A “Black Body Electric” - African American Rhetoric(s) and the Hip-Hop Aesthetic:

Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, Beyoncé Knowles’ *Lemonade*, and

Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*

by

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This work examines the formalistic shifts in contemporary African American literature through a hip-hop lens. No longer following the status quo regarding genre or voice, these texts manage to reposition Black writing by forcing an intimate conversation with their readers that compels introspection. Coupled with a mixed-media approach, these works manage to engage and center those readers who might otherwise not have access to the interior monologues of what it feels like to be Black in “post-racial” America.

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This work is dedicated with deepest love and appreciation to Nina and Siri in hopes that they will always see the beauty and value in all their experiences as they pursue their hopes and dreams, and to Byron, who already does.

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INTRODUCTION

"I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul."
from Part I, "I Sing the Body Electric," Walt Whitman

While some may still debate the idea of literature as a political action, across genres it can be substantiated that literature at its core aims in some way to "move" its reader. Be it reconciling internal discomforts, creating a healthy cognitive dissonance, or more actively compelling a call to action, literature's aim is ultimately inclusive and persuasive, even while entertaining its audience. Three contemporary texts that fit this description well are Claudia Rankine's 2014 *Citizen-An American Lyric*, Beyoncé Knowles' 2016 visual album *Lemonade*, and Ta-Nehisi Coates's 2015 *Between the World and Me*. In the vein of the famous Walt Whitman poem from *Leaves of Grass*, "I Sing the Body Electric," these contemporary African American writers encourage solidarity across race, class, and gender as they intimately articulate the various challenges associated with the black American experience. Like Whitman's multiple revised work to reflect his contemporary world, these texts reflect a type of "revision" of the African-American narrative, one that interestingly aims to become part of the much contested "Body Electric" of which Whitman wrote. While Whitman's 1855 poem was meant to sing the praise and value of all Americans, again, like the poem itself, these writers present narrative experiences often censored in the larger "body" of stories about American identity. With their texts, Rankine, Beyoncé, and Coates reflect the diversity of the issues and challenges of black Americans through mixtures of media and genre, while grounding their art and commentary in the evolutionary product of a

truly American musical art form, Hip-Hop. In this thesis I explore how these writers' use of tropes and tools from the hip-hop aesthetic, as described by James Braxton Peterson in *Hip-Hop Headphones*, support the musings of Rankine, Beyoncé, and Coates on the state of the Black Body in a way that centers the Black experience thereby moving closer towards a valued position within Whitman's "body electric," one that still, to this day, excludes black bodies.

Particularly in the US— from its earliest sermons, pamphlets, essays, and poems— the use of literature as a subversive act has been the norm. Now, as the United States grapples with the racial backlash surrounding the election of its 45th President in response to the two terms of its first African American President, these writers/artists aim to re-position African American experiences in a way that more fully includes the range of fears and anxieties which accompany daily existence within the clutches of systemic racism. In a manner reminiscent of earlier periods in our nation's history, where authors and artists took it upon themselves to publicize the concerns of "Black Folks," these contemporary writers/artists offer a nuanced Blackness in a purposefully disruptive manner, just as DJ might. In the wake of the wave of killings of Black men and women who found themselves on the receiving end of unchecked police brutality and civilian vigilantism, the concerns of Black folks are those of the Black Body in all its physical and metaphysical forms.

Producing a string of journalists/writers in the latter half of the twentieth century that comprised what was later dubbed "The Word Movement" (Nguyen), hip-hop's literary influence is not new. These music-critics-turned-social-commentators "used the music as an entry point into discussing race, identity, youth, and broader

culture...extensively [covering] politics and social issues" (Nguyen). While not necessarily a new concern, discussing how these contemporary artists interpret and reflect upon the Black body by incorporating a variety of media as an extension of the hybridity and intersectional natures of the complex psycho-social issues affecting Black Americans is not as common. Adam J. Banks likens the image of the new age of African American rhetoric to that of a "digital griot" (3), comparing the techniques of the contemporary hip-hop DJ to those creatives of more traditional rhetorical practice. Banks observes that contemporary African American rhetoric(s) engage with a "scratch," or "an interruption… [that] breaks the linearity of the text" (1) and end with the "fade…toward an African American Rhetoric 2.0" that emphasizes "a griotic tradition," engaging in "practices with the mix, remix, and mixtape" (153). While it is imperative to note that Banks' work appears in the context of writing instruction, his theory serves as a useful element in the development of literary theory rooted in hip-hop culture. Especially in Banks' fifth chapter of *Digital Griots*, we are given the tools to theorize the "new ways of writing about race" (Laird), that Rankine embraces, but also Coates and Beyoncé employ in response to race relations in the waning moments of the Obama Era. As alluded to previously, James Braxton Peterson quotes Petchauer who references these elements as "hip-hop aesthetic forms," particularly those elements associated with the "expressive elements" of the musical genre: DJ-ing, MC-ing, Breakdancing, and Graffiti (180). In the context of this thesis, however, the reference to hip-hop aesthetics will include aspects of Banks' theory as it supports Peterson's isolation of "Hip-Hop's educational elements: knowledge, consciousness, search, and discovery, and participation" (180). As subversive as the original musical sub-culture in

its anti-establishment posturing, so are the literary applications of the scratch, remix, and bold centering of African American subjects, found in the works of Rankine, Beyoncé, and Coates. With this approach, audiences consider more urgently, through forced silences and interruptions, the personal experiences of black Americans. Readers leave with new knowledge and consciousness as they attempt reconciliation of the larger implications for American society.

Claudia Rankine's mix resembles more of a "mashup" of poetic prose interspersed with visual images and is the finest example of Banks' analogy concerning the purposeful interruption of an otherwise linear text. Offering her observations in a form reminiscent of dramatic monologue, her use of "second-person present" both "implicates as it includes" (Laird). She chronicles the major public and daily personal encounters with racism through the use of poetically captured prose re-imaginings of everything from news transcripts to micro-aggressions recollected from her own as well as colleagues' experiences. These recollections are bridged with images from across the artistic spectrum. While these experiences are largely rooted in her world of academia, this hybrid approach to racial discourse mirrors Banks' comparison to the DJ practice of compiling a mixtape compilation— creating new commentary by bringing together a variety of complimentary sounds, i.e., voices. Rankine's work is anchored in the abstract notion of what it means to be a Black citizen of the United States, most specifically, but she also throws a transatlantic glance at what it means to be a person of color across the European-influenced diaspora.

Rankine recounts and recollects her experiences in part through what Brittney C. Cooper refers to as "embodied discourse" in her book *Beyond Respectability*, where

Cooper theorizes the centering of the working class and especially Black women through prominent placement of Black female bodies. This type of discourse, which serves to "disrupt the smooth function of the cultural dissemblance and the politics of respectability as the paradigmatic frames through which to engage Black women's ideas and their politics" (3) is emphasized with the reinforcement of the Black female persona in the forms of the various images the author places beside her original compositions. Beyoncé too uses what Cooper calls "textual activism" (3) to engage her audience; likewise, Ta-Nehisi Coates centers tender recollections of the women in his life as a form of counter-narrative to prevailing stereotypes of angry Black women.

It is the Black body that galvanizes these contemporary writers. Ta-Nehisi Coates centers the Black body as a form of his didactic letter to his son in *Between the World and Me* as it is fundamental to the existence of The United States of America. Paul Gilroy in his *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness* argues that it is the Black body that serves as the crux of Modernity as it served as anchor of the North Atlantic Slave Trade, essentially kick-starting commerce for the Modern era. To this day, Black art and culture, blood, sweat, and tears mobilize world economies. Coates reinforces, that is remixes, this idea as he explores the way Black bodies are necessary for the existence of those who "believe that they are white" (5).

Coates continues with a remix of the Baldwinian sentiments of the late 60s. While Coates typically employs his textual activism as a national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, he shifts his mastery of the essay to this use of the "letter," inviting a more personal approach to the political realities he reveals to his "audience," i.e., his son. Updated versions of the same themes tackled by James Baldwin are presented through

a hip-hop generation lens: systemic racism, police brutality, and the smoke screen that is the American Dream is tackled in similar voice as Rankine's second-person, allowing his reader to eavesdrop on this father-son moment in the wake of the acquittal of the police officer(s) involved in the death of Michael Brown. Coates centers the Black body as he notes in various ways to his son "that our world is physical" (33). Several criticisms have taken a closer look at the author's centering of the body, notably James B. Haile, III in "Ta-Nehisi Coates's Phenomenology of the Body" where he writes that Coates "mentions it some forty-two times throughout the book" (494), thereby centering the body in the style of embodied discourse much as Rankine and Beyoncé do. Haile points to one of the originators of Black Body discourse, Frantz Fanon, quoting that

> [t]he Black body is 'stolen' as a dynamic force of self and world creation and replaced with a non-dynamic phenomenal object within the (colonial) system of meaning and value. This [meant], for Fanon, that the meaning of the world, its values, its ideas and concepts, and the material ordering and actions follow not from a Black lived experience but from one that is explicitly white" (495).

Coates aims with his text, as do Rankine and Knowles, to more fully reframe the "Black lived experience" into one that has value on its own by urging his son never to forget and always embrace the struggle for autonomy on his terms rather than aligning himself with the status quo.

Not without criticism, Coates' discourse continues to be scrutinized, most notably by Cornell West, who challenges Coates' rhetoric as "too narrow and dangerously

misleading," resulting in nothing more than a "fetishiz[ing of] white supremacy" (West). Perhaps, though, it is the simpler assessment by University of Mississippi Professor Kiese Laymon that identifies Coates' promise as a writer in his "desire to craft bombastic, but never too dense, political prose, and his ability to write through what he [is] currently learning within the pocket of the piece" (Laymon). This "pocket" alludes to the lyrical groove in which DJs and other musicians find themselves as they become one with their subject, in this case, the music. Consequently, the intimacy of working through an idea to arrive at a greater understanding makes his prose more powerful as a companion piece to those first becoming acquainted with the Black struggle.

Beyoncé Knowles-Carter (hereafter, Beyoncé) has similarly lived her "struggle" for all to witness. She interprets this painful process in a visual album that tackles her personal and public challenges with Black womanhood. As a global pop icon, her marriage to hip-hop mogul Shaun Carter, aka Jay-Z, catapulted the duo to power couple status. With *Lemonade*, Beyoncé shares a portion of their "lived experience" via her music, the poetry inspired by British Somali poet Warsan Shire, alongside the film/video interpretations of her texts. These rhetorical maneuvers are examples of Banks' theory of the "mixtape" and Peterson's "Hip-hop educational elements" as applied to writing. Beyoncé's centering of the Black woman's struggle in the face of patriarchal structures catalyzes feminist discourse as well as racial discourse. Taking life's proverbial "lemons" and making from them *Lemonade*, Beyoncé uses a variety of media forms, textual structures, and layered themes to capitalize on the power of the hip-hop aesthetic. While lauded and criticized at once, Beyoncé's work infuses poetry, visual tropes, alongside her music to tackle the complexities of that which is her experience, in

the process speaking for and to millions, even creating an activist force known as the "BeyHive." Her text serves all facets of the Banks analogy. The aspects of participatory culture that helped propel her work are reminiscent of the crowd that "hypes" the DJ—and vice versa— a sort of call-and-response also encouraged by the second-person intimate address that leads Beyoncé's disclosure in *Lemonade*. Specifically, in "'She Invited Other People to that Space': Audience Habitus, Place, and Social Justice in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*," Amanda Nell Edgar proposes that "place offers an effective framework for connecting popular culture with social justice narratives" (1). Edgar "explored audience interpretations of *Lemonade* in 2016's tumultuous racial climate" and found that audiences used the text "as a tool to understand and reimagine historical social movements…cultivat[ing] an anti-racist habitus in attempts to make their worlds more just" (1). Entire web communities exist in giving a variety of interpretations of *Lemonade*'s symbolism; from the ratchet to the academic, they work together to create a new understanding of perspectives on being Black and female in this world.

Critics and criticism exist for each of these popular works, but none has placed them beside one another as intertextual products of a key moment in Black/world history in a way that reflects the evolution of African American rhetoric as it functions in the twenty-first century in support of social justice advocacy.

While the writers have been interviewed extensively, and each is offered ample opportunity to expand on their texts and themes in digital spaces, it is only of late that analysis of their disruptive nature as an element of African American rhetoric(s) exists. An analysis that investigates the deliberate narrative, rhetorical, and aesthetic choices these authors make in an effort to reach their very specific audiences is warranted as a

guidepost for future engagement. Their range of influence—and those they inspire—might well be extended further if taken into consideration from this angle.

In this thesis, I argue that Rankine, Beyoncé, and Coates each embark upon an intimate presentation of the effects of various aspects of systemic oppressive practices. Each gives voice to a particular aspect of the "lived Black Experience" by inviting the public into their very private encounters and, more importantly, their responses to systemic oppression of various kinds. They employ particular literary techniques rooted in and built upon tropes of contemporary African American rhetoric. Together with hip-hop influenced narrative structures that encourage participatory practices, these three artists with their inclusion of varying media exemplify a new generation of voices that run contrary to established literary norms for social justice advocacy, much in the tradition of the unconventional poetic and musical forms of their hip-hop predecessors.

Re-centering of discourse surrounding social justice advocacy is already happening. From the application of post-colonial to intersectional theories, the move towards dismantling institutionalized oppression may seem to be happening rapidly, but when we consider that these very same conversations were had over a hundred years ago, we are reminded that the journey towards social justice is on-going. Similarly, literature as a tool for disarmament is not a new concept. Particularly when it comes to social justice pursuits in America, the personal narrative has been instrumental in awakening citizens to the social ills that envelop them. Building on tropes of the hip-hop generation, writers and artists like Claudia Rankine, Beyoncé Knowles, and Ta-Nehisi Coates merge the voices of past and present to communicate the intersectional needs of the future.

Including voices from across the African diaspora, the twenty-first century galvanizes genre and adds new media, signifying a new "Black Body Electric," rebooting and remixing parts of Whitman's famous meditation. This intersectional voice builds upon musings as far back as the ancient griots. Seeking inspiration in their Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement predecessors, they utilize the forms and functions post-modern and digital age literacies to engage in the liberatory work touted by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where the educator advocates for social justice practices that emphasize the return to humanity of the oppressor. These texts work to that end by centering the humanity of the oppressed in an empathetic manner, thereby promoting the return to humanity of the pathological oppressor. Literature reflects its time and catalyzes humanity's evolution. In its present, it entertains and informs. Studied in the future, it will continue to inform, but also help reframe conversations that promote social justice progress.

Not at all new topics, the conversations found herein have been a constant of African Americans in a variety of "covert and quasi-public spaces such as beauty shops and barbershops [that] provide safe spaces where Black folks affirm, share, and negotiate African American epistemologies and resist and subvert hegemonic Whiteness" (Nunley 222). As such, their examination finds additional complexity when assessed as an extension of the move away from traditional forms of African American rhetoric.

My conclusion points to a theorizing of these three writers' styles as examples of how new African American rhetoric(s) strive to build upon the ancestors' works by implementing the strategies and aims of hip-hop and how their culminating pieces stand

as hallmarks of the past that influenced hip-hop -- genres also linked to centering Black experience. From the Harlem Renaissance to the Broadside Press Poets, to the hip-hop journalism that marked the beginnings of the chronicling of contemporary cultural and creative voices in the 1980s, these three writers pay homage to their ancestors by synthesis of form, media, and message to address the concerns of the present. Ultimately, music, art, and literature have always been political in the Black community. As a collective, these texts poignantly intensify their persuasive powers across class, gender, and race. In that way, this work seeks to draw parallels between the specific rhetorical techniques that underscore the artistic /creative works of contemporary African American writers whose recent works were all inspired by contemporary racial, social turmoil. Their use of techniques reminiscent of the hip-hop DJ—including mixing, scratching, and remixing of existing works—reflects the complexity of the African American experience in a manner that speaks to audiences across various demographics in a potentially galvanizing manner, much like hip-hop itself. They initiate discourse centered on the impact of race and gender on identity formation. Inspired by Walt Whitman's "I Sing Body Electric's" exploration and celebration of the interconnected nature of the human condition, this thesis attempts to describe the manner in which the writers' texts "discorrupt" the status-quo by giving voice to the historically complex issues facing African American men, women, and children.

Chapter One: Claudia Rankine's *Citizen, An American Lyric*

"Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning in tendon and nerve,
They shall be stript that you may see them."
excerpt from Part VII, "I Sing the Body Electric," by Walt Whitman

Poetry especially, but also precisely crafted prose, when done well, offers unveilings of intense emotion and experiences that are akin to the exposed "tendon and nerve" to which Walt Whitman refers in his poem "I Sing the Body Electric." Received with almost immediate distinction upon its publication in 2014, Claudia Rankine's fifth poetry collection, *Citizen, An American Lyric*, invites readers into the inner landscape of ruminations nurtured by a lifetime of daily encounters as the "other" American. Nominated for awards in both poetry and criticism, Rankine's work asks and answers the question, "What does it feel like to be a citizen of this country, of this world, as a person of color?" Her examinations reveal daily affronts by friends, strangers, and colleagues, reinforced by society and the media-at-large. She purposefully selects and mixes non-traditional poetic and prose forms alongside images to underscore the complex entanglements of race, gender, and class as they similarly serve to disrupt individuals' lives and communities within the body politic in America and across the globe.

Rankine begins her expose from earliest recollections of childhood and moves through to the present, highlighting the layered affronts based solely on race, i.e., racism. In an attempt to reconcile the "historical self" from its "self self" (Rankine 14), Rankine moves from the personal to the public sphere and then back again exposing the vulnerability of Black personhood on all fronts forcing her audience to consider their

part in this publicly conducted private drama. This chapter explores the manner in which Rankine uses elements evolving out of the expressive and educational aspects of hip-hop to reflect on complex race-based experiences in everyday life. In this chapter, I explore how *Citizen*'s structural frame presents as an extension of mixing in the DJ field analogous to the musical genre/technique known as "mash-up," a vernacular term used to describe "a creative combination or mixing of content from different sources" ("Mash Up"). Her specific selections of image next to text similarly allow for the core aesthetic element associated with Hip-Hop's educational aims outlined earlier, including an implicit move towards "search and discovery" as described by Peterson where, in this case, readers are forced to "situate themselves in the … experiences … that speak directly to their own" (185). Particularly her use of second-person and embodied discourse throughout the text encourage consistent audience reflection.

The Mashup

Rankine accomplishes the exposé of the black body's fragility both literally and metaphysically through a mixed genre presentation, coupling prose with poetry and images in seven stanza/chapters by "[examining] where the body fails to catch up with language," and what happens "when language fails to catch up with memory, and how feeling is mediated when these assorted aggressions puncture the world" (Leung). Described best by Angela Hume as "a collage poem" (82), Rankine's genre mashup extends even to links on her webpage that provide the final video productions to accompany the situation scripts highlighted in stanza/chapter six of her book, among other vignettes. In availing her reflections on race from these many different

perspectives, Rankine manages to tap into a broader audience, very notably the reader who might not typically sit down with a "lyric" work. Sparked by the conversations generated by her text, Rankine created The Racial Imaginary Institute, an online community whose Mission Statement invites "an interdisciplinary range of artists, writers, knowledge-producers, and activists. It convenes a cultural laboratory in which the racial imaginaries of our time and place are engaged, read, countered, contextualized and demystified." This intertextual encouragement reinforces the intersectional nature of her subject and addresses the need for multiple approaches to reconciling race relations, more importantly creating a safer existence for those relegated to the margins of our society.

Rankine's interruption of the literary status quo is clear when we consider her text the only one ever nominated for the National Book Critics Circle in both criticism and poetry. She "pushes boundaries as a matter of course" (Wills). With her mixture of prose with poetic forms and images, Rankine does more than interrupt—she mixes to the extent of what can be likened to the "mashup," a term also taken from the music industry. Shiga notes that the mashup denotes "a form of resistance," as it is rooted in the online world of MP3 file sharing to create "unauthorized remixes" of existing music (Shiga 94). Though not defined as an element of Banks' description of the hip-hop DJ's toolbox, the origins of the mashup as an evolutionary by-product of the hip-hop DJ's stylistic contributions lends itself well in a description of Rankine's efforts. *Citizen* is more than a "mix" as it performs as Banks posits, as a new "African American rhetoric that synchronizes oral traditions, print, and digital writing as well as the dialectic tensions" (8) that support an intersectional discussion on global race relations.

As part of this "mash up" element, Rankine makes use of digital spaces as an extension of her book. For example, through her website that, she extends the exploration of racialized experiences both lived and observed. Making available her work to those who might not have been inclined to her print product (*Citizen* is also available on Kindle), she manages to potentially reach younger audiences prone to digital engagement. Her work results in what Banks envisions as a "scholar activist working to build community" (8). Additionally, through her direct address of audience and writing from her position of privilege in academia, Rankine manages to reach across the racial divide, thus beginning the bridge-building of social justice work. Rankine engages in "literacy as social practice…not as a thing to be acquired or achieved but as a complex 'practice,' a continual process of being socialized into the attitudes, behaviors, and engagements of a communicative space" (Banks 12). At once chronicling and archiving a lifetime of racialized experiences, Rankine's mashup approach to *Citizen* becomes not only a fluid representation of reflections on race but also, as Banks summarizes, a griotic critique that

> [binds] time, linking past, present, and future, [she becomes] keeper of history, master of its oral tradition, and rhetor extraordinaire, able to produce or perform for whatever segment of the tribe requires it and whatever the situation demands—celebration, critique, preservation, connection (23).

Particularly stanza/chapter VI of *Citizen* serves in this manner as Rankine begins with a collection of CNN commentary aired directly after the first reports of the 2005 effects of

Hurricane Katrina, quotes that when pulled together reveal the power of media to frame and reinforce particular stereotypical representations of a people.

Rankine, in essence, scratches her text with every new printing cycle by ending the second section with a growing list of “in memoriam” for the victims of state-sanctioned racialized violence. With its first printing in 2014, pages 134 through 135 of *Citizen* contained only the text “November 23,2012/In Memory of Jordan Russel Davis” and “February 15, 2014/The Justice System,” by its 15th printing, the text had expanded to include an additional 21 men and women who had drawn particularly strong media attention in light of the heinous violence and/or subsequent acquittal of the alleged assailant(s). Among those listed is 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was gunned down in the fall of 2014 by police officers responding to a 911 call of a black man pointing a gun at people. As it turns out, Rice was in possession of a toy gun; Rankine follows her list of victims in the more recent printings with the lines “because white men can’t/police their imagination/black people are dying” (135). Using her text to add commentary that reflects current events follows Peterson’s description of the remix where texts “feature…new or distinct lyrics” (188). In this case, Rankine functions simultaneously as a griot, updating history in real time.

Form Follows Function

By employing the powerful second-person throughout her text, Rankine forces the reader to join her speaker as they question their position in this “lesson” on race relations. Rankine notes that her approaches to form serve as reflections for the present

conditions of race in public spaces. In “Arts and Ideas,” Rankine clarifies that her stylistic choices in

> *Citizen* [are] meant in part to destabilize the text so both image and text would always have possibilities, both realized and unimagined…beyond [her] curating powers. Consequently [she] wanted to create an aesthetic form…where the text was trembling. [She] was interested in how the dynamic of intertextuality differently energizes attacks…partly, because [she] feel[s] that the entrance of the black body works like that in the American landscape… image derails expectations for public decorum and decency.

In a form both impressionistic and post-modern, Rankine manages to unsettle her reader in a way that forces more than a characterization of the speaker. Rather, it entices readers to join this reflective journey and find their place within it alongside her. This stirring of empathy creates a potential for a pause in the reader’s next opportunity for interracial interactions, be they at the workplace, on public transportation, or at the tennis club. Both black and white readers are afforded opportunities for reconsidering responses to the other.

Although Rankine declines identification as an activist (Khorana), her explication of the purposefully disruptive functions of her text speak directly to the contrary. In fact, the political positioning of her work is noted even before her book is opened. The cover art of *Citizen* beckons the reader with a centered, semi-glossy, decapitated black “hoodie” on a white background, the hanging ties of the hoodie lead down towards the

bold black title “CITIZEN,” followed by a thin grey font impression of “AN AMERICAN LYRIC.” Immediately, the uniquely American race related connotations associated with hoods, and specifically since the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin, black hoodies, are activated. The associations of terrorism against and acquitted killings of black men specifically are sadly innate with this image. Particularly the killing of 17-year-old Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his murderer are attached to this symbol in light of media attention to the descriptions made by his attacker in a recorded 911 call immediately preceding the shooting. Interestingly, however, the cover art by David Hammons, *In the Hood*, is from 1993, created shortly after one of the first videotaped recordings of abusive police brutality against Rodney King in response to a traffic violation. The global attention garnered by the released video footage to the extreme police handling of Black citizens in particular ultimately resulted in three days of riots in Los Angeles after the involved officers were acquitted of any wrongdoing. The “hood” in America functions as a symbol rooted in racial politics, i.e., systemic oppressive systems. From the hoods of the Klansmen used to hide the identities of the individuals participating in the terrorization and lynching of Blacks and others across the United States, to the ‘hoods of the urban areas where ghettoization of low income Blacks, Hispanics, as well as others were used to disenfranchise, the “hood” as cover art expresses a political positioning of the observations that follow within the text.

Claudia Rankine’s mixing of media and genre throughout her text intimate the consistent encounters with racism from an intersectional perspective that beckons reconsideration of the effectiveness of the respectability politics historically touted by African American civil rights organizations. In literature, this form of respectability

politics—aligning oneself with the majority voice— is best represented by what Vorris Nunley classifies as a "primary strand of an African American rhetorical tradition," one that includes "a purposeful, critical silence" so as not to offend the sensibilities of non-Black audiences (221). Rankine's subject alone does not adhere to this tradition, as many non-Blacks find conversations about race tiresome at best, and at worst, offensive, especially when one is themselves positioned in a higher educational and social status. What possibly could one lament? Rankine uses exactly this position to examine the insidious racism that works its ways into one's life even when one has found seeming success in career and beyond. Nick Laird's review of *Citizen* describes the setting of her meditative vignettes as "her life lived in the mostly Caucasian world of the academy, of privilege." He notes that "[s]he foregrounds her own position…as a means of demonstrating an all-pervasive racism that cuts through economic and social privilege." For some Black readers, these encounters serve as an "amen corner" to the experiences lived by many of African heritage; for white readers the "corrosive, undermining, and overwhelming" nature of the revelations of a lifetime of micro-aggressions may serve more as an "ah-ha" moment. Several specific instances in *Citizen* encourage such a revelatory moment.

Rankine's first chapter/stanza returns to the past, aligning the speaker with their audience. The speaker is "twelve attending Sts. Phillip and James School" (5). The systemic nature of her experience is reinforced by the setting in an elementary school classroom. It's not the overt racist encounter that is highlighted here, but the exploitation, objectification, and simple invisibility that sets the tone for a lifetime of similar slights. She is asked "to lean to the right" so that her classmate can copy her

exam. It is the only time she is acknowledged in her classroom, as she notes, "[y]ou never really speak." While her opening use of the second-person immediately connects the speaker with the audience, this ambiguous "you" allows for a potential shift in position. Does the reader here identify with the speaker or the classmate who tells her she "smell[s] good and [has] features more like a white person"? Rankine forces reconsideration and reconciliations with one's position from the earliest moments of interaction within the confines of our institutions, as noted by Joel Schlosser in his "A Poetics of American Citizenship: Blackness, Injury, and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*." To round out the uncomfortable experience of forced-upon cheating, the speaker wonders if the teacher, "Sister Evelyn," perhaps "never actually saw you sitting there" (6). This recollection of the classroom experience underscores the subsequent exploration of the impact of that which she announces as the story opens, a return to "a past stacked among your pillows…which gets reconstructed as metaphor" (5). In his review, Laird notes that "Rankine repeatedly returns to the space a black body occupies in a white world." Structurally, then, Rankine shifts memory and space to aid her audience's perception of her theme. This interruption of the linear qualities associated with time unsettles reader and speaker, in essence building a coalition that rests in recognition of similarly experienced life events, although, perhaps from different angles. In reflections on her talk on "How Art Teaches Poets to See," Rankine comments on her form, noting that she

> wanted to create a book that was constantly shifting structurally and also, internally for the speaker and the reader, and one of the ways of doing that, besides shifting

> forms, was also to shift genres and to curate the images inside the text which then turned the texts themselves ... into a kind of portraiture so that the whole book becomes as if one is walking through a gallery.

Much like at the end of a group's museum visit, the visitors each share a common experience but are moved in very distinct ways. This is by design. In a 2016 *Paris Review* interview by David Ulin, Rankine shares that "[t]he relationship between public engagement and private thought are inseparable for" her when asked about the "relationship between writer and material." Rankine goes on to explain her very deliberate move to engage in a way that she "could actively be involved in a public discussion about race" in an inclusive manner that was "essential to our well-being as a country," particularly in the wake of then-recent Dallas protests where five police officers were killed in what appeared retaliatory murders for the police-related killings of Michael Brown, Philando Castille, among others. Rankine clarifies our interconnectedness on the social justice front by including that "there's no private world that doesn't include the dynamics of [her] political and social world." So, while the poet may not classify herself as an activist, she aligns her work with the material that possibly helps fuel the creation of an activist's purpose, as in the encounter she shares in the 2016 Ulin interview where "[o]ne man said he was moved by a reading…and wanted to do something to help [her]." Rankine assuages his concerns by clarifying that she leads a quite privileged life and doesn't require his assistance; what he can do, however, is "understand the urgency of the situation for him and to help himself in an America so racially divided."

An important function of her text is that readers “understand that we are all part of the same broken structures.”

Joel Schlosser reframes the relationship between citizenship, blackness, and injury as potentially transformative practice in Rankine’s structural considerations for her text, particularly through the incorporated silences, i.e., images, that force and reinforce reflection and connection to the topics in the text. Reflecting the white gaze back at its audience forces new perspectives necessary in repositioning Black rhetorical work. Rankine forces this kind of focal shift in chapter/stanza six of her text where she presents a series of “scripts for situation video[s],” some of which are also available in final form on her website. In her script for video “In Memory of Trayvon Martin”— a portion of which is used in her “Situation 5” link on her website—Rankine reflects on the “notorious” nature of her “brothers” (89), characterizing their vulnerable status based on the residual impact of “years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs, boy, hey boy…” Her stream-of-conscious lamentation ends with a pause in that she forces almost literally a returned white gaze on the reader by the subsequently selected image. A most apt photograph of a 1930s public lynching follows. A very familiar photograph often reproduced in texts discussing lynching in America, Rankine received permission to edit its contents. As a follow-up to her almost-elegy to Trayvon Martin, Rankine has the images of the lynching victims omitted from the photo, leaving only the white gaze of the onlookers of from the event staring at the camera. There is no other in the picture to detract from the responsibility of the understood horror depicted in the photograph. As such, Rankine forces audience reconsideration of the role they may play in perpetuating societally

motivated violence against black men, in particular as a voyeuristic endeavor, especially in the age of social media where police murders go viral within moments of taping. At least in this age, some might say, the footage can qualify as evidence against the perpetrators. Sadly, however, too often the violent acts are acquitted.

The structure of Rankine's text helps the reader reframe the presented experiences by shifting focus away from the object and onto the appropriate subject, i.e., the "doer" of the activity, or at a minimum has the reader reflect upon their own experiences. Often cause for defensive response in general conversations about race, this approach of allowing the reader to peek inside the emotional landscape through a poetic/artistic lens creates the comfortable distance that allows the potential for an empathetic response. This element of "consciousness" building as an educational element of hip-hop culture is part of the foundation of Peterson's consideration in his chapter on "Rewriting the Remix" in *Hip-Hop Headphones* where he describes the development of consciousness within the listeners, in this case, readers. He writes that "consciousness in most Hip-hop 'circles' suggests knowledge of institutional and historical forms of oppression as well as a dedicated interest in addressing and reforming the societies that continue to support forms of oppression" (184). Rankine manages this with her carefully structured reflections and recollections throughout *Citizen*.

Embodied Blackness

Fundamental to the argument about Rankine's work is an examination of her use of the mash-up as a structural frame that prompts readers' reflections of their position

within the “body electric” and perhaps how and where they place Black bodies within that frame, as just discussed. To further that end, however, the poet also specifically places images of or allusions to Black personalities that have garnered media attention over the past decade in response to the implicit biases surrounding Black bodies. In this use of embodied discourse as described in the introduction, the affront of the Black woman’s body as masculine, aggressive, and threatening is explored. Rankine uses anecdotes from the world of black athletes and the racism they face in very public and very white spaces to center the unconscious prejudice that permeates the dynamic. In stanza/chapter II of Citizen, Rankine points this out with great detail as it relates to Serena Williams, winner of multiple grand slam tennis tournaments. As Rankine opens the section with an anecdote recounting YouTuber Jayson Musson’s “wry” examination of the angry Black stereotype, she notes that he misses “the anger built up through experience and the quotidian struggles against dehumanization every brown or black person lives simply because of skin color” (24). Rankine dedicates the majority of this section to examining Serena Williams in light of a 2009 outburst at the US Open semifinal in which Williams “respond[s]…with a string of invectives” to a call made against her. Using the Glenn Ligon image of Zora Neale Hurston’s quote that reads, in part, “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (52-3), Rankine points out “[p]erhaps this is how racism feels no matter the context-randomly the rules everyone else gets to play by no longer apply to you” (30). She goes on to chronicle Williams’ experiences within the world of the predominately white sport of tennis, noting the body as “trapped in a racial imaginary, trapped in disbelief—code for being black in America” (30). Rankine continues to extend her claim to all black bodies

when she notes that the Hurston statement could “be ad copy for some aspect of life for all black bodies” (25).

In 2015 *New York Times Magazine* article “The Meaning of Serena Williams,” Rankine wrote that “for black people, there is an unspoken script that demands the humble absorption of racist assaults, no matter the scale, because whites need to believe it’s no big deal.” In *Citizen*, Rankine includes a full-page color photo of a 2012 AFP Getty Image (see fig. 1) where “Caroline Wozniacki…imitates Serena by stuffing towels in her top and shorts, all in good fun” (36-7).

Fig.1. Wozniacki imitating Serena Williams: Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen-An American Lyric.* Graywolf Press, 2014, p. 37.

While controversial in its publication, the photo has since been contextualized as a gentle rub between friends, but through her prominent placement of the image, Rankine manages to reinforce the concern that black bodies are more subject to interrogation. In

Chapter three, we will see where Ta-Nehisi Coates makes a similar point about the vulnerability of the Black body throughout his work *Between the World and Me*. In this instance, however, Rankine presents the case for her commentary in a 2015 *New York Times* article that notes how "critiques of your body…perpetuate racist notions that black women are hypermasculine and unattractive." Here, Williams and her resulting anger in 2009 function as a symbol for the disrespect and general chagrin emblematic of attitudes towards Black women whose physicality is seen as contrary to prevailing images of femininity, particularly when they have achieved at the highest levels. Rankine summarizes in "The Meaning of Serena Williams" that "the daily grind of being rendered invisible, or being attacked, whether physically or verbally, for being visible, wears a body down." Allusions to Williams and the strength and composure she must present in order not to appear as "an unreasonable child, a small animal" (65) evoke images of the classic Kipling poem "The White Man's Burden" where imperial conquests must take charge of the natives who are "half devil and half child." The use of embodied discourse in this text works especially well with Rankine's inclusion of images that reinforce the visuals associated with our media depictions and the feelings they evoke. The center page placement of the Rutgers University 2007 women's basketball team catalyzes the recollection of liberties taken by (presumably) whites close to Blacks. Rankine recollects a friend's chastisement for tardiness whereby the friend adds the pejorative "nappy headed ho" (41) as an emboldened extension, perhaps, of "Don Imus and the women's basketball team he insulted with this language" (42). Rankine makes the connection for her readers that the largely publicized indiscretions of a racist nature are not isolated instances relegated to only those individuals who find themselves in the

public eye, but that these occurrences are fundamental to the daily experiences of many blacks. In all instances, Wozinacki, Rankine's "friend," and Don Imus, the insistence is that the comments are meant as "jokes." Rankine's examination within the context of her larger commentary makes clear that these are the insidiously racist aspects of movement in white spaces for black bodies.

This embodied blackness is explored through the application of "embodied discourse" (Cooper 3) throughout the three texts discussed here, and forces recognition of the nuanced ways that discrimination is predicated on an individual's mere physicality, the absurdity of which, once registered, demands for the White reader a reconciliatory response. In "Toward an Antiracist Ecopoetics," Angela Hume explains in great detail the use of embodied discourse as it is used to explore Rankine's "meditation on the 'wasting body'," specifically as it "concerns the difficulty of relating to or identifying with one's environment when one has been othered by the dominant white society and, consequently, forced to live with greater amounts of environmental risk" (80). Rankine's anecdotes in stanza/chapter VI that examine responses to the victims of Hurricane Katrina are a prime example of this challenge. But the threats are not only physical, as she explores the threats to her emotional well-being in the conclusion of stanza/chapter I where she is confronted with terrorized hysterics by an unsuspecting therapist.

She reinforces this idea of randomly applied rules again in part VI when she explores her reflections of the 2006 FIFA World Cup incident where France's Zinedine Zidane infamously head-butts Italy's Marca Materazzi after the Italian defender insults his sister. At the time the incident provoked a racial backlash as claims were made that

the incident revolved around anti-Arab sentiment. The racism that footballers of color encounter both by spectators and teammates had already been widely publicized. This incident brought the alleged racism to center stage as the world watched in the final minutes of a tied game. This altercation marked the end of Zidane's career, whereas Materazzi received only a two-game suspension. Rankine uses this scene to extend her exploration of racism across continents, using quotes of Zidane alongside those of "lip readers responding to the transcript of the World Cup" and "Ralph Ellison" (123). She compiles, "Every day I think about where I came from and I am still proud to be who I am…/Big Algerian shit, dirty terrorist, nigger./Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word" (122). She continues with placement of texts from among others, Frantz Fanon and James Baldwin, all of who addressed the problems double-standards left behind as remnants of an outdated imperialism and how as a subject of colonialism, one remains torn between two cultures internally as well as externally as an ever-existing "other," noting towards the end of this vignette Frantz Fanon's observation that "[i]t is the White Man who creates the black man" (128). As highlighted in the previous section, Rankine uses the art of the remix to emphasize the manner in which these topics remain relevant across time and geography.

Rankine's prose poem moves readers from the racialized pain of invisibility and undesirability to the perceived threat associated with the Black body. Before they reach her growing list of victims of police brutality, readers are taken on a retrospective of seemingly simple situations that for those with black bodies especially can result in death. "In Memory of James Craig Anderson" recollects the 2011 killing of the 48-year-old Anderson. Classified as a hate crime, Rankine characterizes the quintessence of

what enables this type of violence: the abstraction and objectification of the black body. While her "Script for Situation" initially focuses on the pickup truck used to commit the murder, she returns to her strategy of shifting subject with the object that triggers within the reader an understanding of what it means to bear a black body. She writes that "the pickup truck is a condition of darkness in motion. It makes a dark subject. You mean a black subject. No, a black object." (134-5) This abstraction of the black body alludes to that which allows it to be mishandled and abused so easily. Sometimes, however, it is the Black body that inflicts the violence, but even there it is not afforded the same access to the nuanced interrogation of facts as is so often the case in violence committed against blacks. The next anecdote jumps back in time, "December 4, 2006" to "/Jena Six." Rankine continues her examination of physical violence, this time, however, when it is acted out by Black bodies against white bodies. The Jena Six were a group of African American boys charged with the beating of a classmate in Jena, Louisiana. While the boys were initially "charged with attempted murder," the case prompted "thousands of people…to protest what they consider[ed] the overzealous prosecution of six black high school students" (Whoriskey). Rankine captures this disparity when she writes, "Boys will be boys being boys feeling their capacity heaving butting heads righting their wrongs in the violence of aggravated adolescence charging forward in their way experiencing the position of positioning which is a position for only one kind of boy," alluding to the rampant criminalization of young black boys as early as the elementary years in the U.S. schools. Here, Rankine addresses how young black men are not afforded the levity of young adulthood in the same manner as young white men. She concludes by offering, "for the other boys the fists the feet criminalized

already are weapons already exploding the landscape and then the litigious hitting back is life imprisoned" (101). Rankine's grappling with "embodied experiences" in her chosen subject as she notes that she wanted to explore how "black bodies are rendered increasingly deindividuated and expendable" (Hume 80).

The manner in which Rankine divulges the innocent commentaries of peers and strangers alike throughout *Citizen* interrupts the existing narratives of the violent racist attacks of registered white supremacists as the problematic elements in Blacks' lives. Her "scratch" reveals the manner in which respectability politics have little impact on the lived experience of racism regardless of education, achievement, or income. Her presence still elicits fear and resentment in the very same way black men are feared and resented in public spaces; world-class athletes are still the begrudged exception in white spaces.

Rankine's percussive use of text—both print and digital—image, and film appeals prominently to especially academic audiences as evidenced in her recognitions with nominations in both literary (poetry) and critic categories. Recently translated into German, *Citizen* continues to function as an informative personal narrative that engages its reader to consider their complicity in the systemic perpetuation of racism. Not only in the academy, however, do we find Rankine's text. From book clubs to consulting firms, social justice non-profit organizations, Rankine's text shapes the discussion surrounding the "little things"—the daily micro-aggressions— as well as the larger prejudicial and racist practices that comprise the Black experience at every level of society. By focusing her recollections mostly on her encounters and those of her social, educational, and professional peers/circles, however, she even more poignantly addresses the systemic

nature of the encounters, eroding the idea that education, social standing, e.g., "respectability politics," serve as antidotes to discrimination. The mash-up of genres she uses creates a work of art that stands alone as a definitive voice covering the gamut of offenses that plague People of Color in contemporary society. Rankine uses her art to foster an intimate connection with her audience forcing recognition of the interconnectedness of these experiences, creating the opportunity for the liberatory work that serves to dismantle systems from the inside out.

Chapter Two: Beyoncé Knowles' *Lemonade*, The Visual Album

"Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit of the rest,
You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul."
from Part V, "I Sing the Body Electric," Walt Whitman

The Mix Tape

Pop star Beyoncé had foreshadowed her excursion into mixing genre for added social commentary with her 2013 single "Flawless," which featured excerpts of award-winning novelist Chimamanda Adichie's 2012 TEDxEuston presentation "We Should All Be Feminists." In her sampling of Adichie's advocacy of feminism, Beyoncé demonstrates the power of her privilege. While avid readers and members of the literary community might already have been familiar with the Nigerian novelist, Adichie arguably had yet to experience the celebrity status that she now holds. Beyoncé successfully mixes the acclaimed writer's narrative with her own more colloquially driven story. Both texts, however, essentially reflect on the importance of a woman's strong sense of self regardless of the constraints placed upon her by society. Beyoncé's song samples Adichie's exploration of the paradox of female identity formation. Beyoncé echoes the sentiment simply by reminding her (female) listeners that they are "flawless," they "[woke] up, flawless" ("'Flawless,' Beyoncé). Beyoncé's mantra is problematic, however; much like subsequent words of Adichie who have since come under attack for her description of transgender women's experiences, Beyoncé's call for flawlessness is presented with unapologetic complexity. Beyoncé mixes not only genre but also messages: while advocating for feminism, she also stresses the validation she receives from her "man" who makes her "feel so God damn fine" ("Flawless") . It is this tension in

contemporary feminism that adds dimension to the messages embedded in Beyoncé's work and in that way captures the reality of modern feminism.

This moment represents a "scratch" in Beyoncé's popular music, which becomes even more pronounced in her Super Bowl halftime performance in the earlier part of 2016 where she again unapologetically presents her case for a feminist "formation" in song and symbol. Appearing on stage with an entourage of women dancers and musicians, Beyoncé used the forum of the Super Bowl to provoke audiences with costuming reminiscent of the standard dress of the Black Panther Party of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, pointing to the transformative powers of a particular Black solidarity in the face of systemic oppression.

Initially made available only through her streaming company co-owned with her husband, hip-hop mogul Jay-Z, Beyoncé's much-anticipated follow-up full-length album/film was equally as disruptive to the status quo of music merchandising upon release. With this business move, Bey and Jay, as fans colloquially refer to them, stand as an example of what gender solidarity can accomplish. Beyoncé's control of her commodification is part of the allure of her brand for many fans. Building on to the ideas of theorizing African American rhetoric(s) through a hip-hop lens, specifically the sampling and mixing of text and genre, Beyoncé's position as a representative of the Hip-Hop generation not only in age but also affiliation will be used to further illuminate how embodied rhetoric(s) are used in *Lemonade* for centering not only African American narratives, but also more general feminist concerns.

As an art form, Beyoncé's visual album/film rests comfortably in the mixed-genre arena. Beyoncé smoothly integrates distinctly separate genre—film, music, and poetry--

for the creation of an inspired new whole, the “visual album.” Cinematography, poetry, as well as a cross-section of musical genres, were pulled together to give voice to topics ranging from the intensely personal to the broadly public. Like a true mixtape artist/DJ, Beyoncé brings together not only these various genres but highlights in her production and creative teams the artists and personalities currently associated with giving nuanced social commentary in various media fora. From the works of Warsan Shire to Khalil Joseph and The Dixie Chicks, Beyoncé curates her “mixtape” with an eye towards inclusion.

Beyoncé's disruption, foreshadowed at the 2016 Super Bowl halftime show, stems not only from her genre melding and product marketing and distribution, but most poignantly in her message. Tatiyana Jenkins identifies this as a “radical attempt to confront and redefine” black womanhood (5). Jenkins’ close reading of *Lemonade* highlights specifically how each chapter of the album/film figuratively repositions and redefines Black womanhood in all its current dimensions. This rebranding of not only herself as a pop icon-turned activist, but the rebranding of Black Womanhood as a whole is instrumental in the use of texts as catalysts for contemporary social justice pursuits in areas of not only gender but also race. Beyoncé uses her privileged position to shine a spotlight on the artists and inspirations that inform the ongoing conversations occurring in the private spheres of many traditionally unique African American spaces, the type of discourse Vorris L. Nunley identifies as emerging from “hush harbor sites” (222). These spaces have existed throughout African American history as “safe spaces where Black folks affirm, share, and negotiate African American epistemologies and resist and subvert hegemonic Whiteness” (Nunley 222). Beyoncé opens the doors to

these “hushed” backroom conversations for all to hear much in the same way and with the same methods that Claudia Rankine offers in *Citizen*. With direct second-person address and disclosure of the interior monologues that accompany them through their experiences and backed with thought-provoking images, both writers force a renegotiation of the positions audiences take in the existing status quo.

As in the case of “Flawless,” Beyoncé again draws inspiration from—samples, in essence— and consequently brings attention to the musings of an African-born writer, Warsan Shire, this time of Somali-Kenyan immigrant origins. Shire’s layered identities form the foundation for her poetic themes, which extend to grappling with issues of domestic violence, cultural erasure, and other immigrant tensions, as well as the life lessons that are passed on via familial dynamics, particularly through matrilineal heritage. In *Lemonade*, Shire’s poetry becomes the work that Beyoncé uses to “reframe the entire album, making the tribulations that Queen B calls out the struggles of all women” (createcultivate.com) . The majority of the works used to reframe Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*, in fact, are from Shire’s own 2012 digital album, “Warsan vs. Melancholy (the seven stages of being lonely),” and lend not only thematic but also structural framing to Beyoncé’s visual album, where Beyoncé also opts to present her work in parts, or “stages.” Beyoncé’s attempts at sampling and remixing Shire’s work create a new work, which much like the contemporary remix, entices the enthusiastic reader/listener/viewer to seek out the original(s) for a deeper appreciation of the work.

Beyoncé begins her album with excerpts from Shire’s “For Women Who are Difficult to love,” speaking to the self-imposed silencing women undergo for the sake of peace in a relationship. Beyoncé quotes Shire’s poem “I tried to change, close my

mouth more, tried to be soft, prettier. Less…awake" (Chapter One) as an act of "denial" in response to repressed "intuition" is explored. This self-denial is explored sonically in the next song that visually and verbally showcases a controlled, but raging Beyoncé strolling through a small town main street setting, smashing—among other objects— a string of muscle cars as she ponders her "intuition" and reminds her lover that "they don't love you like I love you." ("Hold Up") Beyoncé's use of a mixture of African and Western symbolism in this visual segment is central to her message that black women should call on the strength of their ancestors to overcome the trappings of western ideology, which often leaves women doubting their own stability. Jenkins best summarizes the ensuing destruction that is echoed by the refrain "What's worse, lookin' jealous or crazy?/ Jealous or crazy?/Or like being walked all over lately, walked all over lately/I'd rather be crazy" as an example of Beyoncé's "extreme measures to cleanse her life and her mental state as a method of saving her relationship" (Jenkins 14). Both texts—the poem and the song—deal topically with the extremes to which women may go to salvage a relationship and, in that way, serve as a cautionary tale for women who might deny themselves their authentic voice(s) in the face of disrespect. Here, Beyoncé – through her sampling of Shire – moves the frustrations of self-silenced women to the forefront, allowing them to be heard. Progressing through the frames of her own stages of reckoning, Beyoncé offers "anger" as the next frame, cutting to excerpts from Shire's "The Unbearable Weight of Staying" and its concerns with "elusive" love and the invisibility of those "growing to and from one another, /searching for the same light." Again, Beyoncé cautions her lover not to "hurt [him]self" as she makes clear their connection to one another. Beyoncé makes use of the mix in "Don't Hurt Yourself," this

time with the words from Malcolm X's speech, "Who Taught You to Hate Yourself?" (Jenkins 17). With this interruption—this scratch— Beyoncé moves from the personal to the political as she samples Malcolm X's speech; "[t]he speech interjects with a claim: '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" (Jenkins 17). We can see in this text as well that Beyoncé's application of mixing genre and themes in her use of expressive Hip-Hop elements—primarily mixing existing texts— also reinforces Hip-Hop's educational components: knowledge, consciousness, search and identity, and participation. Here, the intention of her work as more than "just" a personal narrative working through infidelity becomes repositioned as a call for solidarity between Black women in particular.

Enter the Body

As the film/visual album begins, we see Beyoncé in cornrow braids, fox fur, and leaning on a large SUV (see fig.2). That very contemporary imagery is directly cut with images of what appears reminiscent of the West African slave colonies (see fig. 3). The Black body has come a long way, both figuratively and literally.

Fig.2. Beyonce in fur and braids leaning head-down against SUV: Beyonce. *Lemonade.* Parkwood Entertainment, 2016.

Fig.3. Empty Slave Colonies: Beyonce. *Lemonade.* Parkwood Entertainment, 2016.

From the opening scenes, we are invited to experience performed Blackness—body-centered, Beyoncé kneels on the stage—in front of the red velvet curtain of a theater stage (see fig. 4). This is not part of the show, however, sans make-up and made-up hair, Beyoncé prepares to present raw, unadulterated emotional truth. In griotic fashion, she—via the image— cuts back in time to explore "intuition," the first segment of her film evoking plantation memories and images of women who look like conjure women of old slave lore (see fig.5). Her subsequent musical and video journey also begs the engagement of theories on the impact of historical trauma and the generational impact on families and communities that include responses such as "rage, depression, denial, survivor guilt and internalized oppression" (Garrigues). In this manner, the knowledge-building and consciousness-raising elements of the hip-hop aesthetic are brought to the forefront of *Lemonade* in a manner that implores viewers/listeners to research, or at least consider their own "inheritances."

Fig.4. Beyonce kneeling on stage: Beyonce. *Lemonade.* Parkwood Entertainment, 2016.

Fig.5. Woman in white-face: Beyonce. *Lemonade.* Parkwood Entertainment, 2016.

The opening scene ends with Beyoncé free falling from a city building onto the street, only to have the concrete shift shape into the singer's plunge into deep waters. Her next chapter, "Denial," moves the scene from one of potential suicide to one of a water-immersed rebirth—setting the tone for the concept of the album: "making lemonade out of lemons." As in the case of Rankine, Beyoncé's framing is supported by strategic placement of Black bodies, specifically black women's bodies (see fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Various shades and stylings of black women in antebellum dress: Beyonce. *Lemonade*. Parkwood Entertainment, 2016.

Ultimately, Beyoncé's text serves as a deconstruction of what viewers and fans have seen as her marital challenges, while simultaneously celebrating the historical and contemporary connections of the sisterhood that sustains Black women in their efforts to maintain their families in light of interferences of all sorts. *Lemonade* illuminates concepts of double-consciousness, invisibility/erasure, and gender discrimination in her consideration of the historical toxic masculinity that plagues the black community, all against the backdrop of historical and contemporary images of the legacy of systemic racism in America. This visual album interrupts the triteness of pop-culture commodities to force attention to particularly Black feminist topics. She performs a particular

Blackness that forces conversations which advance an understanding of not only current race relations, but equally important, current feminist relationships across race and socio-economic strata. She accomplishes this in *Lemonade* in classic “mix-tape” composition form, interrupting the traditional genre presentation with a work that is part film, part poetry collection, part pop-R&B-reggae-hip-hop- country album— at once intensely personal and simultaneously inviting, for the experiences she shares are not at all unique to her iconic status: cheating partners, jealous peers, mommy and daddy “issues,” alongside genuine concerns about the politics in our country are universal threads connecting her work to her global audiences.

Beyoncé’s inclusion and prominent placement of well-known Black women and girls describe the particular type of embodied discourse described by Brittney C. Cooper in *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women (Women in American History)*. Cooper explains this engagement as one with a “commitment to seeing the Black female body as a form of possibility and not a burden” (3), much as Beyoncé does with the song “Sorry,” which opens the chapter titled “Apathy.” Beyoncé prominently places Serena Williams alongside herself in this segment of the film/visual album, very much in alignment with Cooper’s second premise of embodied discourse, that it “[centers] the Black female body as a means to cathect Black social thought” (3). Much in the same manner that Claudia Rankine uses Serena Williams as a case study for prejudice in predominantly white spaces in *Citizen*, Beyoncé centers Williams as an alluring “[encouragement to] black women to be defiant of oppressive social commentary by confidently expressing their self-love” (Jenkins 18) in spite of the ridicule

and harassment they face for self-expression outside the realm of “respectability.” Jenkins goes on to describe the central element of this video

> For the remainder of this chapter, Beyoncé sits in a large chair with her feet kicked up, slouching and singing the song “Sorry” while Serena dances around her. Although the song lyrics in “Sorry” emphasize Beyoncé’s lack of concern for her partner, By specifically stating “I ain’t sorry/I don’t care about you,” Serena uses her body to show society that she doesn’t care about the expectations perpetuated in the media attempting to constrict her or black women (20).

This idea of containment within particular “social norms” as ineffective against disrespect or even erasure—quite literally in the case of violent police encounters and other systemically racist spaces— runs as a motif throughout the works of Rankine, Beyoncé, and Coates.

In the final chapter, titled “Redemption,” Beyoncé showcases visually in “All Night” all types of family configurations, celebrating the sustaining power of love and family even in the face of “war caused by pain.” She notes that “nothing real can be threatened” and that “true love breathes salvation back into me.” This last chapter alludes to the necessity of Black men and women to work through their struggles for the good of the whole. She uses this moment to make final use of constitutive rhetoric that connects her audiences to the complexity and interwoven nature of identity, utilizing what Marquita Gammage describes as a first attempt at “upholding the African cultural responsibility of artists” (716), as described by W.E.B. Dubois. Gammage cites DuBois

in his explanation that “art for the African is never simply art for art or entertainment’s sake; art must be communal and address the issues of society. Therefore, Black artists are culturally responsible for producing art that enriches their society” (DuBois qtd. in Gammage 716). With this final of eleven chapters, Beyoncé confirms her aims of addressing the healing potential in confrontation, truth, and reconciliation efforts by emphasizing images of white, black, mixed, and LGTBQ couples, and connecting these diverse identities with the whole in decolonizing fashion. She links the implied narratives of the smiling, hugging, and loving representatives of the “body electric” in its fullest sense as she sings “beyond your darkness, I was your light.” In “Moving Beyond Pain,” feminist critic bell hooks cautions, however, that “concluding this narrative of hurt and betrayal with caring images of family and home do not serve as adequate ways to reconcile and heal trauma” (hooks), in this observation hooks foreshadows the lacking optimism in the voice that Ta-Nehisi Coates cultivates as we explore his text in the next chapter.

In “Formation,” the preview track from Super Bowl L, Beyoncé celebrates, claims, and names essentially the layers of identity and stereotype that embody a Southern Black girl. From affirmation of “baby hair, and afros,” wide “Jackson-5 nostrils,” and the mixed-nature of her genealogy (her mother’s Creole background and her daddy’s Alabama heritage, to her allusion to the always-present “hot sauce” that is not uncommon for those with a penchant for the spice to carry with them in their daily travels), Beyoncé—backed by a cadre of women in Black Panther regalia—literally interrupts “America’s Game” to unveil “all the Blackness” to its people. Beyoncé offers a clear presentation of an identity that is not uniquely hers but speaks for and to a good

12.6% of the population, this in the midst of ongoing racial tensions built around the deaths of unarmed black men and women who come into police contact across the country. As part of the final visual chapter in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé revisits the call-to-arms that is “Formation,” but this time excludes references to the Black Panther Party, instead alluding visually and with voiceovers directly to the mishandling of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. In a review of the video for “Formation,” Kevin Ball explains that the video connects the “cultural identity of the black American South in the scene of New Orleans: still submerged, still haunted, yet thriving resiliently” (see fig. 7).

Fig. 7. Beyonce standing with fist up on top of sinking police vehicle: Beyonce. *Lemonade*. Parkwood Entertainment, 2016.

Here, Beyoncé reconnects past to present as she has done throughout her work, serving as Banks’ “digital griot” in all its dimensions. Ball points to the styling in this particular segment as it reinforces a “[call] for an ambivalent course of coordinated political action, drawing on the ‘gear’ of Black hairstyle and dress as cultural technologies for building a new consciousness in the territories of the everyday,” pointing to the various settings and costuming choices made for this chapter (see figs. 8-11).

Fig. 8. Women posing in beauty supply store: Beyonce. *Lemonade.* Parkwood Entertainment, 2016.

Fig. 9. Beyonce and dancers in matching Gucci leotards: Beyonce. *Lemonade.* Parkwood Entertainment, 2016.

Fig. 10. Beyonce flanked by three men in old-west attire: Beyonce. *Lemonade.* Parkwood Entertainment, 2016.

Fig. 11. Beyonce and two women in ante-bellum dress: Beyonce. *Lemonade.* Parkwood Entertainment, 2016.

In "Beyoncé, Creoles, and Modern Blackness," Tyina Steptoe offers a more personal connection to the "mixture of different places and colors" as a reflection of Beyoncé's centering of her Creole heritage. What could be triggering as an aspect of Beyoncé's colorism is in this case used for the repositioning of identity politics to encompass a more inclusive, perhaps even crossover, appeal for the purpose of generative social justice discourse.

Beyoncé uses her existing status as a popular cultural icon to catalyze all sorts of liberatory work. *Lemonade* stands as a public performance of "self-care" as she uses the text to process personal experiences that have shaped her life's path. Also working across genre, she addresses themes from an intersectional perspective, forcing consideration of not only issues of racism and sexism, but even the delicate issues of

colorism and classism within Black communities as they become topics for discussion with her inclusion of African American tropes from across genre and within her stylistic forms. Beyoncé manages to pervert the way that she uses the stereotypical sexualization and gendered associations with her persona, i.e., her music, to garner audience support for a new imaginary, an imaginary which includes hip-hop feminist inspired tropes. Beyoncé "clap[s]back" by engaging directly in a "disrespectability politics" ("Crunk Feminist Glossary") that challenges discourse from multiple directions. This mix-tape approach in aim and form resonates particularly well with younger audiences, a much-needed demographic to maintain the momentum of movements for change. Where particularly female audiences are working towards building movements inspired by Beyoncé's work, these combined efforts encourage an identity politics that includes women and men of all races. Again, in the vain of Whitman's homage to the female body, Beyoncé uses her "privilege [to enclose] the rest" in the act of redemption for all.

Chapter Three: Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*

"The male is not less the soul nor more, he too is in his place,
He too is all qualities, he is action and power,
The flush of the known universe is in him"
from Part VI, "I Sing the Body Electric," Walt Whitman

The first two chapters of this thesis explored specific ways an embodied hip-hop aesthetic centered Black voices through the work of two women authors. In this chapter, along with continuing the examination of influences and application of key aesthetics from the world of hip-hop, my exploration turns specifically to the Black male perspective and the added challenge of centering voices that come-of-age amidst the *physically* violent outcomes of systemic racism. One might argue that this has been the status quo for Black bodies in America from their earliest arrivals on the eastern shores. While Claudia Rankine and Beyoncé centered the emotional and mental consequences of systemic racism, Ta-Nehisi Coates engages conversation that speaks directly to the physical violence that results within and to members of Black communities, particularly black men. In a letter to his son, fifteen-year-old Samori, Coates begins by qualifying existing descriptions of the American experience with an exploration of "America's problem," e.g., racism (6). In a time that many describe as a post-racial America, Coates illustrates the inextricable nature of racism as it is tied to the myth of the American narrative. Connecting the individual Black body to that of its larger body politic, again, much like Rankine, Coates begins the description of racism as "the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them" (6). He explains how subsequently "racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the

way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men" (7). Ultimately, however, Coates corrects this perception of racism for his son, by explaining that it is not a natural phenomenon rooted in biology but rather that "race is the child of racism, not the father" (7). Coates uses the remainder of the text to critically examine the systemic nature of racism as a cautionary tale for his teenage son grappling with the acquittal of police officers involved in the death of Michael Brown.

Aligning with the hip-hop aesthetic, Coates's work presents itself as the didactic component of Peterson's theory, promoting a "consciousness" for his readers, specifically, his son. Peterson explains that "consciousness in most hip-hop 'circles' suggests knowledge of institutional and historical forms of oppression as well as dedicated interest in addressing and reforming the societies that continue to support forms of oppression" (184). Coates's work as a journalist focusing on issues of race, politics, and culture fits well into this category. His writing style, particularly his reliance on allusion and intertextuality, similarly makes use of hip-hop tropes to deliver his message.

The Remix

In the storytelling style of the Golden Era of Hip-Hop rap narratives, á la the works of "Slick Rick" or "Nas," Coates chronicles in epistolary form several significant coming-of-age moments of his own, first as a young boy in Baltimore, then again as a young man at Howard University, and subsequently the unsettling present as a Black father navigating parenthood of a young Black son. While Dana Williams notes the

shortcomings/constraints of the epistolary genre in "Everybody's Protest Narrative: *Between the World and Me* and the Limits of Genre," Darryl Pinkney alludes to the possibilities of answers to these larger concerns of systemic racism by drawing parallels between the function of Coates' memoir and its titular poetic predecessor, Richard Wright's lynching poem "Between the World and Me." Like Rankine and Beyoncé, Coates reaches backward to explain the present. This remix element runs central to Coates' efforts. Both Coates' and Wrights' texts compel an intimate identification with the "problem" with their readers in their use of narrative voice, a trope identified in both Rankine and Beyoncé's approaches. Coates affects this in his use of the "personal conversation" (Williams 180) and Wright in his speaker's graphic imagination and essential projection of self into the experience of the lynched subject. Wright's shared "experience of his 'icy fear'" (Pinckney) as described later in the poem works similarly to the early accounts of the horrors of slavery when first published as collected slave narratives allowing whites glimpses of first-hand-accounts of the atrocities, ultimately sparking more wide-spread support for abolitionist movements. The works' impact is felt in the way they allow readers to feel the heaviness and constant fear that accompanies existence in a Black body, and as such they compel new conversations that work towards a reconsideration of everyone's part in the "problem."

The lines of Wright's poem that form the epigraph of Coates' text set the tone for Coates' work as an unsettling coming-of-age book framed within a reflective comparison of the author's own matriculation into the adult world as an African American male to that of his son's awakening to what it means to be Black in America. Most closely remixed from ideas in James Baldwin's essay "Letter from a Region in My Mind" –

which appeared as part of his book *The Fire Next Time* – but structured in the form of Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew," Coates models his own opening essay in the form of a letter to his son, inserting, i.e., scratching, three decades worth of intimate Black male experiences post-civil rights era alongside the contemplations shared almost 40 years earlier by James Baldwin to his nephew. Topically, Coates follows the same structure as Baldwin as he recollects to his son the moment he registered the fear that permeated his peer group in Baltimore. He writes, "When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid" (14). Compared to the opening lines of Baldwin's letter to his nephew where he reflects his "fourteenth year" in Harlem, registering "for the first time in my life," a fear "of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without" (Baldwin), Coates follows a similar reflective process. Both writers describe the sudden changes in the neighborhood girls and the shifts in the boys' attitudes, and their own sense of displacement in their environments. Coates' writing reflects an intertextuality that is common practice in hip-hop, right alongside the "sampling" of existing works to further capture the crowd. Undoubtedly, a good portion of the success of this work stems in its allusion to the great writers and thinkers of the past, creating an intimacy—at minimum a familiarity-- that captures his reading audience. This intimate conversation is a shift in form for Coates, who writes primarily as a journalist for *The Atlantic* and, as I noted with the previous two texts, interrupts this idea of a post-racial America by explicitly emphasizing the fragility of the Black Body as it exists in public spaces. This parental voice creates a relatable intimacy for readers, though especially in the way it speaks to the uniquely Black *parent's* coming-of-age moment when life events dictate the need to express to their child that as

a Black person in America, the body in all its manifestations, is always under attack. Applying the particulars of hip-hop rhetorical practice into his own work in both content and practice, Coates returns historical and literary precedents to the forefront in the seemingly never-ending discussion of the personal, social, and political implications of race in America.

Coates engages poetry as a specific tool of the hip-hop aesthetic in its "sampling" of portions of existing works to complement his larger new text. Like Rankine and Beyoncé, Coates mixes genre: his memoir is personalized with photos and existing works to strengthen the voice of family historian he shares with his son. The ominous tone of Richard Wright's lines in the epigraph invoke the disturbing imagery of those familiar with Richard Wright's work and is carried as a somber tone throughout much of Coates' text. This somewhat pessimistic voice has consistently, when criticized, been among the elements of concern in Coates' analysis of the Black experience, especially as it relates to his predictions for the country's future in terms of race relations. Wright's opening stanza, and Coates's epigraph set the agenda for the work:

> *And one morning while in the woods I stumbled suddenly*
> *upon the thing,*
> *Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly oaks*
> *and elms*
> *And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves*
> *between the world and me…*

By using this "sample," Coates benefits from Wright's juxtaposition of tranquility and horror in the opening stanza of "Between the World and Me" where he echoes the

stereotypical forest imagery of Robert Frost who, like Whitman, symbolizes for many the voice of the American Spirit. This classic American settler colonial scene of "one morning … in the woods" is quickly repositioned against visions of a "thing" whose "sooty details…[thrust] themselves between the world" and the speaker. As this epigraph foreshadows, Coates' book offers the "sooty details" that describe the realities of the Black male in America as one that sits apart from its tranquil surroundings. The lingering relevance of this remixed and sampled scenario/sentiment begs the question why in the span of the eighty years since the Civil Rights Movement, much longer, of course, America is still grappling with these issues.

Coates returns to poetry excerpts as epigraphs for his first two chapters, focusing specifically on those poets closely associated with the liberatory writers of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka. Each of the samples Coates selects echo the heaviness of the opening epigraph. Sanchez's excerpted opening stanza from her poem "Malcolm" was written upon the Civil Rights activist's assassination and reinforces the inevitability of death for Black men who speak up against the status quo. Sanchez's speaker wants no talk "of martyrdom/of men who die to be remembered," although the impression sits that Coates's subsequent explorations of the history of violence against the Black body in his work does serve as a sort of memorial to those who have died at the hands of the those representing the status quo, specifically the police. Much in the way memorials force their viewers to engage in reflection and remembrance, Coates's naming of the multiple victims and in some instances the details of their cases provide the focused articulation of concern that is often lost in major media outlets' reporting of the incidents. It is in this chapter

that Coates unpacks the idea of the vulnerability of the black body, a trope common to African American letters that have emerged in a country whose foundation he describes as built upon “acts meant first and foremost, to deny [him] and [his son’s] right to secure and govern [their] own bodies” (8). Coates emphasizes the “violent exploitation of other human bodies” from which, apparently, only whites have been exempt. Similarly grim are the excerpts from Amiri Baraka’s “Ka ‘Ba” as they detail the condition of “beautiful people/with african imaginations” (Coates 73) in a poem that explores the unappreciated beauty and pathology of a people who have been alienated from their true identities and wherein the speaker speculates what it will take to reset the situation. In his subsequent chapter, Coates uses this excerpt to frame his reflections on the very personal connections he has to those who fall victim to police violence, particularly the senseless death at the hands of the police of his Howard University classmate, Prince Jones. It is in this recollection especially that Coates manages to also remix notions of Black male masculinity as he tenderly depicts his admiration, affection, and subsequent heartbreak over the tragic police murder of his friend. Coates points specifically to the disruption of the urban stereotype Jones’s lived experience portrayed, a contrast to Coates’s own experience. He remembers him as one who had “love poured into him...Montessori and music lessons...Little League and sleepovers,” and the “dreams” and “shared knowledge and capacity of a black family” that stood behind Prince Jones (81). Within this frame and others, Coates begins the remixing of the narrative of the Black hypermasculine stereotype to claims that his “softness that had once made [him] a target” ultimately afforded him the voice of others as he represented “their stories” in his work as a journalist (62).

The beauty of the African people Amiri Baraka's poem references, similarly tender, also finds itself in Coates's recollections of the diverse representations of womanhood on Howard's campus. While easily critiqued as an objectification of womanhood in his emphasis of the physical attractiveness of his peers, his tone of awe and admiration outweighs the stereotypical lusting of a young college student. Above all, in this narrative, Coates's presentation of nurturing Black women serves as a counter narrative to the image of the hardened Black women, but not in the stereotypical mammy role. In his vision, the Black women at Howard were regal. As he recounts his college crushes, Coates also connects Black womanhood to its historical function as guides to enlightenment, much as Beyoncé intimates in her text and the same as Rankine makes possible in her use of the embodied discourse centered on Serena Williams's representation of non-compliant Black womanhood.

Essentially, however, Coates synthesizes the ideas and tropes of Baldwin and Wright, creating what James B. Haile, III calls a "materialist cosmology of the body" (493). The fact that these two author-friends engaged in public critique of one another based on their craft is not an accidental byproduct of Coates' inspiration in merging the two voices. Each had traditional roots in the Black Church; each sharply criticized the institution and its role in sustaining the oppressive aims of racism. Reared atheist, Coates offers no such critique in the way one simply does not spend time discussing non-issues. Instead, Coates offers a counter narrative in the tradition of the educational elements of Hip-Hop culture (Peterson 181). This remix — synthesis — underscores the complexity of voices and philosophical approaches that might be engaged in in our contemporary political and social climate. Moving away from the existing binaries,

Coates's writing represents the natural evolution of writing and thought that the generation that was reared on Wright and Baldwin as part of the African American canon was educated. Similarly, in his *New Republic* reflections on a course he taught on Richard Wright and James Baldwin at Bennington College in Vermont shortly after the events in Ferguson, MO, Benjamin Anastas describes the difference between the two writers as one where "Baldwin's loving vision" is more useful to discourse than "Wright's cruder binary" of what distinguishes Blacks and Whites. Haile refers to Coates' work as one that "sees great possibilities in the body, the greatest of which is the creation and destruction of 'galaxies of reality'" (493) necessarily accomplished by "[making] peace within the chaos of existence" (494). As I mentioned in my introductory chapter, and Haile illustrates here, this phenomenology is grounded in the discursive practices of Franz Fanon and is a disruptive element applicable to all three works discussed in this thesis: "traditional Western phenomenology cannot address the mind-body-world at the level of alienation" (494), thus, it necessitates that African American writers in particular must produce and interject their narratives in manners that ensure inclusion.

Father to Son

Where Beyoncé ends with her examination of the generational impact of the patriarchal stronghold on women, Coates manages to pick up with a voice that allows the two texts to function complementarily in their messages to the next generation. While both writers emphasize the centering of the nurturing aspects of womanhood as a way to manage the terrain of reconciling past with present, Coates uses his platform to

present specific coming-of-age reflections in light of turbulent times and centers his own "softness" in an effort to break the mold of the hardened demeanor cultivated out of a necessity for survival in the environments in which he grew up. In fact, he explains poignantly how "we lose our softness" as he presents the crux of Black parenting rooted in the fear and mantra that guides "black boys and black girls to 'be twice as good,' which is to say 'accept half as much"' (91). He compares these words to the narratives that little white children are told and surmises, "[t]his is how they steal our right to smile. No one told those little white children, with their tricycles, to be twice as good. I imagined their parents telling them to take twice as much" (91). Centering Black fatherhood in this way runs contrary to several popular stereotypes about Black men: 1) that Black men leave their children to be raised by single mothers, and 2) that Black men in their hypermasculinity celebrate a certain "thug culture" representative of the hip-hop community. Coates' emotional letter to his son provides a more nuanced complexity to Black fatherhood in particular. In "How Fresh and New is the Case Coates Makes?" Thabiti Lewis offers that

> While what Coates reveals is nothing new, his style has managed to touch the heart, emotions, and humanity of his readers. It is indeed not new information, but the truth power and emotion, he conjures stokes the passion, pain, and trauma of the current generation in need of healing words of love; of someone speaking directly to them telling them that they are human, that they matter. (193)

For much of his book, Coates explores in his letter the internal machinations of what it was like for him growing up Black in America. In a manner similar to Beyoncé's reflections on the generational legacy of patriarchal oppression for women, Coates explores an element of toxic masculinity that is perpetuated in pursuit of a position amongst the patriarchy in light of systemic racism. The manner in which he chronicles the legacy of slavery, the Jim Crow lynching era, 1960s Civil Rights struggles, and ultimately his own position as an inner-city youth during the 1980s and 1990s as used to examine the long-ranging effects of racist practices also opens the door for a more tender discourse with his son. His coming-of-age as a member of the hip-hop generation born roughly between 1964 and 1985 (Peterson 191), Coates' reflections serve much as a griot does in the communication of history to his son, and by default his readers. So while readers are confronted with the violent strands of the maneuvering required by Black men, they are simultaneously afforded a glimpse into the more delicate representation of a father gently narrating a painful past in hopes of ensuring for him a safer future.

Unfortunately, but especially in the wake of the police brutality publicized in the media, this description of the evolution of (African) American culture from a father's perspective as it relates to race relations becomes a significant interruption to the status quo of both Black and white communities. Through it, readers receive a quick tutorial on the historical influences of not just any African American identity, but one formed within the major African American enclaves in the urban centers of major American cities, Baltimore, Washington DC, Chicago, and New York. Additionally, Coates' family dynamic as influenced by the Black Nationalist ideologies of Coates's Black Panther

father provide a stark contrast to the Black parenthood made popular in 1980s sitcoms like *The Cosby Show*.

Fear as a motif is central to this text. As a parent, Coates writes, “I was afraid long before you” (14) and acknowledges that this fear was not only generated on the streets, but also at his “Nana’s home in Philadelphia,” where his “father’s father…uncle Oscar…and…uncle David [were] dead and that each of the instances [were] unnatural” (15). He elaborates on the generational fear of his own father, who “was so very afraid,” and that the beatings that fear produced were “applied with more anxiety than anger” as “all around…[e]veryone had lost a child, somehow, to the streets, to jail, to drugs, to guns” (15-6). The parallels to the concerns of the present linger. Coates points out that “[t]he law did not protect us. And now, in your time, the law has become an excuse for stopping and frisking you, which is to say, for furthering assault on your body” (17). This fear creates a distance—two worlds—and between them the already mentioned “sooty details” to which Richard Wright alludes.

The illumination of this distance—this gap—is perhaps the element that strikes white audiences most, the detailed awareness of how parenting and childhood for blacks and whites in this country really is worlds apart. Coates shares with his son that he “knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not” (20-1). While Coates acknowledges that the world of his youth and the world of his son’s—who had only ever known a black President—were also worlds apart, but on the day that Michael Brown’s killer was acquitted, their experiences as black men merged. Coates writes, “for all our differing worlds, at your age my feeling was exactly the same” (21). This is the

turning point for Coates; however, as a father, he does not wish to pass on the legacy of the hardness that still plagues the writer who reflects that "[e]ven in Paris [he] could not shake the old ways, the instinct to watch [his] back at every pass, and always be ready to go" (Coates 126). While Samori has "some acquaintance with the old rules, … they are not as essential to you as they were to me," Coates writes (24). Lewis notes that Coates "expresses a desire to rear a son in a manner different from the author's own upbringing" (193). Coates concedes that in fact he may not have been as tender as he could have "I wish I had been softer with you. Your mother had to teach me how to love you—how to kiss you and tell you I love you every night" (125). With this revelation Coates encourages the discussion for a changing black masculinity, essentially remixing by redefining what it means to be a black man, to be a black father.

Conclusion

"Within there runs blood,
The same old blood! the same red-running blood!
There swells and jets a heart, there all passions, desires, reachings, aspirations,"
excerpt from Part VII," I Sing the Body Electric," by Walt Whitman

Black Bodies in America have been instrumental in producing cultural material wealth since their sale into slavery. From the production of cotton that made possible the invention of the all-American blue jeans, to the jazz music and culture that made Black art an exotic export, to the hip-hop that now frames a universal youth culture – the labor and creativity of Black Americans have insured the nation lucrative exports for centuries. These cultural products often served subversive political purposes as well, however, in the shared lived experiences they made possible. The exploitation of Black labor under slavery led to the publication of the slave narratives that in turn galvanized abolitionist movements. The jazz-influenced Harlem Renaissance gave rise to a black intelligentsia that in turn for many generations set the standard for civil rights legislation and knowledge production, and the hip-hop era sparked 20th-century social movements aimed at combating detrimental Regan-era policies. Of particular influence in the last three decades has been the influence of hip-hop, not only as a cultural export, but as a burgeoning artistic influence beyond popular culture, as evidenced by international gallery walls displaying the works of early graffiti artists like Jean Michel Basquiat and Dondi White, as well as inspiring entire university courses dedicated to the critical examination of hip-hop, and most recently the Pulitzer Prize for music recognition of rap artist Kendrick Lamar's *DAMN*.

As already mentioned, hip-hop as a musical genre instrumental in centering Black culture is not a new arena. However, this thesis has explored how elements of the musical art form have steadily influenced the rhetorical styling of African American texts for aims similar to those articulated most prominently in Tricia Rose's foundational text, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. In it, she identified that “rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins” (loc. 193). This thesis has examined closely three widely heralded contemporary texts and their rhetorical strategies as reflective of the hip-hop aesthetic articulated by Rose, Banks, and Peterson, and has concluded that these are the tropes most useful for examining 21st century African American texts. More important than the techniques, however, is the common thread of generative discourse that each work produces in the way of building bridges that launch social justice movements.

Moreover, I propose that these texts offer but a glimpse of the manner in which African American rhetoric(s) are evolving by applying elements of the hip-hop aesthetic to catalyze social justice advocacy for changes in the broader society. In alignment with the hallmarks of the digital age, these authors/artists challenge the forms of their respective genres, utilizing the techniques much as the hip-hop DJ does in their own contexts. This stylistic approach reinforces the value of hip-hop as a cultural signifier and speaks specifically to the galvanizing quality of this uniquely African American art form. That said, the influence of these texts, much as their stylistic forerunners in the hip-hop music arena, serves to shape commentary and promote the advocacy for addressing contemporary social ills, particularly as they impact the marginalized and under-represented members of our societies.

From its earliest inception, hip-hop has served as community healing and building art. It was the one-time fighting gang members that turned into b-boys dancing in battle. Once registered by the mainstream, hip-hop's influences on music, art, and general style—most prominently its vernacular—brought together at one-time disparate youth cultures. Now, across the globe, hip-hop in all its varieties has built bridges across race, class, and gender. These texts function similarly, as theoretically supported by Banks' query into the African American rhetorical practices that inform multimedia writing, specifically the multi- and mixed-media efforts are an extension of this well-established art of interruption. Banks might agree that these writers present "an approach to African American rhetoric that is fluid and forward-looking yet firmly rooted in African traditions" (3). Primarily, in their attention to weaving voices and media not just in traditional forms, but in digital spaces as well, serve as conduits for new intersectional approaches to identity building and advocates for pushing conversations about race, class, and gender into the public sphere. Banks coins the term "digital griots" to describe the machinations of the contemporary (multimedia) writer as they adopt the stylistic tools of the hip-hop DJ to support the traditional aims of the West African griot, "keeping their history and traditions alive" ("What is a Griot?"). These writers provide valuable social commentary by interrupting the present with a mixture of memory and storytelling that engages a variety of demographics through the use of multiple genre and media.

Both Claudia Rankine and Beyoncé use their mixed-media approaches to convey to audiences the lived experiences of Black women through an embodied discourse, centering the Black woman's experience through prominent placement of her physical

body, as much as her emotional and mental frames. In this manner, they offer counter-narratives to the stereotypical expectations of traditional audiences—both Black and white. In their disruptive and extremely personal narrative choices, both writers produce works that fall outside of the sense of "respectability politics" as long prompted by the Black power structures. They "mix" and "mash-up" texts, recognizing that silence rarely produces progress. These writers present not only the story, but force visibility in the face of erasure with their strong representations of Black bodies. For white audiences the narrative frames potentially disrupt the notion of a post-racial America in a way described by H. Samy Alim and Angela Reyes as even "hyperracial," at once "divided by race," while simultaneously "orienting to race…demonstrate[ing] the myriad ways that American society is fundamentally structured by it" (380). Their texts serve as complements to those texts rooted in a hip-hop aesthetic that centers (linguistic) norms and identities, especially those that favor and support working-class street affiliation and masculinist, heteronormative ideologies of sexuality and gender" (382), as we then see in Coates' work.

The journalistic work of Ta-Nehisi Coates rounds out an examination of contemporary African American rhetoric(s) in the manner it reminds of the social activism of James Baldwin. His "remix" of Baldwin's "A Letter to My Nephew" returns to the classic essay form that spoke to a nation in 1962 as much as it did in 2015. Coates' allusions to the classic texts of the American canon are cemented in his biographical context that was shaped by the machinations of what some refer to as the golden years of hip-hop. His literary and intellectual inspirations move his work forward by reaching audiences across demographics. Coates had already secured his *The Atlantic* readers,

but also members of the Black academic community, particularly as affiliated with its network of affiliations to the HBCU communities. His reach and popularity are extensive and has been a necessary component of the burgeoning discourse and subsequent enlightened understanding of how systems of racism, particularly as they promote violence in Black communities operate. His didactic letter instructs more than just his son as he alludes to what stands between him and the world.

Their use of prose, poetry, and pop culture references rooted in the hip-hop culture that brought together entire generations globally reaches out to an even more extensive range of audiences with these works. Thus, even though disruptive and dissenting voices in tone, timber, as well as form, the writers' works do not alienate as past disruptive voices might have. A real possibility for systemic change is enabled. The numbers are clear, and in a democracy, votes count.

Walt Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric" from *Leaves of Grass* explored the awe of the human body as a metaphor for the complexities and unities of all of humanity, and as a writer, his rhetorical aims often worked to embody the spectrum of the American spirit. "I Sing the Body Electric," interestingly, operated similarly disruptively in 1855, when it was first published, just as the authors/artists explored here. In his sensual celebration of the human body—quite controversial at the time of publication—"Whitman finds a link, an identity, between the erotic body and the body politic" (Gutman). Intersectional before his time, Whitman's text affirms the equality of women and men, slave and auctioneer. More than 150 years later, however, Black voices are still attempting to have their identities included in the discussion Whitman intimated. Their approaches in parts similarly sensual and celebratory in spite of the fragilities of

the black body in America continue the work of moving the stories of slavery's descendants out of the margins and into the mainstream as an extension of the survival efforts of the human spirit.

In the "Introduction" to *African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Keith Gilyard concludes his overview of the chapters by signposting that the text is but an indicator of the "work that needs to be done" in the field (17). He summarizes his preview as one that introduces texts that push for "an understanding of continued Black articulations for a better society," going on to suppose that this is the task towards which our questions should push "if we are to bring a better society into existence" (17). I argue that these texts I have explored in this thesis, with their writing style and rhetorical moves, work towards that end by centering the Black body in a way that mirrors its significance to the all that is embodied by the concept of *America*. Peterson notes that "by studying the ways that hip-hop makes claims...a deeper type of participation unique to hip-hop is made possible" (195). Most significant to the considerations presented within the claims of this thesis, though, is the aim Peterson outlines for his own composition course that explains the benefits of a closer examination of "writers, rappers, and regular folks" as they "use texts and contexts to achieve 'authentic' identities" (194). In this sense, these elements of the hip-hop aesthetic and embodied discourse in African American rhetoric(s) work to include more Americans in the vision of the American body politic that Whitman tried to give us over a century ago.

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