, "At this point we're tired of it because what happens is when you keep on diminishing art and not respecting the craft and smacking people in the face after they deliver monumental feats in music, you're disrespectful to inspiration" (Peters). In 2017, Beyoncé lost again at the Grammys in the Album of the Year category, this time to Adele, who reserved a portion of her speech to praise Beyoncé for her artistic achievement and influence. In surveying the "monumental feats" that have gone un-awarded in this category despite critical reception and wins in rap-related categories—The

Fugees' *The Score* in 1997, Kanye West's *The College Dropout*, *Late Registration*, and *Graduation* albums and more—the disrespect arguably reflects the idea that Album of the Year is reserved for projects which do not disturb the normative standard in place, or what E. Patrick Johnson explains as "'whiteness' as the master trope of purity, supremacy, and entitlement, as a ubiquitous, fixed, unifying signifier" (4).

When Lamar was commissioned to perform at the 2016 Grammy Awards, it would be his second time performing at the show. His discography reflects a consistent and autobiographical interrogation of place, racism, religion, and the trauma suffered at the margins, including in his hometown of Compton. With this is mind, both the show and the spectator alike could assume that he would infuse these themes into his set. Awards host LL Cool J described Lamar's anticipated performance as "controversial" in an interview before the show's airing. As *Billboard* reported, Lamar's motivations as well as the notion of controversy were explained by Grammy producer Ken Ehrlich:

> Controversial… I'm not sure that's the right word. Certainly it's provocative … In this case, Kendrick came to us and said that we live in a time where these issues confront us every day and that it's important that they be given a public forum, and he would like to use his x number of minutes to create a great performance that is consistent with his this [sic] year. It is overtly political and it is overtly provocative, and I think if nothing else it's going to give people something to think about and talk about.

Lamar had already given conservative media plenty to discuss with his performance of song "Alright" at the BET Awards, where he stood atop a patrol car, rapping the lyrics "and we hate po-po / wanna' kill us dead in the street fo' sho.'" Co-hosts at Fox News' *The Five* traded critiques of the performance. Kimberly Guilfoyle acknowledged that it was Lamar's "right to express himself," but said the display did not "excite" her, "turn her on" or "interest her." The eroticization of her gaze on black male bodies had voided the impactful message Lamar wanted

to convey. In the same segment, Geraldo Rivera alleged that "hip hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years." Again similar to Beyoncé, Lamar was provoked to respond to these accusations, telling *TMZ* in an interview:

> the senseless acts of killings of these young boys out there…This is reality, this is my world, this is what I talk about in my music. You can't delude that. Me being on a cop car, that's a performance piece after these senseless acts…Hip-hop is not the problem. Our reality is the problem of the situation. This is our music. This is us expressing ourselves.

Lamar's performance began with a take on America's prison system. He appeared onstage as the lead of a chain gang, the clanking of his shackles remarkably audible in the silence. The stage itself was a prison, with part of the band positioned behind a cell. Lamar performed "Blacker the Berry," rapping just one lyric of the song, or as Spencer Kornhaber wrote in *The Atlantic*, "the one where the narrator is in full righteous-fury mode drawing power from his heritage to confront white America." Like Beyoncé does with "Formation," Lamar described his physical features and the hatred received because of them:

> I'm African-American, I'm African
> I'm black as the moon, heritage of a small village
> Pardon my residence
> Came from the bottom of mankind
> My hair is nappy, you know that it's big, my nose is round and wide
> You hate me don't you?
> You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture

As Lamar and the other mock-prisoners removed their chains, the stage was shrouded in darkness, revealing the glowing patterns upon their uniforms. Freed, the men danced to the song's escalatory chorus. Lamar migrated to another part of the stage, dimension and time. Against the background of a large bonfire, Lamar rapped "Alright," a message of fostering hope despite the odds stacked against Black America. His recitations were often acapella, further emphasizing the discernibility

of his lyrics. Nevertheless, Lamar practiced carefulness in provoking the mainstream spectator—censoring himself by omitting the song's lone lyric on tension between police and black citizens.

Averting any similar criticism that he faced from his BET performance, he instead said "I'm at the preacher's door, wanna' kill us dead at the preacher's door / we said give 'em some mo." Lamar transitioned a final time to another area of the stage. In this set, the bruise impressed on his face was fully visible. As the song "untitled 03", which had not been released yet, intensified, so did the camerawork in an exposition of internal havoc; rapid cuts, sporadic lights, and a speed to Lamar's lyrical delivery make his words more combative than discernible. His final verse summed up the chief goal of his performance: "Conversation for the entire nation/ this is bigger than us." The song ends abruptly as a massive glowing image of Africa appears behind him with "Compton" written in the center. Kendrick stood in the shadow of this image, overtly affixing the plight of Black America to the place of its ancestors.

Similar to the performances of D'Angelo and Beyoncé, Lamar's set garnered massive reception with most media outlets in praise of its efforts to unpack the nation's ills. *CNN Entertainment* surveyed social media responses, reasoning that the performance was accepted as "an authentic representation of what many black people from blighted areas, as well as those who have the means to live elsewhere, still feel: America is not for them." Reviews including *USA Today's* focused on the performance's shock value and provocative display: "People felt uncomfortable with Beyoncé having her dancers wear Black Panthers outfits? Lamar walked out in chains." At *US Weekly*, the first word of their article was simply, "damn," then noting that Lamar "shut down the entirety of the audience with his powerful presence and words." Celebrities lined up to congratulate Lamar on social media. Ellen DeGeneres told Lamar he was "brilliant" while actress Taraji P. Henson heralded the performance as "powerful and moving and on time

and truthful and fearless." With the abundance of admiration for his work, there was yet a small crowd of underwhelmed spectators, including John Moser of the *Morning Call* who insisted that the performance "wasn't the masterpiece theater everyone is saying it was," and the set of three songs was nothing more than a "cacophony medley." Contrary to other reviews, Moser's found the performance far from provocative:

> His being led in chained was very cliché, and if he indeed wanted to make a strong statement, he wouldn't have omitted the incendiary line about blacks hating police, who the song says, "Wanna kill us dead in the street fo' sho'." But he did. Oh well… Far more edgy than Lamar's performance was actor/musician Gary Sinese giving a shout out to military men and women while presenting an award.

Though his review verged on trolling, Moser was likely not alone in his critique of Lamar's performance as it boldly chronicled America's flaws. But as Lamar's performance asserts, history is not cliché, and Lamar's willingness to ignite conversations on the repetitive nature of American history suggests he will continue to do so with hopes that the cycle will end.

The Labor of Unsanctioned Resistance

Outside the arena of sanctioned protest, many significant cultural moments occurred after the aforementioned performances. Many more unarmed Black citizens were killed by police officers. There was Alton Sterling on July 5, 2016, in Baton Rouge, and the next day in Minnesota, Philando Castile was killed, his last moments captured live on Facebook. Across the world in Glasgow, Beyoncé stopped her Formation Tour concert and asked for a moment of silence for Sterling, Castile, and the too many victims of police brutality, displaying their names behind her onstage. She then released a statement on her website, criticizing the recent killings and appealing to all readers to take action:

> We are sick and tired of the killings of young men and women in our communities. It is up to us to take a stand and demand that they "stop killing us." We don't need sympathy. We need everyone to respect our lives. We're going to stand up as a

> community and fight against anyone who believes that murder or any violent action by those who are sworn to protect us should consistently go unpunished. These robberies of lives make us feel helpless and hopeless but we have to believe that we are fighting for the rights of the next generation, for the next young men and women who believe in good. This is a human fight. No matter your race, gender or sexual orientation. This is a fight for anyone who feels marginalized, who is struggling for freedom and human rights. This is not a plea to all police officers but toward any human being who fails to value life. The war on people of color and all minorities needs to be over…While we pray for the families of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, we will also pray for an end to this plague of injustice in our communities.

Protest against police brutality and marginalization was reverberating throughout spaces of entertainment. In the sports realm, Colin Kaepernick used his platform as a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers. For every game of the 2016 NFL season and into the 2017 season until he opted out of his contract, Kaepernick first sat and then began kneeling during the national anthem. His protest was double-sided—he inspired many athletes and citizens around the world to join him in the demonstration against social injustice of African Americans. Conversely, criticism was swift and massive. As one fan put it, "He's entitled to his opinion. We fought for that. I just think he's a jerk." Initially, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell was gentle in his reproach of Kaepernick, citing the need to have "respect for our country, for our flag, for the people who make our country better; for law enforcement, and for our military who are out fighting for our freedoms and our ideals." The idea that, by kneeling, he was disrespecting the military forces and what the flag represented ultimately proved that people misunderstood the method and the message of his protest. As Kaepernick explained when questioned by media, men and women in the armed forces were "dying in vain because this country isn't holding their end of the bargain up, as far as giving freedom and justice, liberty to everybody." His scorn was not directed towards the brave men and women who serve, but with his country, which has

allowed continued injustices and modern-day lynching of its own citizens with no adequate structures of accountability.

Kaepernick, who toiled on the field game after game, taking hit after hit in the name of his team, franchise owner, fans and the NFL organization— was deemed a threat to patriotism when he dared to contest the ills of his country. The disposition towards his protest was further fueled by the Trump presidency, with Trump directly calling for Kaepernick's suspension. Before a crowd of supporters, Trump encouraged NFL owners to fire players who protested during the anthem: "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out. He's fired. He's fired!'" After Kaepernick was released from his contract, not a single team would sign him the following season, leading to speculation of blacklisting and resulting in a collusion lawsuit against the NFL.

Kaepernick was not the only one whose protest was misconstrued. The Black Lives Matter movement—which began in 2012 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in Trayvon Martin's death—was continually demonized by conservative media outlets and politicians, who *New York Time's* Editorial Board insisted were on a quest to "cast the phrase "Black Lives Matter" as an inflammatory or even hateful anti-white expression that has no legitimate place in a civil rights campaign." Many commentators and social media users counter this phrase with #AllLivesMatter, implying that Black lives are not the *only* lives that matter or #BlueLivesMatter, pitting the value of police officers against Black citizens. Both phrases dismiss the devaluation of Black bodies, and it is arguably this willful ignorance that espouses tolerance of the killings. Through artistic expression, Kendrick Lamar takes aim at this contestation of narrative during his opening performance at the 2018 Grammys.

“This Is a Satire by Kendrick Lamar”

Lamar’s performance began with a background of an American flag wavering across a large screen. A line of dancers dressed as troops marched to the beat of “XXX,” a song grappling with the paradox of violence and gun control. The song’s first half reflects on a friend who comes to Lamar and asks for advice on what to do regarding his slain son. Although Lamar practices pacifism, he admits to his friend that if it were his son, or any of his loved ones, he’d kill the person(s) with no hesitation. The intro to “XXX” is a lamentation of America’s selective empathy:

> America
> God bless you if it’s good to you
> America, please take my hand
> Can you help me understand?

Lamar’s face was one of torment as he performed, his eyes rarely leaving the stage floor. Dressed as “Kung-Fu Kenny,” an overarching theme and ominous character referenced throughout his 2017 album *DAMN,* Lamar marched in formation with the troops as he rapped, “ain’t no Black power when your baby killed by a coward.” The song concluded with the sound of a gunshot, and the wavering flag disappeared. Now the screen projected a message: “This is a satire by Kendrick Lamar.” Lamar kneeled as the band U2 appeared behind him. Bono sang of America, “It’s not a place, this country is to me a sound of drum and bass. You close your eyes to look around.” Lamar then transitioned to the second part of another song, entitled “DNA”, a song that outlines what is—and isn’t— in the DNA of Black America. The formation of the troops was suddenly a mob encamping around Kendrick as he rapped, “My DNA not for

imitation / Your DNA an abomination." Again, the song ended with a gunshot. This time, Lamar insinuated that the victim was him, as he gestured a gun with his hand.

Lamar employed Dave Chappelle to interject his performance with breaths of humor, a conscious choice, considering the comedian's style of humor as it pertains to pop culture, politics, and issues of representation. Chappelle introduced himself to the television audience before explaining that he is there to "remind the audience that the only thing more frightening than watching a black man be honest in America, is being an honest black man in America." As the performance resumed, the staging transformed. Lamar was then accompanied by a woman beating a large drum against a background of fiery pyrotechnics. Lamar performed a medley of sorts as the lyrics were both from "Big Shot" and "No Freezer," the former a song featured on the *Black Panther* soundtrack. Lamar's black outfit contrasted with that of the dancer who wore all white. At the end of this performance another gunshot rang, and the dancer lay motionless under Lamar's body. Dave Chappelle appeared again, this time with a look of concern and disbelief. "Is this on cable?" he asked. "This CBS? It looks like this brother's singing and dancing, but this brother's taking enormous chances." Referencing an infamous quote from Muhammad Ali, Chappelle told Lamar, "Rumble young man, rumble!"

Lamar was now surrounded by a mob of men and women all dressed in red. He raps the end of "King's Dead," another song featured on the *Black Panther* film soundtrack which was not released at the time. In a captivating display, with each lyric recited, he 'kills off' each of the onstage dancers:

> Who am I? Not your father, not your brother
> Not your reason, not your future
> Not your comfort, not your reverence, not your glory
> Not your heaven, not your angel, not your spirit
> Not your message, not your freedom
> Not your people, not your neighbor

> Not your baby, not your equal
> Not the title y'all want me under
> All hail King Killmonger

It is important to note that Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan) is the main villain in *Black Panther*. His rage towards main protagonist T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) and the fictional world of Wakanda epitomizes the African adage that "if a child is not initiated into the village, he will burn it down just to feel its warmth." It is T'Challa who reigns as king, and he is positioned as the clean-cut hero of the film. Killmonger challenges him for the kingship, but his rough-edged approach and abrasive treatment of the Wakandans makes him more an enemy than a potential leader. Lamar's lyrics reason that such fixed definitions of identity can be contested. With fiery pyrotechnics still alit, Lamar concluded here to a standing ovation of applause and cheers. Looming behind him on the screen was a massive projection of the Statue of Liberty.

In using various symbols of America—the flag, the soldier, and the Statue of Liberty, Lamar offered a new interpretation of American citizenship for marginalized persons. He interrogates their intended meaning in his lyrics and performance, arriving at the idea that America continues to fail Black and Brown citizens. They may honor and protect American ideals through their pride and service, but they can never fully lay claim to them. For this population of Americans, patriotism is illogical—how can they be proud of a country that seemingly hates them? As he asks America, "can you help me understand?" he calls for the audience to help him make sense of it, presumably starting with dialogue provoked by his protest performance.

In the *Washington Post's* words, simply put— "Kendrick Lamar did not come to play around." Contrary to his last performance, Lamar was especially intentional on marking his piece as protest. The anticipation of backlash is embedded in his performance; before commentators

have the chance to misconstrue the message, Lamar explicitly denotes that it is "satire," daring critics to deny the truth behind the music. As *The Atlantic* writes, "he was out to make a statement about black rage—and to torch the notion that he'd be anyone's respectability totem." In 2016, Lamar stayed within the lines of measurable controversy on the Grammy's stage.

By 2018, he was parodying his detractors. His performance was a premier demonstration of counter-language and subverting the normative gaze. *Vanity Fair* described Lamar's performance as "a forceful opener," and it seemed to establish a precedent for the presenters, performers, and awardees to address issues of the moment with their camera time. In her introduction of Kesha, singer Janelle Monae referenced the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, both addressing the oppression of women on grounds including but not limited to pay inequality, sexual harassment and abuse, and misogynistic industry practices. For those who aligned with these problematic tendencies, Monae warned them that they would soon be eclipsed by women who "have the power to undo the culture that does not serve us well." Cuban-born singer Camila Cabello spoke to the plight of the DREAMers as she introduced U2 and their Statue of Liberty performance. After a riveting performance of "1-800-273-8255" a song on suicide awareness, rapper Logic delivered a powerful message that included admonishing Donald Trump's notion of "shithole countries." Ironically, Logic was muted as he repeated Trump's words and the camera cut to an aerial shot of the audience to further censor him. In his Best Rap Album award speech, Kendrick Lamar used his time to delineate what it meant for him to be a hip hop artist, engaging the politics of the gaze and art's potential to implore change. Beyond the accolades and wealth, "it's really about expressing yourself and putting that paint on the canvas for the world to evolve for the next listener, the next generation after that." And with *DAMN* receiving the 2018 music

Pulitzer prize, "the first non-classical, non-jazz album to win the award in its 75-year history" (Lynch), Lamar has become an exception to the dynamic of denial of black musical artists.

D'Angelo, Lamar, and Beyoncé have each expressed themselves in works of critical acclaim and helped to continue the conversation on police brutality and Black trauma. But how can protest music and performance effect evolution? Daphne A. Brooks writes that such a "musical statement, the sound of black sonic dissent, has a history to it that stretches across the centuries." Freedom songs from slavery to the civil rights movement affected change in the resonance of their message. Long after these movements passed, the songs remain and their messages are enduringly seen, heard, and employed as points of reference for society to reflect on what has and has not changed. As those songs were used to bring hope and courage to those in struggle and bondage, movements today use the works of present-day artists to find this same solace and courage. Black Lives Matter has embraced each of these artists' works as protest songs to score their movement.

As artists, D'Angelo, Beyoncé and Lamar possess fame, wealth, and visibility, and they use each of these facets to carry the message of those who live to tell the story of police brutality and speak for those who are no longer here**.** Since creating these performances, each artist has taken different approaches in sustaining their resistance. While D'Angelo continues to perform his masterful album of political and social commentary around the world, he has not made any waves concerning protest since his SNL performance. Using his social media platform mainly to promote tour dates and reflect on his artistry, D'Angelo has somewhat stepped aside to allow other artists to lead the charge of protest performance and artistry.

With the album *DAMN.*, Kendrick Lamar aimed to go a different route from his previous albums, which are hard-hitting social critiques. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Lamar shared

that his latest release was less about addressing the issues and more about undressing himself: "On the record, I made an action to *not* speak about what's going on in the world or the places they put us in. Speak on self; reflection of self first. That's where the initial change will start from." This mode of self-study pervades the visual projects that accompany his album. Videos for songs "DNA," "Humble," "LOVE," "Element," are all in labor of introspection. As this process is shared with fans, perhaps they too will have the courage to speak the ugly truths about their privilege, ignorance, and passivity in regards to matters of Black life in America, whether they identify as Black or not.

In recent years, Beyoncé's artistry and humanitarianism has emphasized the visibility of Black communities. *Beyoncé* and *Lemonade* marked shifts in the focus of her content—always a proud Black woman, listeners were hearing her express this sentiment in her music. Through the philanthropic works of her BeyGood initiative, she has contributed to Hurricane Harvey relief, celebrated Black History by highlighting several historically black colleges and universities on her website, created a Formation Scholars fund for college students, and led efforts to get clean water to Flint, Michigan residents in addition to other causes. Notoriously private in her personal and philanthropic life, Beyoncé gives fans a glimpse of both areas on her website. While some might see this outspokenness as a ploy for positive press, I reason that it affirms her allegiance to the causes of African Americans. As she lends her voice, wealth, and platform, she asserts that while mainstream America might claim her as the grandest entertainer alive, she is still a Black woman of Creole and African descent from Houston, Texas. She rejects meanings fixed upon her by controlling her narrative.

Beyoncé also uses social media platforms including Instagram to further align herself with Black culture, often with fashion statements. For the Clive Davis and Recording Academy's

annual Pre-Grammy Gala, Beyoncé wore a black gown with a black leather beret. At another pre-Grammy event, she wore black panther earrings with another black gown. And on the night of the 2018 Grammys, she took to Instagram again to post photos of her look—her hair braided, she donned an all-black ensemble complete with a black panther clutch. After wide speculation that the fashion statement was a hint of a cameo in the *Black Panther* film, fashion designer Nicolas Jebran clarified that her looks were inspired by the Black Panther Party. In his words, "The idea was to create a moment, a memorable design with meaning because it's more than just a gown" (Okwodu). On a quest to create moments, Beyoncé would do just that during her 2018 Coachella performance.

#Beychella: From Resistance to Insistence

Created by Paul Tollett, the first Coachella Valley Music Festival was held in 1999. Over the years, the annual festival has attracted crowds upwards of half a million people. The musicians featured offer a range of genres; rock, pop, electronic, hip hop and more have been heavily represented throughout the festival's history. However, despite this variety of music, the festival-goers each year are predominantly white. The lack of diversity extends to gender, as only two female artists had headlined the show before Beyoncé, Bjork and Lady Gaga. The latter was brought in to replace Beyoncé who stepped down from headlining the festival in 2017 following her pregnancy.

Beyoncé was set to make history as the first Black woman to headline the festival, and she made the most of this moment by giving Coachella the most spectacularly Black performance in the festival's history. The overarching theme of her set were historically Black collegiate institutions. Throughout her set, a large marching played alongside her tracks. She

enlisted HBCU alumni to participate as dancers and band members. She simulated a homecoming step show and the customs of Black Greek Letter Organizations, even creating her own—Beta Delta Kappa. As a Black woman and HBCU alumna, I was one of many spectators who felt considered. HBCUs are suffering financially more than ever in recent years and are often derided as having crumbling campuses, chaotic leadership, and resources seemingly insufficient when stacked against predominantly white institutions. They are viewed as last options, less than, or simply—not 'seen' at all. Beyoncé's performance contested notions of undervaluation by delivering a beautiful ode to the traditions of HBCUs. As Doreen St. Félix writes, the performance was "an education in black expression… To preach these lessons at Coachella, where music is secondary to casual hedonism and faux bohemia, was a bracing act of subversion." Beyoncé's survey of HBCU culture was "homecoming as dissent." The music, the Greek life, the energy, the education— it was all there with no context and no apologies.

Beyond a survey of HBCU traditions, Beyoncé provided an audiovisual montage of culture across the African diaspora as well as a plethora of cultural signs. Her set list covered New Orleans' brassy sound, Houston's chopped-and-screwed music, Brooklyn's hip hop legacy, Jamaica's dancehall, and the afrobeat of Nigeria's infamous rebel artist Fela Kuti. She sang "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which is known as the Black national anthem, with no preface to its origin and sampled Nina Simone's "Lilac Wine." Beyoncé continued her examination of Black womanhood and feminism; at one point in the set, the audience marinates on a sound bite from a Malcom X speech where he contended that "The most disrespected person in America is the Black Woman...The most unprotected person in America is the Black Woman." Beyoncé was also intentional in her appearance during the set. Her first dress resembled Egyptian queen Nefertiti, and she later donned a mesh top with a crest that included symbols of power and

liberation in “an Egyptian royal, a black first, a black panther, and a bee” (Borge). Before the audience, Beyoncé thanked Coachella for the honor of being the first Black woman to headline the festival. After a brief pause, she then asked, “Ain’t that ‘bout a bitch?” It was a rhetorical question that would find no justifiable answer.

To put on a display of such magnitude is spectacular, but it is even more astounding when one considers the majority of the Coachella audience, who presumably did not understand Beyoncé’s performance as a tribute to HBCUs. Her mother, Tina Knowles, reflected on her concerns about the performance in a post on Instagram. She warned her daughter that she was “afraid that the predominately white audience at Coachella would be confused by all of the black culture and Black college culture because it was something that they might not get.” In response, Beyoncé told her mother that she had reached a point in her career where she has a “true voice” and “a responsibility to what’s best for the world and not what is most popular.” She had hopes that after her performance, those who did not understand would do the needed research, and that it would encourage youth to consider applying to such schools. To jumpstart this potential movement, Beyoncé announced a new initiative after her performance. Her Homecoming Scholars Award Program will award one student each from Xavier, Wilberforce, Tuskegee and Bethune-Cookman— all historically black universities— a scholarship of $25,000.

With her performance and call to action, Beyoncé transcended resistance, instead asserting her power to teach her audience, to reassign meaning to herself, the institutions of Black culture she holds dear, and even Coachella, a festival that has been slow in giving platforms to women and people of color. In this moment of continual evolution for Beyoncé as an artist and icon, it is not as easy for America to lay claim to her without acknowledging the sources that inform her language and movement.

Conclusion

While police brutality and other ills continue to pervade Black communities, this trinity of artists use their platform to celebrate the history, culture, and persistence of African Americans. As bell hooks tells us, the margin is "a profound edge" (149). Standing in for the marginalized who do not have the platform or voice to share their stories, artists including Beyoncé have become the profound edge for mainstream audiences to trek. Everyone— regardless of race, class, or political affiliation— can meet there. Hopefully, they will not leave the same way they arrived.

Though I do not speak to it extensively here, these performances were heavily engaged through social media and generated much discussion there. The viral potential of these performances issues its own power, in the speed and potential for intersectional discourse. As actual footage of police brutality and instances of prejudice circulate the web—the regurgitation of these images being another form of violence— having positive and even entertaining images counters this pain while keeping the message at the forefront of mainstream media.

This project offers a framework that can generate close examinations into how these performances are dually impactful and limited, implicit and overt, resistant and obligatory. And while D'Angelo, Beyoncé, Kendrick Lamar's performances can and will be debated on grounds of authorial intention and aesthetic pleasure, it is clear they have made great strides towards a resurgence of Black artistry which simultaneously enlightens and entertains an audience.

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