

“I remake my universe every time I use a verse”:
rap music and the changing same of anti-racist struggle in
21st century America

Michael Robert Moschilla, BA and BA (Hons)



This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The University of Western
Australia

School of Humanities

Discipline of History

2023

THESIS DECLARATION

I, Michael Robert Moschilla, certify that:


This thesis has been substantially accomplished during enrolment in this degree.

This thesis is my own work and does not contain any material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text or Authorship Declaration.

This thesis does not contain material which has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution.

In the future, no part of this thesis will be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of The University of Western Australia and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

This thesis does not violate or infringe any copyright, trademark, patent, or other rights whatsoever of any person.

Signature: 

Date: 14/03/2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

I have lived all of my life on unceded Whadjuk Noongar boodja. I acknowledge my place as benefactor of a settler-colonial regime that exhibits many of the same disparities explored throughout this thesis, conditions which have provided – and continues to provide – opportunities for my own growth and prosperity at the expense of First Nations people.

I wish to thank my supervisors Ethan Blue and Kati Tonkin, not only for their obvious intellectual guidance but also their uncanny ability to assuage my concerns at every stage in both this and previous research projects. Whether it be in the form of meetings, swift reads through (frankly underdone) drafts, detailed feedback, or the occasional chat, you've both provided a tremendous amount of support that I will never forget. I have learned more in the past few years than I did in the previous two and a half decades, and I have both of you to thank for that.

The past four years have been an extremely selfish time. As such, I wish to thank all my friends and family who have accepted me even as I've been forgetful and occasionally distant in our relationships. To my grandparents Francesca, Giovanni, Giuseppe, and Maria, all of whom travelled half way around the world in pursuit of economic stability, whose storytelling has taught me more about history than any book ever could: thank you. To my parents Angie and Sam, for their ongoing compassion and care, who have provided not only ongoing emotional and financial support but also the kind of selfless role-models I can only aspire to be: thank you. To my brother John, for being the primary intellectual influence in my life, constantly challenging me to think (and sometimes overthink) beyond my pre-conceived ideas: thank you. And finally my twin brother Joe, you're ... ok.

ABSTRACT

Nearly six decades after the passage of the civil rights act, racism remains a stubbornly persistent feature of American society. In the same century that its first Black president was elected, American cities and schools remain heavily segregated, homelessness continues unabated, racial wealth gaps have worsened, and Black lives continue to be taken via state-sanctioned violence. Perhaps most troubling, not only have these issues remained intact, they are also hidden behind colorblind language and a logic assuming life circumstances to be a simple product of one's work ethic, resilience, and intelligence. These structurally racist conditions – and their masking – owe much to the forces of neoliberal racial capitalism. Gaining primacy in the late-1970s, neoliberalism quickly grew into an economic, political, and ideological 'common sense' functioning to calcify networks of structural inequality. Focussing on multiple examples of this 21st century, neoliberal-based plight – which includes the War on Terror, the Global Financial Crisis, the opioid crisis, and mass incarceration – this thesis examines the effects of racial capitalist crises on African American communities.

More importantly, however, this thesis goes beyond a simple detailing of oppressive histories to focus on some of the ways victims of racial capitalist crises have spoken back. Attuned to both Cedric Robinson's idea of the Black radical tradition and Amiri Baraka's concept of the 'changing same' – a dialectical process in which artistic forms grow out of and influence contemporary historical conditions – I investigate the varied ways musicians confront the oppressions that characterize the late neoliberal moment. Limiting my sources to prominent 21st century rappers including Kendrick Lamar, Janelle Monáe, Danny Brown, and Noname, I broadly argue that rap music offers critiques and diagnoses of the ongoing crises engendered by racial capitalism.

Assessing modern histories through the lens of rap music offers alternative accounts of histories and ideas taken as 'common sense', illustrating the gulf between the grand rhetoric of neoliberalism and its lived reality. But rap does more than this: it seeks alternatives. Every chapter of this thesis looks to rap not only as offering (Black) histories from below, but also as a form of expression seeking to "remake universes" in every conceivable – and heretofore inconceivable – way. Offering answers to modernity that range from Afrofuturist flight to Black liberation theology and abolitionist rebirth, rap music, I argue, offers radical imaginations that rhyme liberating futures into existence.

CONTENTS

Introduction

1

1 - "It's war, lace your boots up": 4th25, the Iraq War, and the Black Patriot of Neoliberal Imperialism

31

2 - "Fuck Earth, I want to live on Mars": The Global Financial Crisis and the Search for *Home* in Afrofuturist Rap

62

3 - "If God got us then we gon' be alright": Black Liberation Theology as a Solution to Neoliberal Alienation in Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*

102

4 - "Only once the drugs are done, that I feel like dying": Emo Rap and the Opioid Crisis in an Age of Despair

146

5 - "We hate po-po / Wanna kill us dead in the street fo' sho": Rap Music, Anti-Prison Critique, and Abolitionist Re-Birth in the era of Mass Incarceration

182

Conclusion - The Future Changing Same

229

Bibliography

237

vi

Introduction

On a Cleveland, Ohio bus in late July 2015, a 14-year-old African American boy was arrested under suspicion of public intoxication. Occurring roughly a year after the police killing of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in the same city and mere days after the news of Sandra Bland's death in a Texas prison cell garnered national attention, this latest arrest sparked immediate concerns for the well-being of the child. Minutes after the teenager (whose name was never mentioned) was escorted off the bus, a group of protestors – who were attending a nearby Movement for Black Lives conference – gathered at the scene as the dozen or so bystanders quickly swelled into the hundreds. With protestors blocking the street, officers swiftly resorted to pepper spray and the teen was (eventually) released.¹

In some ways, this protest appeared unremarkable. After all, African American resistance to the forces of criminalization is as old as the U.S. nation-state itself. But for all its familiarity, this protest – and many more like it throughout the 2010s – adopted an aesthetic that differentiated it from previous eras of counterhegemonic resistance. With tempers flaring and crowds growing larger, the group of protestors came together as they chanted a hook written by one of this century's most prominent rappers, Kendrick Lamar: "We gon' be alright! We gon' be alright!" Lamar, it seems, took up a space vacated by popular musicians of the Civil Rights era – musicians such as Marvin Gaye and Nina Simone – who provided not only expressions of Black self-definition and hope in the face of struggle, but also a language of resistance.² In the 21st century, rap exists as a critical site of survival and community-building in the face of marginalization.

Lamar's sizable impact on anti-racist struggles indicates the direction of this thesis. Guided by Amiri Baraka's concept of the 'changing same' of African American musical cultures – a dialectical process in which artistic forms both grow out of and influence contemporary historical conditions and forces of white appropriation – this thesis traverses the shifting terrain of rap music in 21st century America.³ Each chapter assesses structurally racist conditions of late modern neoliberal capitalism and the unique ways rap music confronts these conditions. In doing so, this thesis asks many

¹ Jeremy Gordon, "Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright' Chanted by Protesters During Cleveland Police Altercation," *Pitchfork*, July 29, 2015, <https://pitchfork.com/news/60568-kendrick-lamars-alright-chanted-by-protesters-during-cleveland-police-altercation/>.

² Throughout this thesis, I capitalize Black but not white. Though grammatically inconsistent, this decision is important for counterhegemonic reasons. I read the capitalization of Black as a celebration of resistant histories. On the other hand, capitalizing white, as I understand it, references histories of white supremacy. Whiteness is the historical subjugating position – the very position the capital B seeks to counter. Therefore, I avoid the capitalization of white.

³ Baraka outlines this concept – which I explore in greater detail later on pages 18-9 of this introduction – in multiple works. See: Amiri I. Baraka, *Blues people: Negro music in white America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1963); Amiri I. Baraka, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," in *Black Music* (Da Capo Press: New York, 1998. Originally from 1966), 181-211.

questions: what are some of the defining moments, events, phenomena, and crises of 21st century America? How have African Americans been particularly affected by these histories?⁴ In what ways has rap been utilized as a means through which to confront these histories? What socio-historical alternatives exist? And what role does rap play in realizing these alternatives? Avoiding singular answers to these questions, I instead argue that (some) rap offers both profound critiques of racial capitalist histories and paths to emancipatory futures freed from these realities.

Understanding contemporary crises via the storytelling of rappers provides an account of 21st century America against the grain. Part of rap's revolutionary power – in addition to the fun and pleasure it provides – lies in its ability to challenge dominant structures and 'official' histories, giving voice to resistant consciousnesses in the process. Though it would be wrong to assume that all rap performs this task – after all, rap is a heterogeneous art-form serving a vast array of complex functions – this thesis dedicates most space to counterhegemonic voices within the genre. "Rap's capacity as a form of testimony," pioneering hip hop scholar Tricia Rose argues, "as an articulation of a young black urban critical voice of social protest has profound potential as a basis for a language of liberation."⁵ Rap, in other words, offers a working-through of marginalization, speaking to and about the conditions that continue to marginalize people of color in the 21st century. But even more than this, rap is a site in which alternatives are rhymed into existence. Rap's creativity and fun, its sense of community and survival, not only challenges the 'changing same' of American racism: it occasionally endeavours to imagine a something else. Rap "remakes universes", communicating ways out of no way.⁶

In identifying 21st century rap music as a form of counterhegemonic critique, I am indebted to Cedric Robinson's conception of the 'Black radical tradition'. The Black radical tradition is a thread of revolutionary thought dedicated to the creation of other (and better) worlds through critiques of racial capitalist domination, a centuries-old "collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality."⁷ In the context of a 21st century America rife with crises – be they in the form of imperialist warfare, economic collapse, drug (and viral) epidemics, the continuance of

⁴ Despite being primarily focussed on the way African Americans are affected by these histories, I should stress that they are not alone. The consequences of every phenomenon I discuss are multifaceted and affect a great many people. Therefore, while I don't focus on immigrants, Native Americans, (poor) white people, or Latin Americans, they are all also deeply impacted by these histories.

⁵ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 144.

⁶ The title of this thesis is taken from a bar by underground hip hop group Deltron 3030 (whom I analyse in Chapter 2). See: Deltron 3030, "Time Keeps on Slipping," track 14 on *Deltron 3030*, 75 Ark, 2000.

⁷ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2000 ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 170-1.

state violence – rap music, I argue throughout this thesis, works within this tradition as it strives for alternatives to our late neoliberal conjuncture.⁸

Literature Review

Racial Capitalism

Investigating rap music in dialogue with forms of 21st century crisis situates this thesis within scholarship on racial capitalism. In his pioneering book *Black Marxism* (1983), Robinson outlined a history of capitalist development that ran against the grain of a (white) Marxist orthodoxy. Far from ‘colorblind’, Robinson explained, “[t]he development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, [as] did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism. I have used the term ‘racial capitalism’ to refer to this development and to the subsequent structure as a historical agency.”⁹ ‘Racial capitalism’ refuses to decouple the history of racism – indeed, of ‘race’ in general – from that of capital accumulation. Instead, ‘racial capitalism’ re-imagines these phenomena as being mutually dependent and re-enforcing. All capitalism is racial.

Guided by Robinson, capitalism should be understood as a political economic structure dependant on the construction – and then exploitation – of forms of hierarchized human difference.

Racialization, as Jodi Melamed explains, is central to this process: “Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires.”¹⁰ Understood in these terms, the history of American anti-Blackness – from slavery to the structural racism that characterizes all of the crises explored in this thesis – is bound within a capitalist economic system that depends on the exploitation of those racialized into a state of ‘justifiable’ exploitability.

⁸ Though originally coined by Antonio Gramsci, Jordan Camp offers a useful definition of ‘conjuncture’: “By ‘conjunctural’ Gramsci was referring to an unpredictable historical moment ripe with contradictions in which previously separate forces can merge to create political transformation.” Jordan T. Camp, “The Bombs Explode at Home: Policing, Prisons, and Permanent War,” *Social Justice* 44, no. 2-3 (2017): 20. By describing our present moment through the phrase “late neoliberal conjuncture”, I am seeking to both capture the climate of crises typical of the 21st century as well as the ongoing resistance to these crises – some of which relate to the Black radical tradition and music.

⁹ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 2.

¹⁰ Jodi Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015), 77.

Though the concept of racial capitalism – as originally formulated by Robinson – remains crucial for any analysis of modern racism, scholars have since expanded upon it. As feminist and queer studies scholars have repeatedly noted, racial capitalism does not simply engage in a process of racialization; it is also a deeply gendered phenomenon. Walter Johnson highlights the inherently gendered nature of racial capitalism in the context of American slavery, noting that “[t]he entire ‘pyramid’ of the Atlantic economy of the nineteenth century ... was founded upon the capacity of enslaved women’s bodies: upon their ability to reproduce capital. ... [S]exual violation, reproductive invigilation, and natal alienation were elementary aspects of slavery, and thus of racial capitalism.”¹¹ Even beyond the visceral violence of slavery, racial capitalism’s dependence on amassing large swaths of exploitable peoples necessitates control over women’s bodies and sexual autonomy. Consequently, whether it be through the systemic rape of enslaved women and the kidnapping of their children or the proliferation of heteronormative femininities tied to motherhood and the performance of reproductive labor, capitalism ensures its existence through an appeal to – and an enforcement of – patriarchal norms.¹²

Inspired by Robinson and other scholars of racial capitalism, this thesis employs a theoretical approach that views the racial and class foundations of American society in tandem with gendered and sexual constructions. Doing so, I believe, offers a suitable framework through which to analyse the kinds of 21st century crises explored by rap music.

Neoliberalism

The section above provides an account of racial capitalism that is in many ways static. With the process of accumulating capital being dependent on forms of exploitable human difference, capitalism racializes and genders large swaths of the global population. However, the specifics of this process are always changing, contingent upon the social, political, and ideological formations of a

¹¹ Walter Johnson, “To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice,” *Boston Review*, Feb 1, 2017, <http://bostonreview.net/forum/walter-johnson-to-remake-the-world>.

¹² Duc Hien Nguyen explains the dependence of capitalist political economies on the heteronormative family: “[A]s the physical space where labor power, social relations, kinships, customs, norms, and tradition are reproduced, the family is indispensable for the functioning of capitalism as such. As a site of nonmarket production, income pooling, mutual aids, and a source of genuine affection and reciprocity, the family is critical to the survival of the working class. Through its social reproductive functioning, the family is a fundamental feature of the mode of production. At the same time, it can be a site of conflict and oppression. As a private, self-sufficient unit dedicated to aggrandizing its own consumption ends, family can be a source of dependency that ties workers and their dependents to continuing waged employment and exploitation. It is within the family that the transmission of compulsory heterosexuality, the gendered division of labor, and the identification of femininity with unpaid reproductive labor take place.” Duc Hien Nguyen, “The Political Economy of Heteronormativity,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 55, no. 1 (2023): 121-2.

given moment.¹³ Consequently, it is important to recognize the shifts to racial capitalist structures. By exploring crises that have converged in the present century, crises that are the legacy of American political economics since the passage of Civil Rights, this thesis centres analysis on neoliberal capitalism.

What is neoliberalism? Though it is a deeply complex and fluid phenomenon, many have still attempted to define. Marie Gottschalk describes neoliberalism as “an ideology and package of policies that deify low taxes, macroeconomic stabilization (through low inflation and low public debt), financial and trade deregulation, privatization of public assets and services, and the retrenchment of the welfare state.”¹⁴ In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), Marxist economic geographer David Harvey expounds on the state’s role in this economic system:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. ... It must also set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture.¹⁵

Under neoliberalism, ironically enough, the state must leverage its power in the service of disabling itself.¹⁶

¹³ Andy Clarno and Salim Vally draw on South African anti-racist movements – and the work of activist Neville Alexander – to call for historically specific analyses of racial capitalism that “examines political, economic, and ideological aspects of a social formation at a particular moment in time and space, recognizing that the status quo is a product of long-standing structural dynamics and constantly evolving struggles between social forces seeking to transform or defend existing structures.” Andy Clarno and Salim Vally, “The Context of Struggle,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, ahead of print (2022): 6.

¹⁴ Marie Gottschalk, *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 11.

¹⁵ Harvey, *History of Neoliberalism*, 2.

¹⁶ This apparent contradiction, Harvey argues, is a common feature of neoliberal theory: “[Neoliberalism’s] theoretical framework is not ... entirely coherent. The scientific rigour of its neoclassical economics does not sit easily with its political commitment to ideals of individual freedom, nor does its supposed distrust of all state power fit with the need for a strong and if necessary coercive state that will defend the rights of private property, individual liberties, and entrepreneurial freedoms. ... And there are ... enough contradictions in the neoliberal position to render evolving neoliberal practices (vis-à-vis issues such as monopoly power and

While its theoretical origins lie in the 1940s, it was not until the 1970s that neoliberalism received broad political support as an alternative to a preceding political economic structuring ideology: Keynesianism.¹⁷ Dominant since the 1930s, the Keynesian project, Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains,

consisted of investments against the tide, designed to avoid the cumulative effects of downward business cycles by guaranteeing effective demand (via incomes programmes, public borrowing strategies and so forth) during bad times. The social project of Keynesianism, following from the central logic that full employment of resources enhances rather than impedes the production of new wealth, was to extend to workers ... protections against calamity and opportunities for advancement.¹⁸

Though far from universally celebrated, Keynesianism was hegemonic in American politics until the economic crisis of the early 1970s. It was in response to this crisis – a crisis attributed to Keynesian economic policy – that neoliberalism developed into the hegemonic ideology it remains today.¹⁹

Within a few decades, a fringe idea with minimal public support developed into an organizing principle of modern politics. With an understanding of the meteoric *rise* of neoliberalism, scholars have since turned their attention to its *effects*. It is to this literature that I now turn, describing some of the primary consequences of neoliberalism and outlining the historical context within which I locate rap.

The secondary literature on neoliberalism is dominated by an examination of its inequities, with particular attention paid to both its racist foundations and racist consequences. In comparison to the enforcement of neoliberal policy elsewhere, the US version was garnered, largely, via consent. To do so, the state inflamed racial fears around a presumed Black insurgent threat in a post-Civil Rights period characterized by economic decline, moral panics, Black revolts – most notably in Watts, Detroit, and Attacca Prison – and a burgeoning ‘law and order’ rhetoric. Jordan Camp explains:

market failures) unrecognizable in relation to the seeming purity of neoliberal doctrine.” Harvey, *History of Neoliberalism*, 21.

¹⁷ For an investigation into the origins of neoliberal thought, see: Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Globalisation and US prison growth: from military Keynesianism to post-Keynesian militarism,” *Race & Class* 40, no. 2-3 (1999): 177.

¹⁹ Harvey captures this transitional period: “By the end of the 1960s embedded liberalism began to break down Unemployment and inflation were both surging everywhere, ushering in a global phase of ‘stagflation’ that lasted throughout much of the 1970s. Fiscal crises of various states ... resulted as tax revenues plunged and social expenditures soared. ... The embedded liberalism that had delivered high rates of growth to at least the advanced capitalist countries after 1945 was clearly exhausted and was no longer working.” Harvey, *History of Neoliberalism*, 12.

Neoliberal state formation took shape as a cycle of revolts led by criminalized sectors of the multiracial working class ripped through U.S. cities and prisons. The moral panics about race, crime, and law and order generated by the events were seized upon by neoliberals to blame fiscal problems on the poor and people of color. They were scapegoated for the urban fiscal crisis, a racist narrative that provided the ideological justification for the deployment of policies of planned shrinkage to gut public expenditures.²⁰

Popular rhetoric linking Black people to criminal ‘pathologies’ provided the foundations upon which neoliberal economic policy would be built. Race, racialization, and criminalization – all of which were filtered through gendered tropes, with Black women narrated as ‘welfare queens’ just as much as Black men were narrated as violent criminals – were thus central building blocks in the construction of racial capitalism’s new epoch.

But American neoliberalism was not simply built upon racist *foundations*: it also has racist *consequences*. Scholars across many fields have routinely observed the dire effects of the neoliberal turn, noting the racial disparities resulting from the dual forces of disinvestment – in industries/sectors from healthcare to welfare, and from education to housing – and investment – primarily in the carceral regime and military industrial complex. On this point, a wide array of sources is relevant. Texts from Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* to Thomas Shapiro’s *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality* to Harriet Washington’s *Deadly Monopolies: The Shocking Corporate Takeover of Life Itself – And the Consequences for Your Health and Our Medical Future* (and many, many more) all explore the neoliberal turn’s racist effects.²¹

But, being less a rupture from racial capitalist state formation than a new incarnation, neoliberalism unsurprisingly subjugates along modalities beyond ‘race’ alone. In *How all Politics became Reproductive Politics*, Laura Briggs observes the gendered costs of neoliberal economics: “The massive neoliberal shift that began in the late 1970s fundamentally realigned the relationships of households, government, and business such that social reproduction and reproductive labor stopped receiving much support from government (including for schools, housing, and public safety), and

²⁰ Jordan T. Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 81-2.

²¹ Ruth W. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Thomas M. Shapiro, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Harriet A. Washington, *Deadly Monopolies: The Shocking Corporate Takeover of Life Itself—and the Consequences for Your Health and Our Medical Future* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011).

frozen real wages sent every available adult into the labor force ... in an effort to keep their household afloat.”²² Consequently, the neoliberal shift has resulted in: women losing access to welfare; the need to care for family without government support (thus necessitating a ‘second shift’); women being targeted by the police; and racial disparities in infant mortality.²³ In summary, the consequences of neoliberalism are extremely wide-reaching for peoples across various and intersecting modalities.

More than simply socio-economic, neoliberalism’s effects are also felt in other ways. Neoliberalism, I argue throughout this thesis (especially in Chapters 3 and 4), is as much an ideology as it is an economics. As Harvey explains: “Neoliberalism has ... become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.”²⁴ All aspects of life have become filtered through neoliberal discourses of individualism, meritocracy, and profit-margins. From the way we interact with people, to our relationships with any and every institution, to the very ontologies we implicitly carry with us, neoliberalism organises much of our lives. Neoliberalism is truly hegemonic, truly ‘common sense’ – to borrow a phrase from Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci that refers to “the diffuse, uncoordinated features of a generic form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment” – in our collective worlds and imaginations.²⁵

The effect of this ideology is not simply the creation of disparities, but also the masking of them. By proclaiming itself to be a meritocratic panacea where individual effort alone determines outcome, neoliberalism effectively shields itself from critique: “While personal and individual freedom in the marketplace is guaranteed, each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being. ... Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing significantly enough in one’s own human capital

²² Laura Briggs, *How all politics became reproductive politics: From welfare reform to foreclosure to Trump* (California: University of California Press, 2017), 188.

²³ Briggs explains these conditions: “On the government support side, as we have seen, the neoliberal efforts to reduce public benefits for reproductive labor began by targeting ‘welfare’—inaccurately but persistently understood as a program most likely to be used by Black mothers. The crumbling of other state supports—for housing, day care, education, disaster relief, public health, and elder care, for example—together with an exacerbation of policing, imprisonment, and the militarization and surveillance of communities of color produce a climate in the United States and the material conditions that would seem to virtually guarantee to increase the stress of Black mothers.” Briggs, *How all politics became reproductive politics*, 131. This added stress, Briggs argues, results in disparate rates of infant mortality. “Highly disparate rates of infant mortality are the persistent and even deepening effect of what we might call a specifically neoliberal racism.” Briggs, *How all politics became reproductive politics*, 130-1.

²⁴ Harvey, *History of Neoliberalism*, 3.

²⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (International Publishers: New York, 1971), 330.

through education) rather than being attributed to any systemic property".²⁶ Neoliberal ideology's trademark individualism bestows blame upon the (disproportionately Black) disenfranchised for their disenfranchisement.

Not only have neoliberal logics rendered the structural causes of disparity invisible, the language and logic used to explain these disparities has also changed. In the post-Civil Rights era, explicitly racist language blaming Black people for their marginalization became broadly unacceptable. In its place, a new 'common sense' grew to prominence: what scholars have called 'colorblind' racism.²⁷ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains this phenomenon and some of its effects:

Colorblindness has become the default setting for how Americans understand how race and racism work. It is repeatedly argued that the absence of racial insult means that racial discrimination is not at play. Indeed, the mere mention of race as a possible explanation, or as a means of providing greater context, risks accusations of 'playing the race card' This is deployed to hide or obscure inequality and disparities between African Americans and whites.²⁸

In the absence of both structural culpability and 'explicit' racism, Black people themselves are assumed to be wrongdoers: bad workers, absent fathers, welfare queens, thugs. Structurally racist forces are rendered invisible in the process.

Though characteristic of the neoliberal era, the specifics of this 'colorblind' racial formation are somewhat different in the 21st century than in the 20th. Lacking (though not entirely) the explicit racial animus of previous eras of American racism, the neoliberal era is notable for its 'inclusionary' qualities. By characterizing the market as *the* solution to all structural problems, neoliberalism makes space for the marginalized. The effect, however, is not racial equality but a more complex system of racialization in which those pushed to the economic margins are also expected to work from within. Melamed describes this specific racial formation as 'neoliberal multiculturalism', a formation which leverages the 'inclusion' of non-white bodies "to portray the equality of the free market as the most fundamental expression of equality, and to make the diversity of goods, services, and capital flowing across national boundaries stand for the best manifestation of

²⁶ Harvey, *History of Neoliberalism*, 65-6.

²⁷ The absence of 'race' (or, rather, explicitly racist language) is a defining element of neoliberalism: "This expurgation of race is a form of non-racialism, the ultimate goal of the neoliberal approach to race." Andre C. Willis, "Obama's Racial Legacy: The Power of Whiteness," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 5, no. 2 (2017): 189.

²⁸ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 72.

multiculturalism.”²⁹ Despite this flow of capital doing little to undo *broad* racial disparities, the benefits that accrue to some ‘included’ *individuals* ‘proves’ neoliberalism’s colorblindness. As a result, neoliberalism racializes without, on the surface, appearing to be racist at all. It symbolically ‘includes’ as part of a process that materially excludes. Throughout this thesis, I engage with some of these ‘inclusionary’ racisms – be they evident in the increased numbers of people of color in the American military or the predatory lending practices typical of the decade leading up to the Global Financial Crisis – in a way that highlights their harmful consequences.

But if racial disparities continue despite neoliberalism’s supposed multicultural validity, then how does neoliberalism justify itself? In other words, how does a cause of racism proclaim itself as the solution to racism? The ongoing existence of structural racism is explained away through a language of culture, wherein the presumed pathological behaviour of members of a community are assumed to be the only cause of disparities. Arun Kundani describes this phenomenon and its centrality to the survival of neoliberalism: “Ideologically, neoliberalism is haunted by the existence of ... surplus populations. They signify a limit to its reach, a failure to universalise, a space from within which resistance is generated. The tension between the desire for a universal market order and the anxiety that there are limits to market rule is resolved through a racial idea of culture Race enables the limits to the universalisation of neoliberalism to be naturalised and dehistoricised”.³⁰ This more flexible reading of race shields neoliberalism from critique, as those left behind are assumed to be less victims of global economic forces than of their own cultural and behavioural faults.

The many texts discussed throughout this section provide the socio-political and economic context in which my analysis of rap music is based. But statistics and timelines do not tell the whole story. George Lipsitz reminds us that “[s]cholarly studies of racism in the United States suffer when they fail to recognize the knowledge about social relations contained in music, literature, and folklore”.³¹ In order to understand the human impact of these histories, we must listen to the voices of the people most heavily burdened by racial capitalist crisis. As perhaps the most popular form of Black expressive culture in the 21st century, rap music offers a powerful lens through which to assess these histories.

²⁹ Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 139.

³⁰ Arun Kundani, “The racial constitution of neoliberalism,” *Race & Class* 63, no. 1 (2021): 64.

³¹ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, rev. and expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 159.

Rap music

Scholarship on the rap genre locates its origins in the socioeconomic conditions of 1970s South Bronx – a moment out of which neoliberalism garnered wide-spread acceptance.³² White flight into the suburbs – a process underway since the 1930s – facilitated government policies of urban renewal which tore down Black neighborhoods and replaced them with freeways intended to support newly migrated whites. With employment opportunities following white America into the sprawling suburbs or overseas, poor and Black Americans took up employment (when available at all) in the low-paying service sector. Unsurprisingly, such jobs did little to provide the kind of financial security required to weather the ongoing storm of economic decline.³³ The consequence of these forces was the effective abandonment of Black America – except for the growing overreach of the carceral regime.

The result of these many structural forces was that inner cities across the U.S. North became rife with mass poverty, homelessness, and disenfranchisement. In response to this spiral of underdevelopment, many African Americans were pushed into underground economies wherein they could strive for the economic security not forthcoming in 'legitimate' circles.³⁴ As Rose illustrates, these many conditions fostered the creation of rap: "Substantial postindustrial shifts in economic conditions, access to housing, demographics, and communication networks were crucial to the formation of the conditions that nurtured the cultural hybrids and sociopolitical tenor of hip hop's lyrics and music."³⁵ In this period of social and economic upheaval, young, inner-city people of color constructed hip hop as a life-affirming voice in the face of distress beyond their control.³⁶

³² It is also worth noting that rap is not 'purely' African American. Instead, as Paul Gilroy argues, rap is a product of rich Afro-diasporic hybrids: "The musical components of hip hop are a hybrid form nurtured by the social relations of the South Bronx where Jamaican sound system culture was transplanted during the 1970s and put down new roots. In conjunction with specific technological innovations, this routed and re-rooted Caribbean culture set in train a process that was to transform black America's sense of itself and a large portion of the popular music industry as well." Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 33.

³³ Thomas Sugrue explores these conditions in the context of Detroit. See: Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

³⁴ My use of the term 'underdevelopment' is borrowed from Manning Marable in *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015. Originally from 1983), who himself was inspired by Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972).

³⁵ Rose, *Black Noise*, 26.

³⁶ But even as much rap challenges conditions associated with racial capitalism, it has also benefited from them. Robin Kelley explains: "[I]n the struggles of urban youths for survival and pleasure inside capitalism, capitalism has become both their greatest friend and greatest foe. It has the capacity to create spaces for their entrepreneurial imaginations and their 'symbolic work,' to allow them to turn something of a profit, and to permit them to hone their skills and imagine getting paid. At the same time, it is also responsible for a shrinking labor market, the militarization of urban space, and the circulation of the very representations of race that generate terror in all of us at the sight of young black men and yet compels most of America to want

Though blossoming as an art-form in the 1970s and through artists such as DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa, rap music only garnered widespread scholarly attention in the wake of its so-called 'Golden Era'.³⁷ Rose's *Black Noise* (1994), William Perkins' edited volume *Droppin' Science* (1995), Robin Kelley's *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!* (1997), and Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop* (2005) are notable examples of this early literature, literature that identified rap as an expressive culture creating spaces of fun and community for Black youths abandoned by deindustrialization.³⁸

These texts normalized scholarly investigations of hip hop such that, as Gail Woldu writes, "[b]y the early 2000s hip-hop [studies] was widely accepted as an academic discipline."³⁹ With increased scholarly attention, analysis of the genre diversified beyond the histories of inner-city disinvestment explained above. A particularly fruitful site of investigation at the turn of the century was the position of women within rap – although Rose had already flagged this dimension in her early work. Joan Morgan's *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (1999), Gwendolyn Pough's *Check It While I Wreck It* (2004), Patricia Hill Collins' *From Black Power to Hip Hop* (2006), and Tracy Sharpley-Whiting's *Pimps Up, Ho's Down* (2007) offered much needed Black feminist analyses of a genre often critiqued for its misogynistic attitudes.⁴⁰ Refusing to disentangle music from forces of commodification, these scholars often highlighted the way Black women's bodies were co-opted and objectified not just by male rappers, but by a music industry intent on selling records by projecting an image of Black femininity that appealed to rap's predominantly white male audience.⁴¹ As much

to wear their shoes." Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 77.

³⁷ Which William Cobb places between the years 1984 and 1992. William J. Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic* (New York: New York UP, 2007), 41.

³⁸ William E. Perkins ed., *Droppin Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

³⁹ Gail H. Woldu, "The Kaleidoscope of Writing on Hip-Hop Culture," *Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 67, no. 1 (2010): 12.

⁴⁰ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999); Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004); Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Tracy D. Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women* (New York: NYU Press, 2007). But, I must stress, each writer expresses quite different views on hip hop culture. As Candice Jenkins argues: "Pough's sanguine approach to hip hop embraces the music's possibilities, particularly for female artists, but Sharpley-Whiting takes a far more doubtful stance, particularly as her work investigates what she sees as the music's collusions with the pornography industry and other public sites of institutionalized sexism, racism, and misogyny. In this she echoes many other second- and third-wave feminist scholars who have weighed in on hip hop's sexual politics—with the notable exception of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins who ... identifies rap as a crucial component of new avenues of black racial and gender exploration." Candice M. Jenkins, "Introduction: 'Reading' Hip-Hop Discourse in the Twenty-First Century," *African American Review* 46, no. 1, (2013): 3.

⁴¹ For example, Sharpley-Whiting argues that record companies representing Black women frequently exaggerated a sexual explicitness, 'diva' persona, and aggressive sexual behaviour that drew on the racist and sexist "twin myths of hypersexuality and easy accessibility". Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down*, 65.

as Black women were exploited through these processes, these scholars also observed the many ways female rappers spoke back, creating spaces of community and empowerment through musical expression and a broader hip hop culture.⁴²

Aligned with these discussions, literature of the early-2000s often confronted the problematic rhetoric circulating around the genre. Rose explores this 'public discourse' side of rap in *The Hip Hop Wars* (2008), detailing some of the debates regarding rap's supposed 'violence', sexism, and even its 'worth' as an artistic form. Well into the 21st century, conservative commentators frequently rejected the genre, assuming it to be reflective of a cultural pathology responsible for Black poverty. As Rose explains: "To many hot-headed critics of hip hop, structural forms of deep racism, corporate influences, and the long-term effects of economic, social, and political disempowerment are not meaningfully related to rappers' alienated, angry stories about life in the ghetto; rather, they are seen as 'proof' that black behavior creates ghetto conditions."⁴³ Despite rap's mainstream popularity into the early 2000s, Rose here captures the complex space the genre held – and, possibly, continues to hold – within American society.

For their part, progressive commentators in both scholarly and public circles spent much time directly challenging conservative pundits for their thinly veiled racist analysis, noting such rhetorical scapegoating as a simple rehashing of a tradition blaming Black people for contemporary crises.⁴⁴ It seems that any problematic idea or image, when proffered by a Black person, is immediately interpreted by conservatives as an external threat to an internal peace, while a genre like rock – which is hardly immune to celebrations of sexism – is given a free pass. Countering narratives that presume rap to be entirely sexist, violent, heterosexist and generally problematic, scholars have largely endorsed the genre. Alternatively, however, and in their rush to reject conservative analysis, some progressives have either trodden too lightly – i.e. overlooked the at times problematic ideas expressed in rap – or offered piece-meal analysis. As Eithne Quinn explains in her 2005 analysis of gangsta rap, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*:

⁴² Joan Morgan outlines an intersectional, hip hop feminism: "More than any other generation before us, we need a feminism committed to 'keeping it real'. We need a voice like our music – one that samples and layers many voices, injects its sensibilities into the old and flips it into something new, provocative, and powerful. ... We need a feminism that possesses the same fundamental understanding held by any true student of hip-hop. Truth can't be found in the voice of any one rapper but in the juxtaposition of many. The keys that unlock the riches of contemporary black female identity lie not in choosing Latifah over Lil' Kim, or even Foxy Brown over Salt-N-Pepa. They lie at the magical intersection where those contrary voices meet". Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 62.

⁴³ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), 5.

⁴⁴ "The terms of the assault on rap music ... are part of a long-standing sociologically based discourse that considers black influences a cultural threat to American society." Rose, *Black Noise*, 130.

Leftist critics have been so wary about the close connections between gangsta and unwelcome stereotypes ... that they rarely attended to its subtle relations of power or its aesthetic complexity. 'Throwing the baby out with the bath-water,' they often ignored the most politically salient features of gangsta along the way. Until we understand how disempowered groups positioned themselves and what they were thinking--good and bad--we cannot understand how and why they might (or, ... might not) mobilize politically.⁴⁵

Hoping to avoid the problematic discourse proffered by conservatives, some analysts have turned away from the music. By focussing on the rhetoric *around rap*, some have lost sight of *rap itself*.

While it is certainly important to both identify problematic ideas in rap and challenge conservative fear-mongering regarding Black youth cultures – not least because similar discussions continue to rage over subgenres such as Drill – focussing solely on these issues stifles analysis. The kinds of rhetorical debates across the broader populace are a deflection. When a marginalized, criminalized Other becomes the face of a social issue, the issue itself becomes invisible. Black people are scapegoated and the true causes continue in perpetuity. As a result, I argue it is time to move beyond discussions of “what rap is/does” to accept its potential to be everything any art-form can be: at times sexist and heterosexist, at times banal, at times co-opted for progressive or conservative means. In other words, this thesis moves away from the kinds of questions that often circle rap – e.g. is it sexist? Is it a bad influence? How ‘real’ is it? – instead examining the genre’s counterhegemonic critiques as part of a much longer and broader Black radical tradition. My analysis focusses on the music and the artists themselves, asking less how others see them than how they express themselves and the different ways they disrupt prevailing societal conditions.

A final recurring theme of the literature that I wish to address relates to what is often framed as the conscious/commercial split. The binary between rap that is ‘political’ (conscious) and rap that is ‘trivial’ and profit-driven (commercial) has been a mainstay of scholarly analysis. Though such binaries are conducive to critiques of what Reiland Rabaka calls “corporate colonialism”, wherein record companies profit from peddling images of rappers that conform to a white gaze, it has also inadvertently created restrictive norms regarding what rap is and should be.⁴⁶ In some of the literature, so called ‘commercial’ rap is assumed to be a degenerative force tarnishing the genre’s otherwise good standing. Rose offers an example of this argument: “[T]he most commercially

⁴⁵ Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 30.

⁴⁶ Reiland Rabaka, *Hip Hop's Inheritance From the Harlem Renaissance to the Hip Hop Feminist Movement* (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books, 2011).

promoted and financially successful hip hop ... has increasingly become a playground for caricatures of black gangstas, pimps, and hoers. ... Relying on an ever-narrowing range of images and themes, this commercial juggernaut has played a central role in the near-depletion of what was once a vibrant, diverse, and complex popular genre, wringing it dry by pandering to America's racist and sexist lowest common denominator."⁴⁷ Consequently, 'commercial' rap is assumed to be a cheapened version of what was once a radical art-form.

Although broadly accepted in the literature, these binaries have been critiqued. For example, Rabaka engages in a blurring of the conscious/commercial binary, noting that the overexposure of 'commercial rap' empowers certain rappers to offer the occasional 'conscious' critique:

[I]t would seem that more 'mainstream' rappers are not only able to achieve fame and fortune, but also have the option to offer crude, often tongue-in-cheek cultural criticism, social commentary, and political analysis from time to time. In short, many of the commercial rappers working within the ghetto/gangsta/pimp/whore paradigm seem to not only be having all the fun ..., but also, because of their solid record sales, they are able to occasionally comment on social and political issues⁴⁸.

'Commercial' rap, in other words, is capable of 'conscious' critique. By the same token, 'conscious' rap is also 'commercial'. Conscious rap is not an unadulterated expression of a pure Black radicalism untethered from the forces of commodification. All music, to a certain degree, traverses commercial planes.

Though I agree with Rabaka's blurring of the binary, I would like to extend his analysis further. It is not enough to say that the 'commercial' can be 'conscious' – which would be an implicit affirmation of the binary. It is more accurate, I believe, to completely do away with the binary due to its narrow definition of 'the political'. It is often assumed that a piece of art becomes political (i.e. 'conscious') when it 'name-drops' a movement, person, or idea that directly correlates to organised politics. As I understand it, and as I employ the term throughout this thesis, 'the political' is best defined by a focus less on the *how* and *what* than, as Robin Kelley explains, the *why*:

I am rejecting the tendency to dichotomize people's lives, to assume that clear-cut 'political' motivations exist separately from issues of economic well-being, safety, pleasure, cultural expression, sexuality, freedom of mobility, and other facets of daily life. Politics is not separate from lived experience or the imaginary world of what is

⁴⁷ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 1-2.

⁴⁸ Rabaka, *Hip Hop's Inheritance*, 182-3.

possible; to the contrary, politics is about these things. Politics comprises the many battles to roll back constraints and exercise some power over, or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives.⁴⁹

Applying standards which are – implicitly, at the very least – classist, sexist, and racist (in the sense that a majority of African Americans, poor people, and even many women face restricted access to the traditional forms of state power), diminishes the significance of the spaces marginalized communities have created for themselves. Consequently, our conception of ‘the political’ needs to be open and fluid.

When we view rap as a product of racial capitalist marginalization, as a microphone for those rendered voiceless, as an avenue to feelings of joy and pleasure, then everything is political. Stories about the gangsta turning to underground economies in the absence of ‘mainstream’ employment are a critique of neoliberal abandonment. Stories of partying and sexual experimentation can be testament to community building and the staking out of spaces for fun and pleasure – even if this ‘fun’ is sometimes riddled with sexist and heterosexist language that makes it less than universally fun – within a world that demonizes most expressions of Black youth culture. Expression itself, not just content, is key. Consequently, this thesis understands *all* rap as a complex form of expression serving both political and aesthetic functions, both revolutionary and pleasurable, both commercial and conscious. Rap’s effect is one of *and*, not *or*, in which the same expression serves multiple functions.

Situating this thesis

Despite a plethora of literature on the subject of rap, there has been a dearth of analysis focussing on the past decade. Much of the literature centres on stories of deindustrialization and the early years of neoliberal restructuring. While such conditions were important in the formation of the genre, and despite the fact that much remains unchanged, the specifics inevitably differ nearly half a century later. By failing to extend analysis into the present moment, we miss many of the qualitative shifts of racial capitalism – socially, economically, politically, and ideologically – unique to this historical moment. Consequently, this thesis explores the kinds of crises – from the War on Terror to the Global Financial Crisis and Opioid crisis – that characterize our late neoliberal conjuncture.

Not only have racial capitalist structures undergone rapid change in the 21st century: so too has rap itself. No longer confined to the block parties that defined rap’s early existence nor the record label

⁴⁹ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 9-10.

‘corporate colonialism’ of the gangsta era nor even the MTV ‘bling rap’ era, rap is now nearly omnipresent. Consequently, it is important to reach beyond the kinds of assumptions – such as the commercial/conscious binary – that have defined the scholarship since its inception. Rather than ‘pin down’ or categorize the music, this thesis celebrates the stylistic and critical shifts unique to the present century. As such, in the course of this thesis I analyse rappers whom many might not instinctively consider part of the rap canon. Lil Peep, Janelle Monáe, Death Grips, are all musicians for whom the label ‘rap’ appears to be suspect at best. Nonetheless, they continue to evidence a counterhegemonic sensibility and familiarity with the genre that inspires resistance to prevailing racial capitalist crises. Prioritizing these voices captures the ‘changing same’ of rap in this historical moment: a moment wherein the beats have changed as the sentiment has remained.

I must stress, however, that I view this thesis as an additive that builds upon the work of a great many scholars, activists, and artists without tearing down. Another way of putting this may be, to borrow from Lipsitz and Barbara Tomlinson, *accompaniment*:

Accompaniment is a disposition, a sensibility, and a pattern of behavior. It is both a commitment and a capacity that can be cultivated. Two metaphors of accompaniment are particularly relevant: (1) accompaniment as participating with and augmenting a community of travelers on a road; (2) accompaniment as participating with others to create music. ... The metaphors of people traveling down a road together or creating music collectively offer devices for individuals from different backgrounds with different experiences, perspectives, and interests to recognize and reinforce each other’s dignity by working together.⁵⁰

Akin to Lipsitz and Tomlinson, I like to think of this thesis as part of a larger body of resistant work that contributes to critiques of oppressive structures. What unique additions I make are based on the specific musicians I assess, many of whom have been under-analysed in the scholarly literature, and my focus on the ways they confront oppressions largely unique to the 21st century.

Methods and Theories

Given the sheer breadth of rap music, this thesis is relatively selective, focussing primarily on music that confronts oppressive conditions partly attributable to 21st century neoliberalism. Even then, there are any number of crises – and musical critiques of these crises – that one could justifiably

⁵⁰ George Lipsitz and Barbara Tomlinson, "American Studies as Accompaniment," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2013): 9-10.

analyse. I therefore must stress that the primary sources and socio-historical contexts I examine are not comprehensive. Rather, my source selection is intended to capture the shifts to, and diversity of, the genre in the present century. As such, I analyse different styles and subgenres, stories that are easily located in rap's canon and others which are more novel, histories which are familiar to rap audiences – such as mass incarceration – and others which are less so – including Black liberation theology, Afrofuturism, and the white suburban locales of emo rap.

Emphasising diversity undoes a normativity around rap which finds authenticity in one or two familiar themes. Challenging authenticities opens spaces for people – primarily women – who are often excluded through rap's norms. As Brittney Cooper argues, when we confine analysis to the classic 'gangsta' or 'badman' tales, we tell a decidedly masculine story: "Although the blues bad man and trickster figures might be origin stories for men's hip-hop tales, women in hip hop have a range of origin stories, including the sexually provocative narratives of blues women and the empowering stories offered in texts such as *The Color Purple*."⁵¹ Analysis that only accounts for cis-men offers an incomplete history of the genre. I would also add that it is crucial to incorporate the voices of LGBTQIA+ people due to the ways some rap continues to evidence heterosexist views just as these very same communities turn to expressive culture to contest such marginalization.

This thesis employs a largely textual analytical approach – though not entirely, as some musicological analysis is offered – that prioritizes rappers' words over public debates tangentially tied to the music.⁵² Doing so provides insights into rap's ability to both question existent structures and make space for a something else beyond the crises of 21st century racial capitalism. Moreover, my methodological approach – which largely comprised of detailed listening to the music, analysis of lyrics, and a deep-dive into the musical and historical contexts – developed as a way to allow analysis of U.S. contexts despite the barriers presented by researching on the far side of the planet.

Viewing music in conjunction with politico-economic and social histories – or music as part of a Black radical tradition confronting the various crises of 21st century neoliberalism – places this thesis within an analytical tradition theorized by Amiri Baraka as the 'changing same'. Explaining this

⁵¹ Brittney Cooper, "'Maybe I'll Be a Poet, Rapper': Hip-Hop Feminism and Literary Aesthetics in 'Push'," *African American Review* 46, no. 1 (2013): 67.

⁵² A weakness of this approach is that by ignoring the context in which rap is performed, I omit some of its political economy. As Rose argues: "Confining the discussion of politics in rap to lyrical analysis addresses only the most explicit dimension of the politics of contemporary black cultural expression. Rap's cultural politics lies in its lyrical expression, its articulation of communal knowledge, and in the context for its public reception. As is the case for cultural production in general, the politics of rap music involves the contestation over public space, the meanings, interpretations, and value of the lyrics and music, and the investment of cultural capital. In short, it is not just what you say, it is where you can say it, how others react to it, and whether you have the power to command access to public space." Rose, *Black Noise*, 124. I should also note that, in writing from Australia during a global pandemic, practical and financial matters limited these methodological options.

approach requires some historiographical context. In the post-World War II era, the field of African American musical studies was dominated by two opposing methodological approaches reflected in the work of Eileen Southern and Baraka. Richard Crawford characterizes Southern's approach – exemplified in *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (1971) – as one borrowed from the empirical thrust of early 20th century musicology, a field broadly interested in an 'objective' tracing of Black musical practices.⁵³ Though she is still an influential figure, Southern's empirical detachment is increasingly antiquated.

By contrast, Baraka's personalised, sociological approach remains dominant in the literature, and accordingly I borrow heavily from him. As opposed to Southern's socially detached methodology, Baraka's strength was contextualisation. In *Blues People: Negro music in white America* (1963), Baraka lays out a methodology that refuses to decouple music from the context in which it is created and performed:

[A]s I began to get into the history of the music, I found that this was impossible without, at the same time, getting deeper into the history of the people. That ... the music was an orchestrated, vocalized, hummed, chanted, blown, beaten, scatted, corollary confirmation of the history. And that one could go from one to the other, actually from the inside to the outside, or reverse, and be talking about the same things. That the music was explaining the history as the history was explaining the music.⁵⁴

In Baraka's methodology, history and music formed a dialectical relationship that spurred unique – but wholly familiar – musical forms: “[M]usic changed as [Black people] changed, reflecting shifting attitudes or ... *consistent attitudes within changed contexts*.”⁵⁵ This thesis seeks to capture the ‘changing same’ that is Black radical expression in response to racist presents. Each chapter deals with phenomena that appear entirely unique. Each response also seems unique. But they all fit within a dialectic of American racism and a Black radical tradition's critique of this racism.

⁵³ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971). Richard Crawford outlines Southern's empirical methodology which “depends first on exploration, on uncovering musical references in all available sources: manuscript documents and letters, newspapers, census records, city directories, journals, books, and, of course, musical scores and recordings. And when the data have been discovered, they must be organized and arranged ... so that they cohere into some kind of a narrative.” Richard Crawford, “On Two Traditions of Black Music Research,” *Black Music Research Journal* 6, (1986): 5-6. For more on the musicological tradition Southern drew on, see: Guthrie P. Ramsey, “Cosmopolitan or Provincial?: Ideology in Early Black Music Historiography, 1867-1940,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1, (1996): 11-42.

⁵⁴ Baraka, *Blues people*, ix-x.

⁵⁵ Baraka, *Blues people*, 153.

Assessing these histories through the storytelling of those most heavily affected by racial capitalist crises also locates this thesis within a Marxist-inspired (Black) history from below. Offering histories ‘from below’ evokes Marxist historian E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963).⁵⁶ Thompson challenged an historiographical orthodoxy that obscured working-class lives, arguing instead that historical analysis should lean on and illuminate working-class voices: “Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not.”⁵⁷ Heeding Thompson’s insights, this thesis centres the ways working-class and marginalized communities traverse and confront their socio-historical landscapes.

Despite its sizable influence on the broader literature, Thompson’s work has gaps. His Marxist analysis, though insightful, adopts a ‘colorblind-ness’ that misses Robinson’s insights into the racial underpinnings of capitalist economies. Consequently, and in an effort to avoid said gaps, I locate this thesis at the intersection of Marxian ‘history from below’ and the racial peculiarities of capitalism. Doing so not only helps to capture the intersectional realities of life under capitalism, it is also well placed to account for the numerous ways marginalized communities have confronted their plight. Oppressions are never uncritically accepted. Throughout racist histories, different forms of resistance have been leveraged in order to stake out spaces of opposition, survival, and humanity in the face of a dehumanizing subjection. It is this very expression that Robinson labelled the ‘Black radical tradition’, and it is to these voices that I turn as I explore rap music’s counterhegemonic knowledge, ability to confront oppressive institutions, and challenging of things taken as ‘common sense’. Put simply, I view rap music – or, more specifically, certain rap musicians – as descendants of this radical tradition.

Lastly, by identifying rap music as a form of counterhegemonic critique that calls into question ‘common sense’ ideas of our current conjuncture, this thesis also draws heavily upon Antonio

⁵⁶ By using the phrase ‘(Black) histories from below’, I am drawing on a tradition older than Thompson. Robin Kelley dates this tradition to a “generation of radical scholars who chose to study slavery and its demise when fascism was on the rise in Europe and the future of colonialism was uncertain. The two most influential books in this respect were written nearly three decades before E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* — namely, W.E.B. DuBois’s *Black Reconstruction* (1935) and C.L.R. James’s study of the Haitian Revolution titled *Black Jacobins* (1938). These majestic histories of revolution, resistance, and the making of new working classes out of the destruction of slavery anticipated the ‘new’ social historians’ efforts to write ‘history from below.’ They also contributed enormously to revising the history of Western revolutions by placing race, culture, and the agency of African people—the slaves and ex-slaves—at the center of the story.” Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 5.

⁵⁷ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1980. Originally from 1963), 12.

Gramsci. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci outlines a theory of power that goes beyond the purely coercive, instead prioritizing a theory of consent as tied to ideology. He explains: “The ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group ... is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.”⁵⁸ By constructing a ‘common sense’, by making certain things appear natural and normal, and by disseminating these world-views to the broader populace, hegemonic social relations may reproduce over time. Organic intellectualism, when it works against the ‘common sense’, has a profoundly counterhegemonic function, and it is in this space that I locate rap. Consequently, this thesis draws upon Gramsci in order to bolster my analysis of the Black radical tradition’s ability to critically assess ‘common sense’ ideas that uphold the racial capitalist status quo.

Prioritizing working-class and counterhegemonic voices through a largely textual analytical approach also allows for a degree of theoretical flexibility. Rather than forcing the music to fit within a singular theoretical lens, each chapter allows the music to guide the theoretical approach. However, such an approach leads to internal contradictions. For example, over the course of the thesis I navigate between the Marxism of Harvey and the anti-Marxism of Frank Wilderson, and from the anti-essentialism of Marquis Bey’s Black trans feminism to the essentialisms of Black liberation theology. I see this as a reflection of rap’s diversity. All rappers employ unique analysis, sounds, feelings, and ideas, and I seek to learn from their modalities of address rather than to force specific theories onto them.

Clarification of Terms

‘Race’ and racial essentialism

The concept of ‘race’ has been theorized by many scholars, but in the context of a thesis assessing the ‘changing same’ of American racism (and resistance to this racism), Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s work is particularly relevant. In *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986), Omi and Winant define ‘race’ as “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.”⁵⁹ As opposed to the biological-basis of race employed throughout most of U.S. history, ‘race’ is in actuality a social and political ‘common sense’ that shifts according

⁵⁸ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 12.

⁵⁹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

to the 'racial projects' of a given historical moment.⁶⁰ In every aspect of life, "from mass actions or comprehensive legislation (examples located at the macrosocial level) to speech acts or personal experiences of prejudice or discrimination (examples located at the microsocial level)", 'race' is made coherent through social relations.⁶¹ 'Race' is thus an inherently fluid category being made and unmade at every moment of one's life.

So if 'race' is social and fluid, then what do I mean by the term 'Black'? An essentialist answer to this question strives for homogeneity, smoothing over difference in favour of a unified vision of Black culture and community. In so doing, the signifier 'Black' becomes a presumed natural block with little to no internal division or the capacity for change over time. Conversely, an anti-essentialist answer embraces the inherent diversity of 'racial' categories, "affirm[ing] blackness as an open signifier ... that is *internally* divided: by class, sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity, economics, and political consciousness."⁶²

The position I adopt throughout this thesis lies somewhere between essentialism and anti-essentialism. The anti-essentialist perspective is convincing. There is no single, all-encompassing Black experience, and to assume otherwise ignores the insights of feminist, queer studies, and Marxist scholars into the conflicted spaces of everyday life. However, the mere fact of 'race's' fluidity and heterogeneity should not be taken as an opportunity to abandon it entirely. Though not 'real' in any biological sense, 'race' remains a defining phenomenon of our late-modern present. As Guthrie Ramsey argues of the idea of a "collective black critique" as found within African American musical cultures: "Together with the musical practices themselves, these critiques en masse not only keep venues of performance packed with paying customers; they continually fill churches and cause resilient musical techniques and tropes to circulate and recirculate across genres, historical periods, singers, and instrumentalists."⁶³ In other words, Blackness may not be 'real', but many people think of themselves as Black, relate to others (Black & white) through their Blackness, are discriminated against on the basis of their Blackness, and make music inspired by this identity and these experiences.

⁶⁰ "Racial projects", according to Omi and Winant, "connect what race *means* in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning." Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 56.

⁶¹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "Once More, with Feeling: Reflections on Racial Formation," *The Modern Language Association of America* 123, no 5 (2008): 1567.

⁶² Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 32.

⁶³ Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race music: Black cultures from bebop to hip-hop* (California: University of California Press, 2003), 41.

Consequently, throughout this thesis I use the term Black to refer to what Ramsey describes as “‘blackness as practice,’ or blackness as a dynamic process of cultural and ideological shape shifting.”⁶⁴ This conception prioritizes the performative basis of identity, recognizing the inherently social nature of ‘race’. It also helps account for the many ways expressive cultures call-upon and utilize ‘Blackness’ as part of their critiques. As Stuart Hall concedes, “historically, nothing could have been done to intervene in the dominated field of mainstream popular culture ... without the strategies through which those dimensions were condensed into the signifier ‘black.’ Where would we be, as bell hooks once remarked, without a touch of essentialism?”⁶⁵ Only by accepting the ‘Black’ signifier can we truly evaluate the role (some) music plays as a counterhegemonic force against the forces of American racism.

Re-narrativizing and “structures of feeling”

Throughout this thesis, I use the term ‘re-narrativize’ to capture some of rap’s counterhegemonic sensibilities. Re-narrativization refers to the many ways rap provides alternative accounts of taken-for-granted histories. In particular, this thesis argues that rap challenges – for the most part, though not always – ‘common sense’ ideas associated with neoliberal racial capitalism.

The counterhegemonic re-narrativizing of neoliberal histories occurs in many ways. A primary way is in re-writing historical scripts with marginalized communities in focus. As Rose explains: “Rap music, more than any other contemporary form of black cultural expression, articulates the chasm between black urban lived experience and dominant, ‘legitimate’ (e.g., neoliberal) ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality.”⁶⁶ Moreover, rap confronts the kinds of images often used to demonize people of color, instead allowing marginalized communities to speak for themselves:

[T]he youngest generation of South Bronx exiles were building creative and aggressive outlets for expression and identification. The new ethnic groups who made the South Bronx their home in the 1970s, while facing social isolation, economic fragility, truncated communication media, and shrinking social service organizations, began building their own cultural networks Although city leaders and the popular press had literally and figuratively condemned the South Bronx neighborhoods and their inhabitants, its youngest black and Hispanic residents answered back.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ramsey, *Race music*, 36.

⁶⁵ Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* 20, no. 1-2 (1993): 110.

⁶⁶ Rose, *Black Noise*, 102.

⁶⁷ Rose, *Black Noise*, 33-4.

Rap offers histories of deindustrialization, poverty, and Blackness itself from the perspective of those who live it. In this way, rap both confronts prevailing rhetoric used against Black people and allows the people affected by these phenomena to self-define beyond the warped stereotypes that pervade white consciousnesses.

But re-narrativizing goes beyond the simple retelling of material histories. It also occurs when rappers communicate the *feelings* that accompany material oppression. In discussing the affect of marginalization, I draw on what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling”. In *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Williams describes ‘structures of feeling’ as “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt”⁶⁸ and that come to characterise the “sense of a generation or of a period”.⁶⁹ Throughout this thesis, I repeatedly argue that by communicating these feelings, rap re-narrativizes ‘common sense’ ideas that uphold neoliberal modernity. Rap challenges prevailing conditions by capturing the disjuncture between the grand rhetoric of neoliberalism and its lived reality.

Academic colonialism and my subject position

As a white cis-man writing in settler-colonial, white-dominated, Australian academic spaces, I admit that in discussing rap I risk colonizing it and detracting from its critical resonance. A particularly poignant feature of organic intellectualism – to which, I argue, rap belongs – is the form it takes.⁷⁰ By refusing norms and the terms of debate, and by speaking in styles considered ‘unacceptable’ or ‘illegitimate’, organic intellectualism subverts expectations of social critique. But when these oppositional art-forms are brought into a mainstream, their radicalism is often tempered. Their language is ‘neatened’ and their demands made more palatable to white audiences. The forms in which they are expressed (audible) are translated into different forms (written) – and stripped of their resonance in the process. Simply by making music fit within an academic context, there is a danger of pacifying it for the benefit of the very spaces and people it often critiques.

Furthermore, even some of the language I use bears the legacy of colonialism. For example, I routinely use the term ‘feminism’, a term which, as Rose explains, has a complex relationship with Black women: “[F]or black women, feminism often reads white feminism and consequently

⁶⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

⁶⁹ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 131.

⁷⁰ I borrow the phrase ‘organic intellectualism’ from Antonio Gramsci. Cornel West summarizes this concept: “Gramsci makes an important distinction between ‘organic’ and ‘traditional’ intellectuals. To put it crudely, the former are those who, because they are organically linked to prophetic movements ... , take the life of the mind seriously enough to relate ideas to the everyday life of ordinary folk. Traditional intellectuals, in contrast, are those who revel in the world of ideas while nesting in comfortable places far removed from the realities of the common life. Organic intellectuals are activist and engaged; traditional intellectuals are academic and detached.” Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 271.

represents a movement that has contributed to sustaining their oppression while claiming to speak on their behalf.”⁷¹ By discussing historical issues in the language that I do and by inadvertently forcing people into a single qualifier, am I stripping them of their ability to self-define?

Some of these many issues are, I believe, unavoidable. I *am* a white cis-man writing in academic spaces. By approaching analysis from this subject position and by reverting to certain academic norms, I am chiselling away complexity in favour of a sense of familiarity to the academic eye. However, I have taken steps to mitigate appropriation. Most importantly, I embrace a radicalism akin to that of the artists I borrow from. Learning from the many artists I examine, I reject a politics that reaches only as far as that which benefits whiteness in favour of a more radical political vision. Furthermore, in prioritizing the voices of musicians, my methodology seeks to diminish the effects of colonialism. As Patricia Hill Collins argues: “Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups”.⁷² By prioritizing the voices of rappers without diluting their language, by exploring the ways marginalized communities (and those marginalized *within* marginalized communities) have challenged white-washed and male-dominated histories, I seek to embrace the revolutionary power of expressive cultures.⁷³

I think it is also necessary to stress the world-wide impact of American rap music – especially as it exists and continues to shift in the 21st century. The subject position from which I write – and listen – may well result in a form of appropriation, but rap has left an indelible mark on my white, middle-class life, informing the way I understand, participate in, and interpret the settler-colonial world

⁷¹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 181.

⁷² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), ix.

⁷³ On the point about not diluting language, it is necessary to comment on some of the offensive language quoted throughout this thesis. Despite recognizing the sensitivity around terms such as the N-word, I have decided not to edit/censor any such terms. Robin Kelley was instructive in this decision. In *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional* (1997), Kelley critiques a social science tradition developing out of the 1960s which, by offering narrow definitions of ‘culture’ through a white gaze, constructed Blackness as synonymous with degeneracy. A primary reason for this flaw lay in methodologies that circumvented Black voices: “[T]oo much of this rapidly expanding literature on the underclass provides less an understanding of the complexity of people’s lives and cultures than a bad blaxploitation film Many social scientists are not only quick to generalize about the black urban poor on the basis of a few ‘representative’ examples, but more often than not, they do not let the natives speak.” Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!*, 16. Learning from Kelley, this thesis prioritizes the words of musicians in the hope of subverting this flawed historiographical tradition. Consequently, however, the quoting of offensive language is inevitable. I should also add that although I am uncomfortable with reproducing this language, I am also uncomfortable with deleting, paraphrasing, or using *** instead. The use of the N-word in much rap is deliberate, used in such a way that speaks to histories of marginalization while also situating the genre within a continuum of African American social history. As a result, I believe it is important to sit in my own discomfort as these feelings are very much part of the reckoning that such language provokes for white interlopers.

around me. Rap music has provided, to paraphrase George Lipsitz, a ‘grammar of opposition’ guiding the many critiques I make throughout this thesis.⁷⁴ I therefore try to see myself as extending the anti-racist lessons of rap music to every social context.

Chapter Outline

This thesis offers five chapters presented in a largely chronological fashion – with the exception of the more thematic Chapters 3 and 5 – in an effort to capture both the ‘changing same’ of structural racism in the late neoliberal 21st century and Black expressive culture’s continued speaking to these issues. When read in full, this thesis offers something of a trajectory of 21st century crisis, capturing the long path to our current conjuncture. Most importantly, however, each chapter returns to, and prioritizes, the Black radical tradition’s place within these histories, broadly arguing that (certain) rap musicians re-narrativize oppressive histories ‘from below’ in the process of envisioning liberation.

Chapter 1 begins my exploration into neoliberal capitalism by extending analysis beyond the confines of the U.S. nation state in reference to the Iraq War. Beginning by contextualizing the invasion of Iraq within longer histories of U.S. imperialism, I locate the conflict as a 21st century incarnation of American imperialism designed to permit access to a once guarded Iraqi national economy. More specifically, I build this chapter around structuring ideas that justified America’s presence in Iraq, paying particular attention to the dual ideologies of exceptionalism and Orientalism, ideas which made coherent the oft-repeated rhetoric of a morally upstanding America extending its democratizing powers over a presumed culturally perverse Middle-East.

This chapter offers a close reading of an album exhibiting a complex relationship with the Orientalist and exceptionalist rhetoric that legitimized the conflict. Written, produced, and performed by a group of American soldiers whilst they were stationed in Iraq in 2005, the album *Live From Iraq* by 4th25 (pronounced “fourth quarter”) provides valuable insights into the complex position of Black

⁷⁴ George Lipsitz offers the phrase “grammar of opposition” as a way of communicating the critical potential of expressive cultures: “The strategies of signification and grammars of opposition developed among post-colonial peoples speak powerfully to the paradoxically fragmented and interconnected world created by new structures of commerce culture and technology.” George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (New York: Verso, 1994), 30. Importantly, this ‘grammar of opposition’ is something that extends beyond the local, offering radical visions to people around the globe: “[T]he music of the African diaspora testifies to the capacity of post-colonial culture to illumine families of resemblance illustrating how diverse populations have had similar although not identical experiences. By virtue of a shared scepticism about the nation state, an identification with the lived experiences of ordinary people, and an imaginative, supple, and strategic reworking of identities and cultures, post-colonial culture holds great significance as a potential site for creating coalitions to pose alternatives to the discredited maxims of conservative free-market capitalism or liberal social democracy.” Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 33-4.

soldiers in global military theatres. Throughout the album, 4th25 illuminate a process whereby African American bodies are co-opted as symbols that prove America's exceptional status in opposition to a perceived anti-/pre-modern Middle East, only to then be coerced into performing the dirty work of empire expansion. Recognizing the complicated position racialized warfare puts Black citizens in, 4th25 respond not by opposing the imperialist regime but by seeking acceptance into it. Adopting an "if we can't beat them, join them" mentality, 4th25 find security via inclusion into the rhetoric of American exceptionalism at the expense of the Orientalized Other.

Chapter 2 retreats from the inclusionary violence of *Live From Iraq* to focus instead on the 'escapist' and fantastical space of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism, Ytasha Womack explains, is "[b]oth an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, [that] combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs."⁷⁵ A decades (centuries?) old genre/aesthetic/critical theory, Afrofuturism paves unique paths to liberation through the imagining of futures emancipated from the oppressions of the present.

Beginning with a quick history of African American housing discrimination – a discrimination that culminated in the Global Financial Crisis – this chapter locates Afrofuturism as an answer to the racisms of the present moment. Less a one-to-one direct response to the GFC than a general rejection of the structural conditions that routinely strip African Americans of the possibility of home-ownership, Afrofuturism is, I posit, an attempt at acquiring the 'ontological security' of home in the outer reaches of space.⁷⁶ In the absence of a home on Earth, Afrofuturists seek home elsewhere and elsewhen.

This chapter investigates two specific examples of Afrofuturist home-making: the 2000 self-titled album by Deltron 3030 and Janelle Monáe's *Metropolis Series*. Deltron's version of home-making prioritizes destruction: from the ashes of an oppressive society, perhaps a true home can arise. Monáe takes a different approach. Analogizing the figure of the cyborg with queer women of color, Monáe's home-making centres on one's sense of self and the body rather than on property. Through acts of dance and queer sex, Monáe reclaims her (and her main character, Cindi's) body,

⁷⁵ Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 9.

⁷⁶ Ofelia Cuevas uses the term 'ontological security' to capture the existential benefits of home-ownership: "[The home] is the site of family and domestic relations, of the possibility of a future, both in terms of biological reproduction and of the projection of the self through time. As such, it functions as a precondition for any meaningful conception of personhood, for without the future, the self dissolves into the evanescence of an eternally fragmented present. Home ownership thus provides what sociologists and psychologists refer to as 'ontological security,' the state of emotive well-being and constancy necessary for developing a stable personal identity." Ofelia O. Cuevas, "Welcome to My Cell: Housing and Race in the Mirror of American Democracy," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2012): 609.

transforming it from a vessel of alienated labor into a site of communal love and pleasure – i.e. home. Consequently, the homelessness of neoliberal modernity is upended.

Returning to Earth, Chapter 3 examines another emancipatory tradition through Kendrick Lamar's widely acclaimed 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. This album does many things, but among them, it narrates both the personal and inter-personal costs of neoliberal ideology through a semi-autobiographical detailing of Lamar's rise from poverty-stricken Compton native to ultra-rich, globally renowned – but miserable and divisive – artist. Opening with a veneer of positivity, the album slowly unravels to identify Kendrick's new life of materialism and individualism as a primary cause of a despair that leads Lamar to a suicidal cliff-edge. Furthermore, such ideologies not only harm Kendrick's own mental state, they also divide 'the' Black community. Consequently, Lamar narrates neoliberal ideology as a source of fleeting pleasures but lasting division and self-hate.

But more than just critique, *To Pimp a Butterfly* paves a path out of the divisions that characterize this neoliberal existence through a Black Christian ethos of self-love and Black empowerment. Echoing James Cone's Black liberation theology, Kendrick finds salvation in a worldly and political God. It is through discovering God that Kendrick acknowledges his neoliberal existence as a primary cause of the sorrows in his life and begins to undo the divisions he had previously inflamed. *To Pimp a Butterfly* is both an insight into the consequences of neoliberal ideology and, similar to Afrofuturism, a vision of revolutionary change. Embracing the politically revolutionary figure of God, Kendrick directly confronts a world that renders itself intelligible through individualistic ideologies of consumption, 'personal responsibility', and competition. Kendrick's religiosity makes intelligible a different world, one defined by community, emotional fulfilment, and Black empowerment.

The positivity offered in Chapters 2 and 3 is not universal, however. Chapter 4 assesses a far bleaker 'structure of feeling' typical of rap in the 2010s. Reflecting similar trends in the broader populace, themes of mental illness and a general sense of despair captured the attention of a great many artists, with rappers frequently describing a turn to prescription drugs such as fentanyl and Xanax to assuage these feelings. What 'structures of feeling' dominate music in this time of rampant licit drug-use? How has a genre historically characterized by drug-dealing become increasingly defined by drug-consumption? My answers to these questions are tied to a defining phenomenon of 21st century America attributable to the forces of neoliberal capitalism: the opioid crisis.

Beginning in the late-1990s with reports of prescription drug overdoses in the most poverty-stricken regions of rural Appalachia, the opioid crisis has quickly grown to epidemic proportions.⁷⁷ Popular

⁷⁷ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): "From 1999–2020, more than 564,000 people died from an overdose involving any opioid, including prescription and illicit opioids." Centers for

histories of this crisis tend to focus on its supply side, with particular attention paid to major pharmaceutical companies who flooded the market with powerful prescription drugs and set the foundations for a crisis since exacerbated by heroin and synthetic opioids. However, my chapter turns to rap music for an insight into the demand side of the crisis. A crisis of this scale does not grow from corporate malfeasance alone. Instead, I argue, it speaks to a deeper condition of the present historical moment. In the context of an increasingly despair-ridden world rife with inequalities, declining social and economic lives for America's uneducated, social isolation, and rampant individualism, opioids have become a way to cope. Opioids, I argue, have become anaesthetic tools used to numb oneself to the despair of neoliberal modernity.

Analysing artists Danny Brown and Lil Peep, Chapter 4 pays particular attention to both the proliferation of drug themes in recent rap and the expansion of despair beyond the confines of urbanity and Blackness to include suburban America and whiteness. Danny Brown's 2016 album *Atrocity Exhibition* places themes of depression, anxiety, and drug addiction within a specifically African American, urban context. The growth of emo rap – and artists such as Lil Peep – converted this same sense of despair into a white, suburban tale. Despite the changing setting, the sense of pain remains, and opioids are similarly embraced as an opportunity to retreat from the world and numb feelings of despair. Unlike the enthusiastic resistance of the likes of Lamar and Monáe, emo rap evidences a wholly different answer to the plight of late neoliberal modernity. Rather than resist, emo rap concedes. Unable to live happily in the world, an opioid-induced numbness becomes “a method to cope with the harsh reality of living”.⁷⁸

The final chapter of this thesis turns to another prominent source of 21st century despair: mass incarceration. Perhaps the most common topic of discussion in rap's 50-year history, the carceral regime remains a primary site of struggle for many rappers criminalized by decades of 'law and order' politics. Chapter 5 locates rap's storytelling as a form of critique that not only challenges the violence of the carceral regime but occasionally endeavours to imagine abolitionist futures. Beginning with a brief history of mass incarceration, I detail the process by which an inflated carceral regime became accepted as 'common sense': a taken-for-granted, almost invisible feature of modernity. After detailing this process – with particular attention paid to its dependence on the trope of 'Black pathology' – I turn to the unique ways rap music contests this 'common sense'. Focussing primarily on how the state's instruments of violence produce feelings of imminent death

Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), *Opioid Overdose: Understanding the Epidemic*, <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/epidemic.html>.

⁷⁸ Nina Palattella, “‘We all Wanna Die, Too’: Emo Rap and Collective Despair in Adolescent America,” (Honors Thesis, Kent State University, 2020), 35.

amongst criminalized populations, I understand rap as a fundamental challenge to the ideological assumptions that circulate around the carceral regime. By illuminating the fallacies of the regime, anti-prison rap calls into question the 'common sense' of punishment.

The second half of the chapter pivots. For all its understandable emphasis on the acute bodily violence of the carceral regime, anti-prison rap too often ignores many other forms of violence that disproportionately target women of color. Though themselves victims of police violence, cis- and trans-women of color also experience violence in more diffuse – though no less lethal – ways, including everything from domestic violence to rape to structural racism. Expanding who it is we think of when confronting violence not only captures the breadth of 'premature death', it also offers a basis from which to envision abolitionist futures. Abolitionism acknowledges that destroying the carceral regime means little if it is not supported by a broader project of rebuilding – of creating a world in which violence of all kinds is impossible. Seeing the fault in all the forms of racial capitalist domination explored in the course of this thesis, abolition functions as a liberatory vision of rebuilding from the ground up – and with the most oppressed in focus.

As protestors chanted Kendrick Lamar's testament to perseverance and survival in the face of a Cleveland police force too ready to employ violent force, they participated in the forging of an abolitionist community. Rap offered a way out of no way in response to the 'changing same' of American racism in the 21st century. Analysing this racism through rap music offers solutions to the ailments of the present not through a detached, 'objective' academia but in reference to an engaged Black radical tradition. This tradition, though centuries old, today finds mainstream voice in (some) rap music, and it is to these stories, imaginations, sorrows, and pleasures that I repeatedly return.

Chapter 1

"It's war, lace your boots up": 4th25, the Iraq War, and the Black Patriot of Neoliberal Imperialism

And just so conservatives don't take it to heart
I don't think Bush did it, 'cause he isn't that smart
He's just a stupid puppet takin' orders on his cell phone
From the same people that sabotaged Senator Wellstone
The military industry got it poppin' and lockin'
Lookin' for a way to justify the Wolfowitz Doctrine
And as a matter of fact, Rumsfeld, now that I think back
Without 9/11, you couldn't have a war in Iraq
Or a defense budget of world conquest proportions
Kill freedom of speech and revoke the right to abortion
Tax cut extortion, a blessing to the wealthy and wicked
But you still have to answer to the Armageddon you scripted
And Dick Cheney, you fuckin' leech, tell them your plans
About building your pipelines through Afghanistan
And how Israeli troops trained the Taliban in Pakistan
You might have some house niggas fooled, but I understand
Colonialism is sponsored by corporations
That's why Halliburton gets paid to rebuild nations

- 'The Cause of Death' by Immortal Technique¹

It's war, lace your boots up
It's real, fuck the rules bro
Close contact one hand combat
Or long distance fuck you fools up
Back in the saddle now
Back up in the battleground
If it's in your heart when it sparks
Act according now
The object man slaughter now
The order shut these fools down
The target, anything moving
Women and children catching slugs now

- 'Lace Your Boots' by 4th25²

¹ Immortal Technique, "The Cause of Death," track 13 on *Revolutionary Vol. 2*, Viper Records, 2003.

² 4th25, "Lace Your Boots," track 3 on *Live From Iraq*, 4th25 Music Group LLC, 2005.

Introduction

Neoliberal racial capitalism is a global project. With national markets being inadequate to meet the demands of citizens and CEOs alike, capitalism depends on foreign markets. Crucially, the process of accessing markets across national boundaries can be militaristic.³ This chapter seeks to capture some of the complexities of this militaristic project and the bind it puts African American soldiers in with reference to a defining event of the early 21st century: the Iraq War.⁴

Within hours of the September 11 terrorist attacks, president George W. Bush released a statement from the Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. His opening sentence broadcast a set of ideas that would become 'common sense' in the following years: "Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward, and freedom will be defended."⁵ In one sentence, and using a popular rhetoric linking America with the very concept of freedom, President Bush built the foundation upon which war would be pursued.

Nine days later, Bush addressed the nation in front of Congress. Building on well traversed ideas of U.S. exceptionalism, the President illustrated the 'need' for war:

Americans have many questions tonight. Americans are asking, 'Who attacked our country?' The evidence we have gathered all points to a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations known as al Qaeda. ... Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated. Americans are asking 'Why do they hate us?' They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.⁶

He continued: "We have seen their kind before. They're the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism."⁷ This was the official framing of events leading to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: a morally unquestionable

³ I say "can be" because 21st century market expansion most frequently occurs via 'legitimate' economic channels such as the IMF and World Bank.

⁴ By centring this chapter around the experiences of an African American soldier, I admittedly leave unexamined the effects of the conflict on Iraqis themselves.

⁵ George W. Bush, "Bush: 'Freedom Will Be Defended'," *Los Angeles Times*, Sep 11, 2001, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-sep-11-ss-44622-story.html>.

⁶ George W. Bush, "President Bush Addresses the Nation," *The Washington Post*, Sep 20, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html.

⁷ Bush, "President Bush Addresses the Nation."

superpower with a patent on the very notion of freedom was attacked by a fear-mongering, culturally backward, Nazi-esque conglomeration who despise 'us' for who 'we' are. In this reckoning, the enemy was not a socio-political entity: but a perverse cultural evil.

In response, one must not only bring such a foe to justice, but patrol the entire expanse of the globe to ensure such horrific events never occur again.

Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen. ... We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists. ... This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight.⁸

Depicted as a pre-modern – and anti-modern – culturally aberrant entity, al Qaeda became the archetype of a global enemy justifying American expansion.⁹ In other words, the 'Culture Talk' of an uncivilised adversary set on punishing the exceptional U.S. was a foundational justification for America's new-found pre-emptive, interventionist zeal.¹⁰

Before long, the 'Culture Talk' surrounding al Qaeda was imparted upon America's most prominent post-Cold War adversary: Saddam Hussein. Following 9/11, dubious claims linking Saddam to al Qaeda and an ever-expanding nuclear weapons program provided the 'evidence' needed to invade Iraq.¹¹ However, the significance of Iraq, and the path to war with Saddam, is more accurately understood within a longer history of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East – but now with a decidedly neoliberal bent. From the Iran-Iraq War – in which America supported both the Saddam-led Iraqi

⁸ Bush, "President Bush Addresses the Nation."

⁹ With this enemy in place, pre-emptive warfare became etched into American foreign policy. Andrew Bacevich explains: "In calling for war not just against al Qaeda but against terror everywhere, Bush succeeded in articulating something that had eluded policymakers since the collapse of the Soviet Union deprived the United States of a readily identifiable enemy: a compelling rationale for a sustained and *proactive* use of American power on a global scale justified as a necessary *protective* measure." Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 229.

¹⁰ I borrow the term "Culture Talk" from Mahmood Mamdani who argues that the 'clash of civilisations' thesis adopted by the Bush administration assumes Islam to be inherently hostile. In this reckoning, 'terrorism' is presumed to be a cultural, rather than socio-political, phenomenon. "Terrorism is not a necessary effect of religious tendencies, whether fundamentalist or secular. Rather, terrorism is born of a *political* encounter. When it harnesses one or another aspect of tradition and culture, terrorism needs to be understood as a modern political movement at the service of a modern power." Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 61-2.

¹¹ As Robert Patman notes, this "rationale fell squarely within the newly defined doctrine of preventive war." Robert G. Patman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 6 (2006): 976.

forces and the Iranian military – to the Gulf War, to the violent sanctions on Iraq from 1991 to 2003, and finally the invasion of 2003 and the swift formation of the U.S.-led transitional government known as the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), America’s interest in Iraq has centred less on peace-keeping than on ensuring a global economic hegemony.¹² Viewed this way, 9/11 and the subsequent ‘Culture Talk’ insisting on both U.S. exceptionalism and Muslim perversity was the political capital needed to justify a long desired control of Iraqi infrastructure.¹³

But such imperialism has not gone uncontested. As a prominent feature of the Black radical tradition, rap music has long critiqued the ‘changing same’ of American racism, and the War on Terror was no different. As Paul Williams argues, in the hyper-patriotic aftermath of 9/11 “American hip-hop has produced some of the loudest and most perceptive critiques of the War on Terror.”¹⁴ Focusing on the link between structural racism and American imperialism, rappers frequently argued that “the Bush administration is discarding nonwhite lives as it executes the War on Terror. In New Orleans, in Iraq, and throughout its history, the United States is constructed as being indifferent or persecutory toward nonwhite peoples; since their lives are valued less than white lives, they can be deployed militarily in Iraq or ‘disappeared’ from America’s streets with impunity, all in the name of national security.”¹⁵ In this critique, state violence at home and abroad reflect a common racial capitalist logic, a logic that renders all people of color disposable for the sake of (white) American prosperity. America’s claim to a moral exceptionalism – a major justification for the war – is challenged through detailing America’s penchant for racial and classist oppression. The passage from Immortal Technique at the start of this chapter is among the most powerful of this tendency within rap.¹⁶

¹² By describing the sanctions as ‘violent’, I borrow from Samia Saliba who highlights the human costs – and, in particular, effects on women’s rights – of the Iraqi sanctions. See: Samia Saliba, “‘We Know We Are Forgotten’: Re-Centering Women in the Study of Economic Sanctions on Iraq, 1990-2003,” (Honors Thesis, Western Washington University, 2020).

¹³ Paul Paolucci argues that war in Iraq was a long-held ambition of Bush: “Mickey Herskowitz, who interviewed him for a biography, claims Bush (II) expressed interest in war in 1999, when he stated, ‘If I have a chance to invade ... if I had that much capital, I’m not going to waste it.’ After 9/11, the administration adopted Wolfowitz’s pre-emptive war doctrine. Five hours after the attacks, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld instructed aides to plan for striking Iraq. Bush’s 17 September 2001 directive charged the Pentagon to prepare for an invasion.” Paul Paolucci, “Public Discourse in an Age of Deception: Forging the Iraq War.” *Critical Sociology* 35, no. 6 (2009): 868.

¹⁴ Paul Williams, “‘I Could Smell the Dawn of Armageddon When this Dick Was Elected’: Hip-Hop’s Oppositional Voices in the War on Terror,” in *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture: September 11 and Beyond*, ed. Matthew B. Hill and Andrew Schopp (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 222.

¹⁵ Williams, “‘I Could Smell the Dawn of Armageddon,’” 222-3.

¹⁶ The Coup’s ‘Head (of State)’ is another example of this anti-War sentiment: “The CIA worked for Standard Oil / And other companies to whom they’re loyal / In a whole ‘nother land by the name of Iran / The people got wise and took a stand / To the oil companies, ay ain’t shit funny? / This is our oil, our land, our money / CIA got mad and sent false info / To Iraq to help start the Iran/Iraq wo’ ... / The CIA is the cops that’s why I hate the

However, assuming a level of homogeneity in critiques of the War on Terror is problematic. It is incorrect to presume that all rap evidences counterhegemonic critiques of racial capitalist structures. Written, produced, and performed by a group of American soldiers led by Sergeant Neal Saunders whilst stationed in Iraq in 2005, the relatively unknown album *Live From Iraq* by 4th25 provides a unique counterpoint to the critiques levelled above. Detailing the day to day experiences of life as an American soldier – with all the complexities, contradictions, and struggles that come with the job of an armed agent of an occupying force – this album provides a deeply personal and viscerally violent exploration of a war that is too often sanitized in official accounts.¹⁷ Moreover, and most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, the album offers valuable insights into the contradictory existence of the Black patriot in an imperial context. His Black body serving as symbolic ‘proof’ of American equality at the same time he is subjected to the stresses of warfare, Saunders adopts dualistic views on the conflict which alternate between an unequivocal embrace of American exceptionalism and a critique of this very ideology. It is this unique perspective that makes *Live From Iraq* an interesting case study into imperialist ideologies.

Drawing on concepts of ‘double consciousness’, Orientalism, and exceptionalism, this chapter understands 4th25’s music as an insight into the underlying logics of neoliberal imperialism. I first locate the invasion of Iraq within a longer geopolitical history of American imperialism. In contrast to ‘official’ narratives depicting the war as a quest to extend freedom to an oppressed people, the subsequent rebuild of Iraq’s economy following invasion suggests that the war was primarily intended to solidify America’s global economic hegemony into the 21st century. When the invasion of and subsequent war in Iraq is understood as less an act of democratization than a quest to bring a presumed anti-modern Iraq within the clutches of racial capitalist control, *Live From Iraq*’s adoption of both exceptionalist and Orientalist world-views comes into clearer focus.

Turning directly to *Live From Iraq*, I first locate the album within the violent storytelling associated with gangsta rap. I argue that by evoking gangsta, 4th25 effectively transpose the badman tradition into the war arena, communicating the kinds of violent masculinities thought necessary of

coppers / Saddam Hussein was their man out there / They told him to rule while keepin people scared / Sayin’ any opposition to him, he must crush it / He gassed the Kurds, they gave him his budget / Said you gotta kick ass to protect our cash / Step out of line and feel our wrath / You know the time without lookin’ at the little hand / Time came for them to cut out the middle man / Children maimed with no legs and shit / Cause the ‘Bombs Over..’ you know the OutKast hit / And they really want you to hate him dead / When just the other day they made him head / War ain’t about one land against the next / It’s po’ people dyin’ so the rich cash checks”. The Coup, “Head (of State),” track 6 on *Pick a Bigger Weapon*, Epitaph Records, 2006.

¹⁷ David Hanauer explains that “[m]ilitary operations in the Iraq war avoided portraying war as injuring the human body and propagated the illusion of warfare as a necessary and even compassionate activity involving bringing freedom to the long-suffering Iraqi people and safety to U.S. civilians at home.” David I. Hanauer, “Being in the Second Iraq War,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (2015): 84.

imperialist warfare.¹⁸ I then turn to the ideological underpinnings of the album with a focus on the ways 4th25 adopt, adapt, critique, but ultimately perpetuate ideas of American exceptionalism and its companion Orientalism. Borrowing from W.E.B. Du Bois, I understand these seeming contradictions as reflective of Saunders' (particular version of) 'double consciousness' in the imperial context. In song after song, Saunders communicates a duality between what I call a 'boots-on' personality (characterized by hyper-masculinity, war-mongering sensibilities and an adherence to exceptionalism) and a 'barefoot' perspective (more reflective, critical, subversive) that narrates a tension between support for and disavowal of American imperialist ideologies.¹⁹ The significance of this 'double consciousness', I believe, lies in bringing to light the 'inhumanity' of imperial warfare and its effect on the Black colonizer.

Unlike some of the more oppositional perspectives traversed in following chapters, this chapter highlights a different response to racial capitalist oppressions. Adopting an "if we can't beat them, join them" mentality, 4th25 frequently – though not always, as the 'barefoot' perspective indicates – celebrate imperial violence as a potential site of Black inclusion at the expense of an Orientalized Other. Consequently, this chapter offers a reading of Black radical expression that recognizes moments of regression as well as progression, of a site in which rap upholds systems of racial capitalist violence rather than tears down.

Colonial Histories and the Quest for Iraqi Neoliberalism

Contextualizing *Live From Iraq* requires a brief history of the Iraq War. However, any such history is complicated given the degree of controversy and debate regarding the war and its aftermath.²⁰ As such, I focus instead on a few major recurring themes in the literature.

¹⁸ Originating in slavery-era folktales, the 'badman' is a heroic archetype characterized by "gun-wielding black male outlaws such as Railroad Bill and Stagolee, whose exploits often included the killing of sheriffs and other lawmen." Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 162. When adopted by gangsta rappers, the 'badman' "is characterized by stylishly violent, emotionally inarticulate, politically insurgent, and socially alienated personas (the crazy nigga, insurrectionary badman, nihilistic bitch, 40-drinking baller, and so on)." Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 93.

¹⁹ My use of 'double consciousness' varies from Du Bois. Du Bois used 'double consciousness' to capture a tension between how African Americans see themselves and how they are seen by the racializing other. Du Bois' concept thus speaks to the (psychological and existential) tensions resulting from American racial projects. My use of the term is similar in that it examines two identities but also different in that I examine the tensions deriving from Saunders' subject position, not the ways American racial projects 'see' him. The spatio-temporal context between Saunders and Du Bois (i.e. Iraq War vs Jim Crow America), as well as their subject positions (i.e. colonizer vs segregated citizen), are also radically different.

²⁰ As Ronald Krebs and Jennifer Lobasz have noted: "Given the potential direct and indirect costs of the 2003 Iraq War and the post-invasion chaos, understanding how the United States came to launch a war against Iraq

In the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, much attention was devoted to explaining the direct motivations of America's political leaders. As Ahsan Butt explains, both popular and scholarly accounts of Bush's motivation for war tend to fit within one of three categories: "[I]deas, interest groups, and WMD."²¹ 'Ideas' refers to the rise of neoconservatism and groups such as the Project for A New American Century (PNAC), an organization of conservative thinkers seeking to cement an American global hegemony into the post-Cold War era through forceful expansion of America's economic and military might; 'interest groups' refers to the influence of oil lobbies seeking control over Iraq's oil fields; and 'WMD' refers to Bush's exaggeration of the threat posed by Saddam's non-existent nuclear weapons program. A fourth, and especially questionable, motivation was the idea that America's presence would initiate a domino effect of democracy expansion in the region, spreading outwards from Iraq to 'revolutionise' a presumed anti-modern Middle East.²²

These accounts of Bush's motivations are all partially true. Neoconservatism certainly did grow in the late 1990s, and Bush's most senior advisors – most notably PNAC members Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney – were ideological leaders of the neoconservative movement. Oil also played a role, as evidenced by America's long-standing presence in the Middle East dating back to Franklin Roosevelt.²³

For the purposes of this chapter, however, the motivation behind the invasion is less significant than the events themselves. Motivations are, by their nature, often unintelligible. Not only is it near impossible to understand the complex array of factors inspiring another person's actions, but an analysis centred on motivation assumes a level of rational agency that belies the nature of human decision-making.²⁴ Consequently, literature on the Bush administration's motivations is of limited

in the first place has not surprisingly risen to the top of the agenda among the George W. Bush administration's many critics." Ronald R. Krebs and Jennifer K. Lobasz, "Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq," *Security Studies* 16, no. 3 (2007): 410.

²¹ Ahsan I. Butt, "Why did the United States Invade Iraq in 2003?" *Security Studies* 28, no. 2 (2019): 252.

²² Patman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism," 976.

²³ Ryan Burke and Jahara Matisek identify energy security as a primary focus of American foreign policy in the region throughout the 20th century: "[E]ach successive administration from FDR to Carter to George W. Bush and Barack Obama knew and understood the consequences of involvement in the Middle East for energy security purposes. Along the way, each administrations' decision was path dependent, forcing the United States down a narrower path of policy options in the Middle East, with American leadership touting democratic principles, while simultaneously supporting some of the least free regimes in the world." Ryan Burke and Jahara Matisek, "The Illogical Logic of American Entanglement in the Middle East," *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 1 (2020): 6. Given the controversial and at times conspiratorial thrust of Bush's critics, it should be noted that the desire for Iraqi oil is not necessarily a case of outright selfishness since Iraqi oil is a vital source of the world's energy security due to a stubborn reluctance by many nations to decrease dependency on non-renewable resources. By extension, however, it also provides whichever country controls this oil with economic hegemony. For more on the link between natural resources and modern warfare, see: Michael Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001).

²⁴ "Motives are important as driving forces of human behavior, but they are often unknown even to the actors themselves and are perhaps in principle unknowable." Krebs and Lobasz, "Fixing the Meaning of 9/11," 411.

use. Instead, the literature that most resonates with the themes of *Live From Iraq* is that which places the war within a longer racial capitalist trajectory of U.S. imperial conquest.

When centring analysis on *function* rather than *motivation*, the Iraq War is best understood as an effort to establish Iraqi neoliberalism, an act that would “guarantee the continuation of American neoliberal hegemony.”²⁵ As early as the 1950s, Iraq posed a serious threat to America’s economic hegemony due to its socialised economy: “Iraq ... existed as a staunch anti-neoliberal, anti-US client state, which had eliminated corporate investors, American or otherwise, from participating in any of its markets post-sanctions: agriculture, health, education, manufacturing, etc. This precluded US or western capital from directly owning or investing in Iraqi industries.”²⁶ Unable to access Iraqi markets, the U.S. turned to neighbouring Iran, toppling democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 and installing a puppet-regime under the auspices of the dictatorial Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Following a brutal 25-year reign during which Iran was made available for American investment (and/or pillaging, to be more polemical), the American-backed Shah was toppled by the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Losing access to markets that had sustained American hegemony for decades, successive U.S. presidents were forced to turn their attention to other Middle Eastern markets. A Saddam-led Iraq became America’s best option.

The newfound American-Iraqi alliance grew in significance following Saddam’s invasion of Iran in 1980. Iran – whose military might owed to decades of American support of the brutal Shah dictatorship and the controversial Iran-Contra arrangement – provided a resolute defence, quickly turning the Iraqi invasion into a bloody, 8-year long stalemate. By 1988, hundreds of thousands of people had died and America’s support of Iraq remained intact, a support eventually stymied following the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Perceiving the invasion as a threat to U.S. interests, George H.W. Bush responded swiftly and violently against the very regime he and his predecessors had been propping up for over a decade. The extreme reaction, which included a massacre of retreating Iraqi soldiers, the destruction of masses of Iraqi national infrastructure, as well as the dissemination of depleted uranium into Iraqi water supplies, was a testament to America’s desire to topple Saddam.²⁷ The subsequent sanctions imposed on Iraq lasting from 1991 to the invasion of 2003 functioned less to help the Iraqi people against a tyrannical dictator than to “compromise

²⁵ Christopher Doran, *Making the World Safe for Capitalism: How Iraq Threatened the US Economic Empire and had to be Destroyed* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 237.

²⁶ Doran, *Making the World Safe for Capitalism*, 117.

²⁷ For an explanation of America’s potential war crimes during the Gulf War, see: Clark Ramsey, *War Crimes: A Report on United States War Crimes Against Iraq* (Washington D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1992); Mamdani, “Chapter Four. From Proxy War to Open Aggression,” in *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 178-228.

[Iraq's] sovereignty."²⁸ When the sanctions failed to force Saddam to concede, the option of outright war became a distinct possibility. The attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon in 2001, followed by the rhetorical wizardry linking Saddam to the attacks, were the final steps in America's decades-long interest in Iraq, providing the opportunity to open up the country's guarded national economy to global capitalist interests.

With the invasion of 2003, Bush Jr had an opportunity to transform Iraq's economy in such a way that would not only solidify America's economic hegemony, but also, according to orthodox neoliberal ideology, bring 'freedom' to the Iraqi people. Implemented by Paul Bremer, the head of Coalition Provisional Authority, America's reform programme "disbanded the organs of Saddam's rule, the Baath Party and the army, and instituted a policy of neo-liberal privatisation. What Bremer called 'the switch from value-destroying public enterprises to value-creating private ones', would then, he hoped, provide a foundation for a free, democratic system."²⁹ Utilising a version of Orientalist logic assuming that Iraqis were too culturally lacking to self-govern, Bremer validated American control in the region. In other words, a violent take-over by 'exceptional' American forces was necessary for the development of conditions that Iraqis had shown themselves 'incapable' of implementing. Orientalism and exceptionalism were thus central logics of this imperialist endeavour.

Harvey outlines Bremer's desired reforms, which included:

'the full privatization of public enterprises, full ownership rights by foreign firms of Iraqi businesses, full repatriation of foreign profits, ... the opening of Iraq's banks to foreign control, national treatment for foreign companies and ... the elimination of nearly all trade barriers'. The orders were to apply to all areas of the economy The labour market, on the other hand, was to be strictly regulated. Strikes were effectively forbidden in key sectors and the right to unionize restricted. A highly regressive 'flat tax' (an ambitious tax-reform plan long advocated for implementation by conservatives in the US) was also imposed.³⁰

As Harvey concludes elsewhere: "Bremer's orders in effect mandated the construction of a perfected 'neo-liberal state' in Iraq."³¹ Although many of Bremer's desired restructurings were

²⁸ Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 186.

²⁹ Nicholas Campion, "Utopianism and Just War: The Invasion of Iraq in 2003." *Libros de la Corte* 16, no. 10 (2018): 261-2.

³⁰ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

³¹ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 215.

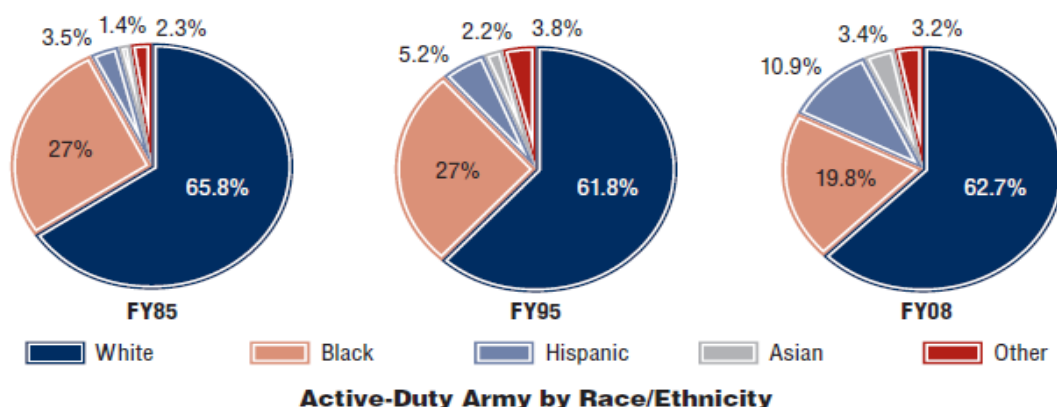
deemed illegal by international courts and subsequently abandoned, they reflect the neoliberal nature of the intervention.

This quick history reveals the inevitable complicity between imperialism, capitalism, and racist ideologies.³² While the *function* of the invasion and subsequent occupation was neoliberal control, the *justification* drew directly on an Orientalist logic that constructed Middle Eastern people as being incapable of ‘proper’ governance. Utilizing such racializing logic, Bush and Bremer sought to expose Iraq to neoliberal pillaging, providing America with one more in a long line of economically productive client states and solidifying U.S. economic hegemony into the foreseeable future.

Imperialism, however, is not simply about an ‘elsewhere’, a foreign land and people: it is also a reflection of internal affairs. The imperialism of the Iraq War is thus as much an opportunity to analyse relations of power within the U.S. as outside of it. Of particular significance to this chapter is America’s racial and class stratification and the consequence of such disparities in ‘motivating’ a great deal of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF). Capturing the link between structural racism at home and imperialist racism abroad is critical to this chapter for it is at the intersection of exceptionalism, Orientalism, and racial capitalism that I locate both the major themes of *Live From Iraq* and broader questions around the inclusion of Black patriots in a moment of 21st century crisis.

Military Make-Up: ‘Race’ and Class

Currently accounting for roughly 13% of the American population, African Americans are disproportionately represented in the United States army. The chart below shows the proportion of American soldiers split into ethnic groups from 1985 to 2008.³³



³² Referring to territorial – as opposed to financial – colonialism, Frantz Fanon writes: “[T]here exists a sort of detached complicity between capitalism and the violent forces which blaze up in colonial territory.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 65.

³³ Graph taken from: U.S. Department of Defense, *The Changing Profile of the Army* (2008), 5.

As well as being disproportionately Black (and, increasingly, Hispanic), army enlistment also correlates with lower socioeconomic status.³⁴ These demographic realities offer an insight into the conditions that lead many to join the military.³⁵

Since the abolition of conscription in 1973, military recruitment has been increasingly dependent not only on foreign soldiers and private contractors, but also on economic conditions that leave many young, poor people of color (mainly men, but increasingly women) with one of two options: enlist or endure a life of unemployment, homelessness, and incarceration.³⁶

With the AVF, the numbers of women, people of color, and working class people in the military skyrocketed. This combined with the early dismantling of Keynesian policies based on redistribution and full employment, and the economic recession of the 1970s and made more people more desperate for any source of stable employment, particularly people of color and youth. The neoliberalization of the economy was thus promising to dovetail quite nicely with the AVF.³⁷

In the ultimate irony, the victims of racial capitalism at home are increasingly expected to shoulder the task of expanding racial capitalism abroad.³⁸ Furthermore, those who do enlist tend to find themselves in the lowest ranks within the military due to lower levels of education and the

³⁴ For more information on the class element of enlistment, see: Florian Olsen, “‘Those About to Die Salute You’: Sacrifice, the War in Iraq and the Crisis of the American Imperial Society,” *Geopolitics* 16, no. 2 (2011): 410-37; Meredith A. Kleykamp, “College, Jobs, or the Military? Enlistment During a Time of War,” *Social Science Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2006): 272-290; Daniel N. Hawkins and Adam J. Maley, “The Southern Military Tradition: Sociodemographic Factors, Cultural Legacy, and U.S. Army Enlistments,” *Armed Forces and Society* 44, no. 2 (2018): 195-218.

³⁵ Although broad trends are observable, soldiers are not a monolith. Individual motivations for joining are diverse and every soldier has a different experience of war.

³⁶ Warfare itself has been altered by the forces of neoliberalism. As Mamdani explains of the Iraq War: “*The Guardian* (London) reported that ‘while the official coalition figures list the British as the second largest contingent with around 9,900 troops, they are narrowly outnumbered by the 10,000 private military contractors now on the ground.’ As a result, it calculated that ‘the proportion of contracted security personnel in the firing line is ten times greater than during the first Gulf War. In 1991, for every private contractor, there were 100 servicemen and women; now there are 10.’ Of the \$87 billion earmarked for the Iraqi campaign this year, the U.S. Army estimates that a third, nearly \$30 billion, will be spent on contracts to private companies.” Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 258-9. See also: Bacevich, “Chapter 6. Gunboats and Gurkha’s,” in *American Empire*, 141-166; Simeon Man, A. Naomi Paik and Melina Pappademos, “Violent Entanglements: Militarism and Capitalism,” *Radical History Review* 133, (2019): 1-10.

³⁷ Deborah E. Cowen, “Fighting for ‘Freedom’: The End of Conscription in the United States and the Neoliberal Project of Citizenship,” *Citizenship Studies* 10, no. 2 (2006): 176.

³⁸ Rapper Yasiin Bey (Mos Def) alludes to the link between economic structures at home and the Iraq War in his song ‘Dollar Day’: “And Mr. President he ‘bout that cash / He got a policy for handlin’ the niggers and trash, / And if you poor [and] you black . . . You better off on crack, dead or in jail, or with a gun in Iraq.” Mos Def, “Dollar Day,” track 7 on *True Magic*, Geffen Records, 2006.

requirement that commanding officers have a university degree.³⁹ Being born of a deeply unequal society, the military apparatus inevitably reproduces these very same inequalities.⁴⁰

However, and more importantly for the major themes of *Live From Iraq*, it is also true that Americans of all ethnicities, genders, and socioeconomic status' find meaning in seemingly pernicious ideologies/structures. Louis Althusser describes this process as 'interpellation': "[I]deology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals ... , or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects ... by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing".⁴¹ In other words, people are not drawn to military service for purely oppressive reasons (e.g. poverty), but also due to a profound sense of identity deriving from inclusion into the ideology of American exceptionalism. Consequently, racial capitalist imperialism is a multicultural endeavor, bringing into the fold people of all ethnicities as part of a regime that oppresses other Others. The members of 4th25, as I come to explain, effectively communicate this process.

Music in the Iraq War

Music was a ubiquitous feature of life for American soldiers in Iraq. As Jonathon Pieslak explains, significant technological improvements at the turn of the century ensured that music listening informed many aspects of the war experience: "From metal and rap music used by American troops to inspire them for combat missions, to anti-war protest songs on popular radio, music functions in a variety of ways in relation to the Iraq war. ... While carrying out patrols and missions, for example, American soldiers can listen to music in tanks and Humvees through self-made sound systems, portable CD players, and mp3 players."⁴² Not only was music ubiquitous, it also served a variety of functions. Lisa Gilman explains: "[B]ecause the emotional needs of troops were so much more complex and layered, troops engaged with more diverse musical styles associated with a broader range of emotional associations privately and in small and large groups to meet a variety of their

³⁹ Cowen, "Fighting for 'Freedom'," 176.

⁴⁰ Another appeal of enlistment lies in the fact that over the previous four decades of state retrenchment, the military has continued to offer educational opportunities. For insights into the social benefits of the armed forces since the 1970s, see: Jennifer Mittelstadt, *The Rise of the Military Welfare State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁴¹ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 118.

⁴² Jonathan R. Pieslak, "Sound Targets: Music and the War in Iraq," *Journal of Musicological Research* 26, no. 2-3 (2007): 123.

psychological needs.”⁴³ From getting pumped-up before battle, to winding down after a treacherous day in the field, to remembering a loved one back home, music was omnipresent.

Despite the many insights provided by Gilman and Pieslak, most of the relevant literature focusses on the consumption of music rather than its creation.⁴⁴ This is understandable since very little music was actually recorded by soldiers due to obvious difficulties with sourcing equipment, expertise, physical confinements, and money. However, music was certainly created and performed by American soldiers, as evidenced by both the scholarly work of Pieslak and the documentary *Soundtrack to War* which detailed the ubiquity of music making (especially rap) during the early stages of the Iraq War.⁴⁵ Despite its regularity, music making rarely left the room, a fact that adds a level of significance to *Live From Iraq* as one of the only first-person accounts of a soldier’s life recorded *during* war, and thus embodying the ideas and mentalities that flourish in this arena.

Live From Iraq, gangsta, and the Imperial ‘Badman’

In an interview with Pieslak in 2006, Sergeant Neal Saunders explained the intent behind *Live From Iraq*: “I wanted the album to be Iraq. I wanted it to be what Iraq made me feel.”⁴⁶ Detailing major milestones in the life of a soldier from deployment to the first patrol, and from losing friends to the act of killing, *Live From Iraq* provides a unique insight into the complexities of life at war. This section offers a quick biography of Saunders, followed by an examination of the hyper-violence that characterizes 4th25’s account of war, first contextualizing it in reference to the gangsta tradition and subsequently arguing that fantasies of homicidal retribution function to illuminate the Orientalist world-views typical of imperialist warfare.

Saunders’ path to joining the military was decidedly similar to the kinds of phenomena recounted by Florian Olsen and Deborah Cowen above. Born in Richmond, Virginia, Saunders was raised by his mother following the death of his father at the age of 3. After dropping out of college to pursue a career in music production and promotion, Saunders found himself amongst a group of people whom, he believed, would eventually lead him to prison.⁴⁷ Seeking to avoid this fate, and wanting to

⁴³ Lisa Gilman, *My Music, My War: The Listening Habits of U.S. Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), 117.

⁴⁴ As well as Gilman and Pieslak, see: Martin J. Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴⁵ *Soundtrack to War*, directed by George Gittoes (Hopscotch Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

⁴⁶ Neal Saunders, “Sgt. Neal Saunders in Phone Conversations with Jonathan Pieslak,” interviewed by Jonathan Pieslak, 2006.

⁴⁷ As Saunders explained in an interview with Jonathon Pieslak: “I took a look at everybody I was around, what they were doing, where they were going in life, and that’s when I realised, you know, for the first time, that

acquire financial stability, he joined the military.⁴⁸ Once in Iraq, however, his musical aspirations did not subside. Indeed, the circumstances in which he found himself inspired Saunders to document his new surroundings.⁴⁹ Consequently, Saunders bought and shipped recording equipment from America and, along with “Sgt. Edward ‘Greg-O’ Gregory, Staff Sgt. Terrance Staves, Specialist Michael ‘Paperboi’ Davis, Sgt. Ronin Clay, and Specialist Michael Thomas”, created *Live From Iraq*.⁵⁰

The truly independent nature of the album, with no censorship and no aversion to difficult (even horrific) themes and stories, makes it particularly useful as an insight into some of the prevailing ideas circling the Iraq War. However, while independent, it would be a mistake to assume that the album exists in a cultural vacuum. By adopting many conventions of ‘90s rap, especially “its braggadocio, its hyper-masculinity, its ‘grittiness,’ its mercilessness”,⁵¹ *Live From Iraq* can be placed within the gangsta rap tradition.⁵² As Pieslak argues: “Many aspects of gangsta rap ideology, such as the survival of the fittest attitude, in which death and violence are portrayed as essential components of survival and attitudes of rebellion against oppressive forces, are recontextualized in the album to depict the experience of combat violence and life/death situations in the lives of soldiers in Iraq.”⁵³ These features of gangsta converge in *Live From Iraq*, finding voice in its most striking feature: violence. From the third song of the album ‘Lace Your Boots’ – an account of a soldier’s first experience with real battle – to the vengeful ‘24 Hours’ – the peak of Saunders’ anger in which he details his homicidal (genocidal?) anger towards Iraqi civilians – the album is characterized by expressions of retributive violence and anger.

everything’s just bullshit, everything looks good, but that’s just ‘cause people are trying to keep up appearances man, but underneath they’re falling the fuck off and it just wasn’t worth it to me anymore, I wasn’t trying to go to jail, I don’t have that ending.” Saunders, interviewed by Pieslak.

⁴⁸ “Already a promoter of hip-hop and R&B with aspirations to break into the music industry, Saunders had enlisted in the military prior to the 9/11 attacks, in an attempt to bring financial stability to his life.” M. Solis, “4th25 offers a hip-hop diary of a harrowing year in Iraq,” *San Antonio Current*, Nov 17, 2005, <https://www.sacurrent.com/music/music-war-correspondents-2275059>.

⁴⁹ As Saunders explained in an interview with Leo Shane III: “While you’re there, going into combat, it changes you into a new person, ... I had to record then.” Leo Shane III, “Rappers deliver rhymes, ‘Live from Iraq,’” *Stars and Stripes*, June 19, 2005, <https://www.stripes.com/living/rappers-deliver-rhymes-live-from-iraq-1.36995>.

⁵⁰ Jonathan R. Pieslak, *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 127.

⁵¹ Cynthia A. Young, “Black Ops: Black Masculinity and the War on Terror,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 1, 2014): 61.

⁵² I believe this to be true despite the fact that Saunders himself has a distaste for the subgenre. On the topic of major record labels refusing to sign him and other soldier rappers, Saunders argues: “[T]heir refusal to want to touch it is because there is no gangsta rapper that is going to have the same, you know it’s not as real as the war ... so I don’t think they want to touch it for that reason. ‘Cause then you can’t have all these fuckers acting hard, because they’re not. Because as soon as one soldier makes it, he just made it harder for everybody else, you know, to tell that same story, that same ‘I sell drugs on the corner’ shit and ‘I shoot people with my .45’ and that crap, majors have a lot of money invested in that.” Saunders, interviewed by Pieslak.

⁵³ Pieslak, *Sound Targets*, 175.

The tendency when analysing such lyrics in rap – amongst the general public, at least – is to assume a level of realism. There are often two sides to this argument: on one hand it is assumed, often using thinly-veiled racist caricatures, that violence and Blackness are synonymous. On the other hand, the inclination amongst progressive commentators is to either excuse this violence, or, alternatively, accept it as an accurate depiction of life for African Americans.⁵⁴ Such fallacies are also apparent in the broader literature on soldiers' accounts of war, where 'realism' is often assumed. This tendency is understandable. As Jessica Ritchie argues in an analysis of soldier-produced online war videos: "[T]he *horror* of war has become synonymous ... with the *reality* of war – the truth is ugly, after all."⁵⁵ Alternatively, it may be tempting to dismiss the kind of violence explored in *Live From Iraq* as nothing more than the inconsequential musings of a soldier trying to cope with the stressors of warfare. Though both interpretations are partially true, I believe they can be extended further.

Themes of violence in *Live From Iraq* should neither be read at face value nor dismissed, instead, they must be prioritized as complex accounts of imperial warfare's racist ideologies. This is most evident in the song '24 Hours'. Perhaps the most confronting song on the album, '24 hours' illustrates a growing sense of paranoia resulting in revenge fantasies against Iraqis. The following quote reflects a sentiment that runs throughout the song:

Everybody's responsible, it's no more outs
Withhold information, taste this in your mouth
I don't feel for this nation, nor give fucks about 'em
They shoot from a mosque then I'm blowing 'em out it
No sympathy here, behind it they hide
Now either they calm down, or everyone dies
There is no in between, no neutral sides
So when coax is flyin, please, don't ask me why
When we kick in your door, there is no alibi
Everybody is guilty, 'til proved otherwise⁵⁶

⁵⁴ This is a view that many rappers endorse: "This assumption—that rappers are creating rhymed autobiographies—is the result of both rappers' own investment in perpetuating the idea that everything they say is true to their life experience (given that the genre has grown out of the African-American tradition of boasting in the first person) and the genre's investment in the pretense of no pretense." Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), 38.

⁵⁵ Jessica Ritchie, "Instant Histories of War: Online Combat Videos of the Iraq Conflict, 2003–2010," *History Australia* 8, no. 1 (2011): 102.

⁵⁶ 4th25, "24 Hours," track 5 on *Live From Iraq*, 4th25 Music Group LLC, 2005.

For all its violence and adoption of Orientalist images of conniving and ‘unknowable’ Iraqis, the song is not a mirror reflection of lived events. Nor is it inconsequential. The analytical significance of the violence in ‘24 Hours’ is that it stands for two specific mental states or ideological positions.

First, Saunders’ violent fantasies reflect a perceived loss of agency that is overcome through dreams of invulnerable aggression. In an environment perceived as quashing autonomy, an environment where death is imminent, gangsta rap’s trope of violent agency serves a cathartic function. Adam Gussow describes this well in relation to the omnipresent images of gun- and knife-wielding blues badmen/badwomen: “[I]t feels *good*, if you’re a blues singer in pain, to project and objectify your rage, heartache, and lust-sickness as images of guns and knives, cutting and shooting, and related tropes.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, and applied to the world of rap, “[g]angsta rap ideology also engages a power element, the power of an individual to survive and wage violence against anyone or anything that threatens survival.”⁵⁸ Invoking the ontological assumptions of gangsta, 4th25 use violence as a kind of masculine reclaiming of power in a world where death is imminent.

Second, and more importantly for the purposes of this chapter, while violent imagery may not be ‘real’, it does reflect a specific consciousness required of imperialist warfare. As I understand it, and as I flesh out in more detail below in relation to Saunders’ ‘boot-on’ consciousness, the album’s visceral violence is a reflection of the narrator’s embrace of an imperialist mentality. The soldier, in other words and to borrow from Althusser, is interpellated by the ideologies of racial capitalist imperialism, manifesting in masculinist violence and Orientalist world-views. The ultra-violence and adoption of blatantly racist ideas is the ideology of American exceptionalism in an imperial moment.

Exceptionalism and Orientalism in *Live From Iraq*

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, belief in America’s exceptional status became ‘common sense’: “[A]part from a brief flirtation with multilateralism ... the Bush administration has generally approached the war on terror with a reinvigorated idea of American exceptionalism—the informal ideology that endows Americans with the conviction that their nation is an exemplary one.”⁵⁹ This exceptionalism, often associated with notions of being the ‘most free’ nation on earth, endows America with a ‘responsibility’ to extend their authority – and, by extension, freedom itself – across the globe.

⁵⁷ Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 224.

⁵⁸ Pieslak, *Sound Targets*, 138.

⁵⁹ Bacevich, *American Empire*, 63-4.

Importantly, however, exceptionalism not only ascribes a sense of superiority to America, it does so in opposition to an 'inferior' Other. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said describes a centuries-long process of the 'west' defining itself as superior in relation to a presumed culturally aberrant, sexually deviant, and violent 'Orient'. In words that remain as relevant to the War on Terror as they were at the time of writing, Said outlines the major tenets of Orientalism (i.e. the fetishized study of the 'Orient', as opposed to the 'Orient' as a physical space):

[O]ne is the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior. Another dogma is that abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a 'classical' Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. A third dogma is that the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself A fourth dogma is that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared (the Yellow Peril, the Mongol hordes, the brown dominions) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation whenever possible).⁶⁰

As Said added in 2003 in reference to the Iraq War: "Without a well-organized sense that these people over there were not like 'us' and didn't appreciate 'our' values—the very core of traditional Orientalist dogma ...—there would have been no war."⁶¹ Orientalism was thus a central organizing principle in America's conflict with Iraq.

Given that American imperialism is built on the dual ideologies of exceptionalism and Orientalism, it is inevitable that 4th25 would be interpellated by these constructs. The significance of *Live From Iraq*, in this respect, is that it provides a personalised, ground-level insight into organizing principles that are often masked by 'official' accounts of warfare. *Live From Iraq* depicts how exceptionalism and Orientalism can become internalised by the (disproportionately Black) working-class people expected to perform the dirty work of empire expansion. It also, on occasion, highlights where these ideologies falter: where the primacy of exceptionalism is called into question.

But before turning to the ways exceptionalism and Orientalism find voice in *Live From Iraq*, I must first explain a process through which these logics function. Though often understood in narrow terms, exceptionalism works across various modalities. In other words, a nation is not only exceptional for being 'the freest', it is also exceptional for being a supposed bastion of racial/gender/sexual/class equality. Examining sexuality as a basis for American exceptionalism

⁶⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary ed. (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 300-1.

⁶¹ Said, *Orientalism*, xv.

during the War on Terror, Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007) observes how the growing visibility and supposed acceptance of homosexuality at home contributed to a wide-spread belief in America's superior status. It was in opposition to an anti-modern, sexually aberrant, Orientalized threat that America's exceptional status was made coherent: "Reinforcing a homogeneous notion of Muslim sexual repression vis-à-vis homosexuality ... works to resituate the United States, in contrast, as a place free of such sexual constraints".⁶² *Inclusion* of one modality (in this case, homosexuality) 'proves' one's exceptional status while also justifying the *exclusion* of the perverse Other. Despite the obvious fallacies of this construction (can America seriously claim to be 'sexually' – or racially, gendered, classed – exceptional?), the self-proclaimed equality of American society was productive for American imperialism.

Utilizing this 'inclusionary' logic, the Bush administration successfully advanced the idea that America lives at the apex of morality. Such claims were supported not only by a supposed sexual tolerance, but also through self-advertising America's 'racial equality'. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Black political figures such as Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell took on more public roles, functioning as symbolic evidence of America's advancements in racial equality since the Civil Rights era.⁶³ Consequently, the Bush administration was able to claim a 'racial' exceptionalism. However, it must be acknowledged, this brand of inclusion is not truly inclusive. Far from accepting formerly Othered communities, Puar argues: "[E]xceptionalisms rely on the erasure of these very modalities in order to function".⁶⁴ Certain modalities (e.g. 'race') are incorporated in such a way that does little to actually contest oppressions (e.g. 'racial' inequality).⁶⁵ Including marginalized communities is less an act of change than of optics, 'proving' exceptionalism without enacting such exceptionalism.

The process of integration as an act of exclusion is best evidenced in *Live From Iraq* in the way 4th25 uncritically accept the logic of 'post-racial' exceptionalism. One of the most surprising elements of

⁶² Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, 10th anniversary ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 92.

⁶³ "[Powell] carried with him a rare stature. He was a black, enlisted man who had risen to great heights through hard work, a keen intellect, and a willingness to follow orders. Powell has never denied the existence of racism in (North) America and the military, but as had others in those Jim Crow generations, he soldiered on, striving to be twice as good as everyone else and breaking racial barriers with a no-fuss, no-muss attitude. His life trajectory was a testament to US racial democracy, making him the ideal ambassador to an international (and national) audience suspicious of US Empire. He was uniquely situated, so the narrative went, to recognize and forestall US power's excesses because of the traumatic racial history his body recalled." Young, "Black Ops," 42.

⁶⁴ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 11.

⁶⁵ Additionally, the recently included are only accepted if they mirror the dominant culture – who Puar describes, borrowing from Lisa Duggan, as the 'homonormative'. For more on 'homonormativity', see: Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 175-194.

Live From Iraq, especially when compared to the prevalence of such themes in rap generally, is the ‘absence’ of ‘race’. Whether through an expression of Black nationalism, uncovering of white privilege or structural racism, rap music has long been tied to the illumination of ‘race’ as a prominent modality of lived experience. *Live From Iraq*, in contrast, largely ignores such themes. This may be due to the fact that Saunders, as he explains in an interview with Pieslak, is very critical of what he perceives as a mentality of entitlement among African Americans.⁶⁶ Whatever Saunders’ reasons may be, the general absence of ‘race’ ties *Live From Iraq* to an exceptionalist narrative that views ‘racism’ as a relic of the past. 4th25’s handling of race – by which I mean their erasure of it – affirms America’s claim to exceptionalism, legitimizing imperial violence in the process.⁶⁷

However, and reflecting the contradictory nature of the album, for all his acquiescence to the rhetoric of U.S. exceptionalism, there are moments in which Saunders destabilises America’s claims to racial equality. The most obvious example is seen in ‘Behind the Screens’, a song depicting frustrations with red tape and a perceived lack of agency in the military. The first verse articulates the only clear racial-based critique of the album:

Thought I could trust those in charge
Look at me now I’m laughin’
...
Got us out here like slaves
Fresh off the ship
Where you would see us pick your cotton
And get our ass whipped
Cause right now
That’s what’s happenin’ and yall ain’t doin’ shit
But tyin’ my hands to my ankles
Telling me stop Michael Vick⁶⁸

⁶⁶ In his interview with Pieslak, Saunders argues that, despite being Black himself, “Black people really piss me off more than anybody. Because, oh my goodness, I think they just have a huge history of never taking responsibility for themselves what so fucking ever, if you’re Black nothing is your fucking fault.” He goes even further by questioning the very existence of racism in America. “Every little white girl I’ve seen is playing with a little Mexican bitch, you know, they’re all playing with Dora, she’s everywhere and if racism truly existed, then the powers that be would never let a Mexican bitch be so mainstream. Racism isn’t about money, it’s not about just using people to exploit them and make money off of them, it’s fuck ‘em completely absolutely. It’s ‘we should kill them all’, that’s how I look at it, that’s what I think it is, according to the definition I’ve seen or based on racism in the past.” Saunders, interviewed by Pieslak.

⁶⁸ 4th25, “Behind the Screens,” track 6 on *Live From Iraq*, 4th25 Music Group LLC, 2005.

These lyrics, unlike much of the rest of the album, do a great deal to challenge the neoliberal myth of colorblindness. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains the significance of discussing the oppressions of African Americans in an imperial context: “The Black experience unravels what we are supposed to know to be true about America itself—the land of milk and honey, the land where hard work makes dreams come true. This mythology is not benign: it serves as the United States’ self-declared invitation to intervene militarily and economically around the globe.”⁶⁹ This specific song, therefore, contests the legitimacy of imperialist warfare by reflecting on the falsehoods of exceptionalist logic.

But beyond this single exploration of racism, *Live From Iraq* broadly ratifies the notion of a post-racial, exceptional America. However, where ‘race’ is largely ignored in *Live From Iraq*, there are other modalities (and disparities) that Saunders does acknowledge. Class, not ‘race’, is the primary site of antagonism in the album – and, by extension, the avenue through which American exceptionalism is most effectively challenged. Analysing class in a place where class appears to have been erased – by which I mean that people are defined less by socio-economics than rank – may seem problematic. However, while class may not be directly applicable to military settings: it is tangentially applicable. Pieslak explains how a class-like consciousness developed in the Iraq context: “The class hierarchy of the military is based on the division between officers and enlisted soldiers. ... [S]ome enlisted-rank soldiers view officers as privileged leaders who are not exposed to danger as frequently because they are more valued within the military hierarchy. This creates a degree of animosity among enlisted soldiers analogous to a social class division.”⁷⁰ Moreover, while class (as conventionally defined) may not exist in any tangible way in military settings, classist institutions/structures within the U.S. – as explained earlier in my explanation of the factors that lead to enlistment and ranking – do have a profound effect on military hierarchies. The inequalities inherent to neoliberal capitalism are reproduced in the imperialist context and, when narrated by 4th25, become the primary site of antagonism. Claims to an exceptional equality are destabilised as a result.

Due to the sheer prevalence of this rank-/class-based antagonism in the album, I will only focus on one of its more obvious illuminations: the final song of the album, ‘Pussy’. The blatantly misogynistic ‘Pussy’ is a hyper-masculine, braggadocios rebuke of officers who, Saunders believes, are spared the real dangers of war while profiting from the suffering of others:

⁶⁹ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 25.

⁷⁰ Pieslak, *Sound Targets*, 160.

Some of the purple hearts and bronze stars awarded round here
Now how the fuck did yall get that cause you ain't do shit
Look I was there when Marion went down and you ain't get hit
And if I recall you ain't bleed at all, he almost lost a limb
Now how the fuck do you deserve the same purple heart as him
And when they presented you with it you accepted it proudly
And if I ever see you wearing it, oh it's coming the fuck off don't doubt me
And it's more people than you runnin' round here undeserving
So I apologize for all you fuckers awarded for lip service
Cause yall'd never tell the truth, I'm here to keep you honest
That without your rank these awards you wouldn't a got 'em⁷¹

The fact that the album ends on this note adds to the poignancy of 4th25's critique. The listener ends the album with a sense of this class-based discrimination being the most pervasive frustration of the war experience. Any claim to universal liberty, a cornerstone of American exceptionalist rhetoric, is challenged by these observations of disproportionate struggle.

Lastly, Saunders explicitly critiques the hypocrisy of claims regarding the benevolence of American imperialism. The Iraq War, he notes repeatedly, is not as depicted in 'official' accounts. It is not an attempt at democracy expansion, but an act of violence intended to amass control. As noted in 'Testament of a Soldier', the freedoms that trickle down to U.S. citizens have only accrued as a result of America's historical penchant for imperialist violence.⁷²

Built on murder
Our country's expanded
And so far our troubles
Have rewarded you handsome
But now you criticize
The hand that fed you
And though you try to forget
No, I won't let you
...

⁷¹ 4th25, "Pussy," track 15 on *Live From Iraq*, 4th25 Music Group LLC, 2005.

⁷² Although he fails to note an imbalance of privilege on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, disability, etc.

And freedom has a price

We payin' it for you⁷³

Even as 4th25 frequently adopt ideas of a colorblind racial exceptionalism as part of their inclusion into the American fold, they also challenge the simplistic rhetoric that assumes America to be innocent of wrongdoing. Fundamentally, 4th25 narrate a truth that is too often masked in exceptionalist rhetoric: America's economic hegemony is built on violent expansion.

By refusing to accept superiority in the form of class, and by acknowledging the imperialist foundations of America's present hegemony, 4th25 challenge baseless claims of exceptionalism. However, despite challenging exceptionalism on these grounds, the group too often fail to note disparities along lines of 'race', gender (indeed, their misogyny inflames sexism), sexuality, and crucially, they continue to uphold a sense of superiority over Iraqis whom Saunders views in a manner akin to Orientalist dogma. Saunders may acknowledge some of the many fallacies purported by exceptionalist rhetoric, but this does not rid him of his imperialist ambition. Saunders' unpacking of classist structures and imperialist violence does not motivate him towards peace: but towards increased violence. His frustration – a frustration that leads to evoking the memory of slavery in 'Behind the Screens' – is built on the fact that he cannot use violence with the impunity he so desires. Although these lyrics – by making previously invisible tensions visible – acknowledge the fallacy at the heart of America's claim to exceptionalism, Saunders remains interpellated by an ideology that demands superiority over the new racial Other.

The following sections unpack the contradictions and dualities noted throughout this section, arguing that they illuminate the complexities of neoliberal imperialist violence. I argue that the contradiction of simultaneously embracing and rejecting exceptionalism derives from the 'double consciousness' required of (Black) soldiers expected to perform racial capitalist empire expansion in their quest to 'join the fold' of American-ness.

The Double Consciousness of Neal Saunders (boots-on)

On the surface, *Live From Iraq* appears riddled with contradictions. Within single songs, Saunders espouses an uncritical acceptance of American exceptionalism only to then question the purpose of America's presence in the Middle East. He alternates between violent, hyper-masculine, murderous fantasies and touching expressions of pain and vulnerability. Rather than considering this a flaw in

⁷³ 4th25, "Testament of a Soldier," track 14 on *Live From Iraq*, 4th25 Music Group LLC, 2005.

the storytelling of the album, I contend that – as well as depicting the varied and complex experiences of a soldier – the dualities of this album point toward the violent realities of racial capitalist imperialism. 4th25 embody a tension best understood as a conflict between Neal Saunders as imperial agent interpellated by exceptionalism and Orientalism (which I am identifying as the narrator with their boots-on) vs. Neal Saunders as vulnerable human (which I am identifying as the narrator being barefoot). One is the narration of a person disciplined into an Orientalist-tinged ‘inhumanity’ – a necessary consciousness for enacting imperial violence – while the other reflects the suffering this violence creates in the individual. Unlike the cathartic fantasy of gangsta rap, the extreme violence of *Live From Iraq* that is most evident in the ‘boots-on’ songs is “more about stepping outside of oneself in order to be able to handle the realities of war (destruction, heightened alertness, death), than about entering a world of pleasurable fantasy.”⁷⁴ In doing so, 4th25 provides the listener with an insight into the realities of neoliberal imperialist warfare and the complex bind of the Black colonizing soldier.

Discussing a duality of identity naturally evokes the insights of W.E.B. Du Bois. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois describes an African American identity that is “both black and American, neither of which could be reduced to the other.”⁷⁵ He labels this duality ‘double-consciousness’:

[T]he Negro is ... born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body⁷⁶.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, I believe that *Live From Iraq* provides an insight into a form of ‘double consciousness’ in a very specific spatio-temporal context. Under extreme duress, Saunders personifies the tension between two identities: one the embodiment of a neoliberal, exceptionalist, masculinist ideal, and the other the internal pain deriving from this ideology.

The experience of dual identities in war is frequently noted by both scholars and soldiers alike. In reference to the ubiquity of soldiers listening to gangsta rap and heavy metal before combat, Pieslak

⁷⁴ Pieslak, “Sound Targets: Music and the War in Iraq,” 142.

⁷⁵ Philip J. Deloria and Alexander I. Olsen, *American Studies: A User's Guide* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 50.

⁷⁶ William E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Originally from 1903), 3.

describes how music helps promote a mindset needed to perform the ‘inhuman’ acts associated with warfare: “[T]he music could be said to have a transformative power that removes the element of humanity from human identity. Saunders believes that ‘war is people having to step outside of themselves. It is you having to become what I consider to be a monster.’”⁷⁷ This recognition of the need for variant mentalities is significant. Viewed this way, the violence and anger discussed in this chapter – as well as being an expression of frustration or an adherence to gangsta rap’s masculinist tropes – is a comment on the behaviours, ideas, and ultimately, the ‘inhumanity’ required to uphold American hegemony.

In the context of *Live From Iraq*, this duality manifests symbolically in the recurring image of a soldier’s boot. Throughout the album, references to the ritual of donning boots and lacing them up represent a kind of symbolic switch into a violent ‘inhumanity’. It is only through this adoption of a secondary consciousness that a soldier can perform their imperialist duties. Most importantly, the routine of lacing up is not just physical, nor is it purely emotional (i.e. it prepares oneself for conflict): instead, it is predominantly ideological. As a soldier ‘laces their boots’, they become the violent agent imperialism requires them to be. I will now explore this process in relation to two songs: ‘Lace Your Boots’ and ‘24 Hours’.

‘Lace Your Boots’:

Directly following two songs dealing with the anxieties, fears, and process of acclimatising to life in Iraq, ‘Lace Your Boots’ details the narrator’s first experience with combat. This is the first song in the ‘boots-on’ category and, not coincidentally, the first time the ritual of lacing boots is referenced. The song begins by depicting this process as Saunders prepares for battle:

It’s war, lace your boots up
It’s real, fuck the rules bro
Close contact one hand combat
Or long distance fuck you fools up
Back in the saddle now
Back up on the battleground
If it’s in your heart when it sparks
Act according now
The object man slaughter now
The order shut these fools down

⁷⁷ Pieslak, “Sound Targets: Music and the War in Iraq,” 140.

The target, anything moving
Women and children catching slugs now

Within this verse we hear for the first time the refrain that will be heard throughout the album: “lace your boots up”. In stark contrast to the previous two songs, where the focus was on survival and returning home safely, here and once ritualised as the imperial soldier, “The object man slaughter now / The order shut these fools down / The target, anything moving / Women and children catching slugs now”. Saunders continues:

I keep my boots laced tight as fuck
In god I trust
These mo'fuckers can't be stupid enough
Not to throw they truce up
But fuck 'em, no this is not love
This is death 'bout to touch 'em
...
All the clothes we left on lifeless bodies
White flags could a saved 'em
But they refuse to choose to wave 'em
So I refuse not to spray 'em, fuck 'em
That's why they stay
With they face to the pavement prayin'
To god they don't get weighed in
Cause we are not playin'
We are on top of this food-chain
And they could never evolve past us⁷⁸

The opening line, “I keep my boots laced tight as fuck” becomes a reoccurring motif. In all the ‘boots-on’ tracks, it is as if Saunders’ boots are so tightly laced that he has lost his other consciousness and grown to completely embody the imperialist project. ‘Boots-on’ Saunders is unapologetically committed to the neoliberal imperialist project and its prerequisites: a belief in America’s superiority (“We are on top of this food-chain”) in relation to the Orientalized Other (“they could never evolve past us”), and the need for violence. It is also here, in his ‘boots-on’ persona, that a particularly violent, emotionally inarticulate masculinity comes to the fore. In

⁷⁸ 4th25, “Lace Your Boots.”

contrast to the emotionally articulate 'barefoot' songs, 'boots-on' Saunders adopts a kind of heightened masculinity that is fostered within the imperial mission.

Sonically, this song is unique in the album for two main reasons: first, it includes real-life battle sounds such as gunfire and explosions, and second, the lyrics are delivered in a digitally distorted, unnaturally slow and deep voice. The real-life sounds of war bring the audience into this extreme setting. Explosions, yelling, and gunfire all inculcate the listener in the conditions that necessitate an imperial mentality or secondary consciousness. The disjuncture between these 'real' sounds and the often musically quiet 'barefoot' songs creates a feeling of distance between two consciousnesses. Furthermore, the vocal distortion in this song, in conjunction with the reference to 'lacing your boots up', acts as a representation of 'inhuman' transformation that amplifies the need for an alternative consciousness.

'24 Hours':

Earlier in this chapter, I analysed a section of '24 Hours'. As the most poignant use of violent imagery in the album, the song's lyrics deserve further quoting:

Burn his shit to the ground, cause he gotta know something
Population of millions, but no one knows nothing
Line 'em up till they talk, if they won't talk fuck 'em
They tune'll change, when you kill enough of 'em
...
Me, I'd hold everyone liable, there is no exception
Especially when you lie for 'em
They run your streets, and I will let you die for 'em
Heat round through the door of the house that they hidin' in
Fuck who or what's around, nothings collateral
Damage was done when you let 'em live round you
Keep launchin' mortars, artillery pounds you
For 24 hours, till we force the peace outta you⁷⁹

When I first listened to this song, I understood it as an expression of a masculinist, violent fantasy in the face of overwhelming emotional distress. In this reading, violence functions in much the same way Gussow understood the recurring theme of violence in blues music – i.e. as a rejection of the

⁷⁹ 4th25, "24 Hours."

daily torment facing African Americans under Jim Crow.⁸⁰ While in no way wanting to equate the position of African Americans under Jim Crow with that of Black imperialist soldiers during war, the *effect* of 'retributive' violence is similar. The power of fighting daily, realistic violence with fantastical, stylized violence is in asserting power over one's life. In hostile environments, evoking a non-caring, violent badman enables a sense of agency in a world where agency is routinely (or, at the very least, perceived to have been routinely) curtailed.

While I still believe this analysis rings true, it misses a crucial point. As well as an expression of agency in a violent world, this song is also a critique of the kinds of violence required of the soldier. The first-person narrative of the song is less an expression of retributive violence, and more a reflection of the soldierly consciousness required of neoliberal imperialism.⁸¹ The process of installing a perfected neoliberal state through military intervention is not a peaceful one. Instead, it is a process requiring violence and a sense of innate superiority over an Orientalized other. When ritualised as the imperial agent, 'boots-on' Saunders embodies this ideology.

In his 'boots-on' form, Saunders depicts the ideology of American neoliberal imperialism for what it truly is. Cynthia Young summarises the mentality described in '24 Hours', noting its relationship to colonial racism:

In this fantasy of emptying the land to save the land, we hear familiar echoes of settler colonial narratives, even as they come from a newly (if only imaginatively) empowered source, the black soldier. No mercy, no discrimination—everyone is equal before the weight of the soldier's rough justice, and only total capitulation on the part of the Iraqis will suffice. Here 'fixing' Iraq is stripped of any humanitarian implication; instead, a brute show of force brings peace and resolution for the soldier, if not for the country's rightful inhabitants.⁸²

By adopting these clearly racist narratives in the first-person, 4th25 depict the inevitable outcome of this colonialist mentality.⁸³ In '24 Hours', a desire to liberate Iraqis is completely dismissed. The

⁸⁰ Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*.

⁸¹ In his interview with Pieslak, Saunders communicates the kind of consciousness required of the colonizing soldier. He explains, in reference to a photo in the album's liner notes of a crying soldier: "[T]hat tear from that soldier's eye when he's looking out over all the carnage that he's created, he's not smiling, he's not laughing about it, and he's not trying to like hold back a snicker, you know, it's the one moment where he can no longer keep up appearances, so he's crying because he doesn't want to fucking have to do it. But then if you go to the quote on the back 'Death? The vehicle through which we preserve our own life', he's explaining to you how even though he's looking at it and he's crying, how he can turn into what it is that he has to turn into". Saunders, interviewed by Pieslak.

⁸² Young, "Black Ops," 63.

⁸³ This is also not to suggest that the events of *Live From Iraq* are entirely 'realistic'. The point here is that 'boots-on' Saunders reflects a specific *ideology*, not an ethnographic depiction of lived events.

mission of the soldier is not a humanitarian one: it is, rather, one of control over perverse racial Others. When interpellated as the neoliberal foot-soldier and 'included' into the fold of American exceptionalism, 4th25 begin to see the world in the terms Orientalism, violent masculinity, and racial capitalist imperialism demand.

The Double Consciousness of Neal Saunders (barefoot)

At odds with these 'boots-on' songs are the vulnerable and contemplative songs I have labelled 'barefoot'. If becoming the soldier requires a process of 'lacing the boots', then to be barefoot is to dissociate from the logic of neoliberal imperialism. To be barefoot is to be in the barracks where a consciousness typified by feelings of vulnerability, sadness, and pain take primacy. Despite a popular narrative of humanitarianism and liberating the Iraqi people, 'boots-on' Saunders illuminates the ideology behind the Iraq War in all its brutality. 'Barefoot' Saunders, on the other hand, recognises the destructiveness of this ideology and its consequence for both the world and his own mental state. The critique embedded within the dual consciousness of the main character is thus one of the effects of being 'included' into the American exceptionalist project in this specific arena.

The very structure of the album, with most of it alternating between boots-on and barefoot, indicates something about the 'double consciousness' of the soldier interpellated by a violent regime. Juxtaposing the extreme violence of a song like 'Lace Your Boots' with the depressed vulnerability of 'Holdin My Breath' ("I hold my tears 'til I'm underwater / So yall don't never see me cryin' / Holdin' my breath till I can resurface / But I can feel myself dyin'") adds to a sense of the two extremes of a soldier's life.⁸⁴ Placed within an imperial context, this double consciousness functions as a critique of the violence of the Iraq War.

There is, both lyrically and musically, an obvious split between the two categories. The most noticeable sonic element of the 'barefoot' category is the use of neo-soul sounds and down-tempo instrumental arrangements. Neo-soul, though closely related to rap, is associated with very different sounds and ideas from gangsta (the primary musical influence across the 'boots-on' songs): "Neo-soul artists frequently sing about and celebrate black life, black love, black culture, and the black community."⁸⁵ Sonically, while 'boots-on' songs are characterised by electric guitars and distortion, 'barefoot' songs invoke neo-soul through the use of acoustic guitar and soft keyboard arrangements as well as sung lyrics. In songs such as 'The Deployment', which details farewells before deployment

⁸⁴ 4th25, "Holdin' My Breath," track 4 on *Live From Iraq*, 4th25 Music Group LLC, 2005.

⁸⁵ Reiland Rabaka, *Hip Hop's Inheritance From the Harlem Renaissance to the Hip Hop Feminist Movement* (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books, 2011), 157.

and the journey to Iraq, 'Holdin My Breath', and 'Dirty', a song about the anxiety induced by suspicions of a partner's infidelity, singing is prominent. This soulful singing evokes emotional responses different to those of the 'boots-on' songs, amplifying the gulf between the conflicting consciousnesses.

These musical qualities also speak to another central theme of the album: masculinity. The conditions of war, perhaps even more so than other spheres, foster a violent, hyper-masculinity that is evidenced in a great many songs from the misogynistic 'Pussy' to the genocidal violence of '24 Hours'. The effect of this masculinity is deep pain for both male and female soldiers – and especially the Iraqi civilians whom Saunders oppresses.⁸⁶ The sounds described above take us away from the hyper-masculinity generally associated with gangsta and its evocation in the 'boots-on' songs. Instead, neo-soul sounds while 'barefoot' introduce the vulnerability of a less problematic masculinity.⁸⁷ While 'barefoot', Saunders challenges the violent masculinity thought necessary of being laced up and the pain it creates in his non-soldierly consciousness. In other words, 'barefoot' Saunders communicates the personal costs of being co-opted by/included into racial capitalist regimes.

Saunders best describes this contemplative state in 'Matter of Time', a barefoot song reflecting on the likelihood of death. Like '24 hours', 'Matter of Time' is a contemplation of war but with a greater emphasis on the sense of paranoia, fear, and regret combat creates in the participant. Comparing 'Matter of Time' to '24 hours' illuminates the tension between an imperialistic ideology on one hand, and its effect on a non-soldierly consciousness on the other. Verse one begins:

I'm halfway home but it's still a long road to be travelled
And I know at any given moment, things could go sour
From sweet, to the streets on fire, problems unravel
Still holding my breath, boots laced for battle in a place
Where they would gladly, see me scattered
All over they streets, cause here, my life don't matter

⁸⁶ Geoffrey Wright notes that despite the growing presence of women in the armed forces, "the US military still exhibits a hyper-masculine culture that renders it problematic to be both a woman *and* a soldier." Geoffrey Wright, "'I'm a Soldier, Not a Gender': Iraq War Literature and the Double Bind of Being a Woman in Combat," *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 47, no. 5-8 (2018): 660.

⁸⁷ I say 'less problematic' because it is important not to overstate Saunders' emotional transformation. Although 'barefoot' Saunders does adopt a more vulnerable, contemplative mentality, many of his ideas remain problematic. For example, 'Dirty' narrates Saunders' feelings of anxiety and loneliness but also a deeply possessive sentiment regarding a romantic relationship.

The knowledge of what imperialist violence truly entails is increasingly harming the mental state of the 'barefoot' Saunders. However, it is only when barefoot that he can truly reflect on – and come to terms with – how this violence affects his emotional state:

I'm trying to keep it together, but things fall apart
Especially when I'm gone for so long, losing feeling in my heart
Desensitized from my surroundings, every color's turning dark
I don't see nothing beautiful no more, only targets my reticle marks
Was emotional, then emotion-less, now I don't feel a thing
And though it once killed me to kill, I'd gladly do it again
If only you could really understand, the state of mind that I'm in
Only then could you feel me, only then would I make sense
If only I hadn't had been to some of the places I've been
If only I hadn't have seen what I saw maybe I could feel again
But it's too hard to separate, what's going on within me
It's just so much easier to let hate be my remedy⁸⁸

This moment of reflection enables 'barefoot' Saunders to realize just how deeply affected he is by everything he has seen and done. Trained to be a violent agent, Saunders is finding it increasingly difficult to shake the imperialist logic that defines his life ("I don't see nothing beautiful no more, only targets my reticle marks"). When reflecting on what he has done and what he knows he must continue to do, Saunders realizes that the effects of being 'laced up' have poisoned his 'barefoot' consciousness. Perhaps the most poignant and significant part of this is that the introspection of 'Matter of Time' does not result in peace and a critique of the structures that created 'barefoot' Saunders' misery, but instead leads to a return to extreme violence with the very next song 'Fuck 'em', which expresses a growing apathy towards Iraqis. Neoliberal imperialism is self-perpetuating in its racist violence.

The 'double consciousness' of Neal Saunders, the transition from 'inhuman' to human, from 'boots-on' to 'barefoot' and back again, illustrates the tensions resulting from the neoliberal war machine. The very same person who would go back to the barracks to hope for a return home, for a future without the guarantee of violence, is forced into performing violence on a daily basis. The quest for economic hegemony necessarily inflicts these kinds of sufferings on the Black soldier (colonizer) interpellated by the ideology of imperialism – and, much more so, on the colonized.

⁸⁸ 4th25, "Matter of Time," track 7 on *Live From Iraq*, 4th25 Music Group LLC, 2005.

Conclusion

When assessing the war experience, it is easy to make sweeping generalisations about the soldiers involved.⁸⁹ Rather than making either/or assessments of a person's motivations or behaviours, it is necessary to understand the dualities, conflicts, and contradictions that inevitably arise in the (Black) soldier caught within the repressive forces of a racial capitalist ideological framework. The power of *Live From Iraq* derives from these very contradictions.

War, Saunders argues in his interview with Pieslak, "is a disgusting thing, it's not anything pretty, but people for some reason want to make it pretty, man."⁹⁰ As opposed to the almost ritualised sanitization of 'official' accounts, *Live From Iraq* depicts the Iraq War with the grittiness that it deserves. By drawing on the conventions of gangsta rap and applying them to a new spatio-temporal context, Saunders illuminates the ideologies of imperialist warfare in the neoliberal era. As a conflict for the security of America's economic hegemony, the Iraq War is an arena in which the dominant philosophies of neoliberalism interpellate everyone involved. As a result, these participants become adherents of exceptionalist and Orientalist mentalities. However, such ideologies are not adopted seamlessly. The rhetoric of American exceptionalism is always contested by the reality of what soldiers see on a daily basis. Being made a subject of neoliberal modernity through a process of inclusion does not strip an agent of their humanity nor of the visceral emotional responses to images (and acts) of bloodshed. By challenging the claims of American exceptionalism in the realms of class, occasionally 'race', and the very idea of a peaceful exception to an 'evil' global rule, 4th25 observe the fallacies of American exceptionalism even as they embody its primacy.

But for all its critiques, *Live From Iraq* offers a largely supportive voice to racial capitalist regimes. The following chapter provides a counterpoint to this perspective. Rather than find room in a racist and masculinist here and now, Chapter 2 looks to the speculative and fantastical space of Afrofuturism as a poetic of refusal that creates room for something beyond that which currently exists.

⁸⁹ As David Hanauer has argued, "it is easy for ideologues on different sides of the conflict to define a soldier who volunteers for active duty in the U.S. military in dichotomous terms as good, a protector, a fighter for freedom and patriotic or as evil, an occupier, a murderer, and an oppressor." Hanauer, "Second Iraq War," 84.

⁹⁰ Saunders, interviewed by Pieslak.

Chapter 2

“Fuck Earth, I want to live on Mars”: The Global Financial Crisis and the Search for *Home* in Afrofuturist Rap

A rat done bit my sister Nell
With whitey on the moon
Her face and arms began to swell
And whitey's on the moon
I can't pay no doctor bills
But whitey's on the moon
Ten years from now I'll be payin' still
While whitey's on the moon
The man just upped my rent last night
Cause whitey's on the moon
No hot water, no toilets, no lights
But whitey's on the moon
I wonder why he's upping me?
Cause whitey's on the moon?
Well I was already giving him fifty a week
With whitey on the moon
Taxes taking my whole damn check
Junkies making me a nervous wreck
The price of food is going up
And as if all that shit wasn't enough:
A rat done bit my sister Nell
With whitey on the moon

- 'Whitey on the Moon' by Gil Scott-Heron¹

They planning for our future, people
None of our people involved
...
It always seems the poorest persons
Are people forsaken, dawg
No Washingtons, Jeffersons, Jacksons
On the captain's log
They'd rather lead us to the grayest water poison deadly smog
Mass un-Blackening, it's happening, you feel it y'all?
Rather see we in a three-by-three structure with many bars
Leave us where we are so they can play among the stars
We taking off to Mars, got the space vessels overflowing
What, you think they want us there? All us niggas not going

- 'The Space Program' by A Tribe Called Quest²

¹ Gil Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon," track 9 on *A New Black Poet – Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, Flying Dutchman Records, 1970

² A Tribe Called Quest, "The Space Program," track 1 on *We Got It from Here... Thank You 4 Your Service*, Epic Records, 2016.

Introduction

Recorded roughly a year after the 1969 moon landing, Gil Scott-Heron's 'Whitey on the Moon' offered an account of space exploration that ran against the grain of American exceptionalism. Capturing the disjuncture between development and underdevelopment, (white) escape and (Black) abandonment, Heron problematized (hu)mankind's great leap by juxtaposing it with conditions that continued to marginalize African Americans in a post-Civil Rights moment. Some 50 years later, Heron's critique remains relevant. As I write this chapter, two of the wealthiest people to have ever lived – Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos – are engaged in their own space race. In a great irony, the victors of late modern racial capitalism are looking to escape a planet ostensibly doomed by the forces of racial capitalism and its resultant crises, most notably climate change. A Tribe Called Quest capture this moment, noting – as Heron did decades earlier – the continued abandonment of Black people in white America's explorative flights. But many musicians go beyond critique, pivoting off the kinds of marginalization noted by Heron to construct liberating futures of their own. This chapter examines one such example of creative storytelling that re-purposes space exploration for the benefit of racial capitalism's Black victims: Afrofuturism.

Echoing Scott-Heron, this chapter contextualizes Afrofuturist flight within histories of housing discrimination. The history of African American housing has been typified by precariousness and instability. Homes (both material and imagined) take on a tremendous symbolic power under these conditions. Home is both a safe haven free from the white gaze, and a testament to the realities of poverty and residential segregation. Home is a place from which to imagine a better tomorrow, but also a space wherein oppression has followed Black people, from the plight of domestic servants to police raids, from slave patrols to no-knock warrants. Home is private, but far less private than the white home due to literal overcrowding and the constant threat of state violence. Home is here and now, but can also simultaneously be across the Atlantic and in the past. Home is thus a contradictory, unstable, and yet inspiring symbol throughout African American cultural history. This chapter adopts the concept of *home* as a structuring metaphor for these uncertain histories that, I argue, inform quests for *home* in Afrofuturist rap. In the absence of *homes* on Earth (due to a myriad of historical factors), Afrofuturists seek *home* elsewhere and elsewhere.

For the purposes of this chapter, the historical moment of most interest is the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). If the War on Terror – and the broad colonial regime it was part of – came to define US geopolitics in the first years of the 21st century, the political economic changes to neoliberalism subsequently found expression in the GFC. An investigation into this crisis could be approached from many directions. However, any analysis that fails to engage with the deeply embedded racist

structures of American housing and the shifts in these structures into the current century is flawed. Simply put, the crisis was built upon an extensive history of anti-Black discrimination which brought, and continues to bring, tremendous wealth to many white Americans.³

But the significance of housing goes beyond the purely economic. Homes not only offer economic prosperity; they are also a critical site of identity-formation and personhood which has historically been kept from African Americans.⁴ The notion of *home* as an important site of existential meaning is an idea that I borrow from Ofelia Cuevas:

[The home] is the site of family and domestic relations, of the possibility of a future, both in terms of biological reproduction and of the projection of the self through time. As such, it functions as a precondition for any meaningful conception of personhood, for without the future, the self dissolves into the evanescence of an eternally fragmented present. Home ownership thus provides what sociologists and psychologists refer to as 'ontological security,' the state of emotive well-being and constancy necessary for developing a stable personal identity.⁵

It is for these ontological reasons, as well as the economic, that housing must be central to discussions of American racism. The 'ontological security' of these spaces also helps me to differentiate between housing and the *home*. We can think of the economics of American racism through the materiality of the house, but to gain a deeper understanding of racial capitalism's existential consequences we need to think of *home* as an important site of meaning-making. *Home*, as I use the term throughout this chapter, is more a symbolic space of security, peace, autonomy, and self-definition than any obvious material entity. It is in the absence of *home*, as well as the

³ Sarah Burd-Sharps and Rebecca Rasch explain how the GFC was built upon racial inequalities: "In the lead-up to the financial crisis, economic opportunity remained deeply unequal across racial lines, but economic trends suggested that America was on a path toward narrowing the yawning wealth disparities between white and black families. Deeply rooted economic inequality, however, fueled some of the most harmful lending practices, allowing financial institutions to engage in discriminatory and predatory lending that accelerated the financial collapse. Looking back, it is clear that racial discrimination played a pivotal role in the housing market crash." Sarah Burd-Sharps and Rebecca Rasch, "Impact of the US Housing Crisis on the Racial Wealth Gap Across Generations," *Social Science Research Council* (2015): 1.

⁴ Thomas Shapiro outlines the many economic consequences of home-ownership and its role in perpetuating racism: "Homeownership is by far the single most important way families accumulate wealth. Homeownership also is the way families gain access to the nicest communities, the best public services, and ... quality education. ... Homeownership appears critical to success in other areas of life as well, from how well a child does in school to better marital stability to positive civic participation to decreased domestic violence. How young families acquire homes is one of the most tangible ways that the historical legacy of race plays out in the present generation and projects well into future." Thomas M. Shapiro, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

⁵ Ofelia O. Cuevas, "Welcome to My Cell: Housing and Race in the Mirror of American Democracy," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2012): 609.

house, that many artists turn to speculative fiction to imagine spaces that provide the kind of existential security that remains out of reach in the late neoliberal present.

A particularly novel example of this desire to create *homes* freed from the realities of discrimination is Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism can be defined as “a contextual counter-position to mainstream western culture that reevaluates and reappropriates art and technology, within a frame that draws upon various concepts from the past in order to project a representation of the future.”⁶ A great many African American musicians – from John Coltrane and Sun Ra to George Clinton and Patti LaBelle to Andre 3000 and Erykah Badu – have embraced the space- and time-travelling characteristics encapsulated under the umbrella term ‘Afrofuturism’. While often dismissed as ‘just’ escapism, Afrofuturism is as much a critical theory as it is an aesthetic, confronting the ‘changing same’ of racist, sexist, heterosexist, and classist conditions by imagining futures liberated from these oppressions. This chapter locates Afrofuturist expression as a critical theory of (the kinds of) racisms that culminated in the GFC, racisms that prohibit the feeling of *home* in late modernity.⁷

This chapter’s theoretical approach is informed by Derrick Bell’s understanding of the permanence of racism and the potential of speculative fiction to combat this condition. Bell’s *Faces At the Bottom of the Well* (1992) consists of a series of short pieces constructed around the central premise that “racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society.”⁸ Bell argues that any anti-racist movement focussed on education ignores the profits, both financial and existential, afforded to whiteness independent of education levels. Any legal approach is similarly flawed, since legal changes by and from within a power structure that benefits from racism are unlikely to remove the benefits racism affords non-Black people. This leads Bell to his main assertion: “Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary ‘peaks of progress,’ short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies.”⁹ Adding to this conception of racism’s permanence, Frank Wilderson’s book *Afropessimism* (2020) locates racism’s immutability within the ideological framework of Humanism. Humanity (as a concept, not a biology), Wilderson argues, can only exist in opposition to that which it is not. Looking back to both Arab and European colonizations of Africa, Wilderson argues that this

⁶ Adam de Paor-Evans, “The Futurism of Hip Hop: Space, Electro and Science Fiction in Rap,” *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 126.

⁷ I do not seek to make a direct connection between the events of the GFC and Afrofuturist rap. Instead, I regard both phenomena as products of the ‘changing same’ of American racism wherein African Americans are both targeted by forces of racial capitalist marginalization and turn to expressive cultures to contest said marginalization.

⁸ Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), ix.

⁹ Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, 12.

non-, this other against which Humanity is defined, is Blackness.¹⁰ Accordingly, Wilderson understands racism as an unreformable social fact. Therefore, while *important* changes can and do occur (e.g. abolition of slavery and accrual of Civil Rights), no *essential* differences are possible in a world that depends for its coherence on the idea of Blackness as Other.

But while racism, according to thinkers such as Wilderson and Bell argue, is permanent, all is not hopeless. Bell's short stories implicitly argue that the act of speculation enables emancipation.¹¹ 'Within-system' arguments seeking to challenge racism's presence through a more thorough engagement with neoliberal capitalist regimes (much like 4th25) will likely fail to overcome oppressive structures. Alternatively, the act of speculation does something 'within-system' arguments can never achieve: it imagines spaces free from the tyranny of the 'real'. Afrofuturist speculation calls for new realities, histories, futures, feelings in a way that affirms Black life against the history of Black erasure and oppression. In creating new realities, by constructing arguments outside of the accepted forms of critique, and in speculating, Afrofuturists achieve the closest thing to anti-racism: they reject the confines, both spatial and ontological, that American racism demands. Similarly invested in challenging the now and imagining alternative futures, queer studies also provides valuable insights into the potential of the speculative. The second half of this chapter draws on José Esteban Muñoz's conception of queer futurity – detailed in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Turning away from the norms that define the present (what Muñoz calls 'straight time'), queer futurity finds utopian hope in the 'not-yet-here': "We must strive," Muñoz argues, "in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds."¹² Queer futurity is a utopian vision of the potential that futures hold for queer people, futures that transgress the oppressive norms of 'straight time'.

¹⁰ "[T]he Human is not an organic entity but a construct; a construct that requires its *Other* in order to be legible; and ... the Human Other is Black." Frank Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020), ix.

¹¹ My thinking here is illuminated by a comparison of two of Bell's Afrofuturistic short stories: 'The Afrolantica Awakening' and 'The Space Traders'. The major difference between these stories lies in the African American response to a supernatural/extra-terrestrial scenario. In the former, the main characters fail to reach their utopia, but the tone is still positive because they engaged in struggle. In the latter, an inability to imagine alternatives leads to what is potentially a new era of chattel slavery as African Americans board space ships destined for unknown lands. The difference between the two stories lies not in the external haven/threat, but in the way African American characters respond to these externalities. The very act of imagining is liberating, independent of outcome. As Michelle Commander describes, Bell stresses the value of "speculation as a technology by which to subvert ... social marginalization." Michelle D. Commander, "The Space for Race: Black American Exile and the Rise of Afro-Speculation," *ASAP journal* 1, no. 3 (2016): 430.

¹² José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press: New York, 2009), 1.

This chapter centres on two 21st century Afrofuturists who, in their critiques of racial capitalist marginalization, are easily located within the Black radical tradition: Deltron 3030 (a hip hop trio comprised of Del the Funky Homosapien, Dan the Automator, and Kid Koala) and Janelle Monáe. In particular, I focus on the unique ways each artist embraces the speculative as an act of emancipatory *home*-making. Both artists employ Afrofuturist conventions in ways that construct *home*, but they do so in drastically different ways. Deltron 3030 – evoking Afropessimism – conceive of *home*-making through total destruction; from society’s ashes, perhaps *home* can be built. Alternatively, Monáe’s *home*-making completely undoes the need for the material, instead creating the *feeling* of *home* from within herself through dance and sex. Synthesizing Afrofuturism with queer futurity, Monáe’s storytelling details a process whereby queer Black women (analogized as cyborgs) re-claim their bodies from the forces of racial capitalist domination by engaging in autonomous movement. Through a celebration of the body’s forces, cyborgs transform themselves from objects of alienated labor into subjects eliciting pleasure and community, feelings which create a sense of ‘ontological security’ and *home*.

Afrofuturists re-contextualize the ‘changing same’ of rap’s counterhegemonic critiques within cosmic spaces untethered from the reality of modern America and, by extension, the ideologies and structures of power that dominate there. Where 4th25 identified solutions to racial capitalist modernity through inclusion, Afrofuturists instead seek something beyond. Recognizing the resultant *homelessness* of events such as the GFC, Afrofuturists take flight into the potential of outer space, constructing *homelier* environments in the process.

History of Housing Discrimination: Pre-1968 and ‘Predatory Exclusion’

I begin this chapter with a history of Black house and *home*. While a truly comprehensive history of Black housing should reach as far back as the first appearance of Africans on the North American continent and their subsequent incarceration in slave cabins running adjacently to the house (and *home*) of the slave owner, my chapter requires only a more recent description of Black housing from the mid-20th to early 21st centuries for it was out of these histories that the GFC manifested. The year 1968 is a pivotal moment in this recent history. This year, according to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, marked a clear turning point in American housing policy away from ‘predatory exclusion’ (wherein existential and financial profits accrued to whiteness through the ghettoization of African Americans) towards ‘predatory inclusion’ (wherein the very same profits derived from seeking out and exploiting African Americans). Distinguishing between these forms of discrimination helps capture the neoliberal shift in American housing, a shift culminating in the subprime housing market

and GFC. Engaging with this history in a way that reflects the precarity, instability, and false promises of African American housing helps frame the *home* as a site of aspiration in the fantastical spaces of Afrofuturism.

The Great Migration and the foundations of northern segregation

The most frequently discussed phenomenon in the secondary literature on African American housing is the Great Migration and subsequent creation of Northern ‘ghettos’. The Great Migration saw millions of African Americans leave the U.S. South for industrialising northern centres from roughly 1910 to 1960.¹³ Eager for employment and seeking escape from Jim Crow segregation, migrating African Americans arrived to radically different housing arrangements from their southern past. Designed to facilitate an agricultural economy, the South of the early 20th century saw African Americans inhabit homes built on alleys and side-streets adjacent to the ‘big house’. Simultaneously, however, the North was undergoing rapid economic change as agricultural economies gave way to the burgeoning industrial sector. As local economies shifted towards the industrial, so too did housing. Within a short period of time, northern employers went from requiring a dozen or so workers living alongside farmland to thousands of employees in close proximity to meet the demands of an industrial economy. Large cities with dense populations were now a necessity. The dual effects of migration and industrialisation led to the formation of ‘ghettos’, as local governments sought to house Black migrants in increasingly segregated spaces. Far from the bastion of racial harmony that many hoped it would be, the North was as committed to segregation as the South.¹⁴

The process by which segregated spaces were created and preserved is long and complex, involving webs of both private and public discrimination. Upon reaching the North, migrating African Americans were confronted with the same sentiments regarding racial inferiority they were seeking refuge from:

Middle-class whites were repelled by what they saw as the uncouth manners, unclean habits, slothful appearance, and illicit behavior of poorly educated, poverty-stricken migrants Working-class whites, for their part, feared economic competition from the

¹³ “The number of Black people who left the South rose from 454,000 from 1910-1920, 749,000 from 1920-1930, to 1,599,000 from 1940-1950.” Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015. Originally from 1983), 86.

¹⁴ It may seem strange to think of the North as segregated since the South often lies at the centre of discussions around segregation. However, this ignores the reality of Jim Crow segregation as described by Massey and Denton: “The implementation of Jim Crow did not increase segregation ... or reduce the frequency of black-white contact; it governed the terms under which integration occurred and strictly regulated the nature of interracial social contacts.” Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 26.

newcomers; and being first- or second-generation immigrants who were themselves scorned by native whites, they reaffirmed their own 'whiteness' by oppressing a people that was even lower in the racial hierarchy.¹⁵

Ideas of Black contagion thus justified segregationist actions, especially within the real estate industry.¹⁶ The most obvious example of segregationist behaviours within this industry were 'covenants', a practice whereby property owners signed contractual agreements promising not to sell or lease properties to African Americans. When coupled with mob violence policing the boundaries of segregated spaces, covenants inevitably led to the creation of Black ghettos. Not only did this entire process enshrine segregation and the squalid conditions therein, it also brought wealth to many white Americans. *Indirectly*, white neighborhoods saw housing values rise due to the absence of Black residents; *directly*, property owners benefitted from exploiting the population density and competition for living space in urban centres.¹⁷

By the 1930s, residential segregation had become a mainstay of America's urban geography with its severity only increasing in the post-war period.¹⁸ However, segregation was not solely a product of de facto discrimination (e.g. covenants or mob violence): it was also a product of de jure discrimination:

There is ... considerable evidence pointing to the persistence of prejudice against blacks in the postwar period, and to the widespread translation of this sentiment into systematic, institutionalized racial discrimination within urban housing markets. These

¹⁵ Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 29.

¹⁶ But white citizens, as well as institutions, also contributed to segregation. "They lobbied city councils for zoning restrictions and for the closing of hotels and rooming houses that attracted blacks; they threatened boycotts of real estate agents who sold homes to blacks; they withdrew their patronage from white businesses that catered to black clients; they agitated for public investments in the neighborhood in order to increase property values and keep blacks out by economic means; they collected money to create funds to buy property from black settlers or to purchase homes that remained vacant for too long; they offered cash bonuses to black enters who agreed to leave the neighborhood." Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 36.

¹⁷ Denton and Massey describe how property owners exploited the competition for living spaces in 'ghettos': "At first, the newcomers took the place of whites departing from racially changing neighborhoods located near the fringe of the ghetto. Once these neighborhoods had become all black, however, further ghetto expansion proved to be difficult because, given the housing shortage, there was nowhere for whites on the other side of the color line to go. As whites in adjacent neighborhoods stood firm and blocked entry, the expansion of the ghetto slowed to a crawl, and new black arrivals were accommodated by subdividing housing within the ghetto's boundaries. Apartments were carved out of bedrooms, closets, garages, basements, and sheds." Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 43.

¹⁸ "Among northern cities, the average level of black spatial isolation more than doubled between 1930 and 1970, going from 32% to nearly 74%. Whereas a typical northern black resident was likely to live in a neighborhood dominated by whites in 1930 (only Chicago and Cleveland were exceptions), by 1970 ... blacks in all northern cities were more likely to live with other African Americans than with whites, and in four cities the average black person lived in a neighborhood that was over 80% black (in Chicago, Cleveland, Gary, and St. Louis)." Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 46-8.

private beliefs and actions, however, were not the only forces shoring the walls of ghetto between 1940 and 1970. What was new about the postwar era was the extent to which the federal government became involved in perpetuating racial segregation.¹⁹

We witness here what Yelena Bailey describes as “the various scales on which anti-Blackness operated at this time.”²⁰ On the micro level, Black urbanites were ‘policed’ through de facto measures while on a macro level, these actions were legitimized by policy designed to ensure the ‘racial purity’ of American cities. The de facto and de jure wings of American segregation were symbiotic. I now turn to this government-led discriminatory history, focussing on Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loans, white suburbanization, and urban renewal – policies which enshrined the unstable housing conditions resulting in a seemingly perpetual cycle of *homelessness*.

Federal Housing Administration loans

The most notable example of state-led discrimination lies in a series of policies enacted under Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. In response to the Great Depression’s calamitous effect on the housing industry, the 1930s saw a great deal of political interest in expanding home-ownership to previously underserved Americans. While a series of policies were enacted, the one that has attracted most scholarly attention is the Federal Housing Administration (FHA).²¹ Enacted in 1934, the FHA

operated by guaranteeing the value of collateral for loans made by private banks.

Before this program, mortgages generally were granted for no more than two-thirds of the appraised value of a home, so buyers needed to acquire at least 33% of the value of a property in order to make a down payment The FHA program, in contrast, guaranteed over 90% of the value of collateral so that down payments of 10% became the norm. The FHA also extended the repayment period to twenty-five or thirty years, resulting in low monthly payments, and insisted that all loans be fully amortized.²²

Though extremely successful in enabling home-ownership (and thus generating substantial inter-generational wealth) for many poorer white Americans, the FHA had gaps.

¹⁹ Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 51.

²⁰ Yelena Bailey, *How the Streets Were Made: Housing Segregation and Black Life in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 19.

²¹ Other notable policies include the Veterans Administration (VA) and Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC). I must note, however, that some scholars have challenged assumptions about the HOLC’s discriminatory effects. See: Kristen B. Crossney and David W. Bartelt, “The Legacy of the Homeowners Loan Corporation,” *Housing Policy Debate* 16, no. 3-4 (2005): 547–74.

²² Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 53.

The FHA marked the first government policy to normalize a discriminatory practice known as redlining, a process whereby metropolitan areas were color-coded to indicate to lenders where it was 'safe' to do business: majority white areas were marked favourably (colored green), while majority Black areas were marked unfavourably (colored red) and thus excluded from the lending process.²³ The extent of redlining is evident in the following statistics: "Only 2.3 percent of FHA-insured mortgages outstanding in 1950 were associated with nonwhite borrowers, even worse than the 5 percent of conventional mortgages with nonwhite borrowers."²⁴ Ultimately, the FHA had overwhelmingly positive results for many white Americans for whom home-ownership was previously impossible. However, these positives came at the expense of an African American population driven further into *homelessness* through exclusionary practices.

White suburbanization

Supported by FHA loans, white America rapidly suburbanized between 1940 and 1970.²⁵ The major problem with this process was its racial restrictiveness. As explained above, the FHA was designed with redlining at its core, so those approved for loans – and thus those fleeing cities – were almost always white. Not only did this enable a swift generation of wealth for those fleeing, but those left behind suffered from the draining of resources and political interest away from urban America. In a double blow for the economic and existential security of African Americans, the process of white suburbanization simultaneously functioned as a process of urban disinvestment.

Once again, the process of 'predatory exclusion' saw the profits of American racism accrue to the pockets and psyches of whites. The very same government policies that enabled tremendous wealth for newly suburban, white home-owners consigned African Americans to decaying ghettos.²⁶ By the early 1960s, the process of suburbanization was mostly complete, with a majority of Northern whites living in suburbia.²⁷ For those left behind, however, conditions were declining.

²³ "Although lending discrimination and redlining practices of private-sector lenders preceded the creation of the FHA, the agency adopted, formalized, and legitimized such practices." Daniel Immergluck, *Foreclosed: High-Risk Lending, Deregulation, and the Undermining of America's Mortgage Market* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 48.

²⁴ Immergluck, *Foreclosed*, 49.

²⁵ "Only one-third of U.S. metropolitan residents were suburban residents in 1940, but by 1970 suburbanites constituted a majority within metropolitan America." Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 44.

²⁶ Ironically, in the neoliberal era the federal government has absolved itself of any responsibility to enable Black home-ownership when it was this very support that facilitated white home-ownership. Elvin Wyly et. al. summarise this history: "Ironically, the largest welfare program in American history—the vast greenfield vistas of suburban houses for middle-class whites—is falsely remembered as a golden age of the private market." Elvin Wyly, et. al. "New Racial Meanings of Housing in America," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2012): 582.

²⁷ "Whereas an average of 71% of northern whites lived in suburbs by 1980, the figure for blacks was only 23%." Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 69.

Urban renewal

Another example of ‘predatory exclusion’ was urban renewal. With urban America now populated largely by Black people, urban renewal projects sought to reimagine urban spaces in ways that benefitted recently fled whites. Despite housing moving to the suburbs, jobs largely remained in the city, meaning that there was now a need to make travel between suburban households and places of employment easier. In order to do so, urban spaces were torn down and replaced with federally funded highways which “set in motion a vicious cycle: population loss led to decreased political power, which made minority neighborhoods more vulnerable to further urban renewal and freeway construction, not to mention more susceptible to the placement of prisons, incinerators, toxic waste dumps, and other projects that further depopulated these areas.”²⁸ Though justified as an attempt to ‘save’ American cities, urban renewal had calamitous consequences for locals. As Bailey explains: “Rather than integrating displaced Black communities into higher-income areas, these policies further concentrated urban poverty, thus reinforcing Black spatial segregation. Instead of solving issues of urban crime and poverty, these programs simply moved them farther away from White America.”²⁹ Urban renewal’s lasting impact on segregated spaces was the tearing down of vital community resources, increasing the numbers of homeless, and providing the groundwork for gang and drug economies into the 1970s and ‘80s.³⁰

Fair Housing Act and the end of ‘predatory exclusion’

With the passing of the Fair Housing Act, many hoped for rapid improvements to these troubling histories. Comprising of titles VIII and IX of the 1968 Civil Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act was intended to abolish racial discrimination in the housing sector. Unfortunately, however, the Act did

²⁸ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, rev. and expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 8.

²⁹ Bailey, *How the Streets Were Made*, 27-8. George Lipsitz also explains that the promise to rebuild housing was rarely kept: “During the 1950s and 1960s, local ‘pro-growth’ coalitions led by liberal mayors often justified urban renewal as a program designed to build more housing for poor people. In reality, urban renewal destroyed more housing than it created. Ninety percent of the low-income units removed for urban renewal projects during the entire history of the program were never replaced. Commercial, industrial, and municipal projects occupied more than 80 percent of the land cleared for these projects, with less than 20 percent allocated for replacement housing.” Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 7.

³⁰ But throughout these histories, Black communities resisted: “While the migration of millions of black people to cities in the twentieth century was met with forced urban housing segregation (producing what we now call black ghettos), those neighborhoods were also sources of community strength and general stability. Yes, poverty, discrimination, and other urban problems persisted, but areas like Watts in Los Angeles, Harlem in New York City, East St. Louis, and the Hill District in Pittsburgh became stable, multiclass communities where black people, as scholar Earl Lewis maintained, ‘turned segregation into congregation.’” Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), 44. A wonderful example of ‘turning segregation into congregation’ is found in Open Mike Eagle’s album *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream*, an album reflecting on the rapper’s childhood in Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes housing project. Open Mike Eagle, *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream*, Mello Music Group, 2017.

little to make housing more equitable, due largely to its inadequate enforcement measures. In an effort to garner bipartisan support, Lyndon Johnson's government centred enforcement around individual action: "[P]eople who believed they had suffered racial discrimination were forced to initiate legal proceedings on their own."³¹ Unfortunately, proving discrimination was a near impossible task. In the era of colorblind racism, it was socially unacceptable for realtors to erect 'whites only' signs or engage in blatant discrimination, so how was a Black home-seeker to know if a realtor's inability to find them the right house was due to prejudice? This issue was compounded by another flaw: not only were individuals forced to pay for court expenses if they brought claims of discrimination, but the statute of limitations was a mere 180 days.³² With little time and no government support, it was nearly impossible for claimants to prove wrong-doing, meaning discrimination continued into the post-Civil Rights era – albeit now hidden behind colorblind language.

Even worse, what little the Fair Housing Act did to curb housing discrimination was quickly reversed by the Nixon administration's outright enabling of discrimination:

Nixon officials worked to narrow the definition of racism to the intentions of individual actors while countering the idea of institutional racism by focusing on 'freedom of choice' as a way to explain differential outcomes. ... For example, Nixon and others called the division between rich and poor 'economic discrimination' but defended it, citing the right of property owners, in particular, to protect and maintain their property values by limiting the incursion of the poor into their communities.³³

By the time Ronald Reagan entered office in 1981, all interest in enforcing anti-discrimination laws had withered away: "Between 1968 and 1978, the Justice Department prosecuted an average of thirty-two fair housing cases per year During the first year of the Reagan Administration, in contrast, *not one* fair housing case was initiated, and in 1982 only two were filed. This virtual abandonment of fair housing litigation occurred at a time when the number of complaints was

³¹ Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 197.

³² The individualist approach also ignores the reality that housing discrimination is a complex process that goes beyond realtors and landlords: "[P]rocessing individual complaints against discrimination was hardly an effective strategy for weeding out the deeply ingrained and institutional nature of housing discrimination. Housing discrimination was not going to end on an individual level. There would have to be fundamental shifts in how the real estate market functioned, how banks were lending money, and how builders conceived of development." Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 164.

³³ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 63.

rising; between 1979 and 1982 the number of discrimination complaints filed with HUD nearly doubled.”³⁴ The ‘70s and ‘80s remained as heavily segregated as the pre-1968 period.³⁵

Although the Act failed to make housing more equitable, it would be wrong to assume that it did nothing. There are two key points here: first, the passage of anti-discrimination laws coupled with the persistence of segregation functioned as ‘proof’ that the problem of inequality lay not with the government or white people but with Black people themselves. It is thus of little surprise that the ‘70s witnessed an influx of ideas regarding Black pathology, as well as the concept of ‘the streets’ as a site linking Blackness with degeneration and crime – themes I return to in Chapter 5.³⁶ Second, and even more importantly for a history of the GFC, anti-discrimination laws created a new market of ‘predatory inclusion’ wherein lenders targeted the ‘riskiest’ and poorest Americans in a quest for greater profits – a process that would eventually lead to subprime markets and the GFC.

History of Housing Discrimination: Post-1968 and ‘Predatory Inclusion’

Much of the secondary literature centres on 1968 and the passage of the Fair Housing Act. Scholars usually note the failure of this Act to create tangible change – due largely to its underwhelming enforcement protocols. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor provides a different account, one that recognizes the decidedly ‘inclusionary’ shifts to racial capitalist exploitation in the neoliberal era. Rather than discriminations of the past simply carrying over into the post-‘68 period, Taylor describes a new set of discriminatory policies filtered through a growing “*collaborative* relationship between public and private sectors” that differentiates the pre- and post-‘68 eras of American housing.³⁷ In 1968, the Johnson administration passed the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Act, a policy intended to enable home-ownership for poorer Americans through “the construction or rehabilitation of twenty-

³⁴ Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 207. I should also note that by the end of Reagan’s presidency, support for anti-discrimination laws had resurfaced and amendments to the Fair Housing Act were made: “The 1988 amendments extended the time to file a housing discrimination complaint from 180 days to two years, allowed attorney’s fees and court costs to be recovered by prevailing plaintiffs, created a streamlined process for trying cases before an administrative law judge, and empowered administrative judges to order full compensation for damages plus civil fines of up to \$10,000 for a first violation, and \$50,000 for a third offense.” Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 210.

³⁵ “[D]uring the 1970s, black-white segregation was maintained at high levels in most U.S. metropolitan areas, yielding high levels of racial isolation that were particularly intense within central cities. The characteristic pattern of black cities surrounded by white suburbs persisted”. Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 73.

³⁶ “[B]ecause the physical, social, and cultural creation of the streets is rooted in White supremacy and anti-Blackness, it produced myths of urban Black pathology, financial irresponsibility, and inherent violence that have fueled the economic and social divestment of Black communities, as well as a broader divestment from Blackness as a part of U.S. identity.” Bailey, *How the Streets Were Made*, 3-4.

³⁷ Taylor, *Race for Profit*, 7.

six million housing units, six million of these for low and moderate income families.”³⁸ However, this Act required a level of investment that the federal government was unwilling and/or unable to achieve. They therefore turned to the private sector who agreed to work with the government on one condition: risk-protection. In a decisive moment in the transition to ‘predatory inclusion’, Johnson’s government agreed “to pay lenders in full for the mortgage of any home in foreclosure”.³⁹ Now, in the post-’68 era, mortgage companies were encouraged to engage with historically underserved communities without fear of losing investments. Though the federal government had hoped this would enable home-ownership for urban communities, the result was the exact opposite. In the absence of regulation, the private sector pressured minority borrowers into extremely risky mortgages that served little benefit to them, but tremendous profit to the private sector. In the past, such practices would have been too risky for lenders due to the likelihood of foreclosure, but with protections from the federal government under HUD, this risk was mitigated.⁴⁰ Rather than expand home-ownership to millions of previously underserved Americans, HUD’s private-public partnership granted free-reign and tremendous profits to a sector notorious for upholding structural racism. Discrimination thus continued into the post-Fair Housing Act era in a decidedly ‘inclusionary’ way, a shift that laid the foundations for the subprime boom of late neoliberalism.

Global Financial Crisis

The Global Financial Crisis hit in 2008. A key moment in the timeline of the GFC is linked to the neoliberal turn itself: the financialization of the global economy.⁴¹ With the global shift towards finance capital, debt became profitable for mortgage companies who (with ever-increasing impunity after years of neoliberal economic reform) began engaging in increasingly predatory lending practices which were supposedly free of risk through a process known as securitization: “[S]ecuritization is a process in which funding of—or investments in—mortgage loans is separated from the origination (and originator) of the loans. The loans stand, together in pools with many other loans, ‘on their own’ and are no longer tied to the fate of the originating lender. A key objective of securitization is to isolate the loans that provide the cash that eventually flows to the

³⁸ United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968. P.L. 90-448,” (Aug 1, 1968), 601.

³⁹ Taylor, *Race for Profit*, 5.

⁴⁰ “In an earlier era, risk had been the pretext for excluding potential Black homeowners; by the late 1960s, risk had made Black buyers attractive. In fact, the riskier the buyer, the better.” Taylor, *Race for Profit*, 18.

⁴¹ “Neoliberalism is the expression of the new hegemony of finance.” Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, “Costs and Benefits of Neoliberalism. A Class Analysis,” *Review of International Political Economy* 8, no. 4 (2001): 601.

investors from the originating lender."⁴² Even with investments supposedly safe-guarded through this process, there remained one missing variable for mortgage companies seeking immense yields: volume.⁴³ The real estate industry quickly filled this demand through a wide-reaching predatory lending scheme that targeted risky borrowers, particularly borrowers from minority communities (Black women most of all) who were desperate to acquire both the economic and existential benefits associated with *home*-ownership.⁴⁴ This process brought tremendous wealth to mortgage lenders and banks until 2006, when the housing market began a rapid decline. When an increasing number of borrowers were unable to make payments on their high interest-rate mortgages, many were forced to default on their loans, leading to the crash and thrusting unsuspecting home-buyers into even greater debt. This is a short history of the crisis. A longer, more comprehensive history requires that we go back to the 1990s and the birth of subprime loans.

Though only entering common parlance with the 2008 collapse, subprime loans had been a prominent feature of the housing industry for over a decade. With the inclusionary discrimination of the post-'68 moment now common-place, subprime loans – defined generally as loans “with a higher-than-average interest rate” – became the main form of predatory lending for mortgage companies nation-wide.⁴⁵ In the mid-'90s, and again in the early 2000s, subprime loans became exceedingly ‘popular’ as a series of technological advancements and marketing strategies enabled companies to pursue new clientele: those for whom conventional mortgages were inaccessible (this

⁴² Immergluck, *Foreclosed*, 34. It should also be noted that securitization was a by-product of state retrenchment. Immergluck explains: “[T]he eventual dominance of securitization in mortgage markets by the late twentieth century is perhaps best attributed to the federal financial deregulation of the early 1980s By explicitly favoring the securitization circuit ... , federal policymakers provided crucial help in shifting the structure of the mortgage industry from a predominantly local to a predominantly national system and from one in which most loans were made by relatively more regulated lenders (S&Ls) to one in which predominantly unregulated mortgage companies and a growing set of essentially unregulated mortgage brokers dominated.” Immergluck, *Foreclosed*, 41.

⁴³ Taylor explains this need for volume: “Large profits for mortgage banks also came through their ability to package multiple mortgages and then resell them to investors These sales allowed mortgage banks to pay off their original high-interest loans while also freeing up the capital necessary to originate more mortgages. Because the interest was high on their original loans, the mortgage banks did not want to hang on to those loans for very long. More importantly, the loans could only be sold to larger investors on a volume basis. It meant that mortgage bankers had to create packages of loans before they could unload them, generating an incentive to lend indiscriminately.” Taylor, *Race for Profit*, 154-5.

⁴⁴ Nathalie Baptiste explains that Black women were disproportionately targeted for subprime loans: “Specifically targeted for subprime loans among the minority demographic were black women. Women of color are the most likely to receive subprime loans while white men are the least likely; the disparity grows with income levels. Compared to white men earning the same level of income, black women earning less than the area median income are two and a half times more likely to receive subprime. Upper-income black women were nearly five times more likely to receive subprime purchase mortgages than upper-income white men.” Nathalie Baptiste, “Staggering Loss of Black Wealth Due to Subprime Scandal Continues Unabated,” *The American Prospect*, Oct 13, 2014, <https://prospect.org/justice/staggering-loss-black-wealth-due-subprime-scandal-continues-unabated/>.

⁴⁵ Burd-Sharps and Rasch, “Racial Wealth Gap Across Generations,” 9.

included people with few assets, minimal wealth, and bad credit histories).⁴⁶ It would be easy to assume, given the absence of explicitly racist language in the justification for the use of subprime loans (they instead favoured words like 'risky'), that 'race' was completely absent in this crisis.⁴⁷ The opposite is true.

In a process known as 'reverse-redlining', poor, heavily segregated and historically underserved minority communities – and especially women within these communities – were actively targeted by mortgage companies for subprime loans.⁴⁸ As a result, by the early 2000s, low-income African Americans “were twice as likely to receive [subprime] loans as low-income White Americans. The ratio is even worse for higher-income Black Americans, who were three times as likely to receive such loans as their White counterparts.”⁴⁹ In the short term, reverse-redlining appeared to bear fruit, as many underserved communities finally gained access to the housing market.⁵⁰ In the long term, however, hope gave way to panic and collapse. Given the unfavourable rates and structurally subordinated position of many subprime borrowers, a substantial number of people foreclosed on their recently purchased homes, sinking both themselves and mortgage companies further into debt and sparking the crisis.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Subprime loans were thus an example of inclusionary discrimination: “Although disparities in mortgage lending—and mortgage exclusion in particular—are certainly nothing new, the subprime boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s was in some ways a reversal of earlier discriminatory customs. The historic practice of mortgage discrimination (i.e., rationing of credit by race) was replaced by market segmentation. Lenders opened up credit to blacks, Latinos, and other previously excluded groups, but in the form of higher cost and riskier subprime credit. The lending industry ... served those who were socioeconomically advantaged differently from those who were not.” Jacob W. Faber, “Racial Dynamics of Subprime Mortgage Lending at the Peak,” *Housing Policy Debate* 23, no. 2 (2013): 331.

⁴⁷ Though 'race' seemed not to play into public discussions of subprime loans, it certainly informed lenders' decision-making: “It turned out that several of the major banks had been purposely giving people of color subprime mortgages, including borrowers who would have qualified for a prime loan. The City of Baltimore took Wells Fargo to court, bringing some of the banking giant's abhorrent lending practices to light. One former employee testified that in 2001, Wells Fargo created a unit that would be responsible for pushing expensive refinance loans on black customers, especially those living in Baltimore, southeast Washington, D.C., and Prince George's County – all locations with large black populations.” Baptiste, “Staggering Loss of Black Wealth.”

⁴⁸ While minority communities were prime targets, they weren't exclusively so. All people - white and non-white, wealthy and poor – were targeted by the subprime market. This marked a drastic shift from previous eras of predation, wherein “the innovations of predatory capital were safely contained by the spatial separations of the city-suburb divide and neighborhood-level processes of class difference and racial and ethnic segregation.” Wyly, et. al. “New Racial Meanings of Housing,” 579-80.

⁴⁹ Bailey, *How the Streets Were Made*, 39-40.

⁵⁰ Massey and Rugh indicate that “subprime lending accounted for 43 percent of the increase in black home ownership during the 1990s and 33 percent of the growth in ownership within minority neighborhoods.” Douglas S. Massey and Jacob S. Rugh, “Racial Segregation and the American Foreclosure Crisis,” *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 5 (2010): 630.

⁵¹ The Pew Research Centre captured the extent of foreclosures: “The number of homes in the United States with at least one foreclosure filing increased from 717,522 in 2006 (0.6% of all housing units) to 2,330,483 in 2008 (1.8% of all housing units).” Pew Research Centre, “Through Boom and Bust: Minorities, Immigrants and Homeowners,” (May 12, 2009), 22.

Now that we have established the role played by ‘race’ in the collapse of the housing sector and subsequent GFC, it is worth describing the tangible consequences of this collapse on African Americans as it is from these oppressive conditions that speculative fiction finds voice. Minority communities suffered the most from the GFC: “In the Great Recession, ... the wealth of U.S. families overall was reduced by 28.5 percent. But for blacks ... the decline was far greater: a loss of 47.6 percent.”⁵² This disparity is largely accounted for by the fact that Black wealth, unlike white wealth, lay almost entirely in housing. Asset accumulation was historically difficult for African Americans, so those with homes likely had few to no other assets. Therefore, not only did white Americans on average lose less of their overall wealth, but a diversity of wealth meant their economic recovery was relatively swift in comparison to African Americans.⁵³

In the aftermath of the GFC, rather than placing blame on the predatory housing industry, public and political discourse focussed on the perceived carelessness of people of color:

[W]hen reports of sky-high foreclosures in black and Latino neighborhoods filled the headlines, many commentators in the news framed the issue in terms of the failure of black and Latina/o homebuyers to educate themselves on ‘the fine print’ or to choose the best mortgage deal. The evidence of fraudulent loan practices, redlining, and discriminatory rate-setting was swept aside in favor of a neoliberal, postracial view of a marketplace that faltered only because of inexperienced or greedy individuals.⁵⁴

The ‘common sense’ of neoliberal ideology ensured that Black individuals were often blamed for their plight. Consequently, in the decade since the Crisis, scholars have noted a return to ‘predatory exclusion’ – where poor people are considered too risky and thus never engaged with – meaning that home-ownership is again unattainable.⁵⁵ Neoliberal ideology, it appears, has been bolstered despite a financial crisis attributable to neoliberal racial capitalism.

⁵² Baptiste, “Staggering Loss of Black Wealth.”

⁵³ Writing in 2015, Burd-Sharps and Rasch explain the likely long-term consequences of the GFC on the racial wealth gap: “[A]mong families that owned homes, white households have started to rebound from the worst effects of the Great Recession while black households are still struggling to make up lost ground. ... Unequal opportunity to rebuild wealth coming out of the crisis is leading to widening racial disparities. The racial wealth gap, in other words, is now on track to compound over time.” Burd-Sharps and Rasch, “Racial Wealth Gap Across Generations,” 1.

⁵⁴ Catherine R. Squires, “Coloring in the Bubble: Perspectives from Black-Oriented Media on the (Latest) Economic Disaster,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2012): 545-6.

⁵⁵ “[F]inancial institutions appear to be ... limiting access to credit to low-income individuals even when responsible credit options that would benefit borrowers exist. Such practices unjustifiably exclude many borrowers of color from the market and limit their ability to build wealth through home equity.” Burd-Sharps and Rasch, “Racial Wealth Gap Across Generations,” 26.

So far, much of my analysis – like most of the secondary literature – has focussed on the economic costs and benefits of housing. While important, this approach ignores a second, but no less important, element of home-ownership: its existential significance. In ‘Welcome to My Cell: Housing and Race in the Mirror of American Democracy,’ Ofelia Cuevas discusses “the fundamental role of the notion of property in both liberal and idealist concepts of personhood and freedom, and the privileged position of the home in forming those concepts, through which home ownership functions as a precondition for any meaningful conception of personhood and freedom.”⁵⁶ The main issue with this conception of personhood in the American context, Cuevas argues, is the fact that African Americans have been systematically excluded from property-ownership, and with it the ‘ontological security’ engendered through the *home*.⁵⁷

Subprime loans offered something historically beyond reach of Black people, but they failed to deliver. Consequently, African Americans “were cut off not only from the possibility of acquiring any real value or accumulation of wealth but also from the full personhood and freedom held out to them by the promise of home ownership.”⁵⁸ The reason this point is so central to my analysis is that this existential factor, the *home* part of house ownership, is the psychological element that leads many to seek ‘ontological security’ in other spaces. It is due to the absence of *home* on Earth that Afrofuturists seek *home* elsewhere.

Afrofuturism

Seeking to define Afrofuturism almost necessarily minimises the potential of the aesthetic/genre since a large part of its critical potential lies in existing beyond clear definition (and white/academic spaces). I agree with Jamika Ajalon, who speaks of the power of that which lies outside of definition: “Too often ‘radical’ discourse is subsumed into the majoriborg machine – once it is static, it runs the risk of becoming essentialist, reflecting the very prison from which it sought to escape.”⁵⁹ Following Ajalon, I consider it necessary to avoid rigid attempts at defining Afrofuturism. Instead of pinning down the concept as a whole, I hope to embrace its fluidity, heterogeneity, and refusal to accept the

⁵⁶ Cuevas, “Welcome to My Cell,” 606.

⁵⁷ “Such a conception ... operates on the basis of a universality that is implicitly white and that, historically, has explicitly excluded Black and brown people in the United States from both home ownership and the multivalent security that it ostensibly provides.” Cuevas, “Welcome to My Cell,” 606.

⁵⁸ Cuevas, “Welcome to My Cell,” 606-7.

⁵⁹ Jamika Ajalon, “FAR SPACE-WISE – Without Edges a Center Cannot Exist in Stasis,” in *We Travel the Space Ways: Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions*, ed. Henriette Gunkel and kara lynch (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020), 423.

terms of debate. In what follows, I loosely describe the history of Afrofuturism without seeking to define, limit, or categorise it.⁶⁰

The label 'Afrofuturism' was coined by cultural studies scholar Mark Dery in 'Black to the Future' (1994). Dery begins his investigation into Afrofuturism with a simple explorative question: "Why do so few African Americans write science fiction, a genre whose close encounters with the Other – the stranger in a strange land – would seem uniquely suited to the concerns of African-American novelists?"⁶¹ "This is especially perplexing", Dery continues, "in light of the fact that African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movement; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind)."⁶² Not only was there a dearth of African American sci-fi authors, but mainstream sci-fi has a suspect history of either using Black characters as token symbols of multi-racial utopias or completely bypassing Blackness altogether.⁶³ Due to its historical refusal to incorporate people of color or even engage with questions of 'race', mainstream sci-fi became less post-racial than whitewashed. The (somewhat) inevitable result of this was that Blackness, as Alondra Nelson argues, came to symbolise the anti-future. Blackness existed as a liability to be expunged for the betterment of future humanity.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Defining Afrofuturism also risks essentialist assumptions of Blackness. Denise Dalphond notes: "Afrofuturism assumes a singular, monolithic concept of Blackness that can be applied theoretically to any cultural production whose many varied characteristics include a nod toward the future and Black identity. ... Afrofuturism is not based on collections of facts about Black culture, expressed and framed by Black people; it is not based on ethnographic study centered around first-person narratives and primary sources of Black culture. Afrofuturism scholarship forms its analytical framework around small collections of singular musical, artistic expressions, and applies this framework to a global African Diasporic cultural perspective without suggesting or exploring possible impact on local cultural differences. ... Afrofuturism carries the potential to erase uniqueness and difference in African diasporic existence around the globe." Denise Dalphond, "Black Detroit: Sonic Distortion Fuels Social Distortion," in *Black Lives Matter and Music: Protest, Intervention, Reflection*, ed. Fernando Orejuela and Stephanie Shonekan (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), 103.

⁶¹ Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Disclosure of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 179-80.

⁶² Dery, "Black to the Future," 180.

⁶³ "From the 1950s onwards, sf in the US magazine and paperback tradition postulated and presumed a color-blind future This shared assumption accounts for the relative absence of people of color from such sf: if race was going to prove unimportant, why even bother thinking about it, when energies could instead be devoted to more pressing matters, such as how to colonize the solar system or build a better robot?" Mark Bould, "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF," *Science Fiction Studies* 34, no. 2 (2007): 177.

⁶⁴ "Forecasts of a utopian (to some) race-free future and pronouncements of the dystopian digital divide are the predominant discourses of blackness and technology in the public sphere. What matters is less a choice between these two narratives ... and more what they have in common: namely, the assumption that race is a liability in the twenty-first century In these politics of the future, supposedly novel paradigms for

But even as Blackness was being purged from these mainstream (read, white) futures, Afrofuturism was correcting the ledger. Though first defined by Dery, Afrofuturism, we can say in retrospect, existed long before any attempt at academic description and is found within the stories of exploration, flight, and alien-ness by innumerable figures from Du Bois to Octavia E. Butler, Samuel Delaney, and Ishmael Reed.⁶⁵ Well before white science-fiction was expunging the future of Blackness – and even further before academics were defining it – Afrofuturism was ‘coloring’ the future in critical, fun, and inspiring ways. Perhaps even more significantly, by coloring the future, such artists were coloring the present, providing spaces for an uncompromising expression of Black liberation and creativity in presents that offered little other than subjection. The key to understanding this history, however, is to build on Dery’s *literary* approach to include the way *musicians* have actively confronted whitewashed futures through their take on science-fiction.

Musical Afrofuturism: An accelerated history⁶⁶

Most music-centred histories of Afrofuturism begin with jazz legend Sun Ra. Born Herman Poole Blount in 1914, Sun Ra acquired the name and persona he would become famous for one night in Alabama. In a story he would recount for the rest of his life, on that fateful night, Blount was abducted by aliens and transported to Saturn where he learned of his galactic mission: to save an Earth that was headed for destruction. He returned from his travels as Sun Ra, innovative musician and cosmic savior who, along with his band the Arkestra, sought to save the oppressed with the help of their newfound cosmic perspective. Ra would continue this mission for the rest of his life, infusing his music with themes of anti-racism, the need for imagination in liberation movements, and the necessity of space travel to free oppressed peoples. Robin Kelley’s description of Ra provides a wonderful insight into his aesthetic:

Dressed in metallic outfits that might best be described as ancient Egyptian space suits, Sun Ra’s Arkestra played an advanced form of music that incorporated vocalists, dancers, and electronic instruments long before they became popular. He did not

understanding technology smack of old racial ideologies. In each scenario, racial identity, and blackness in particular, is the anti-avatar of digital life. Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress.” Alondra Nelson, “Introduction: Future Texts,” *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 1.

⁶⁵ Scholars have also furthered Afrofuturism. Most notable in this respect is Kodwo Eshun’s *More Brilliant than the Sun* in which Eshun explores Afrofuturism while embracing its fantastical style. See: Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998).

⁶⁶ I would like to note that while I do not focus on them here, genres such as techno and disco are closely linked to Afrofuturism both in their use of new technologies and, especially regarding disco, in their emphasis on reimagining gender and sexuality. See: Kara Keeling, “‘I Feel Love’: Race, Gender, Technē, and the (Im)Proper Sonic Habitus,” in *We Travel the Space Ways: Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions*, ed. Henriette Gunkel and kara lynch (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020), 245-50; Reynaldo Anderson, “Fabulous: Sylvester James, Black Queer Afrofuturism and the Black Fantastic,” *Dancecult* 5, no. 2 (2013).

consider his music jazz, nor did he accept the 'avant-garde' label. As he once said, 'It's more than avant-garde, because the 'avant-garde' refers to, I suppose, advanced earth music. But this is not earth music.'⁶⁷

Though Ra never reached the popular heights of contemporaries such as John Coltrane and Miles Davis, his ideas and aesthetic would find wider resonance in the work of countless musicians – most notably George Clinton and his Parliament-Funkadelic collective.

Originators of funk, Parliament-Funkadelic (who were two separate groups both headed by Clinton) married disparate genres to create sounds and images wholly original in music history. Known for their extravagant stage shows which incorporated UFOs landing on stage, outrageous clothing, and surrealist humour, the group extended many of the themes present in Ra's artistry into more mainstream spaces.⁶⁸ Together, Clinton and Ra created the sounds, themes, and aesthetics we today associate with Afrofuturism. "[I]f there's a cosmic ground floor for the existence of Afrofuturism in music," Ytasha Womack argues, "Sun Ra and George Clinton would be that foundation. The idea of a song mythology from the cosmos, highflying African-inspired space costumes, wordplay that challenged logic, and the use of traditional and electronic instruments to redefine sounds and push for universal love were established by Sun Ra and George Clinton."⁶⁹

The liberating power of Afrofuturism should not be understated. More than creativity for its own sake (though this is important in and of itself), these stories and sounds also perform important existential work. Cornel West locates the social and political power of Clinton's Afrofuturism in reference to its ability to create spaces of Black pride, love, and identity in the now: "Funkadelic and Parliament defy nonblack emulation; they assert their distinctiveness—and the distinctiveness of 'funk' in Afro-America. This funk is neither a skill nor an idea, not a worldview or a stance. Rather, it is an existential capacity to get in touch with forms of kinetic orality and affective physicality acquired by deep entrenchment in ... the patterns of Afro-American ways of life and struggle."⁷⁰ Musical Afrofuturism, as developed by Ra and Clinton, is thus an inherent quest for – and expression of – the existential security engendered in the symbol of the *home*.

⁶⁷ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 31.

⁶⁸ "Parliament/Funkadelic funk juggernaut introduced the world to the Mothership Connection and the characters of 'Starchild' and 'Dr. Funkenstein' in albums that take funk to the farthest reaches of the galaxy. These releases were supported by outrageous live performances that would include over a dozen costumed musicians and UFOs landing on stage." Rusty Aceves, "We Travel the Spaceways: Afrofuturism in Music," *SF Jazz*, July 8, 2019, <https://www.sfjazz.org/onthecorner/we-travel-space-ways-afrofuturism-music>.

⁶⁹ Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 57.

⁷⁰ Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 182.

Afrofuturism's themes have continued into the present and found voice in rap. Not only does rap often utilize the work of Clinton through sampling, but artists such as Afrika Bambaata in many ways pioneered rap around techniques that would, in mere decades, come to be defined under the label 'Afrofuturism'.⁷¹ As we enter the 21st century, artists as varied as Flying Lotus, Solange, Andre 3000, Thundercat, and Erykah Badu have continued to expand the Afrofuturist universe. Two noteworthy examples of Afrofuturist expression that exhibit all of the aesthetic and philosophical ideas described in this section are works by Deltron 3030 and Janelle Monáe. Although entirely distinct from one another, both artists provide fascinating insights into the political and existential power of Afrofuturism as an overall search for, and creation of, *home* in future-spaces.

Afropessimist Destruction as an Act of *Home-Making* in *Deltron 3030*

To this point, my analysis of Afrofuturism has assumed an optimistic tone. The following definition reflects a common sentiment in much of the relevant literature: "Afrofuturism offers a hopeful vision to a population whose existence has been systematically marginalized and largely ignored in mainstream depictions of a utopian future."⁷² While often true, this positivity is not universal, with many musicians adopting a decidedly pessimistic outlook on the future. Echoing theorists such as Derrick Bell and Frank Wilderson, I now turn to an album that reflects the possibility (likelihood?) of racism's permanence into the future.

An example of Afrofuturist rap that engages with themes of the permanence of racism, embodying the cyborg other, and the emancipatory potential of destructive violence is the self-titled 2000 underground classic by Deltron 3030. Formed in California in 1999, Deltron 3030 quickly developed a reputation as a unique voice within the broader rap landscape – a voice informed as much by anime, sci-fi, and video games than anything obviously musical.⁷³ Celebrated for Dan the Automator's

⁷¹ As Tricia Rose argues in an interview with Mark Dery regarding Bambaataa's embrace of the technological: "What Afrika Bambaataa and hip-hoppers like him saw in Kraftwerk's use of the robot was an understanding of themselves as *already having been robots*. Adopting 'the robot' reflected a response to an existing condition: namely, that they were labor for capitalism, that they had very little value as people in this society. By taking on the robotic stance, one is 'playing with the robot.' It's like wearing body armor that identifies you as an alien: if it's always on anyway, in some symbolic sense, perhaps you could master the wearing of this guise in order to use it *against* your interpolation." Dery, "Black to the Future," 213-4.

⁷² Aceves, "We Travel the Spaceways."

⁷³ Del explains how he was influenced by these other forms: "I used to be into anime and video games, manga. I used to like this game called Mega Man, and I know that they had a game called *Mega Man X*. It was basically the same *Mega Man*, but with souped-up graphics. Just futuristic. I just tripped off that and played with that same concept with myself. Still Del. But set in a futuristic world. Better raps. Souped-up raps." "Deltron 3030: An Oral History," *Red Bull Music Academy*, Aug 12, 2014, <https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2014/08/deltron-3030-oral-history>.

diverse production style (which is equal parts g-Funk, Afrofuturist psychedelia, and grand orchestration) and Del tha Funkee Homosapien's abstract lyricism, the band made a name for themselves by exploring the kinds of terrains that few rappers before them had traversed. Their self-titled debut album is a perfect example of this creative expression.

Deltron 3030 employs a kind of Black cyberpunk aesthetic in its telling of a cosmic rebellion led by Deltron Zero – part-human, part-machine mech-soldier-turned-revolutionary rapper – and his DJing sidekick Dan the Automator against the hyper-capitalistic and tyrannical colony of Earth in the year 3030.⁷⁴ “[D]elivered as observer-participant imagined ethnographic study”, *Deltron 3030* portrays our protagonists as they (mis)use their hybridised bodies to planet-hop through the oppressive terrains of this future, slowly enacting plans for world destruction.⁷⁵ Their main weapons in this endeavour are music, rhyming, and a holistic embrace of biological-technological hybridity.

Though in some ways classically Afrofuturist (especially in its humour and themes of space-exploration), the album's unique combination of dystopian themes, destructive violence, and lyricism as an emancipatory device compels analysis. In particular, this chapter concentrates on what I take as Deltron's embrace of an Afropessimist praxis centred on total destruction as part of a broader act of *home*-making. Deltron's use of violence is not mindless. Rather, it is a response to the reality that even in the year 3030, *home* remains unattainable. In other words, destructive violence is a praxis intended to create space for something new: a *home* out of the rubble.

What is Afropessimism?

Conceiving of *3030* as a call to revolutionary violence against racist structures draws this album within the purview of thinkers such as Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, and Joel Sexton, three figures at the centre of an analytical tradition called Afropessimism.⁷⁶ I will take some time describing this theory due to its relevance for an analysis of *3030*.

Wilderson's book *Afropessimism* (2020) begins by recalling an interaction between himself and a Palestinian friend which affirmed to him the uniquely oppressed position of Black people. His friend describes the shame of encountering Israeli police forces, but continues:

⁷⁴ Deltron 3030, “Positive Contact,” track 5 on *Deltron 3030*, 75 Ark, 2000.

⁷⁵ de Paor-Evans, “The Futurism of Hip Hop,” 133.

⁷⁶ Hartman and Sexton are particularly influential Afropessimist thinkers. See: Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Macmillan, 2007); Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *Intensions* 5 (2011): 1-47.

‘[T]he shame and humiliation runs even deeper if the Israeli soldier is an Ethiopian Jew.’
The earth gave way. ... How was it that the people who stole his land and slaughtered his relatives were somehow *less* of a threat in his imagination than Black Jews, often implements of Israeli madness, who sometimes do their dirty work? What, I wondered silently, was it about Black people (about *me*) that made us so fungible we could be tossed like a salad in the minds of oppressors and the oppressed?⁷⁷

The answer, Wilderson argues, lies in ontologies established centuries ago, beginning with Arab enslavement of Africans in the sixth century and affirmed through the European colonial project. It was through these histories, buttressed by the Enlightenment Humanist project, that Blackness came to be defined as the ultimate Other: the non-human to the non-Black human (which includes those Wilderson describes as the ‘junior partners’ of whiteness).⁷⁸

So if Blackness is non-Human, then what is it? Unlike the Human subject, Blackness, Wilderson writes, is defined as object: as a tool: “Black people are political currency or objects, not political actors or subjects. Subjects have homes, or at least the capacity for some sort of sanctuary. Objects exist as implements, tools, in the psychic life of Human subjects.”⁷⁹ Being inscribed into Humanism itself, Black subjection – and the ‘social death’ that results from this subjection – is immutable.⁸⁰ Consequently, *home* is ideologically prohibited.

If, as Wilderson argues, society functions on the basis of an ontological distinction between Black and non-Black, what possibilities exist for a more just future? What constitutes an Afropessimist praxis? Political moderates would likely argue for engagement in the political process and constant struggle to prove one’s humanity. 4th25 engage in a politics of inclusion, proving one’s worth via acts of imperial violence. Afropessimism rejects this approach, arguing that there is no room in humanity for the non-human. The only political response capable of challenging Black subjection,

⁷⁷ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 11-2.

⁷⁸ Wilderson describes the junior partners of whiteness as people who “are Human but not White hetero males. For example, people of color and White women who are targets of White supremacy and patriarchy, respectively, and, simultaneously, the agents and beneficiaries of anti-Blackness. This category also includes LGBT people who are not Black and Indigenous communities.” Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 95.

⁷⁹ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 198.

⁸⁰ Orlando Patterson’s conception of ‘social death’ is central to Afropessimist theory: “The slave relation ... [is] defined by a threefold condition: a) general dishonourment (or social death), b) natal alienation (i.e. the systematic rupture of familial and genealogical continuities), c) gratuitous or limitless violence. This threefold combination gives rise to a being experientially and socially devoid of relationality: the slave relation is a type of social relation whose product is a relationless object.” K. Aarons, “No Selves to Abolish: Afropessimism, Anti-Politics and the End of the World,” *Mute Magazine*, Feb 29, 2016, <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/no-selves-to-abolish-afropessimism-anti-politics-and-end-world>. Crucially, Wilderson and others argue, this slave relation crossed over into the post-emancipation era. To again quote Wilderson, not only were Black people slaves, but “Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness: Blackness *is* social death”. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 102.

according to Afropessimists, is destruction: “The only way to cure the condition of slavery that ails Black people ... is ‘the end of the world.’ There will have to be a total end to things—an apocalypse. From civilization’s ashes something truly new might finally grow.”⁸¹ Afropessimist imaginations seek not to placate or appease, but to destroy.

Is Deltron Afropessimistic?

Deltron 3030 resonates strongly with Afropessimist futurisms. The (main) hero, Deltron Zero, is a literal tool of a military state, upholding oppressive power structures at the same time as his Blackness rationalizes a ghettoized society. Most important, however, and where we witness tremendous resonance between *3030* and Afropessimism, is Deltron’s emphasis on destruction as a first step in a much longer process of *home*-making. The album’s plot revolves around the protagonists destroying this future-world through the dissemination of a computer virus from which humanity can never recover:

I wanna devise a virus
To bring dire straits to your environment
Crush your corporations with a mild touch
Trash your whole computer system and revert you to papyrus
I want to make a super virus
Strong enough to cause blackouts in every single metropolis
Cause they don't wanna unify us
So fuck it – total anarchy and can't nobody stop us
...
Lights out shut down entire White House
I don't want just a bug that could be corrected
I'm erecting immaculate design
Break the nation down, section by section⁸²

Despite the album’s dystopian qualities, the emphasis on complete destruction (as well as the fun of Del’s rhyming, as I explain later) inspires positivity. Dystopianism – and the feelings of *homelessness* that are fostered in such spaces – need not result in a paralysing misery. Resistance is possible, assuming it takes the form of destruction. As Wilderson attests:

⁸¹ Vinson Cunningham, “The Argument of ‘Afropessimism,’” *The New Yorker*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism>.

⁸² Deltron 3030, “Virus,” track 7 on *Deltron 3030*, 75 Ark, 2000.

I am not suggesting that Black people should resign themselves to the inevitability of social death—it *is* inevitable, in the sense that one is born into social death just as one is born into a gender or a class; but it is also constructed by the violence and imagination of other sentient beings. Thus, like class and gender, which are also *constructs*, not divine designations, social death can be destroyed. But the first step toward the destruction is to assume one’s position (*assume, not celebrate or disavow*), and then burn the ship or the plantation ... from the inside out.⁸³

This is exactly the process through which Deltron challenges future oppressions and the feelings of *homelessness* that arise out of dystopian conditions. Assuming his position as an object designed to safeguard global hegemonies, Del ‘misuses’ his object-ness to tear down the world: “Lookin’ up the sky is red / City’s burning up over head (flame on baby) / We can make the best of it (rock that) / In this post apocalypse (right on)”.⁸⁴ This destruction reflects a uniquely Afropessimist form of *home-making*. *Home* remains as unattainable in the 31st century as it does in the 21st. In response, Del utilizes warfare to create the groundwork upon which better futures can arise. Emancipation, as symbolised in the *home*, is gained through comprehensive, destructive war.

However, it is also important to point out the moments when Deltron are decidedly non-Afropessimistic. This is most evident in the way they continuously link their oppression to that of an *exploited* working class. Unlike the often wholly novel spaces of Afrofuturist speculation, *3030* depicts a deliberately familiar space (with some 31st century twists): “Peacekeepers seek to take our manhood / Which results in the form of global apartheid / Ghettos are trash dumps with gas pumps / Exploding and burnt out since before the great union / ... Human rights come in a hundredth place / Mass production has always been number one / New Earth has become a repugnant place”.⁸⁵ Various skits provide flaneur-like insights into the conditions of those at the bottom of the well, scrambling for money and the means to survive while those on top accumulate wealth and corrupt institutions (as best evidenced by the song title ‘The News (A Wholly Owned Subsidiary of Microsoft Inc.)’).⁸⁶ Consequently, the year 3030 exhibits many of the same discriminatory conditions that prevent a sense of *home* in the racial capitalist 21st century.

Though a profound part of the album’s critique, emphasis on the capitalist foundations of oppression counters Afropessimist ideas about the false analogies between the *exploitation* of the

⁸³ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 103.

⁸⁴ Deltron 3030, “Memory Loss (Ft. Sean Lennon),” track 20 on *Deltron 3030*, 75 Ark, 2000.

⁸⁵ Deltron 3030, “Virus.”

⁸⁶ Deltron 3030, “The News (A Wholly Owned Subsidiary of Microsoft Inc.),” track 15 on *Deltron 3030*, 75 Ark, 2000.

working classes and the total *domination* of Black people.⁸⁷ In Wilderson's (race-reductionist) reckoning, the decisive antagonism undergirding society is a racialized one between Black and non-Black, not a Marxist relationality between employer and employee. Racism's permanence, in other words, lies outside of economics and is instead ontological in nature: "Blacks are not in possession of something exterior to themselves that civil society wants. Civil society does not want ... Black consent, as it wants working-class consent What civil society wants/needs from Black people is far more essential, far more fundamental than land and profits. What civil society needs from Black people is confirmation of Human existence."⁸⁸ Put another way, Wilderson argues that Marxist analysis only conceives of an end to *exploitation*, but nowhere does it proffer the emancipation of the objects of a capitalist economy (i.e. Blackness) – those not *exploited* but *dominated*.⁸⁹ Deltron, conversely, adopt a decidedly Marxist reading of future oppressions as linked to consumer capitalism. In summary, while Deltron's response to an oppressive world (i.e. total destruction) is Afropessimistic, the oppressor they seek to destroy is racial capitalist, not ontological, in nature.

Liberation through fun and rhyme

Despite its significance to the album, it is important not to overstate the primacy of physical violence in Deltron's revolutionary praxis. Although narratively structured around the creation of a catastrophic virus, most of *3030* focusses on the revolutionary power of orality. In other words, Deltron Zero confronts the permanence of racism – and the feelings of *homelessness* engendered by racism – through hip hop. Rapping itself is the most revolutionary weapon at our hero's disposal:

On the run with a handgun, blast bioforms; I am warned
That a planet-wide manhunt with cannons
Will make me, abandon, my foolish plan of uprisin'
Fuck dyin, I hijack a mech
Control it with my magical chants, so battle advanced
Through centuries of hip-hop legacy, megaspeed
Hyperwarp to Automator's crib and light the torch
They can't fight the force

⁸⁷ Given the claim of a foundational antagonism between Black and non-Black (which includes other marginalized communities such as Native Americans), Afropessimists have attracted critique from settler colonial scholars. See: Iyko Day, "Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiracism, and Settler Colonial Critique," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015): 102-21.

⁸⁸ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 219.

⁸⁹ Wilderson analogises Blackness as less the abattoir worker than the cow. Blackness is the *dominated* capital around which workers are *exploited*, meaning that any effort to compare the oppressions of the working-class to Blackness is false. Frank Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 225-40.

Victory is ours once we strike the source
Enterprisin' wise men look to the horizon
Thinkin' more capitalism is the wisdom
And imprison, all citizens empowered with rhythm
We keep the funk alive by talking with idioms⁹⁰

Music is Del's main revolutionary device, allowing him to enchant, recruit, and control weapons of resistance. Rhyme – as well as material destruction – has the power to destroy and remake worlds: "I remake my universe every time I use a verse".⁹¹ In both the future space of *3030* and the present moment, the 'changing same' of Black radical expression as found within rap music continues to contest racisms and construct the foundations for a something else (i.e. *home*).

Furthermore, *Deltron 3030* is a very fun album. It creates future spaces that appear, on the surface, to echo present day oppressions in cyberpunk form, but enables catharsis through a shared expression of rejection. Not only does Del violently attack oppressors, he mocks them and encourages a listening audience to do the same. Much like the wacky characters and larger than life story-telling of Afrofuturism's forbears (especially George Clinton), *Deltron* creates a world that emancipates through ridiculousness.

By tearing down worlds through laughter and destructive violence, *Deltron 3030* adopt a unique approach to Afrofuturist *home*-making that orbits the Afropessimistic. The passage of a thousand years has done little to change the reality that *homes* for Black people are unattainable. In a final act of resistance, *Deltron* decides to destroy this world in the hope that a more existentially profitable *homeland* can rise from its ashes. Despite its pessimistic veneer, Del's ability to rhyme, plot violent retribution, and imagine emancipatory futures leaves the listener with positivity in spite of dystopia. But *Deltron* are not without gaps in their revolutionary imagination. In particular, their cyber-punk, masculine rendering of Afrofuturism ignores the unique oppressions affronting Black women. Janelle Monáe counters this with a take on Afrofuturist speculation that puts queer Black women in focus.

Dance as an Act of *Home*-Making in Janelle Monáe's *Metropolis Series*

To this point, much of my engagement with Afrofuturism has assumed a masculine face. To do so is to reproduce the kinds of exclusionary spaces I criticized early white sci-fi for creating – those thinkers who thought of themselves as beyond 'race', but ultimately expunged the future of

⁹⁰ *Deltron 3030*, "3030," track 2 on *Deltron 3030*, 75 Ark, 2000

⁹¹ *Deltron 3030*, "Time Keeps on Slipping," track 14 on *Deltron 3030*, 75 Ark, 2000.

Blackness. To counteract this and engage with a different approach to the Afrofuturist aesthetic, I will now analyse a queer feminist take on the ideas described above, focusing on the self-defining and hopeful storytelling – and *home*-making – of Janelle Monáe.

Most biographies of Janelle Monáe proceed along similar trajectories. The granddaughter of Mississippian sharecroppers and the daughter of a janitor and garbage truck driver, Monáe's identity is described as deeply connected to her Black, working-class roots. They then go on to explore her unique, genre-bending musical style and commitment to producing art that speaks to and celebrates marginalized communities – especially queer Black women. They note her growth into superstardom, becoming one of the 21st century's most prominent Afrofuturists best known for popularizing ideas bound within a queer Black feminist tradition.⁹² All this (often) leads to an analysis of her *Metropolis Series*, a multi-album opus centred around Cindi Mayweather, a fugitive android from the year 2719 who has been scheduled for disassembly after committing an android mortal sin: falling in love with a human – a relationship Monáe describes as queer.⁹³

However, though important, I believe that such descriptions fail to capture the extent of Monáe's critical work. Monáe's *music* is not the only source of her celebratory queerness: rather, her re-working of *identity* is also a queering act. Throughout her career, Monáe has responded to questions about her identity by stating: "I am Janelle Monáe. And also Cindy Mayweather. I think that we all possess multiple identities. I strongly believe that. And the way that I am genetically coded, I've always felt like I was sent back to the present but from the future."⁹⁴ As I understand it, Monáe/Mayweather is rejecting easy binaries and categorisation, engaging in an ongoing process of self-making untethered from conventional understandings of human identity. Therefore, her identity – as well as her music – is dedicated to the queering of hegemonic identifiers in the hope of establishing a community for marginalized communities, those who are othered whenever they dare to exist beyond the hegemonic. She not only tells stories of the post-human, she becomes the post-

⁹² "Monáe presents a persona that can be likened to a polyvalent Afrofuturistic aesthetic that embodies the desires of black feminism mixed with a futural sonic flare. She goes beyond the outer limits of storytelling providing a signature sound, which critiques the monotone concept of punk, and clearly addresses the complexities of race, gender, and sexuality at the same time." Grace D. Gipson, "Afrofuturism's Musical Princess Janelle Monáe: Psychedelic Soul Message Music Infused with a Sci-Fi Twist," in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, ed. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016), 91-2.

⁹³ As Monáe explains in an interview with *Elle Magazine*: "[Y]ou have an android, Cindi Mayweather, who has fallen in love with a human, and the love that they have between each other is considered to be queer." Keely Weiss, "'The Electric Lady': Janelle Monáe On Her New Album And An Exclusive Behind-The-Scenes Look Of Her Cover Art Photoshoot," *Elle*, Aug 29, 2013, <https://www.elle.com/culture/music/news/a23604/janelle-monae-interview-electric-lady/>.

⁹⁴ "Talking with Janelle Monáe on sci-fi, androids and Slack (full interview)," Youtube Video, posted by "CNET Highlights," Jan 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLHAa-1D2WU>.

human and, in the process, embodies transformative possibilities. Consequently, rather than provide a conventional biography for Monáe, I am instead offering an outline of both the *Metropolis Series* and Cindi Mayweather in a way that honours this queering practice.

Monáe's *Metropolis Series* is part *Matrix*-style chosen-one mythology, and part android-human love story.⁹⁵ The series follows Cindi Mayweather, a queer android whose 'aberrant' sexuality has deemed her worthy of criminalization and destruction. The rest of the series (consisting of one EP and two full-length albums, with 5 of a total 7 suites completed) tracks Cindi's journey from escaping disassembly, to being on the run, to returning as a political revolutionary determined to challenge existing marginalities. Even more interesting, upon return, Cindi's focus turns almost entirely to the oppressions facing queer Black women and finds power not through violence (the resistance is explicitly non-violent), but through self-definition, pleasure, and bodily autonomy.

The rest of this chapter centres on the *Metropolis Series*, prioritizing themes of Afrofuturism as a space for a hopeful queer futurity as well as dance and sex as acts of bodily reclamation and *home*-making, acts which create in the body the feelings of 'ontological security' typically associated with *home*. In contrast to the dystopian future of *Deltron 3030*, the *Metropolis Series* evidences the revolutionary potential of a decidedly queer hope and pleasure-seeking. It is Cindi's ability to create communal spaces for the unashamed expression of queer pleasure that makes her so dangerous to the normative functioning of this future-scape. Central to this envisioning of a queer Black feminist emancipation is the act of dance. Through bodily mobility and the sheer joy this movement elicits, Cindi (and Monáe, for the differentiation between character and artist is one Monáe routinely subverts) makes *home* in her own body – transforming her cyborg body from a mere vessel of alienated, racial capitalist labor into a site of pleasure and 'ontological security'.

Deltron's masculine blind-spot and the 31st century 'badman'

Before delving further into the queer futurities of Monáe's *Metropolis Series*, I first want to re-visit the masculinized history of Afrofuturism I proffered in the *Deltron 3030* section. The narrative of *3030* is one in which violence is a necessary revolutionary tool. Here, I seek not to question the validity of violence in anti-racist movements, but to assess how violence reflects a masculine rendering of Afrofuturist *home*-making that provides an interesting counterpoint to the gendered work performed by Monáe.

⁹⁵ The series consists of the following three albums: Janelle Monáe, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*, Bad Boy Records, 2007; Janelle Monáe, *The ArchAndroid*, Wondaland Arts Society and Bad Boy Records, 2010; Janelle Monáe, *The Electric Lady*, Wondaland Arts Society, Atlantic Records and Bad Boy Records, 2013.

In their adoption of verbal jousting and masculine braggadocio, Deltron evoke '90s era gangsta rap. The following is an example of the album's many braggadocios moments:

I want y'all to, get open, like the ocean
Brothers be buggin' like 'He's from Oakland?'
What? I'll whoop you insinuat' we ain't capable
Stupid ass niggas is gonna rape a ho
A few out a thousand
My town is foundin' fathers of the Black panthers we provide answers
You don't wanna believe then y'all some blind bastards
They got you set up real good: generalizing
Industry rising while energies declining
Niggas think I'm whinin'
Really? I don't give a shit⁹⁶

By embracing this braggadocio, in conjunction with calls to destructive violence, Deltron project the badman traditions of blues and gangsta into the 31st century. Referring specifically to blues musicians' confrontation with the visceral violence of the lynching-as-spectacle era, literary critic Adam Gussow describes a form of badman resistance that functions by complete refusal: "[T]he blues badman proclaims his outright *rejection* of white terror and the victims it has claimed. ... Mourning his lynched black kin, much less imagining himself into their place, holds no interest for him. He would rather kill than mourn."⁹⁷ This is one part of Deltron's argument. Instead of being consumed by the grief caused by a decidedly capitalist anti-Black terror, Deltron Zero turns his mutilated and exploited body – remembering that he was formerly a mech-soldier who misused these technologies to teleport, planet-hop, and wage war – into a source of resistance. He resists by turning himself from an object of state control into a subject of violent, anti-capitalist struggle.

Unfortunately, this badman persona evokes a masculine rendering of Afrofuturism that reproduces gendered oppressions even as it overcomes racial capitalist ones. Unlike Monáe, who centres much of her storytelling on intersectional forms of oppression and resistance, gender appears to be 'non-existent' in Deltron's cyber-punk future – which, in effect, equates to masculine for nothing is ever really gender-neutral. *3030's* hyper-capitalistic future dystopia, as well its destructive approach to *home-making*, completely ignores questions around women and non-heteronormative sexualities,

⁹⁶ Deltron 3030, "Memory Loss (Ft. Sean Lennon)."

⁹⁷ Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 169.

how they manifest in this space, how they too can seek autonomy through the speculative, and, most importantly, how they can also find *home* in and through destruction. Moreover, they completely ignore how men's liberation is established via the domination of women (and thus the "rape a ho" line from the passage above). Consequently, the *home* Deltron seeks to build is not *homely* for all.

Feminist Afrofuturism

But these gendered and sexuality-based blind spots are not universal. Afrofuturism, many scholars have noted, has historically embraced Black feminist possibilities. For example, P-Funk not only looked upon 'traditional' masculinities as one of many social ills, they also created space beyond the constraints of a 1960s and '70s Black masculinity:

There were no berets, no pastor's collars, no long leather coats, and no pimp suits in evidence on the Mothership. Rather, Parliament's album covers and concerts represented outrageous and intentionally unsettling versions of black masculinity—from George Clinton's slinky stage moves, to vocalist-guitarist Garry Shider's infamous diaper wearing and pacifier sucking, and to bassist-vocalist Bootsy Collins's funky-couture spangled hats and suits and signature star-shaped sunglasses.⁹⁸

However, while P-Funk were effective in forging subversive masculinities, their re-imagination of gender rarely extended to women. For example, as Daylanne English and Alvin Kim explain, the song 'Handcuffs' "imagines literal restraints, even though the singer knows 'that's not the way it should be,' in order to hold on to his woman in the context of 1970s feminism". Though delivered in a playful fashion, this song shows that "although both Clinton and P-Funk might have been performing black masculinity in a relatively unrestrained way, neither black femininity nor an underlying gender binary got an especially new ride on the Mothership."⁹⁹

Despite this suspect history, a host of Afrofuturist women have grown to prominence in the aftermath of P-Funk to extend Clinton's minor attempts at revolutionary gender constructions further. In contrast to P-Funk's adherence to a gender binary, artists from Octavia Butler to Erykah Badu to N.K. Jemisin and Monáe herself seek greater fluidity. As Womack explains: "In Afrofuturism, black women's imagination, image, and voice are not framed by the pop expectations and sensibilities of the day. ... Women develop theories, characters, art, and beauty free of the pressures of meeting male approval, societal standards, color-based taxonomies, or run-of-the-mill female

⁹⁸ Daylanne K. English and Alvin Kim, "Now We Want Our Funk Cut: Janelle Monáe's Neo-Afrofuturism," *American Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013): 221.

⁹⁹ English and Kim, "Now We Want Our Funk Cut," 221.

expectations.”¹⁰⁰ What we witness in Monáe’s work is the most mainstream representation of a radical and self-defining Black feminist Afrofuturism that seeks to create in oneself what is unforthcoming in the rest of the world: the safety, pleasure, and ‘ontological security’ of *home*.

Intersectional queer futurity

A notable feature of the *Metropolis Series*, one that heavily informs Cindi’s *home*-making endeavours, is an emphasis on queer feminist community and hope. By conceiving of the future in these quasi-utopian terms, Monáe evokes the analytical tradition of queer futurity. A rejection of the norms that oppress queer people in the present moment (i.e. ‘straight time’) – norms that result in a sense of *homelessness* due to their stifling effects on self-definition and safety – José Esteban Muñoz conceives of queer futurity as “the utopian impulse embedded in queer collectivity: the hope that new ways of being, doing and relating exist just over the horizon. As such it hinges upon an insistence on potentiality and affect, and may offer a radical mode of resistance to a fearful and anxious present.”¹⁰¹ Queer futurity emancipates by embracing the potential of the ‘not-yet-here’, a temporality in which oppressive norms melt away. The present may well be characterised by its oppressive ‘straight-ness’, but the “future is queerness’s domain.”¹⁰² The future, in other words, is queerness’s *home*.

In contrast to the glum ‘structures of feeling’ that dominate Afropessimism – and queer studies more broadly, as exemplified by Lee Edelman’s *No Future* – queer futurity is a critical affect of hope.¹⁰³ Muñoz warns against the pessimism that defines much critical theory, arguing that “[a]n antiutopian might understand himself (sic) as being critical in rejecting hope, but in the rush to denounce it, he (sic) would be missing the point that hope is spawned of a critical investment in utopia, which is nothing like naïve but, instead, profoundly resistant to the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present.”¹⁰⁴ In response to an unfulfilling, normative present, queer futurity embraces the hope of utopianism as both a critical theory of ‘straight time’ and inspiration for *home* in the ‘not-yet-here’.

By utilizing hope as both critical theory of the present and basis of futurist speculation, queer futurity bears a striking resemblance to – and intersects with – Afrofuturism. Like Afrofuturism, though, queer futurity runs the risk of blind-spots. As we saw with the violence-centred

¹⁰⁰ Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 101.

¹⁰¹ Anna Stielau, “Towards a Queer Futurity: The Utopian Impulse in the Work of Athi-Patra Ruga and Milumbe Haimbe,” *Agenda* 29, no. 1 (2015): 127.

¹⁰² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

¹⁰³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁰⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 12.

emancipatory praxis of *Deltron 3030*, in the process of overcoming certain marginalities other oppressions can be preserved. The same logic also applies to queer utopian futurities. Utopian visions may well imagine space for queer pleasure and community, but this does not ensure that such visions are accepting of people of color. If speculative futures are to be universally liberating, they require an intersectional focus that simultaneously confronts racism, classism, homophobia, sexism, and so on. It is in this space that I locate Monáe.

Synthesising queer- and Afro-futurisms, Monáe corrects the (possible) gender-, sexual-, and 'racial'-blind spots of the two speculative traditions. Consequently, Monáe's intersectional Afrofuturism is well placed to contest the multifaceted forms of oppression that target queer people of color. Ajalon's reflection on the potential of such an intersectional speculative tradition is worth quoting at length due to its resonance with Monáe's work:

As intersectional WOC, we often identify with somewhere out there as being home, and negotiate our subjectivities accordingly. It is not simply because of our race, but an intersection of every aspect of our fractured selves. Selves which are asked to assimilate in order to fit in the 'world'; an ordered self we are expected to learn and perform. The inability to perform them well enough makes us feel alien. If we are not accepted in the majoriborg order, it can seem we have few choices: self-annihilation (physical and or psychic), debilitating solitude, or movement/migration – in search of others with whom we can identify A utopia for the Othered ... must be space. Sun Ra put it best: Space is the Place – the place where the impossible is possible. This is particularly true when it comes to Queer POC where sometimes, even within our 'own' communities of color and/or feminist circles our realities are either sidelined or subsumed – finding the space to perform freely as agents can seem 'unrealistic' if not impossible, as we are asked forfeit a part of who we are to be included in those communities/discourses.¹⁰⁵

Self-definition – and thus emancipation from restrictive (violent?) norms – for queer women of color is actualised in Monáe's intersectional Afrofuturist storytelling. Monáe's Afrofuturism acts as a safe space in which said communities can imagine themselves beyond the uncertainty, insecurities, and *homelessness* that results from normative ontologies in 'straight time'.

Alienated cyborg-/Black-ness, Juke joints, and *home*-making through dance

In contrast to *Deltron*, the specific version of *home*-making employed by Monáe is not centred on material construction (via destruction), but on the body itself. Monáe does not attempt to construct

¹⁰⁵ Ajalon, "FAR SPACE-WISE," 425.

a *home* outside of herself. Instead, her revolutionary moves seek to make possible the feeling of *home* – including a sense of security, pleasure, and community – in her own body.

The body carries with it tremendous symbolic significance.¹⁰⁶ Throughout American history, Black bodies have performed a great deal of cultural, economic, and symbolic work to justify and perpetuate oppressive conditions. To cite just a few examples, the political economy of Black bodies have: been co-opted as ‘bucks’ to be bred for the perpetuation of a slave economy; been used as ‘proof’ of Black beasts and the need to affirm a white patriarchal control; functioned as violent, drug-addled, welfare-dependent fiends and ‘queens’ justifying state retrenchment and the creation of the prison industrial complex; and functioned as the basis of an ‘incorrect’ performance of gender as Black men have become synonymous with promiscuity while Black women have become the face of an improper femininity (as either ‘jezebel’ or ‘mammy’) and thus responsible for a supposed Black degeneracy. And, as explained in the previous chapter, Black bodies were co-opted by the imperial war machine to justify the War on Terror as an act of democracy expansion. By the same token, however, the symbolic power of the body also renders it a profound site of resistance. In other words, the owner of the body is never passive, having the ability to re-imagine the logics inscribed onto it. The remainder of this chapter explores dance and queer sex in the *Metropolis Series* as an example of this bodily resistance, a resistance which undoes external control over Black female (cyborg) bodies. Once re-claimed, they are stripped of the meaning inscribed onto them from afar and are replaced by new, self-determined feelings, ideas, and sentiments.

But what exactly do I mean by ‘reclaiming the body’? Why is Monáe not in possession of herself? Throughout the *Metropolis Series*, Monáe celebrates cyborgism alongside a Black feminine identity, something which analogises both robot and queer Black woman on the basis of a shared history of exploitation. Both Black women and the robot exist, in the logic of racial capitalist economies, to be accumulated and exploited for the benefit of an economic order. When these definitionally controlled bodies move of their own free-will, the body becomes revolutionary. The unchecked, unashamed movement of bodies defined as property is an act of reclamation that enables a sense of being at *home* in the body.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ As Tera Hunter argues: “As an object of discipline and liberation, the body is a site where a society’s ideas about race, class, gender, and sexuality are constructed to give the appearance of being mandates of nature while actually conforming to cultural ideologies.” Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 185.

¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the dances performed by Monáe are deeply rooted in African American history. In the video to her song ‘Many Moons’, “Monáe performs dance steps that are a veritable primer in the African American vernacular dance of James Brown, Michael Jackson, Prince — the mashed potato, the slide, the moonwalk.” Gayle Murchison, “Let’s Flip It! Quare Emancipations: Black Queer Traditions, Afrofuturisms, Janelle Monáe to Labelle,” *Women & Music* 22, no. 1 (2018): 87. Evoking styles rooted in African American artistic expression

Crucially, and attuned to the utopian possibilities of queer futurity as described by Muñoz, the *home*-making qualities of Monáe's dance are also communal. Throughout the *Series*, Cindi not only dances herself: she *publicly* encourages others to do the same, taking the idea of dance as a life-affirming activity and putting it to work in public spaces such as night clubs:

You're going crazy, the hitmen always find you
Do that dance, smokin' in the girls' room
Kissin' friends, keep a-rockin' and a-rollin'
'Cause the dead just love to rock and roll
...
But I really, really want to thank you for dancing 'til the end
You found a way to break out
You're not afraid to break out
But I need to know if the world says it's time to go
Tell me, will you freak out?¹⁰⁸

Spaces allowing cyborgs to “kiss friends” and “dance to the end” are thus critical pieces in attaining feelings of *home*, spaces that provide opportunities for cyborgs to evade external control and move together as community in celebration of the body's forces.

I understand the power of these spaces as being similar to that of Juke joints throughout the blues-era.¹⁰⁹ In *Race Rebels*, Kelley observes the social and existential significance of these spaces through their ability to reimagine Black lives freed from the monotonies of a racial capitalist exploitation – while also facilitating community:

Most people attended those events to escape from the world of assembly lines, relief lines, and color lines, and to leave momentarily the individual and collective battles against racism, sexism, and material deprivation. But this is still only part of the story, for seeking the sonic, visceral pleasures of music and fellowship, the sensual pleasures

further contributes to the sense of resistance. Monáe is not just dancing, she is dancing in a way that recalls a history of bodily autonomy in response to demands of bodily control. She is performing fugitive dance.

¹⁰⁸ Janelle Monáe, “Dance Apocalyptic,” track 9 on *The Electric Lady*, Wondaland Arts Society, Atlantic Records and Bad Boy Records, 2013

¹⁰⁹ Juke/Jook joints were, at their simplest, African American clubs developed in the decades following emancipation. “The classic jook, though it might have been found in a small town or even a city, catered to the rural work force that began emerging after emancipation. Jooks were often ‘shoddy confines,’ smelly and rarely immaculate. The term itself connotes a place where lower-class African-Americans drink, dance, eat, and gamble. Its constituency imposed a character and psychology, derived from their labor experience, on the first dance arena to emerge after emancipation.” Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 80-1.

of food, drink, and dancing, was not just about escaping the vicissitudes of Southern life. Black patrons went with people who had a shared knowledge of these cultural forms, people with whom they felt kinship, people to whom they told stories about the day or the latest joke, people who shared a common vernacular filled with a grammar and vocabulary that struggled to articulate the beauty and burden of their racial, class, and gender experiences in the South.¹¹⁰

Spaces such as these were wholly unique in the post-Reconstruction era in their sanctioning of a bodily autonomy that transgressed expectations of Black subservience.¹¹¹ Juke joints thus became a critical locale within which Black people – especially Black women – could contest (if implicitly) their alienated servitude and re-claim their bodies as their own:¹¹² “The masses of black women and men embraced dancing because it ... countered the debilitating impact of wage labor. ... In the unregulated and secluded ‘jook joints,’ ... blacks could reclaim their bodies from appropriation as instruments of physical toil and redirect their energies toward other diversions.”¹¹³ Juke joints functioned as spaces wherein Black people could build community, re-claim bodily autonomy by moving of their own free-will, and form identities around an unalienated pleasure-seeking in refusal of the oppressive demands of racialized wage labor.

Monáe conjures similar spaces throughout the series, with the most obvious example coming in the form of a night club called Mushrooms and Roses (from a song of the same name). Monáe describes the song as depicting a chance meeting between Cindi and a love-interest, Blueberry Mary, “who’s in this club called Mushrooms and Roses, and I’m infatuated with her. Cindi’s infatuated with her. ... Mushrooms and Roses is the place where people go and they can be . . . All the androids, they’re not working, they, like, get to, like, be crazy and free and, you know, all those things.”¹¹⁴ Mushrooms and Roses, like the Juke joint, is a space wherein exploited peoples come together to move and inspire each other. For a brief moment, club-goers evade surveillance, subvert alienation, live out fantasies

¹¹⁰ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 47.

¹¹¹ I should note that these spaces were not wholly emancipatory due to the fact that they were heavily surveilled by law enforcement, white vigilantes, and both Black and white middle-class social reformers.

¹¹² Oppressed by the double bind of racism and sexism, Black women lacked even the minimal bodily autonomy procured by Black men in their places of employment – such as in the fields or factory floors. Instead, the close quarters, hyper-surveillance, and sexual violence experienced by Black women as domestic servants (a vast majority of Black women were employed as domestic servants in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras) prohibited spaces of autonomy.

¹¹³ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 178-9.

¹¹⁴ “Janelle Monáe talks ‘Pynk’ Pants, Prince and Afrofuturism | Red Bull Music Academy,” Youtube Video, posted by “Red Bull Music Academy,” Sep 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywiik_XEFH8.

of bodily autonomy, and most importantly, experience joy. Dance allows Black people/cyborgs to claim both one's body and "one's life as one's own."¹¹⁵

But more than simply facilitating dance, Mushrooms and Roses' explicit queerness is central to its revolutionary power – and *home*-making potential. The narrative of the *Metropolis Series* is one in which non-normative sexualities are prohibited, a prohibition so strict that Cindi's queerness renders her 'faulty' and thus scheduled for disassembly. This marginalization often results in a state of anguish for Cindi: "Am I a freak because I love watching Mary? (Maybe) / Hey sister am I good enough for your heaven? / Say will your God accept me in my black and white? / Will he approve the way I'm made?"¹¹⁶ But through the creation of queer spaces, Monáe transforms a source of condemnation (and criminalization) into one of empowerment. As she explains, Mushrooms and Roses is predominantly a space that celebrates non-normative sexualities:

[Cindi] goes to Mushrooms and Roses and she sees Blueberry Mary's there and this is like the first time she's really been attracted to her spirit. I mean, Cindi's an android in this song, so it's kind of like everybody's pansexual, you know, in Metropolis. It's just all about a vibe. It's not about, like, how you identify because everybody identifies as so many different things, you know. It's a spectrum. And she sees Blueberry Mary, and for the first time she's having feelings that she's just, has never felt before and so that song is an exploration of that and Blueberry Mary's the person who pulls out what's been inside of Cindi and what was kind of laying dormant, but it needed to be spruced up and watered for it to blossom, you know. And so they have a connection. I think they may have hooked up that night.¹¹⁷

Queer sexualities become the norm in this working-class, female-centric space. No longer a source of existential concern and criminalization, queerness is suddenly a site of empowerment.

Here again we witness similarities to the Juke joint. As Tera Hunter explains, the moral panic surrounding places of public dance lay in their fostering of a 'fugitive' sexuality deemed by wider society to be repulsive at best and a threat to the safety of whiteness (particularly white women) at worst:

The sultry settings, dimmed lights, and prolonged musical renditions invited intimacy as couples swayed together. The 'slow drag,' one of the most popular dances in the 1910s,

¹¹⁵ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 180.

¹¹⁶ Janelle Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N. (Ft. Erykah Badu)," track 3 on *The Electric Lady*, Wondaland Arts Society, Atlantic Records and Bad Boy Records, 2013.

¹¹⁷ "Janelle Monáe talks 'Pynk' Pants," Youtube Video.

was described by one observer this way: ‘couples would hang onto each other and just grind back and forth in one spot all night.’ The Itch was described as ‘a spasmodic placing of the hands all over the body in an agony of perfect rhythm.’ The Fish Tail put the emphasis on the rear end, as the name suggested; the ‘buttocks weave out, back, and up in a variety of figure eights.’¹¹⁸

The overt queer-ness of Mushrooms and Roses replicates the ‘dangerous’ sexualities of Juke joints.¹¹⁹ ‘Criminal’ sexualities are celebrated in spaces such as these, transforming bodies from mere vessels of alienated wage labor into life-affirming entities seeking pleasure, community, and the ‘ontological security’ of *home*.

Public expressions of bodily autonomy (i.e. dance and sex) are a challenge to the characteristic marginality of both ‘straight time’ and the ‘not-yet-here’. Dance, for queer Black women (and cyborgs), is an act that re-narrativizes the body in opposition to racist, sexist, and heterosexist caricatures designed to elicit control. To move is to claim ownership of one’s body and to contest alienation. Spaces such as ‘Mushrooms and Roses’ are powerful sites wherein this unique form of *home*-making becomes possible, where bodies find ‘other’ ways of moving. Dance and sex are community, and *home*, in motion.

Conclusion

The GFC grew out of an extensive history of discriminatory practices – practices which became decidedly ‘inclusionary’ in the neoliberal era – that prevented the generation of both economic and existential wealth for many African Americans. These very histories provide the social context in which some artists seek *home* amongst the stars.

Deltron 3030 and Janelle Monae provide two of the most striking Afrofuturist expressions of the 21st century. Deltron conceive of a Marxist-inspired – though still Afropessimistic – praxis centred on destruction. Destruction itself becomes a necessary first step in a longer process of *home*-making: from society’s ashes, emancipation becomes a possibility. However, by offering masculine

¹¹⁸ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 175.

¹¹⁹ Juke Joints during the blues era were not the only sites of ‘dangerous’ Black sexualities in American history. Rebecca Sheehan observes the ‘threat’ posed by Little Richard’s sexuality in the 1950s: “In conservative, racially segregated, 1950s America, when interracial marriage was illegal, and homosexuality was a crime, Little Richard’s popularity embodied the perceived dangers of the new generation’s music. There was particular concern that young people would be influenced into alternative lifestyles including via mixing across lines of race and class at dance halls.” Rebecca Sheehan, “A-lop-bam-boom: Little Richard’s saucy style underpins today’s hits,” *The Conversation*, May 10, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/a-lop-bam-boom-little-richards-saucy-style-underpins-todays-hits-138263>.

performances and by ignoring non-heteronormative sexualities, work by artists such as Deltron is never wholly revolutionary – they may abolish classism and racism but run the risk of recreating patriarchies and heterosexisms. The queer, hopeful futurity of Monáe’s work fills these gaps by creating spaces wherein marginalized communities can define and move themselves as an act of refusal. Dancing, loving, and pleasure-seeking as community creates the feeling of *home* in one’s body.

To dismiss these flights of fancy as mere escapism misses the point. Some might squabble over the success or failures of specific *home*-making attempts, but Afrofuturism is always successful in that it imagines Black survival through a lens of creativity, community, and perhaps most of all, fun.

Seminal Black, queer sci-fi writer Samuel Delaney pronounces the necessity of futurist speculation: “We need images of tomorrow; and our people need them more than most. Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics, and politics beyond our control. One is tied up in a web, in a net, with no way to struggle free. Only by having clear and vital images of the *many* alternatives, good and bad, of where one *can* go, will we have any control over the way we may actually get there in a reality tomorrow will bring all too quickly.”¹²⁰

The revolutionary sensibilities explored in this chapter are not limited to Afrofuturism. Chapter 3 examines Kendrick Lamar’s 2015 album *To Pimp A Butterfly* as evidencing another revolutionary response to the oppressions of neoliberal racial capitalist modernity: Black liberation theology.

¹²⁰ Samuel Delaney, *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, rev. ed. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 14.

Chapter 3

“If God got us then we gon' be alright”: Black Liberation Theology as a Solution to Neoliberal Alienation in Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly*

Alls my life I has to fight, nigga
Alls my life I
Hard times like, yah!
Bad trips like, yah!
Nazareth, I'm fucked up
Homie, you fucked up
But if God got us then we gon' be alright
- ‘Alright’ by Kendrick Lamar¹

Introduction

The emancipatory moves discussed in the previous chapter are not limited to Afrofuturism. Historically, the ‘changing same’ of Black artistic resistance to contemporary struggle has often adopted the language and ontologies of religion. From enslavement through to the present, religion has inspired visions of survival and redress both in a utopian future and the contemporary historical moment. This chapter focusses on religiously inspired political resistance against one form of 21st century oppression: neoliberal ideology.

Any comprehensive investigation into the history of American racism – and resistance to this racism – requires a discussion of religion.² Throughout the slavery era, ideas such as the Curse of Ham, a belief in the ‘civilising’ potential of religion, and various biblical justifications for racial hierarchies were adopted by enslavers to preserve the oppressive status quo. But while Christianity often justified racial hierarchies, for enslaved people themselves Christianity provided an avenue to meaning-making independent of white control. The formation of the Black church, and its separation from white America, allowed for a form of self-definition distinct from the white conception of Blackness as commodity. Cornel West explains:

[B]lack people were *confined* to a perpetual and inheritable state of domination and *defined* as dishonored persons with no public worth, social standing, or legal status—only economic value, mere commodities to be bought, sold, or used. In this regard, the

¹ Kendrick Lamar, “Alright,” track 7 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

² “Given the intricate role religion has played in sustaining racial hierarchies, no attempt to study racial progress would be complete without mention of religion.” Shaonta’ E. Allen, “Doing Black Christianity: Reframing Black Church scholarship,” *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 10 (2019): 11.

black church signified and signifies the collective effort of an exploited and oppressed, degraded and despised, dominated and downtrodden people of African descent to come to terms with the absurd *in* America and the absurd *as* America.³

Religion, therefore, served a profoundly existential function for enslaved African Americans.

Beyond the purely existential, Black churches also aided in the formation of a powerful activist tradition. Not only was the social death characteristic of American slavery stymied by the communalism of the church, but it was in these private spaces where key forms of Black political consciousness, tied to both an African past and experience with a marginalized American present, were forged.⁴ Therefore, from its beginnings, African American Christianity was centred on a worldly resistance that would heavily influence activist movements for centuries to come.⁵

Not unrelated to this political tradition is the profound influence of faith – and faith institutions – on musical expression. As Samuel Floyd argues: “Through the spirituals, slaves made the Christian religion their own; through the spirituals, they affirmed their traditional worldview (modified by the realities of slavery and the myths and rituals of Christian religion).”⁶ While much of this religious musical tradition was passed down through the church, the end of slavery brought dramatic shifts to the world of Black religion and music. With greater (albeit heavily limited) freedoms, the post-slavery era afforded more opportunities for the rise of a ‘profane’ expressive culture beyond the four walls of the church – with blues being the most cited example of ‘profane’ music.⁷ However,

³ Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 4.

⁴ It is important to stress the hybridity of Black Christianity. An African cultural heritage was not lost on arrival to the ‘New World’. Instead, it was synthesised into new surroundings. “African styles of worship, ritualistic forms, and belief structures were fused in a hybrid Christianity with New World cultural embellishments.” Gary R. Peck, “Black Radical Consciousness and the Black Christian Experience: Toward a Critical Sociology of Afro-American Religion,” *Sociological Analysis* 43, no. 2 (1982): 162.

⁵ Michael Emerson and Jason Shelton describe this revolutionary thrust as a key building block of Black Christianity: “Those believers with a shared social experience could come together around not simply a single mode of belief and object of faith but also the aim of liberation. Thus, *liberation became a norm that fueled Christian faith for the enslaved.*” Michael O. Emerson and Jason E. Shelton, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: How Racial Discrimination Shapes Religious Convictions* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 36.

⁶ Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 41.

⁷ The blues’ emphasis on alcohol, Lucifer, and sexuality drew criticism from an African American religious hegemony. Debates around the blues-women of the 1920s best highlights this tension. As Angela Davis argues: “[T]he construction of this women’s community entailed bold challenges to institutions and ideologies within the African-American community, as well as in the dominant culture. Women’s blues contested black bourgeois notions of ‘high’ culture that belittled working-class popular music. They also challenged the most powerful African-American institution, the Christian church. In order for the blues to be extricated from a hierarchy that established Christianity as the community’s overarching moral authority, they had to affirm, in a self-conscious manner, their own cultural integrity.” Angela Y. Davis, *Blues legacies and Black feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 120-1.

and importantly for an investigation into the religious qualities of rap music, the development of music untethered from the church should not be mistaken as a rejection of the spiritual.

Fundamentally, these post-slavery musical traditions highlight the existence of the sacred within the everyday, existing independently of religious institutions and the norms of the church.

In the neoliberal era, the spiritual significance of popular music has only grown. In the aftermath of Civil Rights, the urban flight of middle-class Black churches left a vacuum for religious leadership in predominantly poor Black communities. Rap music, Ralph Watkins argues, helped fill this void: “When Tupac came out with *2Pacalypse Now* in 1991, he essentially became a new Martin Luther King Jr. for pastors locked in middle-class African American churches who were incapable of crossing the class divide as did Martin Luther King Jr. and his peers.”⁸ Many ‘90s era rappers adopted a theological message of worldly liberation – not in the afterlife alone – in a language and form often deemed incompatible with the sacredness of religion. This combining of a sacred message with a profane aesthetic was, indeed, the power of rap’s message. In the context of a neoliberalizing, post-industrial America increasingly characterized by drug and gang economies, mass incarceration, and a lingering sense of Black abandonment, (some) rappers became modern preachers connecting a marginalized community to an empathetic and revolutionary God.⁹

The two predominant religious influences on rap prior to the 2000s were the Nation of Islam and the Five-Percent Nation.¹⁰ Some of the genre’s most prominent voices during this ‘golden-age’ – including figures such as Ice Cube, Q-Tip, and Rakim – incorporated these American Islamic theologies into their musical stylings. Adopting an Islamic message similarly solidified rap (symbolically, at least) as a genre detached from hegemonic (white) cultures.¹¹ Less interested in appeasing white America than in expressing oppositional perspectives, American Islam’s counterhegemonic qualities facilitated rap’s quest for self-definition: “As historic analogues, both African American Islam and hip-hop exposed codified as well as unwritten myths, ideologies, and

⁸ Ralph B. Watkins, *Hip-Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 51.

⁹ As Julius Bailey argues: “[H]ip hop stars like Tupac and KRS-One in the ‘90s and Jay-Z and Kanye West in the last decade have undoubtedly contributed to the ongoing dialogue with the community that attempts to define what it means, in the 21st century, to be religious, spiritual, or, in extreme cases, godlike.” Julius D. Bailey, “Existentialist Transvaluation and Hip-Hop’s Syncretic Religiosity,” in *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, ed. by Bernard Freeman, Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), 53.

¹⁰ For more on the influence of American Islam on rap, see: Felicia Mikayawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop’s Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

¹¹ “[R]eflective of the hegemonic place afforded to Christianity within the United States, Islam played the most overt role in the formation of rap music, and thus helped to shore up early definitions of hip hop as an oppositional discursive practice in relation to the American cultural mainstream.” Josef Sorett, “‘Believe Me, This Pimp Game is Very Religious’: Toward a Religious History of Hip Hop,” *Culture and Religion: Hip Hop and Religion* 10, no. 1 (2009): 14.

stereotypes. They rejected the normative logic and realities of dominant society, creating alternative formulations that were far more relevant to the lives and experiences of black people.”¹² As the genre grew in popularity into the late ‘90s, American Islamic affiliations slowly gave way to an orthodox Sunni Islam and rappers such as Yasiin Bey (formerly Mos Def) and Lupe Fiasco. Despite shifting institutional affiliation, the counterhegemonic sentiment remained: “These Sunni-influenced artists share with their Five Percenter counterparts a salient concern for the inequalities and injustices that beset Black people and denizens of the post-industrial urban landscape.”¹³ Islam has thus long held a deep relevance in the rap landscape.

As we enter the 21st century, perhaps in response to the increased demonization of Muslim-Americans in the wake of 9/11, and certainly as a result of rap’s entrance into the mainstream, Christianity has grown to be rap’s dominant religious force.¹⁴ It is within this Christian inspired musical tradition that I place Kendrick Lamar’s 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (from this point referred to as *TPAB* – pronounced “t-pab”).¹⁵ *TPAB* depicts the semi-autobiographical rise-fall-rise again of Compton, California rapper Kendrick Lamar. Where Lamar’s two previous albums (*Section.80* and *good kid, m.A.A.d city*) described life for a young Black man under the pressures of structural racism in his home town, *TPAB* finds Kendrick in a wholly new environment. No longer the average teenager contemplating life, sex, friendship, and God, K. Dot (his stage name in his younger days) is now Kendrick Lamar, globally renowned rapper. Consequently, Lamar encounters worlds that his life in poverty had previously shielded him from. But while the setting has changed, many themes remain consistent. Lamar continues to engage with the allures of wealth, sex, evil and God, but from the perspective of someone who has come face-to-face with these temptations rather than someone aspiring to them from afar.

Capturing Lamar’s newfound status as global superstar, *TPAB* offers insight into the resultant alienation of neoliberal capitalist ideologies. When thinking about neoliberalism, there is a tendency to emphasise its economic and political manifestations. However, as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, neoliberalism is as much ideological as it is economic, manifesting in a celebration of individualism and wealth accumulation. By engaging with themes of consumption, materialism, and abstract notions of meritocracy within a deeply unequal society, *TPAB* illuminates both the social

¹² Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, “A Jihad of Words: The Evolution of African American Islam and Contemporary Hip-Hop,” in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 66.

¹³ Joseph Winters, “Unstrange Bedfellows: Hip Hop and Religion,” *Religion Compass* 5, no. 6 (2011): 265.

¹⁴ Christina Zanfagna offers a detailed ethnographic account of this transitional period and the religious significance of rap music in LA. See: Christina Zanfagna, *Holy Hip Hop in the City of Angels* (California: University of California Press, 2017).

¹⁵ Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

and psychological consequences of neoliberal ideology. Moreover, Lamar counters these divisive ideologies with the help of a divinely inspired praxis. In other words, *TPAB* not only highlights the corrosive effects of neoliberal capitalism on Black unity, it also evidences the revolutionary potential of Black liberation theology – a theology centred on emancipation through community works.

Through a close-reading of the album, I argue that Kendrick’s religiosity acts as a counter-weight to the shallow and ultimately dangerous allure of neoliberal ideology. Employing a textual analysis that traces the sequential narrative of the album – often going song-by-song – I seek to unpack *TPAB*’s detailing of Kendrick’s path to accepting God, and with it, a praxis of Black communal empowerment attuned to the emancipatory goals of the Black radical tradition.¹⁶ The album is thus both a deeply critical view of neoliberal ideology and an insight into the potential for Black faith to overturn the divisive consequences of this world-view.

Black Liberation Theology and Hip Hop Theology

The history of African American Christianity has attracted a great deal of scholarly interest. For the purposes of this chapter, the following areas are of most relevance: 1) ‘Black liberation theology’ that emphasises the politically engaged nature of African American Christianity; and 2) literature focussing on the religious in rap.

Black liberation theology

Any discussion of Black theology must engage with James Cone. Perhaps the most prominent scholar in this field, Cone’s significance lies in his emphasis on the modality of ‘race’ in theological scholarship. Claims of a theological objectivity are, according to Cone, false. One’s personal experience necessarily informs one’s reading of the bible, one’s connection to Christ, and ultimately, one’s theology. As Cone argues in *God of the Oppressed* (1975): “I am a *black* theologian! I therefore must approach the subject of theology in the light of the black Church and what that means in a society dominated by white people.”¹⁷

¹⁶ This is just one of many potential interpretations of *TPAB*. Part of the ongoing relevance of the album is due to its complexity and layers of meaning. Lamar alludes to this complexity in many of his interviews: “It’s so intricate, there’s layers upon layers. With my first album, you have those singles, those catchy catchphrases and things like that. Which is cool; I made it work to the best of my ability So with this second project, now that I got my feet wet, I said I’m going to define my own rules. It had to feel organically right. That was my approach”. Miles Marshall Lewis, “Kendrick Lamar Talks Politics, Spirituality, Music + More [INTERVIEW],” *Ebony*, Sep 18, 2019, <https://www.ebony.com/exclusive/kendrick-talks-politics-spirituality-music-more-333/>.

¹⁷ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 4.

In the context of American racism, Black Christianity has routinely functioned as both a site of hope and footing for political action. Cone's politically engaged theology, what he calls 'Black liberation theology', centres on this revolutionary sensibility: "God is making plain that God's kingdom is not simply a heavenly reality; it is an earthly reality as well. Human beings were not created to work in somebody else's fields, to pick somebody else's cotton, and to live in ghettos among rats and filth. They were created for liberation – for fellowship with God and the projection of self into the future, grounded in historical possibilities."¹⁸ Black theology is, fundamentally, a theology of liberation in an historical present, not in the hope of an utopian afterlife.

By heeding Cone's insights, we can better understand the politically engaged nature of Black Christianity since its birth. Prominent abolitionists from Frederick Douglass to Sojourner Truth brought deep-seated religious convictions to their activism. Over a century later, Martin Luther King Jr's Southern Christian Leadership Conference embodied this same revolutionary tradition. Even the Black Panther Party's secular activism worked closely with local churches while also having profound links to the activist traditions of the Southern Black church.¹⁹ Furthermore, Black Christianity's political thrust goes beyond the purely organised and institutional. Religious communalism itself, as much as any single leader or organisation, fosters a resistant consciousness that transcends the individual. The political nature of Black Christianity works in complex ways both within and outside the church, through both 'legitimate' (churches) and 'illegitimate' (music) channels. It is within this history of a Black oppositional religiosity that I place *TPAB*.

For all its insights, this literature is underdeveloped in the context of neoliberal capitalism. In other words, linking Black religiosity to political activism is very common, but religion as a specific resistance to neoliberalism (both economic and ideological) – as seen in *TPAB* – is rarer.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that although religion, for Lamar and many others, is an instrument to ward off the alienation of a distinctly neoliberal capitalism, it frequently has the opposite effect. Whether through the rise of prosperity evangelists or the natural effect of church teachings in a neoliberal age, many Christians – Black and white – adopt a theology that promotes individualism and wealth accumulation ahead of social justice.²⁰ Jason Hackworth labels this trend

¹⁸ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 144.

¹⁹ Donna Murch details the religious influences of the Oakland Black Panthers: "By ministering to basic needs for food, shelter, education, and health care, the BPP highlighted the shortfalls of state welfare and its failure to remedy urban poverty. In a striking reversal from the Party's earlier militancy, during this later era of 'survival pending revolution,' the Panthers worked together with local churches and civil rights groups to launch a series of municipal campaigns that registered thousands of new black voters." Donna J. Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 10.

²⁰ This 'prosperity theology' is quite prominent in rap. For example, Kanye West has routinely drawn on his faith as part of a broad thematic obsession with wealth and power. He states in 'On God': "The IRS want they

‘religious neoliberalism’, a concept that holds a glaring contradiction: “In many ways, religion has an awkward at least, countervailing at most, relationship with neoliberalism. All of the world’s major religions are at least superficially devoted to themes that do not fit well with neoliberalism – e.g., cooperation, community, reciprocity, love.”²¹ For all its resistant potential, Christianity is too often embedded within a strictly neoliberal worldview to be able to challenge it.

Religion and rap

Beyond the explicitly activist, Black religiosity has also had a tremendous influence on musical cultures. From the spirituals of the slave era to the soul music of the 1960s and beyond, African American musical history has always been spiritually invested. Despite contemporaneous accusations of ‘devil’s music’, genres from blues to R&B adopted the religious in both covert and overt ways, constantly challenging the false dichotomy of the sacred and profane.²² However, rap music, with its liberal use of profanity, apparent glorification of drugs (a topic I return to in the following chapter), violence, and sex, brought new challenges to the religious listener. But as with the premature proclamations of ‘devil’s music’ in the age of Robert Johnson and Ma Rainey, the demonization of rap has proven to be reactionary.

Scholarship on rap has refuted the sacred-profane binary. Daniel White Hodge, for example, argues for the intimacy of the two categories through what he calls the ‘neo-secular sacred’: “The neo-secular sacred theological concept argues that there is both good and evil present in our lives. When one begins to deny the presence of one or the other, one essentially denies the self, because like the sacred, the secular is a constant within all of us.”²³ Rap, it could be argued, necessarily engages with the profane. The first-person narratives of a musical genre born of the social crises of post-industrialism has necessitated a dwelling in what a previous generation would have labelled profane. However, the simple presence of the profane does not negate rap’s sacredness. On the contrary, and as Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marlon Hall argue, “the moral paradox of Hip Hop is not the absence of spirituality; it is evidence of it. Hip Hop, like all other human endeavors, shows evidence of the

fifty plus our tithes / Man, that’s over half of the pie / I felt dry, that’s on God / That’s why I charge the prices that I charge / I can’t be out here dancin’ with the stars / No, I cannot let my family starve / I go hard, that’s on God”. Kanye West, “On God,” track 5 on *JESUS IS KING*, GOOD Music, 2019.

²¹ Jason Hackworth, “Religious Neoliberalism,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Neoliberalism*, ed. Damien Cahill, Melinda Cooper, Martijn Konings and David Primrose (Los Angeles: Sage Publications Ltd, 2018), 323.

²² David Brackett explores the hybridity of African spiritualism and Christianity in the work of blues legend Robert Johnson. See: David Brackett, “Preaching Blues,” *Black Music Research Journal* 32, no. 1 (2012): 113-36.

²³ Daniel W. Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 182-3.

friction between right and wrong and the tension between good and evil.”²⁴ Rap engages with the good and bad without claims to an easy, banal sacredness.

Among the most significant theoretical insights into hip hop theology is Anthony Pinn’s idea of ‘Complex Subjectivity’. A reaction to historically narrow conceptions of religion (i.e. things tied to scripture or the church), ‘complex subjectivity’ instead seeks out the religious in all facets of existence.²⁵ Using this construction, the religious in rap is less about scripture than meaning-making and identity. Pinn and Monica Miller explain:

By religion, we mean the manner in which the existential and metaphysical arrangements and rhetoric of meaning are developed, worked out, and (re)arranged. That is to say, we do not use this conceptual category as proxy or code for institutions, doctrines, beliefs and creeds Rather, we simply mean to understand religion as a conceptual and taxonomical ‘place holder’ of sorts, a way by means of which humans parse out and explore the social world, the self, and human experience²⁶.

Miller expands on Pinn’s ‘complex subjectivity’ by arguing that he is too focussed on abstractions as opposed to the ‘use’ of religion.²⁷ Instead, Miller argues for “a redescription of the religious by focusing on what *uses* of religion ... accomplish, authenticate, and authorize in the cultural activity of Hip-Hop. ... In many cases, the use of religion in these works doesn’t *mean* anything in the strict sense. Rather religion *functions* as a means by which to *authorize* particular social interests.”²⁸ Here, religion is more about activity than internal meaning. “The question is not what *is* religious about certain activity; rather, what are the effects of various uses of the religious?”²⁹ By focussing on the

²⁴ Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan and Marlon Hall, *Wake Up! Hip-Hop Christianity and the Black Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 58.

²⁵ Anthony Pinn defines ‘religion’ as “a general quest for complex subjectivity in the face of the terror and dread associated with life within a historical context marked by dehumanization, objectification, abuse, intolerance, and captured most forcefully in the sign/symbol of the ‘ghetto.’ The quest for complex subjectivity that is the elemental nature of religion involves a desired movement from life as corporeal object controlled by oppressive and essentializing forces, to life as a complex conveyer of cultural meaning with a detailed and creative identity.” Anthony B. Pinn, “‘Handlin’ My Business’: Exploring Rap’s Humanist Sensibilities,” in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 86.

²⁶ Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn. “Introduction: Context and Other Considerations,” in *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, ed. Bernard Freeman, Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), 3.

²⁷ Benjamin Rolsky describes Miller’s understanding of religion as focussed on the ‘how’, as opposed to the ‘what’, of religion: “Miller is interested in how discourses about ‘religion’ serve their speakers in acquiring social and religious capital within a broader discursive context. In short, she investigates the ‘how’ of ‘religion’ as a product of human production rather than the ‘what’ of its phenomenological description and composition.” Benjamin L. Rolsky, “Hip-Hop and the Study of Religion,” *Method Theory in the Study of Religion* 27, no. 2 (2015): 177.

²⁸ Monica R. Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 69-70.

²⁹ Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop*, 98.

activity of religion, its place in the everyday and 'political', Miller locates rap within the kind of religiosity espoused by Cone: an active, politically revolutionary one. It is within this effect-based, non-institutional religious tradition that I locate Kendrick Lamar and *TPAB*.

Kendrick Lamar's Theological Flexibility

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth was born in 1987 in Compton, California. The effects of structural racism, particularly in the form of state violence and underground economies, were ingrained into Lamar's consciousness from birth. When asked about his childhood, Lamar explained: "It was tough. I speak from the standpoint of a young boy trying to escape the negative influences, whether it's gang violence or police brutality. That's something I had to deal with my whole life. Everybody around me was influenced by that, from my family to my closest friends. I tried my best to manoeuvre in and out of that negative world but it was tough, man. I bumped my head a few times."³⁰ Living these struggles profoundly informed Lamar's religious and political consciousness.

Lamar did not grow up in a church. Instead, his earliest engagement with spirituality came through his grandmother and mother, only to then develop more strongly in his teens in response to the very social conditions his music confronts. As reported in the *New York Times*, Lamar "had previously been saved as a teenager in the parking lot of a Food 4 Less ... when the grandmother of a friend approached him after a tragedy, asking if he had accepted God. 'One of my homeboys got smoked,' Mr. Lamar recalled. 'She had seen that we weren't right in the head. That was her being an angel for us.'"³¹ Lamar expanded on this experience and his overall religiosity in an interview with *Ebony* magazine in 2019:

EBONY: Where did you get your spiritual foundation?

KL: I think the foundation was planted by my grandma, to my mother. I mean, my moms didn't raise us in the church like that. ... Whether we was inside a church or not, my mother always kept that faith inside of us. The more I started going through my own things in life, my faith got put to the test, and I had to believe that God is real in my

³⁰ Andrew Nosnitsky, "Kendrick Lamar Talks Rap, Religion and the Reagan Era," *MTV News*, July 11, 2011, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2694080/kendrick-lamar-talks-rap-religion-and-the-reagan-era/>.

³¹ Joe Coscarelli, "Kendrick Lamar on His New Album and the Weight of Clarity," *The New York Times*, Mar 16, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/arts/music/kendrick-lamar-on-his-new-album-and-the-weight-of-clarity.html>.

heart, my lord and savior Jesus Christ, and I can't run from that. I'll always put that in my music or it just wouldn't be right.³²

The experiential nature of Lamar's Christianity is evidenced here. Not only were his religious foundations outside of the church, but his faith is intertwined with the socio-political realities of structural racism. His religion is never detached from the 'real' world.

As well as being heavily invested in the 'real', Lamar's religiosity is particularly notable for its fluidity. Observing theological shifts from his 2012 album *good kid, m.A.A.d city* to his 2017 album *DAMN.* highlights this fluidity. *good kid* opens with a group recounting the sinner's prayer, foreshadowing the album's major theme of survival amongst the realities of poverty. Here, as Olga Segura observes: "Lamar is at the start of his faith. He is hopeful. For him, in God, all things are possible. No matter how much we fail, if we repent, if we continue to acknowledge how we fail, how we fall, God will save us."³³ In *good kid*, salvation is found in repentance. However, in *TPAB*, as I will soon show, this action-less spirituality is no longer sufficient. Instead, Lamar's salvation requires a translation of faith into works. By the time Lamar released *DAMN.*, his theology had shifted into something more aligned with Black Israelism.³⁴ Lamar's God in *DAMN.* is no longer satisfied with repentance or works: now, God is vengeful and has punished people for perceived historic wrongdoings (a major tenet of Black Israelite theology).³⁵ My reason for discussing this fluidity is not to imply a contradictory theology in Lamar's work, but rather, to note the reality of a lived, experiential faith. Unconcerned with the abstract theologies of one creed or another, Lamar's religiosity centres around making sense of the world and creating change.³⁶ Reminiscent of Cone's and Miller's theorizations above, Lamar's religiosity is about engagement and Black liberation.

This focus on how Lamar's religiosity informs his political imagination – in particular, his anti-neoliberal critiques – is missing from much of the scholarly and journalistic literature. The music

³² Lewis, "Kendrick Lamar Talks Politics, Spirituality, Music."

³³ Olga Segura, "From 'Good Kid' to 'DAMN.' Kendrick Lamar shows faith is constantly changing," *America: The Jesuit Review*, Oct 19, 2017, <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2017/10/19/good-kid-damn-kendrick-lamar-shows-faith-constantly-changing>.

³⁴ In 'YAH', Kendrick somewhat controversially stated: "I'm a Israelite, don't call me Black no mo' / That word is only a color, it ain't facts no mo'". Kendrick Lamar, "YAH.," track 3 on *DAMN.*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2017. For more on Lamar's Black Israelism, see: Sam Kestenbaum, "'I'm an Israelite': Kendrick Lamar's spiritual search, Hebrew Israelite religion, and the politics of a celebrity encounter," in *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning*, ed. Christopher M. Driscoll, Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 274-299; Spencer Drew, "Hebrew Israelite covenantal theology and Kendrick Lamar's constructive project in *DAMN.*," in *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning*, ed. Christopher M. Driscoll, Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Routledge, 2020), 321-333.

³⁵ For a history of the U.S. Black Israelite Movement since the late 19th century, see: Jacob S. Dorman, *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁶ Lamar is, as R.S. Naifeh has argued, "theologically idiosyncratic". R.S. Naifeh, "Kendrick Lamar's Real God," *Christ and Pop Culture*, Aug 7, 2017, <https://christandpopculture.com/kendrick-lamars-real-god/>.

journalism on *TPAB* is diverse, a testament to the album's complexity. Much of this literature focusses on the social and political resonance of the album – with particular attention paid to its influence on the then burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement.³⁷ This approach, however, often ignores the religious elements of the album and its introspective thrust.³⁸ The existential element of Lamar's religiosity has also received much analysis, with a general focus on his engagement with feelings of anxiety brought on by a kind of urban despair and closeness to death (a theme I return to in Chapter 5). Matthew Linder's argument is typical: "[W]hen Kendrick participates with something that transcends the self, namely, God, his anxiety and guilt are diminished, first, by self-affirmation of his black body, second, with his acceptance of divine forgiveness, and lastly, the ability to face death and place hope in the peculiarity of Christian resurrection."³⁹ Unfortunately, this existential analysis is also too narrow in that it ignores the broadly activist in favour of personal meaning-making – an approach which is problematic since Lamar's religiosity is both existential *and* profoundly counterhegemonic. My analysis seeks to bring together these two elements (the political/activist and the religious) within (and against) a specifically neoliberal context.

Structure

TPAB can be divided into a conventional three act structure (alluded to by Lamar in a poem that ends the album, which I discuss later): Caterpillar, Cocoon, and Butterfly.⁴⁰ This structure helps

³⁷ Not only does the album explicitly engage with issues of police violence and structural racism, but, as explained in the opening anecdote of this thesis, the hook to 'Alright' was adopted by Black Lives Matter protesters. For more on the album's social critiques, see: Will Fulton, "The Performer as Historian: Black Messiah, To Pimp a Butterfly, and the Matter of Albums," *American Music Review* 44, no. 2 (2015): 1-11; Colin Outhwaite, "'You Crossed My Mind... Before?': An Intertextual Analysis of songs from To Pimp A Butterfly," (Honors Thesis, Edith Cowan University, 2020); Jamilah King, "The Improbable Story of How Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright' Became a Protest Album," *Mic*, Feb 12, 2016, <https://www.mic.com/articles/134764/the-improbable-story-of-how-kendrick-lamar-s-alright-became-a-protest-anthem#:~:text=a%20Protest%20Anthem-.The%20Improbable%20Story%20of%20How%20Kendrick,Alright%22%20Became%20a%20Protest%20Anthem&text=It%20was%20a%20warm%20Midwestern,gathered%20at%20Cleveland%20State%20University.&text=The%20police%20responded%20by%20pepper,more%20protesters%20to%20the%20scene>; Clover Hope, "The Overwhelming Blackness of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*," *Jezebel*, Mar 17, 2015, <https://themuse.jezebel.com/the-overwhelming-blackness-of-kendrick-lamars-butterfly-1691770606>.

³⁸ Jacob Sillyman explains how an overemphasis on the album's 'political' elements has often left under-examined its more personal, introspective elements: "To view the work in this manner leaves unresolved and perhaps irreconcilable the politically problematic aspects of the work. It also understates the major artistic characteristic of the work, in which Lamar purposefully complicates the work's political signaling by setting into conflict the speaker's own sense of self and interiority with the work's social responsibility and message." Jacob Sillyman, "Loving You Is Complicated: The Aesthetics of Personal and Political Tension in Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*," (Honors Thesis, University of South Carolina, 2017), 4.

³⁹ Matthew Linder, "'Am I Worth It?': The Forgiveness, Death, and Resurrection of Kendrick Lamar," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 33, no. 1 (2017): 108.

⁴⁰ By approaching the album in this manner, I am borrowing from Cole Cuchna who identifies 4 distinct acts and an epilogue. My structure is right for a spiritual journey, Cuchna's is right for a leadership journey. See:

illuminate the consciousness of the main character as he transforms from a hyper-individualistic, neoliberal, consumptive caterpillar (Act 1) to a community driven butterfly (Act 3). Tracing these acts sequentially via a close reading of the album takes us from an illumination of the corrosive effects of neoliberal ideology on Black unity to a Christian resistance built on self-love and Black community.

It is also necessary, here, to differentiate between Kendrick (as character in the album) and Lamar (as narrator and real historical figure). The album depicts a narrative of Kendrick's growth, but throughout, Lamar comments on the events being depicted. While the album is in large part autobiographical, the narration functions as a kind of retroactive observation by Lamar on the events depicted.

Act 1 - Caterpillar: Embodied Neoliberalism

Act 1 depicts Kendrick (character) in the immediate aftermath of signing his first record deal. A far cry from the stories of impoverishment in Lamar's previous albums, the Kendrick of *TPAB* has entered the world of global superstardom and come face to face with the temptations, stresses, joys, and anxieties associated with this position. Even though the narrative of this act is one of empowerment through achieving one's dreams, the meta-narrative is a critique of a life dissociated from loved ones, community, and ultimately, from God. In this act, in direct contrast to the rest of the album, God is generally absent, and it is in this absence that the temptations of a neoliberal existence get the better of Kendrick leading to the adoption of a self-aggrandizing, braggadocious, individualist mentality that enflames Black division – and Kendrick's own mental distress.

The first act is concerned with the falsity of the American dream – a concept given material representation in the form of Uncle Sam. Having been socialised in capitalist America whilst not having access its spoils, Kendrick has been taught that all of life's desires will be granted once the American dream of social mobility has been accessed. Liberation, according to the Kendrick of Act 1, is tied directly to his ability to consume. While the adoption of this neoliberal ideology has a veneer of fulfilment, Lamar (narrator) subtly critiques the individualism and consumerism we as listeners are witnessing, guiding us to the realisation that this mentality is far more dangerous than it appears. It is only with Act 2 that Kendrick realises this capitalist dream to be a mirage. Rather than being happy and fulfilled, it made him arrogant and self-serving, selfish and sexually entitled, retributive and divisive, when he could have been using his position to unite *all* Black people.

"Dissecting Kendrick Lamar: Exploring To Pimp A Butterfly," Youtube Video, posted by "88Nine Radio Milwaukee," Aug 31, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBSmEELNzF8>.

My argument here is not intended to contest the self-evident truth – as a great deal of rap attests to – that there is an empowering element to accumulating wealth.⁴¹ Rather, my focus is on Kendrick’s (mis)use of this wealth. Kendrick’s sense of empowerment in Act 1 is built on consumption. In the moment, this existence provides Kendrick with a flickering sense of satisfaction that quickly burns out, leaving depression, alienation, and division (across gender, class, gang-affiliation, age) in its wake. Only by embracing a liberation theology that puts faith into works (which occurs in Act 3), does Kendrick undo the division he created throughout Act 1.

‘Wesley’s Theory’⁴²

The album opens with ‘Wesley’s Theory’, a song depicting Kendrick’s emotional and mental state immediately after signing his first record deal; signing with a record label is Kendrick’s avenue to the American dream. The song not only depicts Kendrick’s new surroundings and the temptations that arise therein, it also lists the many things he hopes to achieve with his new-found fame. As Lamar explained in an interview: “You know what’s crazy about this record? ... it’s actually a real true inspiration because before I got signed, these the things I said I want to do. ‘I want to get this, I want to get that, I want to take the homies, show ‘em around the world, do that, do that, and say middle fingers up to everybody. We on.’”⁴³ In expressing the desires associated with a life of wealth, this song reflects the opening stages of Kendrick’s divisive neoliberal mentality.

‘Wesley’s Theory’ starts with the crackling of a record player and a sample from the theme song to 1974 Blaxploitation film *Every Nigger Is a Star*. The line “every nigga is a star” is repeated 4 times before being cut off by a James Brown-esque “HIT ME”. Sonically, this shift is jarring and takes us directly from a nostalgic sense of early 1970s Black consciousness into a much more modern, crisp, g-funk inspired sound that evokes the individualist ‘90s-era West Coast gangsta scene. This break is not inconsequential. Sampling – a technique whereby musicians repurpose elements from older songs – carries significant cultural meaning. As Colin Outhwaite argues: “Due to the cultural baggage that each musical reference carries within its place in time, the act of sampling enables artists to recontextualise cultural and socio-political themes to address concerns of the present.”⁴⁴ The use of

⁴¹ I agree with Greg Dimitriadis when he writes: “[T]o struggle for the rewards of capitalism in a deeply unfair society can be a profoundly allegorical endeavor. The struggle for material rewards in such an unequal society can both highlight persistent inequities and offer ways of vicariously coping with them”. Greg Dimitriadis, “Hip Hop and Humanism: Thinking Against New (and Old) Fundamentalisms,” in *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, ed. Bernard Freeman, Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), 147.

⁴² Kendrick Lamar, “Wesley’s Theory,” track 1 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

⁴³ “Kendrick forgives his haters + says his album is not a classic YET!,” YouTube Video, posted by “HOT 97,” Apr 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkedvCA8330>.

⁴⁴ Outhwaite, “‘You Crossed My Mind... Before?’,” 3.

this sample followed by the hard cut into a gangsta aesthetic introduces the listener to an individual-communal split that will be a dominant theme for the entirety of the album. The major difference between the song's opening 30 seconds and the rest is its espousal of a different kind of liberatory Black politics. At the start, we hear a cry of Black communal resistance. After the sudden break, we hear how these communalist, Black-love mentalities have given way to a sense of individual empowerment through wealth accumulation, a sentiment more characteristic of the neoliberal era. Salvation, we learn by the end of the album, is not found in the individual, but in the divinely inspired Black communal love typified by the song's opening refrain.

The song then essentially lists all the things Kendrick hopes to achieve with his new-found wealth. The phrase "When I get signed, homie" introduces each stanza of the first verse, foreshadowing the ways Kendrick will abuse his power throughout Act 1: "When I get signed, homie, I'ma act a fool / Hit the dance floor, strobe lights in the room / Snatch your little secretary bitch for the homies / Blue-eyed devil with a fat-ass mouth." Such a mentality of 'passing women around' for the sexual gratification of Kendrick's friends is a particularly troubling depiction, something Tracey Sharpley-Whiting observed as being relatively common in the late-'90s hip hop culture Lamar evokes through his adoption of g-funk sounds.⁴⁵ As well as misogyny, Kendrick's individualism is also seen to perpetuate gang-violence: "When I get signed, homie, I'ma buy a strap / Straight from the CIA, set it on my lap / Take a few M-16s to the hood / Pass 'em all out on the block, what's good?" Here, Kendrick imagines distributing guns (M-16s), thus perpetuating gang-divisions. The wealth Kendrick has attained motivates him create division rather than do good.

As Kendrick pontificates on all the 'joys' and riches that await him, he meets Uncle Sam, who addresses Kendrick directly: "What you want you? A house or a car? / Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar? / Anything, see, my name is Uncle Sam, I'm your dog / Motherfucker, you can live at the mall". The reference to "Forty acres and a mule" – the unfulfilled promise of land ownership and means of subsistence given to recently freed slaves – is significant. It speaks to the ongoing marginalization of African Americans from the economic mainstream and shows Kendrick's aspirations of wealth to be intimately linked with his experience of racism. Now in a position of authority, Kendrick appears within reaching distance of these reparations, and thus finally benefitting from racial capitalism. Uncle Sam continues:

⁴⁵ "The politics of respectability and the protection of womanhood has been thoroughly replaced in black youth culture by variations of male bonding found prominently in an 'it ain't no fun if my homies can't have none' mentality." Tracy D. Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 79.

I know your kind (That's why I'm kind)⁴⁶
 Don't have receipts (Oh, man, that's fine)
 Pay me later, wear those gators
 Cliché? Then say, 'Fuck your haters'
 I can see the baller in you, I can see the dollar in you
 Little white lies, but it's no white-collar in you
 But it's whatever though because I'm still followin' you
 Because you make me live forever, baby
 Count it all together, baby
 Then hit the register and make me feel better, baby
 Your horoscope is a gemini, two sides
 So you better cop everything two times
 Two coupes, two chains, two C-notes
 Too much ain't enough, both we know
 Christmas, tell 'em what's on your wish list
 Get it all, you deserve it, Kendrick

Uncle Sam, the symbol of the American dream Kendrick now has access to, is not only defined by promises of wealth: he is fundamentally nourished by consumption. The temptations of wealth, and its consequences in the form of misogyny and gang-violence, are tied to American capitalism. The American dream produces a temporary joy for Kendrick personally, but increased division for all Black people.

However, and truly reflecting the power of Lamar's argument, at no point does the listener lose sight of the structural determinants of Kendrick's malfeasance. The explicit argument of the song is that US capitalism sucks life (and money) out of Black musical 'products' and dispenses of them once nourished. Uncle Sam ends verse 2 by explaining to Kendrick, in reference to actor Wesley Snipes who was convicted of tax evasion in 2008: "But remember, you ain't pass economics in school / And everything you buy, taxes will deny / I'll Wesley Snipe your ass before thirty-five". In the very same

⁴⁶ The line, "I know your kind (That's why I'm kind)", is an example of Lamar's creative word play. Øystein Hauso explains: "Uncle Sam says he knows Lamar is kind, but the line plays with the homophony of 'kind', and the difference between 'your' and 'you are'. The sentence can thus be read in two ways: 'I know you are kind' (that's why I'm kind)', telling Lamar that he is charitable and that is why he is offering him material goods 'Kind' can also mean a 'type of person', and may refer to the racial stereotype of African American lavishly spending money on material goods. Lamar is therefore the type to want material goods and to foolishly spend his money, and Uncle Sam knows this is a way to exploit him." Øystein Hauso, "'Caterpillars and Butterfly': The Process of Self-Realization and Unity in Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*," (Master's Thesis, The University of Bergen, 2020), 25.

verse where he has regaled Kendrick, we realise that Uncle Sam is exploiting the protagonist. The music industry and the forces of American racial capitalism exploit and divide Black people, rather than help them. Not only is this relationship between Uncle Sam and the now-wealthy Kendrick parasitic, but Lamar understands its place within, and dependence on, structural racism. This relationship is enabled by a society where education is disseminated disproportionately along wealth (and thus racial) lines. Racial inequality and a lack of access to education ensures that even when working-class Black people break the cycle of poverty, they may be ill-equipped to deal with it. The structural is never far away from the individual in *TPAB*.

'Wesley's Theory', a song supposedly about the empowering nature of this consumerist existence, ends with an expression of deep anxiety. In the final 10 seconds, voices enter, chanting with increasing volume and shortness of breath: "Tax man comin', tax man comin' / Tax man comin', tax man comin' / Tax man comin', TAX MAN COMIIIIIN'". For all its upbeat funk, Lamar ends 'Wesley's Theory' by affirming this neoliberal existence as one characterised by fear and anxiety as Uncle Sam subjects Kendrick to a divisive nightmare.

'For Free? (Interlude)'⁴⁷

Issues related to the failed promises of the American dream are raised again in the second song of *TPAB*, 'For Free?'. Now that he has risen to a position of authority, Kendrick demands personal reparations for a history of African American oppression. In keeping with the album as a whole, Lamar links this individualist mental space to the realities of structural racism. Commenting on the chasm between the promises of American capitalism and the reality of life as an African American person, Lamar notes the psychological effects of a life of poverty surrounded by promises of wealth:

This dick ain't free
You lookin' at me like it ain't a receipt
Like I never made ends meet
Eating your leftovers and raw meat
This dick ain't free
Livin' in captivity raised my cap salary
Celery, tellin' me green is all I need
Evidently all I seen was Spam and raw sardines
This dick ain't free
...

⁴⁷ Kendrick Lamar, "For Free? (Interlude)," track 2 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

Oh America, you bad bitch, I picked cotton and made you rich
Now my dick ain't free

It is only now, once he has risen to superstardom, that Kendrick can demand reparations. Moreover, and through his evocation of slavery (“I picked cotton and made you rich”), Lamar is connecting the entire history of U.S. racial capitalism, recognizing structural racism as a shift – not, crucially, a rupture – from slavery. These many forms of racism are all part of the same political economic system that Kendrick believes he is subverting in his demand for reparations.

However, as with ‘Wesley’s Theory’, while these demands have a veneer of positivity, Lamar frequently subverts this reading. Despite his sense of empowerment, Kendrick’s demands do not emphasise community – something Lamar aspires to. He is not demanding compensation for all Black people. Rather, he is referring specifically to his own achievements and a desire for personal wealth in an overtly self-aggrandizing fashion. His solution to histories of racial capitalist domination is simply inclusion into this world.

A primary example of the dangerous implications of this mentality is seen in the depiction of a woman (performed by Darlene Tibbs) who opens the song cursing Kendrick out:

Fuck you, motherfucker, you a ho-ass nigga
I don't know why you trying to go big, nigga, you ain't shit
Walking around like you God's gift to Earth, nigga, you ain't shit
You ain't even buy me no outfit for the Fourth
I need that Brazilian, wavy, twenty-eight inch, you playin'
I shouldn't be fuckin' with you anyway
I need a baller-ass, boss-ass nigga
You's a off-brand-ass nigga, everybody know it
Your homies know it, everybody fuckin' know it
Fuck you, nigga, don't call me no more

Raquel Willis notes the sexist depiction of this character:⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Willis is not alone in critiquing sexist elements in Lamar’s work. For example, Michael Thomas notes: “Two problematic issues with Lamar’s views on women throughout his catalog appear in his discussions of women in *Section.80*: his championing of natural beauty standards and the use of women as stock characters that embody stereotypes of women in poverty. ... These issues elide with the second problem of controlling images, such as the jezebel. Kendrick’s aesthetics of women play off of these controlling images, attempting empowerment while positioning women as objects for his sexual gaze. Thus, Lamar’s misogynistic feminism replicates the images and objectification of black women.” Michael Thomas, “Singing experience in *Section.80*: Kendrick Lamar’s poetics of problems,” in *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning*, ed. Christopher M. Driscoll, Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Routledge, 2020), 59-60.

Lyricaly, the album prompts very little discussion of black women, but the sole major inclusion is a misguided use of one in the 'For Free' interlude. In the jazz-laden track, the woman represents the pressures and expectations that white America places on the black man. It's an ill-favored conflation of the relationship between black men and black women and the relationship between black men and the ills of white supremacy and capitalism — suggesting that in America, black men suffer an oppression that black women routinely serve to augment.⁴⁹

While this is a valuable perspective, I believe that it misses the true significance of this character. Not only is Willis wrong to argue that this is “the sole major inclusion” of Black womanhood ('Complexion', in Act 3, engages this topic in the form of a feature by rapper Rapsody), but also, this critique fails to realise that this woman is not reflective of the mentality of Lamar (person), but rather Kendrick (character). The depictions in 'For Sale?' are reflective of a certain mentality that flourishes when socialised in the neoliberal environment of Act 1. This sexist depiction, and Kendrick's antagonistic response, is not (necessarily) a product of Lamar's sexism, but rather, the divisive effects of Kendrick's hyper-capitalistic life. Neoliberal ideology is poisoning Kendrick's world-view.

'King Kunta'⁵⁰

On a surface level, 'King Kunta' appears to be a moment of triumph, depicting Kendrick's homecoming following the 'success' of the preceding songs. In many ways, this veil of triumph is accurate. A young Black man from Compton reaching a level of authority is undoubtedly profound. However, throughout the song, Lamar subverts this reading. As with 'Wesley's Theory', while Kendrick appears happy, his new life of excess and individualism is causing harm.

The intro to 'King Kunta' depicts Kendrick's return home for the sake of reclaiming his throne: “I got a bone to pick / I don't want you monkey-mouth motherfuckers / Sittin' in my throne again / Ayy, ayy, nigga, what's happenin'? / K-Dot back in the hood, nigga!” As we will see in the second last song of the album, 'i', the notion of royalty (and homecoming) is an important part of Black-

⁴⁹ Raquel Willis, “To Pimp The Black Woman: On Kendrick Lamar's Limited Black Liberation,” *Medium*, Apr 14 2015, <https://medium.com/cuepoint/to-pimp-the-black-woman-on-kendrick-lamar-s-limited-black-liberation-26d63d94cad>.

⁵⁰ Kendrick Lamar, “King Kunta,” track 3 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

empowerment.⁵¹ However, unlike 'i', 'King Kunta' sees Kendrick (mis)use his position of royalty for questionable means:

Twenty-four-seven, three-sixty-five days times two
I was contemplatin' gettin' off stage
Just to go back to the hood, see my enemy, and say... (Oh yeah)

[Chorus]

Bitch, where you when I was walkin'?
Now I run the game, got the whole world talkin'
King Kunta, everybody wanna cut the legs off him
Kunta, black man taking no losses, oh yeah

Returning home, in this moment, is a potential to gloat and show off a sense of superiority. The gloating continues into the third verse: "I was gonna kill a couple rappers, but they did it to themselves / Everybody's suicidal, they ain't even need my help / This shit is elementary, I'll probably go to jail / If I shoot at your identity and bounce to the left / Stuck a flag in my city, everybody's screamin', 'Compton!' / I should probably run for mayor when I'm done, to be honest". This description of returning home in order to rub his success in the faces of people he has left behind, thus creating more division, is one moment in which Lamar hints towards the malfeasance of caterpillar Kendrick.

Another particularly noteworthy moment occurs at the end of 'King Kunta'. Recurring either at the end or beginning of certain songs, Lamar structures *TPAB* around a poem that is expanded by a line or stanza each time it appears. The function of this storytelling device is to allow a retroactive narration by Lamar on the meta-narrative of each song. At the end of 'King Kunta', the joyousness induced by the funky, danceable bass-line and recurring chant of "we want the funk," gives way to silence, allowing Lamar to deliver the first lines of the recurring poem with great resonance. He says, before quickly transitioning to the next song:

I remember you was conflicted
Misusing your influence

With these lines, Lamar shows the triumphant feel of the song to be an illusion. He may be rich and famous. He may lay claim to royalty and material goods. But is Kendrick truly 'succeeding'? This

⁵¹ One narrative device Lamar utilizes throughout this album is a kind of mirroring effect with specific songs in the second half of the album thematically juxtaposing songs from the first half. 'King Kunta' is mirrored by 'You Ain't Gotta Lie', 'u' is mirrored by 'i', 'These Walls' by 'Complexion', 'For Free?' by 'For Sale?'.

poem immediately challenges the alienated, self-aggrandizing, God-less rhetoric we have witnessed so far. Having accepted the spoils offered by Uncle Sam, Kendrick is retreating from the social goals Lamar aspires to achieve.

'Institutionalized'⁵²

'Institutionalized's' investigation of ethics is a marked shift from the preceding songs. Lamar opens the song with a short preface: "I'm trapped inside the ghetto and I ain't proud to admit it / Institutionalized, I keep runnin' back for a visit, hol' up / Get it back / I said I'm trapped inside the ghetto and I ain't proud to admit it / Institutionalized, I could still kill me a nigga, so what?" Despite his newfound wealth and power, Kendrick is unable to shake the mentality that arose out of structural oppression.

The mentality of 'the ghetto', in 'Institutionalized', is embodied by Kendrick's friend, whom he invites to attend the Black Entertainment Television (BET) awards. Lamar raps verse 2 from the perspective of this friend:

Fuck am I 'posed to do when I'm lookin' at walkin' licks?
The constant big money talk 'bout the mansion and foreign whips
The private jets and passport, presidential glass floor
Gold bottles, gold models, givin' up the ass for
Instagram flicks, suckin' dick, fuck is this?
One more sucker wavin' with a flashy wrist
My defense mechanism tell me to get him
Quickly because he got it
It's a recession, then why the fuck he at King of Diamonds?
No more livin' poor, meet my four-four

Øystein Hauso argues that this verse reflects the impact of oppression on an individual's psyche: "Lamar presents the idea that African American men are born and tricked by the society into adopting a certain way of thinking and acting, which disables them from becoming united and stronger as a social group."⁵³ In Act 3, an activist Kendrick introduces the Willie Lynch theory, a slavery-era concept about dividing Black people in order to maintain control over them. This song is a testament to the ways both neoliberal ideology and capitalist economics have forced division upon Black people and created ongoing psychological distress. As Jack Nielsen has suggested:

⁵² Kendrick Lamar, "Institutionalized," track 4 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

⁵³ Hauso, "Caterpillars and Butterfly," 15-6.

'Institutionalized' serves as a double meaning that connects two of the major themes of *To Pimp a Butterfly*: Kendrick's mental health issues and how the African-American community has been institutionally suppressed since slavery by various government policies, mass imprisonment of African-Americans, and systematic racism. Connecting these two themes in one track, Kendrick is possibly hinting that one of the reasons that he is depressed ... is because they feel trapped in a society where they can't advance themselves or their community.⁵⁴

The survivalist mentality that grows out of oppression is deeply pervasive. Even though Kendrick is, by this stage, a leader in the rap industry, he is still institutionalised within an aggressive, 'get rich quick' mentality. Most notable, however, is Lamar's insight into who this mentality harms. As noted earlier, the events of this song take place at the BET awards, which means that Kendrick's friend is stealing from other Black people, not from mainstream America or Uncle Sam. This vengeful mentality – a mentality fostered through marginalization – is shown by Lamar to perpetuate Black division. 'Institutionalized' is Willie Lynch in action.

'These Walls'⁵⁵

'These Walls' is simply another insight into the array of divisions perpetuated by neoliberal ideology. Like every song to this point of the album, this song is upbeat and funky. Furthermore, its explicit description of sex would normally (in reference to rap music generally) be taken as a positive moment. However, Lamar adopts a decidedly reflective tone. The recurring poem introduces 'These Walls', imploring us to look beyond the song's upbeat aesthetic to observe the issues hidden beneath:

I remember you was conflicted
Misusing your influence
Sometimes I did the same

As the poem closes, the voice of a woman moaning enters as other voices chant with building urgency: "If these walls could talk / If these walls could talk / If these walls could talk / If these walls could talk / If these walls could talk / If these walls could talk / If these walls could taaaaaallllk ..." before being abruptly cut off by a voice asserting: "SEX".

⁵⁴ Jack J. Nielsen, *The Afrofuturism Cyclicity of Past, Present, and Future in Kendrick Lamar's To Pimp a Butterfly* (Independently Published, 2018), 26.

⁵⁵ Kendrick Lamar, "These Walls," track 5 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

At face value, this song is about sex, with the title 'These Walls' being a rather unsubtle metaphor. Verse 2 adopts a myriad of metaphors depicting Kendrick's sexual exploits with an unnamed woman: "Walls telling me they full of pain, resentment / Need someone to live in them just to relieve tension / Me, I'm just a tenant / Landlord said these walls vacant more than a minute / These walls are vulnerable, exclamation / Interior pink, color coordinated / I interrogated every nook and cranny". Despite its playful veneer and upbeat, funky sound, this depiction ultimately gives way to a sense of anxiety, fear, and confusion as the walls metaphor takes on new meaning.

Verse 3 is more down-tempo and the rapping is closer to spoken-word. Here, Lamar subverts the positive feel (again, positive in reference to rap's norms) of the opening verses as we learn the true purpose of his sexual exploits: he is using sex to gain revenge on someone who murdered his friend. Sex becomes one more instrument through which Kendrick divides 'his' community along gendered lines, and thus retreats from God. Verse 3 meanders and slowly unravels to reveal the toxicity of Kendrick's behaviour. Note that he is speaking directly to the imprisoned man, with the 'walls' becoming analogous for a prison cell:

If your walls could talk, they'd tell you it's too late
Your destiny, accept it, your fate
...
Killed my homeboy and God spared your life
Dumb criminal got indicted same night
So when you play this song, rewind the first verse
About me abusing my power so you can hurt
About me and her in the shower whenever she horny
About me and her in the after-hours of the morning
About her baby daddy currently serving life
And how she think about you until we meet up at night
About the only girl that cared about you when you asked her
And how she fuckin' on a famous rapper
Walls can talk (Talk)

Kendrick has not only used sex as a revenge tactic, objectifying a woman in the process: he has done so in order to further divide 'his' community along lines of gang-affiliation.

Neoliberal philosophy and the effects of structural oppression further divide, and a mentality that seeks liberation for the self by creating misery for others, fails to be truly liberating. Kendrick of Act 1 is an embodiment of the kind of problematic masculinity bell hooks observed in gangsta rap:

Today's young and hip black male who fancies himself a radical ... is definitely not critiquing capitalism; making rap music is his way into the system. ... Black male hip-hop artists who receive the most acclaim are busy pimping violence; peddling the racist/sexist stereotypes of the black male as primitive predator. Even though he may include radical rhetoric now and then, the hip-hop artist who wants to make 'a killing' cannot afford to fully radicalize his consciousness. Hungry for power, he cannot guide himself or anyone else on the path to liberation.⁵⁶

While I disagree with this broad characterisation due to the sheer diversity of rap music – especially in the 21st century – the sentiment regarding how this consumptive mentality creates more division than it eliminates is pertinent to Act 1. Each song so far has grappled with intra-Black division – in terms of gender, or a (kind of) monarchist hierarchy, or intra-Black violence along gang and class lines – in such a way that captures the toxicity of Kendrick's current mind-set.

As all the songs of Act 1 are playing out, the music creates in the listener a sense of positivity. This is a subversion, reflecting the sensations of being inculcated with the American dream and gaining access to the spoils of racial capitalism. However, while the music implies positivity, subtle moments – especially the poem – function to challenge this individualist existence. Ultimately, Lamar is taking the listener on the same journey Kendrick is on. What at first seemed to be an exciting life is actually the cause of his downfall and the perpetuator of division. When we realise this world is not as great as it seemed when looking at it from below, when we come to understand the false promises of Uncle Sam and the American dream, we (and Kendrick) enter a decline that reaches a suicidal cliff edge.

Act 1 ends with the poem that sees Lamar reflecting on the events so far and giving an indication of the narrative to come:

I remember you was conflicted
Misusing your influence
Sometimes I did the same
Abusing my power full of resentment
Resentment that turned into a deep depression
Found myself screaming in a hotel room

⁵⁶ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black men and masculinity* (New York, Routledge, 2004), 55-6.

Act 2 - Cocoon: Liminality and Conversion

In contrast to the thematic consistency across Act 1 (i.e. all songs depicting divisions along lines of gender, gang-affiliation, and class resulting from an embodied neoliberalism), Act 2 is far more eclectic, taking the listener on a more complicated emotional journey as Kendrick searches for meaning.

In this act, Kendrick finds himself in a liminal space – both spatially and spiritually. It is only when cut off from the world of Act 1 that Kendrick is able to engage with his failings and seek out deeper meaning. Ultimately, this journey of self-discovery is profoundly religious. Act 2 sees God and the recurring character Lucy (Lucifer) fighting for Kendrick’s attention. In ‘Alright’, God is winning, but Kendrick is then tempted during his time in the desert (represented as a shopping mall in ‘For Sale?’). This contest is finally resolved in the dramatic ‘How Much A Dollar Cost’, where we witness a conversion moment enabling Kendrick’s transformation into an enlightened butterfly capable of unifying the very community he divided in Act 1.

‘u’⁵⁷

Opening with the sound of yelling (“found myself screaming in a hotel room”), ‘u’ sees Kendrick engaging with feelings that were suppressed in Act 1. As Lamar has explained in an interview, the events of ‘u’ are semi-autobiographical and refer to a time when, whilst on tour in 2013, he was suddenly struck with an overwhelming sense of failure: “3 of my home boys that summer time was murdered, you know, close ones too, not just somebody that I hear about, these are people I grew up with. It all, psychologically, it messes your brain up because you live in this life, you know what I’m saying, but you still have to face realities of this. I gotta get back off that tour bus and go to these funerals, you know, and go talk to my moms and go talk they aunties, the kids that lost their lives.”⁵⁸ Cocooned in a hotel room, away from family and friends, Kendrick reflects on the misuse of his influence. His conclusion is expressed in the hook of the song: “loving you is complicated”.

‘u’ is the emotional low-point of the album. The sporadic, jazzy, wailing saxophone amplifies the sloppy vocal flow, and as the song builds, we not only hear alcohol bottles clanking, but the lyrics are delivered in a sobbing fashion.

I know you irresponsible, selfish, in denial, can't help it
Your trials and tribulations a burden, everyone felt it

⁵⁷ Kendrick Lamar, “u,” track 6 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

⁵⁸ “Kendrick Lamar Breaks Down Tracks From 'To Pimp A Butterfly' (Pt. 2) | MTV News,” YouTube Video, posted by “MTV,” Apr 2, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hu4Pz9Pjoll>.

Everyone heard it, multiple shots, corners cryin' out
You was deserted, where was your antennas again?
Where was your presence? Where was your support that you pretend?
You ain't no brother, you ain't no disciple, you ain't no friend
A friend never leave Compton for profit, or leave his best friend, little brother
You promised you'd watch him before they shot him
Where was your antennas? On the road, bottles and bitches
You FaceTimed him one time, that's unforgiven
You even FaceTimed instead of a hospital visit
Guess you thought he'd recover well
Third surgery, they couldn't stop the bleeding for real
Then he died, God himself will say, 'You fuckin' failed,' you ain't try

The misuse of Kendrick's influence is here identified in his perpetuation of social division and in the distance he has built between himself and loved ones. His inability to develop a unified community and family – the consequence of his embodied neoliberalism – is shown to be the cause of his suicidal descent:

I know your secrets, nigga, mood swings is frequent, nigga
I know depression is restin' on your heart for two reasons, nigga
I know you and a couple block boys ain't been speakin', nigga
Y'all damn near beefin', I see it and you're the reason, nigga
And if this bottle could talk *gulping*
I cry myself to sleep, bitch, everything is your fault
...
You just can't get right, I think your heart made of bullet proof
Should've killed yo' ass long time ago
You should've felt that black revolver blast a long time ago
And if these mirrors could talk it'd say, 'You gotta go'
And if I told your secrets the world'll know money can't stop a suicidal weakness

Through the introspection of 'u', Kendrick comes to realise that the grandeur of Act 1 was an illusion. This Kendrick embodies the pain bell hooks observed as growing out of a capitalist existence: "Male success in patriarchal society tends to be measured by material standards (how much money a man makes, what kind of car he drives, or even the looks of the babe on his arm). This leads folks to

forget that one can have the outer trappings of material success, even wealth and fame, and still feel an inner emptiness, an ongoing feeling of loss.”⁵⁹ Acknowledging this emptiness, Kendrick spirals.

The recognition of God’s disappointment is another crucial element of the song. Acting as Kendrick did in Act 1 not only causes an emptiness, it also attracts God’s ire (“God himself will say, ‘You fuckin’ failed”).⁶⁰ James McLeod highlights the religious meaning of ‘u’:

‘u’ traces an extended conversation Lamar has with himself wherein he experiences doubt and guilt from moments when he has chosen fleeting and temporal pleasures over being faithful to God and himself. ... [A]nxiety about his life ... causes Lamar to attempt to place several temporal goods in the place of God throughout the album. He encounters trappings of life that often accompany the stereotypical existence of a famous rap star. He expresses faith in the stuff money allows him to acquire, in sexual conquests with women, and in the painkillers he employs to self-medicate depression. In each case, the things of this world fall short.⁶¹

As ‘u’ fades out, the listener is left uncertain: has Kendrick committed suicide? ‘Alright’, with its celebration of God, provides a resounding answer of resilience. Having recognised the shallowness of the material world, ‘Alright’ finds fulfilment and happiness through an increased connection to God – if only temporarily.

‘Alright’⁶²

‘Alright’ sees Kendrick rising out of the depths of his depression. This hope comes not from money or fame: but from a belief in the liberating power of God and community. Lamar opens the song with a show of defiance via an interpellation of a famous line from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*:

Alls my life I has to fight, nigga
Alls my life I...
Hard times like, ‘Yah!’
Bad trips like, ‘Yah!’

⁵⁹ hooks, *We Real Cool*, 92.

⁶⁰ Danielle Macon makes a similar observation: “Here, he proclaims his frustration and anger with himself for choosing celebrity and fame over the well-being of his family and community The indulgence of material products led to alcohol abuse. Within this state of depression, Lamar reveals that he has not only failed his family and community, but he has failed the creator.” Danielle S. Macon, “To Pimp a Caterpillar: Hip Hop as Vehicle to Spiritual Liberation Through the Decolonization of European Ideology” (Master’s Thesis, Temple University, 2017), 39.

⁶¹ James D. McLeod, “If God Got Us: Kendrick Lamar, Paul Tillich, and the Advent of Existentialist Hip Hop,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 33, no. 1 (2017): 128-9.

⁶² Lamar, “Alright.”

Nazareth, I'm fucked up
Homie, you fucked up
But if God got us, then we gon' be alright

'Alright' is a testament to the Black theology articulated by James Cone. In the face of a worldly oppression, the belief in a supportive, politically invested, liberating God sustains Black life. Furthermore, a politically inclined Black Christianity comes to the fore as 'Alright' doubles as a challenge to the carceral regime. The defiance and self-love of 'Alright' is not benign. Rather, it is a revolutionary act of resistance against the instruments of Black oppression Kendrick identifies in the pre-chorus:

Wouldn't you know
We been hurt, been down before
...
Nigga, and we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'
Nigga, I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak, and my gun might blow
But we gon' be alright

Kendrick locates God as a political actor enabling perseverance in the face of police violence. Despite being "hurt" and "down before", re-discovering God enables Kendrick to discover his true purpose: Black empowerment.⁶³

Most importantly, for my purposes, it is only upon finding meaning in and through God that Kendrick uncovers the temptations of Uncle Sam for what they really are: the work of Lucifer. This epiphany occurs very subtly at the start of verse 2: "What you want you, a house? You, a car? / 40 acres and a mule? A piano, a guitar? / Anything, *see my name is Lucy*, I'm your dog / Motherfucker, you can live at the mall".⁶⁴ This stanza is a direct repetition of the opening of verse 2 in 'Wesley's Theory', with the only difference being that the name Uncle Sam is replaced with Lucy. The introspection of 'u', and Kendrick's newfound connection to God, has allowed him to discover the truth about Uncle Sam: that this figure is actually the Devil. The two are synonymous to the point where Lucy is

⁶³ This empowerment is found in the chorus: "Nigga, we gon' be alright / Nigga, we gon' be alright / We gon' be alright / Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright / Nigga, we gon' be alright / Huh? We gon' be alright / Nigga, we gon' be alright / Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright". Lamar, "Alright." The extensive use of the N-word here is a further testament to the song's rhetoric of racial empowerment enabling Black self-love and survival.

⁶⁴ Emphasis added.

actually Uncle Sam (or at least disguised as him). The spiritual battle between God and Lucy is thus analogized as a contest between the neoliberal ideology of the American dream – as well as the materialisms of racial capitalism – and a life freed from these forces.

But this is not Kendrick’s moment of salvation. Lamar returns to the poem at the end of ‘Alright’, giving insight into the liminality that again follows:

I remember you was conflicted
Misusing your influence
Sometimes I did the same
Abusing my power full of resentment
Resentment that turned into a deep depression
Found myself screamin' in the hotel room
I didn't wanna self-destruct
The evils of Lucy was all around me
So I went runnin' for answers

‘For Sale? (Interlude)’⁶⁵

‘Alright’, with its frequent referencing of God, provided Kendrick with a moment of clarity in which he discovered the realities of the temptations all around him. Rather than a gift from Uncle Sam, these material things were actually the temptations of Lucifer. Confronted with these duelling forces, Kendrick “went running for answers”. ‘For Sale?’ is Lucy’s retort to ‘Alright’.

‘For Sale?’ depicts Kendrick being chased by Lucy, who pleads with him to retreat from God. The similarities between this story and the Parable of Jesus in the Desert are clear and deliberate, with the only difference being the physical manifestation of this liminal space. In the Bible, Jesus retreats to the desert to reflect on his prophetic mission and affirm his faith. Kendrick’s retreat into liminality serves a similar purpose, except Kendrick’s desert is a shopping mall: the material embodiment of Act 1’s consumerism. Now, truly isolated from the world, Kendrick must make a decision: remain with God or sign a contract with Lucy (and thus return to the divisiveness of Act 1).

The song begins with the heavy breathing of someone running (“went runnin’ for answers”). Suddenly, a digitally distorted voice performed by Bilal enters: “What's wrong, nigga? / I thought you was keeping it gangsta / I thought this what you wanted / They say if you scared, go to church / But remember, he knows the Bible too”. This comments not only on the failure of caterpillar Kendrick to

⁶⁵ Kendrick Lamar, “For Sale? (Interlude),” track 8 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

attain happiness, but also re-contextualizes the album as a contest between God and Lucifer. The remainder of the song describes Kendrick wandering through his desert with Lucy in pursuit tempting him into a life of individualism and excessive wealth. Much of the song is delivered in a higher pitched, faster flow than the rest of the album as Lamar adopts the persona of Lucy. The chorus indicates the true purpose of Lucy's pursuit:

Now, baby, when I get you, get you, get you, get you
I'ma go hit the throttle with you
Smoking, lokin', poking that doja 'til I'm idle with you
'Cause I (want you)
Now, baby, when I'm riding here, I'm riding dirty
Registration is out of service
Smoking, lokin', drinking that potion, you can see me swerving
'Cause I (want you)
(I want you more than you know)

Nielsen provides a brilliant analysis of this chorus: "In 'For Sale?' he raps, 'smoking lokin' poking the doja till I'm idle with you' as he understands that Lucy/Lucifer/America wants Kendrick to become idle, to not pursue his dreams of leading and influencing his people, breaking down barriers, and assisting in both a revolution and leading hip hop as a genre. The powers that oppose his goals want him to become idle or stoned and forget where his passions lie."⁶⁶ This chorus reflects the true intent of Lucy/Uncle Sam: maintenance of very same status-quo – i.e. Willie Lynch – Kendrick was enabling in Act 1.

Verse 2, again rapped as Lucy, shows exactly what Kendrick is tempted with:

'My name is Lucy, Kendrick, you introduced me, Kendrick
Usually I don't do this but I see you and me, Kendrick
Lucy give you no worries, Lucy got million stories
About these rappers that I came after when they was boring
Lucy gon' fill your pockets
Lucy gon' move your mama out of Compton
Inside the gigantic mansion like I promised
Lucy just want your trust and loyalty, avoiding me?
It's not so easy, I'm at these functions accordingly

⁶⁶ Nielsen, *The Afrofuturism Cyclicity*, 84.

Kendrick, Lucy don't slack a minute, Lucy work harder
Lucy gon' call you even when Lucy know you love your Father⁶⁷
I'm Lucy, I loosely heard prayers on your first album, truly
Lucy don't mind, 'cause at the end of the day you'll pursue me
Lucy go get it, Lucy not timid, Lucy up front
Lucy got paperwork on top of paperwork
I want you to know that Lucy got you
All your life I watched you
And now you all grown up to sign this contract, if that's possible'

We reach the concluding moments of 'For Sale?' not knowing what Kendrick has decided. Has he succumbed to the temptations of Lucy, or will he remain with God? While the song is largely upbeat and catchy, after the negotiation has ended, the music descends into a spacey, haunting arrangement that circles back to the poem. Lamar adds one more line indicating that the answers Kendrick went running for are found not with Lucy's promises of mansions, but with homecoming:

I remembered you was conflicted
Misusing your influence
Sometimes I did the same
Abusing my power full of resentment
Resentment that turned into a deep depression
Found myself screamin' in the hotel room
I didn't wanna self-destruct
The evils of Lucy was all around me
So I went runnin' for answers
Until I came home

'Momma'⁶⁸

Having rejected Lucy, Kendrick continues on his path of self-discovery. 'Momma' finds Kendrick during his homecoming, reflecting on the effects of superstardom on his humility and humanity. Verse 2 highlights the effects of wealth on his perception of self:

I know everything, know myself
I know morality, spirituality, good and bad health

⁶⁷ Referring both to Kendrick's Dad – and thus dividing his family – as well as God (the "Father").

⁶⁸ Kendrick Lamar, "Momma," track 9 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

I know fatality might haunt you
I know everything, I know Compton
I know street shit, I know shit that's conscious
I know everything, I know lawyers, advertisement, their sponsors
I know wisdom, I know bad religion, I know good karma
I know everything, I know history
I know the universe works mentally
I know the perks of bullshit isn't meant for me
I know everything, I know cars, clothes, hoes, and money
I know loyalty, I know respect, I know those that's ornery
I know everything, the highs, the lows, the groupies, the junkies
I know if I'm generous at heart, I don't need recognition
The way I'm rewarded, well, that's God's decision
...
Until I realized I didn't know shit
The day I came home

This verse reveals the illusions of Act 1. Kendrick thought he “knew everything”, but in reality, he “didn't know shit”. Only through homecoming – not the arrogant homecoming of ‘King Kunta’, but the reflexive homecoming of ‘Momma’ – does he learn of his ignorance. Note, however, that this reflection has yet to turn to action. Kendrick may have reached a level of honesty with himself and a closer connection with home and God, but he is not yet bettering the world. It is with Act 3 that this introspection is put into practice.

‘How Much a Dollar Cost’⁶⁹

In ‘How Much a Dollar Cost’, Kendrick’s lingering neoliberal spirit is tested. Although the humility of ‘Momma’ leads the listener to assume that Kendrick has rejected Lucy’s advances, ‘How Much a Dollar Cost’ reveals the complexity of liberating oneself from a problematic ideology. Despite choosing the righteous path, Kendrick is not immune to the wrongs that characterised his Act 1 self.

This song finds Kendrick riding through South Africa in a luxury car. Thinking highly of himself, Kendrick’s selfishness is challenged when confronted by a homeless man:

Walked out the gas station
A homeless man with a semi-tan complexion

⁶⁹ Kendrick Lamar, “How Much a Dollar Cost,” track 11 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

Asked me for ten rand, stressin' about dry land
...
A piece of crack that he wanted, I knew he was smokin'
He begged and pleaded
Asked me to feed him twice, I didn't believe it
Told him, 'Beat it'
Contributin' money just for his pipe—I couldn't see it
He said, 'My son, temptation is one thing that I've defeated
Listen to me, I want a single bill from you
Nothin' less, nothin' more'
I told him I ain't have it and closed my door
Tell me; how much a dollar cost?

Unable to ignore the man, Kendrick soon becomes irate:

He's starin' at me in disbelief
My temper is buildin', he's starin' at me, I grab my key
He's starin' at me, I started the car, then I tried to leave
And somethin' told me to keep it in park until I could see
The reason why he was mad at a stranger
Like I was supposed to save him
Like I'm the reason he's homeless and askin' me for a favor
He's starin' at me, his eyes followed me with no laser
He's starin' at me, I notice that his stare is contagious
'Cause now I'm starin' back at him, feelin' some type of disrespect
If I could throw a bat at him, it'd be aimin' at his neck
I never understood someone beggin' for goods
Askin' for handouts, takin' it if they could
And this particular person just had it down pat
Starin' at me for the longest until he finally asked
'Have you ever opened up Exodus 14?
A humble man is all that we ever need'
Tell me; how much a dollar cost?

This interaction not only functions as a source of frustration, it also raises questions relating to the American dream's meritocratic myth. For Kendrick, his value, both financially and existentially, stems

from his hard work and selfishness – an ideology he must continue to abide by if he is to remain ‘on top’. Kendrick, here, embodies a neoliberal ideology as he converses with the victim of this very ideology. He then engages with the man one last time:

I should distance myself, I should keep it relentless
My selfishness is what got me here, who the fuck I'm kiddin'?
So I'ma tell you like I told the last bum
Crumbs and pennies, I need all of mines
...
The jig is up, I seen you from a mile away losin' focus
And I'm insensitive, and I lack empathy
He looked at me and said, ‘Your potential is bittersweet’
I looked at him and said, ‘Every nickel is mines to keep’

Having rejected the man again, Kendrick appears steadfast in his ways, comfortable in his superiority and place within a grossly unequal world. He is then confronted one last time. As the music swells, the voice of the homeless man becomes louder and more assertive as he transforms:

He looked at me and said, ‘Know the truth, it'll set you free
You're lookin' at the Messiah, the son of Jehovah, the higher power
The choir that spoke the word, the Holy Spirit
The nerve of Nazareth, and I'll tell you just how much a dollar cost
The price of having a spot in Heaven, embrace your loss—I am God’

Where Lucifer manifested as Uncle Sam, God is disguised as a homeless man – moreover, a South African homeless man, thus hinting at both the global disparities of racial capitalism and the need for a Pan-African communalism. This depiction of God resonates with the God of liberation theology: a being invested in the lives of the most oppressed and vulnerable. In his violent rejection of the man, Kendrick is simultaneously rejecting both God and the embodiment of neoliberal oppression. His failure to realise this, and the fact that he places greater value on a single dollar than on the wellbeing of a fellow human being, results in God’s judgement.

Through his interaction with God, Kendrick learns the error of his ways. He ends the song by admitting to wrong-doing and accepting a more righteous path:

I washed my hands, I said my grace
What more do you want from me?
Tears of a clown, guess I'm not all what is meant to be

Shades of grey will never change if I condone
Turn this page, help me change to right my wrongs

This ending is a realisation that faith without works is dead. The passive religiosity Kendrick adopted after rejecting Lucy's advances is not enough. The interaction with God enables him to transform into an enlightened butterfly ready to reverse the division he fostered in Act 1.

Act 3 - Butterfly: 'Faith Without Works is Dead'

The adoption of neoliberal ideology led to Kendrick's abject misery. It is only when he returns home, develops a sense of community, and becomes a leader against the social ills of neoliberal modernity that Kendrick finds salvation. Furthermore, adopting a world-view more aligned with that of Black liberation theology leads Kendrick to turn his attention to transforming oppressive social conditions – and reversing the divisions he created in Act 1. In doing so, the post-conversion songs of Act 3 are a testament to the phrase 'faith without works is dead'. "Black Christian eschatology", Cornel West argues, "focuses on praxis against suffering, not reflection upon it; personal and collective resistance to suffering, not a distancing from it."⁷⁰ Heeding this message, Kendrick not only illuminates the ideas and behaviours that perpetuate division (or, as Kendrick describes it, Willie Lynch), he actively works to change it. For the rest of the album, Kendrick becomes as a quasi-preacher, espousing a prominent Black pride/love sentiment in the very spaces he had previously divided.

'Complexion (A Zulu Love)'⁷¹

'Complexion' is a song that speaks to the insecurities created by white, European beauty standards. It does so in reference to an historical love story between a house and field slave, reflecting the ways white America has systematically divided Black America. Furthermore, aligned with some of the themes of 'How Much a Dollar Cost', salvation is found via a Pan-African sense of community – as implied by the reference to 'Zulu love':

Dark as the midnight hour, or bright as the mornin' sun
Brown skinned, but your blue eyes tell me your mama can't run⁷²
Sneak (dissin')
Sneak me through the back window, I'm a good field nigga

⁷⁰ West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 165.

⁷¹ Kendrick Lamar, "Complexion (A Zulu Love)," track 12 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

⁷² The lyric, "Brown skinned, but your blue eyes tell me your mama can't run" frames this song as one focussed on the specific persecutions (especially sexual violence) experienced by Black women.

I made a flower for you outta cotton just to chill with you
 You know I'd go the distance, you know I'm ten toes down
 Even if massa listenin', I got the world's attention
 So I'ma say somethin' that's vital and critical for survival
 Of mankind, if he lyin', color should never rival
 Beauty is what you make it, I used to be so mistaken
 By different shades of faces
 Then Whit' told me, 'A woman is woman, love the creation'
 It all came from God, then you was my confirmation
 ...
 Let the Willie Lynch theory reverse a million times

The master (slave master/mainstream America) determines value on the basis of one's complexion. If the master's words are heeded, Black love (both of self and of a Black diaspora) is forever unattainable. Instead, Kendrick argues, one must view the world through the lens of the divine. Acknowledgement of God's creation is central to overcoming these divisions ("A woman is woman, love the creation' / It all came from God") and thus creating a more unified society.

Another particularly resonant moment is Kendrick's acknowledgment of the Willie Lynch theory. As William Cobb explains, the Willie Lynch Letter was a false – though widely circulated – document outlining different forms of psychological control over enslaved people intended to sow "dissent and disunity among the slave population. ... [T]hese tactics—creating divisions based on age, gender, color, and status—are meant to have the effect of paralyzing the black population 'for at least three centuries,' and thereby rendering any attempt at insurrection or collective action impossible."⁷³ The reference to this concept is an indication of Act 3's direction. Where Act 1 represented Willie Lynch in action, Act 3 is Kendrick's attempt to reverse it a "million times" by unifying those currently divided across lines of gender, complexion, age, and gang affiliation.

Moreover, here, in contrast to the arrogance of Act 1, Kendrick is aware of his inability to speak for the entire Black community. As such, he calls on Rapsody to express the gendered effects of the issues – including colorism – explored in the song:

Keep your head up, when did you stop loving thy
 Color of your skin? Color of your eyes
 That's the real blues, baby, like you met Jay's baby

⁷³ William J. Cobb, "Willie Lynch Letter," in *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, ed. Patrick L. Mason, 2nd ed. (Boston: Credo Reference, 2013), 282.

You blew me away, you think more beauty in blue, green and grey
All my solemn men up north, 12 years a slave
12 years of age, thinkin' my shade too dark
I love myself, I no longer need Cupid
...
The new James Bond gon' be black as me
Black as brown, hazelnut, cinnamon, black tea
And it's all beautiful to me
Call your brothers magnificent, call all the sisters queens

This verse demonstrates the communalism of Act 3, especially when we remember the problematic depictions of women earlier in the album – primarily in 'For Free?' and 'These Walls'. By speaking to the unique pressures facing Black women, Kendrick is directly reversing the gendered divisions he perpetuated in Act 1. Willie Lynch is collapsing.

'You Ain't Gotta Lie (Momma Said)'⁷⁴

Although he has now accepted his position as leader, Kendrick is still developing his leadership skills. 'You Ain't Gotta Lie' sees Kendrick again return home in an attempt to better embody the transformative power of the Butterfly.

'You Ain't Gotta Lie' starts with the evocation of a homely domesticity: "Hey, y'all close that front door, y'all let flies in this motherfucker / Close that door! / My OG up in this motherfucker right now / My pops man with the bottle of Hennessy in his hand, actin' a fool". Instantly, the listener is reminded of the opening to 'King Kunta'. Both songs depict a triumphant home-coming, but where caterpillar Kendrick used this return as an opportunity to divide, butterfly Kendrick returns home with a humility that brings people together.

From here, Lamar again adopts a different flow to indicate a new persona, this time rapping from the perspective of his mother:

I could spot you a mile away
I could see your insecurities written all on your face
So predictable your words, I know what you gonna say
Who you foolin'? Oh, you assuming you can just come and hang
With the homies but your level of realness ain't the same

⁷⁴ Kendrick Lamar, "You Ain't Gotta Lie (Momma Said)," track 14 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

Circus acts only attract those that entertain
Small talk, we know that it's all talk
We live in the Laugh Factory every time they mention your name

[Bridge]

Askin' 'where the hoes at?' to impress me
Askin' 'where the moneybags?' to impress me
Say you got the burner stashed to impress me
It's all in your head, homie
Askin' 'where the plug at?' to impress me
Askin' 'where the jug at?' to impress me
Askin' 'where it's at?' only upsets me
You sound like the feds, homie

As much a critique of rap music's conventions – such as the fetishizing of wealth and misogyny – as it is a critique of Kendrick himself, Kendrick's mother criticises the idea that fulfilment comes from anything other than humility and community. Here, as Linder suggests, Lamar "synthesizes life in poor African-American urban spaces and his lyrical presentation of Christianity to reconstruct realness in terms of sincerity and a common humanity, instead of the artificially created litmus tests of Hip Hop authenticity."⁷⁵ The bridge is also a rather direct criticism of the very mentality Kendrick adopted in Act 1. Rather than a site of empowerment (as Kendrick thought of it earlier), wealth and claims to superiority falter at home, instead sounding "like the feds".

'i'⁷⁶

'i' opens with a familiar feel. Aligned with the musical qualities of Act 3, 'i' adopts a distinct soul sound in order to help communicate the overall message of unity and Black love. The upbeat, jangly guitar line of The Isley Brothers' 'That Lady' provides the backdrop for 'i', a song depicting Kendrick putting his faith into works as he unifies a crowd through religiously inspired self-love rhetoric.

'i' begins with Kendrick testifying to the salvific potential of God:

I done been through a whole lot
Trial, tribulation, but I know God
The Devil wanna put me in a bow tie

⁷⁵ Matthew Linder, "Kendrick Lamar's Collapsing of Hip Hop Realness and Christian Identity," *The Journal of hip hop studies* 5, no. 1 (2018): 127.

⁷⁶ Kendrick Lamar, "i," track 15 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

Pray that the holy water don't go dry
As I look around me
So many motherfuckers wanna down me
But an enemigo never drown me
In front of a dirty double-mirror they found me⁷⁷

[Chorus]

And (I love myself)
When you lookin' at me, tell me what do you see?
(I love myself)
Ahh, I put a bullet in the back of the back of the head of the police
(I love myself)
Illuminated by the hand of God, boy, don't seem shy
(I love myself)

Referencing the tug of war between Lucifer and God, Kendrick is able to proclaim that he has now been saved. Upon meeting God, returning home, rediscovering connections to family and friends, and by accepting his place as role model for 'the' Black community, Kendrick has finally found salvation in and through action. The realisation of his growth enables a proclamation of self-love: "I love myself" – an inversion of the hook "loving you is complicated" from 'u'. Darrius Hills describes the power of this claim to self-love in the context of racial oppression: "Self-love, as a strategy of resistance, is useful as a response to despair. The assaults upon Black humanity and selfhood necessitate healthy self and communal regard because the heightened embrace of self and the love of self can also function as an affirmational antidote that assists the rejection of descent toward despair, which is always particularly dangerous, because there is the potential for spiraling toward a nihilistic posture toward life."⁷⁸ Self-love is thus a revolutionary position capable of replacing white domination with Black community and survival.

But to this point of the song, Kendrick's prophetic message is centred on himself. Kendrick has recounted his personal ascent to self-love, but how can others achieve this state? As Kendrick begins the third verse, he is interrupted by the sounds of fighting in the crowd. Disturbed by this event, he

⁷⁷ This is a reference to the suicidal decline of 'u', specifically the lines: "You should've felt that black revolver blast a long time ago / And if these mirrors could talk it'd say, 'You gotta go' / And if I told your secrets the world'll know money can't stop a suicidal weakness". Lamar, "u."

⁷⁸ Darrius D. Hills, "Loving [you] is complicated: black self-love and affirmation in the rap music of Kendrick Lamar," in *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning*, ed. Christopher M. Driscoll, Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Routledge, 2020), 187-8.

stops rapping and directly addresses the people in attendance. Attempting to quell the division, Kendrick proffers an expression of Black empowerment:

All my niggas listen, listen to this:
I promised Dave I'd never use the phrase 'fuck nigga'
He said, 'Think about what you saying: 'Fuck niggas'
No better than Samuel on the Django
No better than a white man with slave boats'
Sound like I needed some soul searching
My Pops gave me some game in real person
...
So I'ma dedicate this one verse to Oprah
On how the infamous, sensitive N-word control us
So many artists gave her an explanation to hold us
Well, this is my explanation straight from Ethiopia
N-E-G-U-S definition: royalty; king royalty – wait listen
N-E-G-U-S description: black emperor, king, ruler, now let me finish
The history books overlook the word and hide it
America tried to make it to a house divided
The homies don't recognize we been using it wrong
So I'ma break it down and put my game in a song
N-E-G-U-S, say it with me, or say it no more
Black stars can come and get me
Take it from Oprah Winfrey, tell her she right on time
Kendrick Lamar, by far, realest Negus alive

The “Negus” monologue is Kendrick’s attempt at promoting self-love for every Black person.⁷⁹ Kendrick is not adopting a rhetoric of royalty in order to differentiate himself from others – as he did in ‘King Kunta’. Instead, he is drawing on royalty to enable widespread liberation.

Beyond the purely lyrical, the sonic construction of this song contributes to Kendrick’s argument. The Isley’s sample evokes a ‘70s-style Black consciousness which creates a sense of inter-generational community (another step in overcoming Willie Lynch). By affirming the necessity of the soul generation in his religiously inspired Black community, Kendrick critiques the individualist

⁷⁹ Although, here, maybe we can see an in-built sexism. Negus, he explains, refers specifically to king. Are women to be ignored in this construction of Black royalty?

approach to Black empowerment of the gangsta tradition (the primary musical influence of Act 1). Eithne Quinn argues: “G-funk’s willful political inertia ... ran totally counter to the sense of social engagement that proliferated, if often implicitly, in the soul music that accompanied the civil rights and Black power movements.”⁸⁰ Kendrick overcomes this inter-generational chasm by incorporating soul anthems in a new context.⁸¹

‘Mortal Man’⁸²

‘Mortal Man’ is something of an epilogue, capturing Kendrick in a moment of reflection. Here, Kendrick is concerned with how he can sustain his activism and whether he will receive the community support required to continue his quest for Black liberation. The opening four and a half minutes sees Kendrick dwelling on the legacies of Black political leaders from Nelson Mandela to Malcolm X, and wondering whether he will be pushed aside (and killed) like the latter, or universally adored like the former. These questions reflect Kendrick’s extensive arc. He began the album imagining all the things he could purchase with his newly acquired riches and he ends it by pondering on how best to change the world.

The final seven minutes of this 12-minute track take a drastic turn. The music fades into the background as Kendrick completes the recurring poem:

I remember you was conflicted
Misusing your influence
Sometimes I did the same
Abusing my power full of resentment
Resentment that turned into a deep depression
Found myself screaming in the hotel room
I didn’t wanna self-destruct
The evils of Lucy was all around me
So I went running for answers
Until I came home
But that didn’t stop survivor’s guilt
Going back and forth trying to convince myself the stripes I earned

⁸⁰ Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2005), 144.

⁸¹ Errol Henderson notes the potential of sampling as a tool of inter-generational community building: “Hip-hop ... has the potential to fill a transitional void of cross-generational cultural transmission within Black culture by providing a new lyric to an old tune, in some cases literally.” Errol A. Henderson, “Black Nationalism and Rap Music,” *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 3 (1996), 311-2.

⁸² Kendrick Lamar, “Mortal Man,” track 16 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

Or maybe how A-1 my foundation was
But while my loved ones was fighting the continuous war back in the city
I was entering a new one
A war that was based on apartheid and discrimination
Made me wanna go back to the city and tell the homies what I learned
The word was respect
Just because you wore a different gang color than mine's
Doesn't mean I can't respect you as a Black man
Forgetting all the pain and hurt we caused each other in these streets
If I respect you, we unify and stop the enemy from killing us

The poem, when heard in its entirety, provides an insight into the true purpose of the album: building Black community. Kendrick's journey of self-discovery is fundamentally a journey to reverse Willie Lynch.

But Lamar is not finished with the layers of meaning. As Kendrick completes the poem, we hear paper rustling, indicating that he is reading the poem from a piece of paper to an unknown listener. He then engages in discussion with this other person, who we soon learn is Lamar's deceased hero Tupac Shakur:

I always wanted to ask you about a certain situa-
About a metaphor actually, uh, you spoke on the ground
What you mean by that, what the ground represent?

[Tupac]

The ground is gonna open up and swallow the evil
That's how I see it, my word is bond
I see—and the ground is the symbol for the poor people
The poor people is gonna open up this whole world
And swallow up the rich people
'Cause the rich people gonna be so fat
And they gonna be so appetizing, you know what I'm saying wealthy, appetizing
The poor gonna be so poor, and hungry
...
There might, there might be some cannibalism out this muh-fu-
They might eat the rich, you know what I'm saying?

The presence of Tupac is not inconsequential. Tupac is remembered as one of the most revolutionary minded and influential rappers in the genre's history.⁸³ By evoking Tupac's memory, and by bringing his voice to life, Kendrick is again drawing from a well of Black political resistance – as he did via his sampling of The Isley Brothers and Alice Walker – that contributes to his message of an inter-generational, community based activism.

Kendrick and Tupac continue their discussion until we reach a second poem that concludes the album. Where the recurring poem narrates, this concluding poem is more allegorical and reflective:

The caterpillar is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it
Its only job is to eat or consume everything around it
In order to protect itself from this mad city
While consuming its environment
The caterpillar begins to notice ways to survive
One thing it noticed is how much the world shuns him
But praises the butterfly
The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness
And the beauty within the caterpillar
But having a harsh outlook on life
The caterpillar sees the butterfly as weak
And figures out a way to pimp it to his own benefits
Already surrounded by this mad city
The caterpillar goes to work on the cocoon
Which institutionalizes him
He can no longer see past his own thoughts
He's trapped
When trapped inside these walls certain ideas take root, such as
Going home, and bringing back new concepts to this mad city
The result?
Wings begin to emerge, breaking the cycle of feeling stagnant

⁸³ "His prophetic and prescient sensibility about the national trajectory of the United States are on full display in too many of his lyrics to list here, but consider, as an example, his lyrics about America's unreadiness for a Black president that have been sampled by Nas and others, in their own tributes to President Barack Obama. His impression of the prison system, his experiences with police brutality and harassment, and the fact that he talked about these issues in nearly all of the music that he recorded produce a sense of timeless connection to the experiences of young black men in America." James Braxton Peterson, "A PARTICULAR PAC: Ontological Ruptures and the Posthumous Presence of Tupac Shakur," in *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, ed. Bernard Freeman, Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), 84.

Finally free, the butterfly sheds light on situations
That the caterpillar never considered, ending the internal struggle
Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different
They are one and the same

This poem speaks to the meta-narrative of *TPAB* as one of growth away from the problematic ideology of the caterpillar towards that of an enlightened, altruistic, community-driven butterfly. But before Kendrick can hear any more guidance, Tupac goes silent. The album ends on a poignant note as, once he has finished the poem, Kendrick turns to Tupac but hears nothing in return: “What’s your perspective on that? / Pac? Pac? PAC?!” We end the album in a state of confusion, sadness, and ultimately, with a sense of a mission incomplete. This ending speaks to the ongoing struggles associated with Willie Lynch. The pervasiveness of this division is seen in that Kendrick’s hero (who died of gang violence) is unable to pass on his guidance. Black liberation is impossible in a society where Willie Lynch reigns.

Conclusion

Black religiosity has forever demonstrated a revolutionary sensibility. “The real point of Black faith,” Manning Marable argued, “is to change the conditions of the oppressed Black majority for the better. If Black ministers ... succeed, they have the potential to spark anew the moral and ethical commitment that remains essential within the struggle against racism and capitalist exploitation.”⁸⁴ A far cry from white assumptions of the pacifying effects of religion during the era of slavery, Black faith has routinely proven itself capable of inspiring resistance out of seeming hopelessness.

To Pimp A Butterfly continues this (Black radical) tradition of revolutionary religiosity. In the course of the album, Kendrick testifies to the liberating potential of faith as he navigates his way through the dangers of neoliberalism, both ideologically and economically. For all its upbeat, positive aesthetics, the effect of this neoliberal ideology is overwhelmingly negative. Not only does it result in self-hate and depression: it also perpetuates Black division. It is only by accepting God and turning this faith into works that Kendrick embraces a new goal: reversing Willie Lynch. Once “illuminated by the hand of God,” Kendrick enters a state of enlightenment where he can reform the world in God’s communal, love-based image. Rather than submit to neoliberalism’s primacy, *TPAB* paves a path to

⁸⁴ Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015. Originally from 1983), 238.

liberation through a religiously-inspired critique of the poisons of an ideology that prioritises the self over the community, material over spiritual wealth, and ultimately, division over unity.

Chapter 4

“Only once the drugs are done, that I feel like dying”: Emo Rap and the Opioid Crisis in an Age of Despair

Someone has to pay today
Someone's gotta pay the bills
I can't even look in the mirror
Oh baby would you get my pills?
I need a xanny and a vicodin
A percocet and valium
Anything to take the edge away
I travel through the light in the ceiling and everything goes away

...

I know of a place inside my mind where I can fly!
(Take another pill! take another pill!
Take another pill and I go, where I go no one knows)
I know of a place inside myself where I can be!
(Take another pill! take another pill!
Take another pill and I go, where I go no one knows)
I know of a place inside my mind where I am free!
(Take another pill! take another pill!
Take another pill and I go, where I go no one knows)

- ‘The Boys Who Died In Their Sleep’ by Flying Lotus¹

I can mingle with the stars, and throw a party on Mars
I am a prisoner, locked up behind Xanax bars
I have just boarded a plane, without a pilot
And violets are blue, roses are red
Daisies are yellow, the flowers are dead
Wish I can give you this feeling I feel like buying
And if my dealer don't have no more, then
(I feel like dying)
Only once the drugs are done, that I feel like dying I feel like dying
Only once the drugs are done, that I feel like dying I feel like dying

- I Feel Like Dying by Lil Wayne²

Introduction

The general sense of positivity in the music of Chapters 2 and 3 is far from the norm in popular rap. Indeed, a despair-ridden and hopeless ‘structure of feeling’ has dominated for much of the 21st

¹ Flying Lotus, “The Boys Who Died In Their Sleep,” track 16 on *You’re Dead!*, Warp Records, 2014.

² Lil Wayne, “I Feel Like Dying,” track 16 on *The Drought Is Over 2: The Carter 3 Sessions*, 2007.

century, reflecting the ways that the alienation explored by Lamar has developed into a broader condition of the present moment. This down-trodden sentiment has developed alongside another striking phenomenon of the rap scene: drug overdose deaths. On the 15th of November 2017, 21-year-old rapper Lil Peep (real name Gustav Åhr) passed away from an overdose of Xanax and fentanyl. Praised as much as he was derided, Lil Peep is remembered either as a pioneer for his influence on the burgeoning SoundCloud rap genre or as a moping, “stupid-as-shit”, stale and uncreative “rapper”.³ Rap is not a genre immune to death – both the work and public murders of two of its most famous exponents, Tupac and Biggie Smalls, attests to this fact. But the passing of Lil Peep was different. Peep was influential in the transition of popular rap towards a *primary* focus on themes of depression and drug addiction. Almost every song released by Peep engaged with drugs as self-medication for pain originating from an often unnamed source. Ultimately, a young (white) man who grew to fame rapping about his mental health issues and a turn to prescription drugs to numb them, died in just the way he predicted throughout his career. But even more concerning than this single story is the fact that drug-related deaths in the world of rap are no longer rare.

Approximately a year after Peep’s death, on September 7th 2018, Malcolm McCormick, known professionally as Mac Miller, died. The cause of death was eerily familiar. Found unresponsive in his Los Angeles home, Miller had fatally overdosed on a combination of cocaine, alcohol, and fentanyl.⁴

Approximately one year later, another name was added when Juice WRLD (Jarad A. Higgins), a rapper who grew to popularity on the back of open discussions of his own mental health struggles, overdosed and died. Flying to Chicago on a private plane stashed with numerous substances, Juice WRLD was made aware of a police search that would greet him at his destination. Afraid, he ingested a large quantity of drugs. By the time law enforcement entered the plane, Juice WRLD had gone into convulsions. He died hours later with autopsy results revealing a lethal combination of oxycodone and codeine in his bloodstream.⁵

On the 8th of April 2020, Chynna Rogers, known professionally as Chynna, died of an accidental overdose in her Philadelphia home. Like the rappers mentioned above, much of Chynna’s lyricism centred on her long history with opioid addiction and failed attempts at sobriety. Like many of her contemporaries, Chynna was admittedly overwhelmed by a sense of despair, the consequence of

³ Drew Millard’s provocatively titled article, “Is Lil Peep’s Music Brilliant or Stupid as Shit?” captures the conflicted sentiment surrounding Peep. See: Drew Millard, “Is Lil Peep’s Music Brilliant or Stupid as Shit?” *Vice*, Dec 23, 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/nznmag/is-lil-peeps-music-brilliant-or-stupid-as-shit>.

⁴ Dan Hyman, “Mac Miller’s Last Days and Life After Death,” *Rolling Stone*, Nov 15, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/mac-miller-legacy-loss-756802/>.

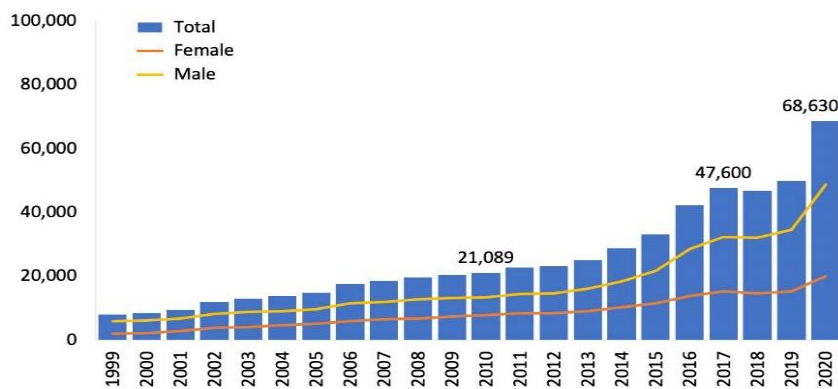
⁵ Zoe Haylock, “Everything We Know About Juice WRLD’s Death,” *Vulture*, Dec 21, 2021, <https://www.vulture.com/2021/12/how-did-juice-wrld-die-cause-of-juice-wrlds-death.html>.

which was drug-dependency. As one interviewer describes: “Her output thrives on bringing light to the things often relegated to hushed conversations in the corners of the mind: drugs, death, despair. She’s never been formally diagnosed with depression, but she certainly feels the weight. ‘If you’re not depressed right now, you might be getting high,’ she laughs ‘Everyday I wake up with new shit to be mad about. It’s too much.’”⁶ Drug-use, it seems, is an increasingly prominent response to a despair-ridden world.⁷

Stories of celebrities dying from an overdose of illicit drugs are far from uncommon, but the above stories are different. They recount young people dying through an interaction with readily available, often licit drugs acquired through doctors’ appointments and pharmacy visits. How, one might ask, can such a thing happen? The answer lies in a decades long history of deregulation, malfeasance, and neoliberal capitalism in the pharmaceutical industry, leading to one of the most devastating public health crises in American history: the opioid crisis.

Beginning in the late 1990s with increases in drug overdoses in the poorest counties of rural Appalachia, the opioid crisis has steadily grown to epidemic proportions.⁸ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “[f]rom 1999–2019, nearly 500,000 people died from an

Figure 3. National Overdose Deaths Involving Any Opioid, Number Among All Ages, by Gender, 1999-2020



*Among deaths with drug overdose as the underlying cause, the any opioid subcategory was determined by the following ICD-10 multiple cause-of-death codes: natural and semi-synthetic opioids (T40.2), methadone (T40.3), other synthetic opioids (other than methadone) (T40.4), or heroin (T40.1). Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Multiple Cause of Death 1999-2020 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released 12/2021.

⁶ Briana Younger, “Introducing Chynna, the Ex-Model and Ex-Addict Who Can Rap Her Ass Off,” *Pitchfork*, Jan 18, 2018, <https://pitchfork.com/features/rising/introducing-chynna-the-ex-model-and-ex-addict-who-can-rap-her-ass-off/>.

⁷ These rappers join a long list of artists to have died of prescription-drug overdoses in the 21st century. Within the rap world alone, add to this list: DJ Screw (29 y.o.: codeine, Valium, and PCP), Lexii Alijai (21 y.o.: fentanyl and ethanol), DJ Rashad (34 y.o.: heroin, cocaine, and Xanax), Ol’ Dirty Bastard (35 y.o.: cocaine and tramadol).

⁸ The current crisis now overshadows every previous drug crisis in American history. “In 2016, more than 64,000 Americans died from drug overdoses, of which more than 33,000 were opioid-related. By comparison, there were 7,100 recorded overdose deaths from drugs of any type in 1975, at the height of the heroin epidemic.” Keturah James and Ayana Jordan, “The Opioid Crisis in Black Communities,” *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 46, no. 2 (2018): 405.

overdose involving any opioid, including prescription and illicit opioids.”⁹ Unfortunately, as seen in the graph above, the crisis is far from over – indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated it.¹⁰

Further complicating the crisis is its relative diversity. Despite beginning as a largely white, rural issue, the crisis has since expanded to all segments of the US population. Max Haiven’s description captures this heterogeneity:

The faces of the opioid crisis are diverse: urban or rural, of all complexions, young and old. It involves bored suburban teenagers raiding their parents’ medicine cabinets for a quick high, indebted retirees transformed into drug dealers when they realise the street prices for their prescribed painkillers could supplement their impossibly low pensions, injured or idled workers seeking disability insurance and opioids to help combat a sense of uselessness and alienation, overworked doctors ignorant of or denied the ability to offer holistic therapies reaching for a panacea or being threatened or pressured by their patients for a fix.¹¹

It is this diversity, coupled with the sheer number of deaths, that makes the opioid crisis such a defining phenomenon of 21st century capitalist histories.

It is within this disturbing context that I place the drug themes of a specific subgenre of rap music: SoundCloud rap. Also often categorised under the names ‘mumble rap’ (due to the unclear diction typical of the genre’s rappers) and emo rap (due to its incorporation of sounds typically associated with early 2000s emo rock), SoundCloud rap rose to prominence in the mid-2010s via the music streaming platform from which it takes its name.¹² Thematically, this subgenre differentiates itself

⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), *Opioid Overdose: Understanding the Epidemic*, <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html>. Of these 500,000, roughly half involved prescription drugs. Barry Meier, *Pain Killer: An Empire of Deceit and the Origins of America’s Opioid Epidemic* (London: Random House, 2017), 173.

¹⁰ National Institute on Drug Abuse, *Overdose Death Rates*, <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>. The 2020 spike is particularly notable. A series of policy shifts throughout the 2010s appeared to be flattening the curve of opioid related deaths. Unfortunately, COVID-19 worsened the crisis due mainly to disruptions in global drug supply chains meaning that people turned to suspect channels to acquire opioids. See: Ishika Patel, Lauren A. Walter and Li Li, “Opioid overdose crises during the COVID-19 pandemic: implication of health disparities,” *Harm Reduction Journal* 18, no. 1 (2021): 1-5.

¹¹ Max Haiven, “Our Opium Wars: The Ghosts of Empire in the Prescription Opioid Nightmare,” *Third Text* 32, no. 5-6 (2018): 667.

¹² I should note that while I use ‘emo’ and ‘SoundCloud’ interchangeably, I avoid using the term ‘mumble’ as it is often considered a slur against the subgenre. For example, Adam de Paor-Evans describes emo rap as “the most recent art form of rapping - or arguably the art of not rapping. Rather than rapping clearly, eloquently, articulately and with prowess and esteem, mumble rappers string occasional words together, like ‘cat’, ‘sat’ and if you’re lucky, ‘mat’. And mumble rappers tend to do just that, they mumble.” Adam de Paor-Evans, “Mumble Rap: Cultural Laziness or a True Reflection of Contemporary Times?” *The Conversation*, Sep 2, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/mumble-rap-cultural-laziness-or-a-true-reflection-of-contemporary-times-85550>.

from 'traditional' rap through a *primary* focus on themes of depression, angst, suicide, and especially drug-addiction. "Collectively," Jason Parham explains, "the music is largely defined by a biographical vulnerability that gives way to violence, drug-addled introspection, and a kind of ritualistic self-loathing."¹³ This alienated, despair-ridden worldview forms the sentiment of the subgenre out of which comes a dependence on opioids.¹⁴

Whilst drugs have always been part of rap music, SoundCloud rap's evocation of drugs is particularly unique.¹⁵ During the gangsta era of the 1990s, drugs – especially crack cocaine – were most frequently evoked in relation to drug-dealing. Then, drugs were portrayed as providing (and in many cases, did provide) an avenue to economic autonomy in a world where both agency and employment were lacking for many African Americans. As Eithne Quinn argues: "[H]ard-pressed individuals who engaged in drug dealing were often striving to circumvent the lack of other avenues open to them for attaining success. With the exploding market for crack, dealing became for many underemployed youth the most attractive of their dead-end service-sector options".¹⁶ Therefore, the dominant 'structure of feeling' of '80s/'90s rap was *entrepreneurial* as rappers turned to drug economies (or, at the very least, embellished stories about drug-dealing) in order to stake out spaces for economic stability.

Today, an entirely different 'structure of feeling' dominates. Where drug cultures in '90s rap were an attempt to more effectively 'succeed' in a flailing economy, the sentiment pervading SoundCloud rap speaks to a desire to *numb away* the problems of neoliberal modernity. No longer dealing but consuming, many of today's victims of neoliberal racial capitalism – both Black and white – are depressed, riddled with despair, battling extreme mental distress, and, due to the extensive influence of the pharmaceutical industry, strung out on opioids. 21st century rap has witnessed a

¹³ Jason Parham, "Rap Will Continue to Dominate Music in 2018, Thanks to Its Distaste For Genre," *Wired*, Jan 19, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/soundcloud-rap-2018/>.

¹⁴ "[D]iscussions of mental health and drug abuse in emo rap frequently appear simultaneously because the substances mentioned are often used to treat mental health conditions such as anxiety." Nina Palattella, "'We all Wanna Die, Too': Emo Rap and Collective Despair in Adolescent America" (Honors Thesis, Kent State University, 2020), 25.

¹⁵ I should also note that my analysis is limited to a few specific musicians. I do not claim that the examples of drug abuse evidenced in this chapter are common to all rappers (for many, drugs are still about partying, money-making, and fun). Furthermore, it would be a mistake to assume that every story told in emo rap is autobiographical. For example: "[The rapper Future] clarifies that he does not use drugs. When the interviewer asks why Future raps so much about prescription drugs, Future states, 'I feel like that's the number one thing everybody likes to talk about. It's a catch.' In other words, it appears that rapping about prescription medication abuse has some sort of 'it' factor with rap fans." Hollyann M. Morales, "'Codeine' the Lyrics: A Content Analysis of Prescription Medication References in Popular Rap Lyrics." (Ph.D. Thesis, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology, 2017), 37-8.

¹⁶ Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 50.

shift from an entrepreneurial 'structure of feeling' to a pharmacological 'structure of feeling'. Unable to repel neoliberalism (as did the Afrofuturists and Lamar), and finding the world too hurtful to participate in (ala 4th25), these rappers isolate themselves and seek numbness.

This chapter examines these contemporary trends in rap music to gain a better understanding of the opioid crisis, youth culture, and contemporary crises of American capitalism, or what I call – synthesizing works by poet W.H. Auden and sociologists Anne Case and Angus Deaton – the *age of despair*.¹⁷ Written in 1947, Auden's poem *The Age of Anxiety* captured the paranoia and instability of the Cold War moment. Case and Deaton's 2020 book *Deaths of Despair* focusses on the 21st century trend of worsening morbidity rates resulting from declining economic and social lives for working-class white Americans. These two texts guide my understanding of the present historical moment. When speaking of the social and economic conditions that provided fertile ground for both the opioid crisis and the predominant themes of emo rap, it seems to me reasonable to speak of a transition from Auden's 'age of anxiety' to a late neoliberal *age of despair*. This chapter assesses SoundCloud rap's obsession with opioids as a specific kind of response to a late modern, despair-ridden age, a response that prioritizes numbness over entrepreneurial agency.

In conceiving of opioids as a numbing agent to the realities of a despair-ridden world, I draw on Susan Buck-Morss' essay 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics'. Buck-Morss, building on Walter Benjamin, describes the modern existence as one characterised by a constant bombardment by overwhelming stimuli. In order to survive under these conditions, one seeks numbness: "[T]he synaesthetic system is marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock. As a result, the system reverses its role. Its goal is to *numb* the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather, one of *anaesthetics*."¹⁸ Although originally applied to the late-19th century and the aftermath of the industrial revolution, Buck-Morss' ideas resonate with the present moment. Though the factories have given way to the drudgery of the gig economy, and as the sensory overloads of radios and phonographs have given way to the internet and social media, opioids continue to dominate as a response to the anxiety and pace of modern life.¹⁹

¹⁷ Wystan Hugh Auden, *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948); Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

¹⁸ Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62, (1992): 18.

¹⁹ "To the already-existing Enlightenment narcotic forms of coffee, tobacco, tea, and spirits, there was added a vast arsenal of drugs and therapeutic practices, from opium, ether, and cocaine to hypnosis, hydrotherapy, and electric shock." Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," 18.

By engaging with the mentally deleterious effects of neoliberal modernity, this chapter deals less with a crisis point of racial capitalism than with capitalism as normal. This may sound paradoxical. On the one hand I am discussing one of the largest public health crises in American history, and on the other I argue that I am unconcerned with crisis points. One of the arguments I make is that this crisis is a consequence of the very same structures, behaviours, policies, and ideas that have dominated American political and social life since neoliberalism came into being. In other words, I understand this crisis as a consequence of many of the things taken as *normal* over the past four decades: stagnant wages; declining economic and social lives of poor Americans; growing disparity between rich and poor (or educated and uneducated); deregulation; state retrenchment; rampant individualism; social isolation. Emo rap's obsession with drugs is a critique of what Carl Ratner describes as the 'pathological normalcy' of society.²⁰ Drug dependency derives not from the 'failings' of the individual drug consumer, but the 'failings' of the social and economic contexts that give rise to these 'pathologies'.²¹ The sense of alienation, dread, and lack of purpose evidenced in emo rap is, I argue, a reaction to the everyday realities of our late neoliberal conjuncture.

This chapter engages with emo rap as a way to excavate the despair-ridden, anaesthetic dependent 'structure of feeling' of 21st century American neoliberalism. Investigating this music, beginning with Danny Brown and ending with Lil Peep, is reflective not only of the transformation of drug themes in rap, but also of the diversity and scope of the *age of despair*. Danny Brown's 2016 album *Atrocity Exhibition* places themes of depression, anxiety, and drug addiction within a specifically African American, urban context. Here, self-medication develops out of the knowledge that death is around every corner. The growth of emo rap transformed this same sense of anxiety into a white, suburban tale. Despite the changing setting, the sense of pain and alienation remains, and opioids are similarly embraced as an anaesthetic response to despair-ridden lives. It is within the space of emo rap that

²⁰ Ratner combats the 'traditional biomedical model' of pathology with what he calls the 'cultural-medical model'. The traditional model conceives of a normal *and* pathological. Someone is pathological if they exhibit certain behaviours completely outside of the 'normal' that is wider society. Ratner disagrees, arguing that the 'normal' of contemporary, neoliberal capitalist society (i.e. extreme inequality, prejudiced judicial system, health care failures) is itself deeply pathological. It is from this 'pathological normalcy' that individual 'abnormalities' derive. See: Carl Ratner, "Overcoming Pathological Normalcy: Mental Health Challenges in the Coming Transformation," in *Health Care Under the Knife: Moving Beyond Capitalism for Our Health*, ed. Howard Waitzkin (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 211-223.

²¹ As Carl and Malakai Hart argue: "We know that one's chances of becoming addicted increase if s/he is young, unemployed and/or has co-occurring psychiatric disorders. That is why it is critically important for policies to ensure that people have jobs, affordable housing and access to effective mental health services, rather than exclusively focusing on eliminating drugs from society." Carl L. Hart and Malakai Z. Hart, "Opioid Crisis: Another Mechanism Used to Perpetuate American Racism," *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology* 25, no. 1 (2019): 8-9.

the alienation of racial capitalism (of a similar kind to that explored by Lamar) finds itself affecting everyone, not simply those forced to the economic margins.

As opposed to much of the oppositional and inspired sentiment of rap's history, we witness in this subgenre a concession to the pressures of modernity. Rather than grapple with pain and push onwards, emo rappers retreat inwards, staking out spaces to self-medicate and forget. Numbness is the last resort to a world offering little more than despair.

Opioid Epidemic

The road to the epidemic was far from simple or predictable. Indeed, throughout much of the 20th century a crisis of this scale was literally impossible, owing to the quasi-prohibition of opiates enforced under the Harrison Narcotic Act of 1914.²² By the 1980s, however, the medical landscape had radically changed and the use of powerful opiates in the treatment of acute pain was increasingly standard.²³ Soon, this growing acceptance opened the space for debate regarding the potential value of opioids in the treatment of chronic pain – a radically different proposition. One expert in particular, Dr. Russell Portenoy, led the cultural charge seeking to normalise opioid-treatments for chronic pain. With the aid of suspect statistics and the financial backing of major pharmaceutical companies, Portenoy and others were successful in turning the tide towards a greater acceptance of opioids – a shift that proved extremely dangerous.²⁴

With the medical world now far more receptive to opioids, and with the Harrison Act superseded by a tiered system of drug availability (passed under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970), the scene was set for a major pharmaceutical company to meet the demand for opioid medications. Purdue Pharmaceuticals came to the fore in the mid-'90s with their release of the most potent prescription

²² This prohibition was so wide-ranging that even the terminally ill were often prohibited opioids: "The way of treating severe pain in some groups of patients—in particular, the elderly and newborns—bordered on the barbaric. Up until the mid-1980s, surgeons operated on desperately ill newborns without using painkillers, because they were considered too risky for infants to tolerate. For years, children in pain were inadequately medicated." Meier, *Pain Killer*, 34-5.

²³ Though often used interchangeably in both the scholarly and popular literature, 'opioids' and 'opiates' are, in fact, different. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention explains: "Opiates refer to natural opioids such as heroin, morphine and codeine. Opioids refer to all natural, semisynthetic, and synthetic opioids." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), *Commonly Used Terms*, <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/terms.html>.

²⁴ Chris McGreal, "Doctor who was paid by Purdue to push opioids to testify against drugmaker," *The Guardian*, Apr 10, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/apr/10/purdue-opioids-crisis-doctor-testify-against-drugmaker>.

drug in American history: OxyContin.²⁵ OxyContin's claim to fame lay in its patented slow release formula. Previous opioid painkillers released their active ingredient, oxycodone, in a single shot. OxyContin, on the other hand, released oxycodone over an extended period of time, thus theoretically easing pain for longer than the single hit alternatives. Though reasonable in conception (slow release of oxycodone would allow for the possibility of a full night's sleep for chronic pain sufferers), the reality was far more problematic. The slow release formula justified a greater potency in comparison to previous drugs.²⁶ As opposed to the 5 milligrams of oxycodone typical of previous painkillers (which was mixed with over-the-counter pain relievers of lesser strength), OxyContin "was pure oxycodone, and the weakest dosage contained 10 milligrams of the narcotic It was also available in much higher dosages, including 20, 40, 80, and 160 milligrams of oxycodone."²⁷ Even worse, as many users quickly learned, once crushed and ingested the entire dose was absorbed in a single hit. Despite claims to the contrary by Purdue representatives, OxyContin was highly addictive: "[W]hile Purdue salespeople told doctors that less than 1 percent of OxyContin patients would become addicted, Purdue's own study from 1999 found the rate to be 13 percent."²⁸ By the early years of the 21st century, OxyContin was ubiquitous.²⁹

With the scene set, the opioid crisis was now burgeoning in rural Appalachia.³⁰ The period between 1996 and 2010 has since been called the epidemic's first wave, most notable for its rural

²⁵ Although Purdue are the face of pharmaceutical malfeasance, they are not alone. The crisis was and is a structural issue. The very same tactics adopted by Purdue were profitable for any number of companies because decades of deregulation and privatisation allowed them to be. Jonathan Marks explains: "Most of the media attention has focused on Purdue Pharma However, it is important to keep in mind that this company was only one of several drug companies that promoted their opioids by building webs of relationships with a variety of public health agencies, academic institutions, and public health NGOs, as well as thousands of individual health professionals." Jonathan H. Marks, "Lessons from Corporate Influence in the Opioid Epidemic: Toward a Norm of Separation," *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (2020): 174.

²⁶ "When the FDA approved OxyContin for sale in late 1995, regulators ... permitted Purdue to imply that OxyContin might pose a lower risk of abuse than traditional painkillers because it was a time-release narcotic." Meier, *Pain Killer*, 74.

²⁷ Meier, *Pain Killer*, 8.

²⁸ Ben Westhoff, *Fentanyl, Inc: How Rogue Chemists Are Creating the Deadliest Wave of the Opioid Epidemic* (Brunswick: Scribe Publications, 2019), 25, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/lib/uwa/detail.action?docID=5889500>.

²⁹ Approved for sale in 1995, OxyContin prescriptions experienced a "nearly tenfold increase ... from about 670000 in 1997 to about 6.2 million in 2002." Art Van Zee, "The Promotion and Marketing of OxyContin: Commercial Triumph, Public Health Tragedy," *American Journal of Public Health* 99, no. 2 (2009): 223.

³⁰ Despite a common perception that the crisis is a white issue, it actually draws on 'race' in interesting ways. Though often shielded by colorblind language, we continue to see racialized thinking in political responses to the crisis. A particularly egregious example comes from former Maine Governor Paul LePage, whose sympathetic response to opioid addicts gave way to racially charged indignation when shifting attention to drug distributors: "The traffickers. These aren't people that take drugs. These are guys that are named D-Money, Smoothie, Shifty—these type of guys—that come from Connecticut and New York. They come up here, they sell their heroin, then they go back home." "Incidentally," LePage continued, "half the time they impregnate a young white girl before they leave, which is a real sad thing because then we have another issue that we got to deal with down the road." Gregory Krieg, "Maine Governor Blames Media for Racially Charged

demographics.³¹ In contrast to the 1980s and early 1990s, where drug mortality rates amongst Black and white Americans paralleled each other, the first wave disproportionately affected rural whites while leaving African Americans relatively unscathed.³² Furthermore, this wave was largely licit in nature, with three quarters of the roughly 20,000 opioid-related deaths nationally in 2008 attributed to prescription pain relievers.³³ Neither these deaths nor an historic fine against Purdue Pharma in 2007 did anything to halt the first wave.³⁴ It would take until 2010, and a reformulation of OxyContin making it more difficult to crush, for any significant changes to occur. But this was not the end of the crisis. With an extensive market for opioids in place and now with an absence of strong, affordable prescription drugs, illicit alternatives soon flooded the market. An epidemic created by the legal structures of neoliberal capitalism now entered its illicit phase.

The second wave saw an influx of heroin that built upon the ravages of the first wave. It seemed that at every stop across the US, heroin grew to prominence because licit drugs flowed there first.³⁵ Notably, this expansion reached increasingly wealthy, suburban, but still largely white communities:

The new addicts were football players and cheerleaders Wounded soldiers returned from Afghanistan hooked on pain pills and died in America. Kids got hooked in college and died there. Some of these addicts were from rough corners of rural Appalachia. But many more were from the U.S. middle class. They lived in communities where the driveways were clean, the cars were new, and the shopping centers attracted congregations of Starbucks, Home Depot, CVS, and Applebee's.³⁶

Language Dust-Up," *CNN*, Jan 9, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/07/politics/paul-lepage-maine-heroin/index.html>. We see similar race-baiting at the national level by politicians who, rather than point the finger at the heavily under-regulated pharmaceutical industry, revert to xenophobic dog-whistling in which Mexicans are blamed for importing drugs. 'Build the Wall' acts as a racial smokescreen to the crimes of unchecked pharmaceutical capitalism.

³¹ "The increase in opioid deaths has been accompanied by a striking shift in the prevalence of fatal drug overdoses from urban to rural counties. The highest rates now occur in predominantly rural states, including West Virginia, New Mexico, Utah, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Nevada, Kentucky, and Tennessee". Susan Okie, "A Flood of Opioids, a Rising Tide of Deaths," *The New England Journal of Medicine* 363, no. 21 (2010): 1982.

³² Alex Hollingsworth, Christopher J. Ruhm and Kosali Simon, "Macroeconomic conditions and opioid abuse," *Journal of Health Economics* 56, (2017): 222.

³³ Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, "Vital Signs: Overdoses of Prescription Opioid Pain Relievers — United States, 1999–2008," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 60, no. 43 (2011): 1488.

³⁴ In 2007, Purdue pleaded guilty to 'misbranding' OxyContin and minimising the risks of addiction: "To avoid federal prison sentences for its executives, the company paid a \$634.5 million fine, among the largest in the history of the pharmaceutical industry at the time." Sam Quinones, *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2016), 267.

³⁵ Quinones, *Dreamland*, 305.

³⁶ Quinones, *Dreamland*, 7.

By 2014, heroin overdose deaths surpassed those from prescription opioids.³⁷ Soon, however, a third drug would enter the fold and transform a crisis into a true epidemic.

The third, and current, wave of the epidemic is a new phenomenon with familiar origins. Beginning in 2013, this wave distinguishes itself through a new drug of choice: fentanyl – a drug roughly 80 to 100 times more potent than morphine.³⁸ “[F]entanyl”, Ben Westhoff argues, “was quietly creating a brand-new drug epidemic, one that quickly outstripped the previous one and has become more destructive than any drug crisis in American history”.³⁹ The other defining feature of this wave is its expansion into increasingly urban and Black locales. As opposed to the overwhelmingly white make-up of the first and second waves’ victims, “the rate of increase in opioid deaths has been comparable across races for the last five years.”⁴⁰ As we enter the present moment, a crisis that was initially contained in a few poor, rural counties, has become national in scope.

All this describes the realities of the crisis as it continues to kill tens of thousands of Americans each year. But how exactly do we account for this epidemic? The sections below seek to answer this question by separating the crisis into its supply and demand determinants.

Supply

The quick history offered above details the who and what of the crisis, but tells us little of the how. My reading of the crisis is akin to that of Chris McGreal, who argues: “It is a tragedy forged by the capture of medical policy by corporations and the failure of American institutions to protect the public. That in turn is the result of a medical system run not as a service for the public good but as a business for corporate profit”.⁴¹ Here again, as with the GFC and War on Terror, the consequences of neoliberalism have been dire.

To truly understand the foundations upon which this crisis was built, we need to return to the early 1980s. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) – the agency responsible for the testing and approval of new drugs – was once the darling of the American public. In the 1960s, the FDA successfully banned Thalidomide (a morning sickness and insomnia drug) due to unconvincing evidence of its safety. The drug was soon discovered to be responsible for thousands of abnormalities in new born babies across Europe – including babies born with extra limbs. But these

³⁷ In that year, “[a]bout 15,400 people were killed by heroin, 1,000 people more than painkillers.” Chris McGreal, *American Overdose: The Opioid Tragedy in Three Acts* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2018), 252.

³⁸ United States Drug Enforcement Administration, *Fentanyl*, <https://www.dea.gov/factsheets/fentanyl>. By way of comparison, heroin is roughly 5 times stronger than morphine.

³⁹ Westhoff, *Fentanyl, Inc*, 9.

⁴⁰ James and Jordan, “The Opioid Crisis in Black Communities,” 406.

⁴¹ McGreal, *American Overdose*, xiv.

regulatory golden years were soon challenged as a result of the Reagan Revolution of ‘small government’.⁴² By the mid-1980s, the FDA had dwindled significantly, now acting without adequate funding at the very same time big business was granted a longer leash. The result was a necessarily weaker drug testing and approvals process.⁴³ Furthermore, the lack of funding created an agency rife with special interests as drug approval processes were now funded by the very same companies seeking to have their drugs passed.⁴⁴

The combination of weakening public infrastructure and growing impunity for private business is a crucial part of the crisis’ origins. In the absence of a well-funded regulatory body, companies like Purdue were able to leverage their economic might in order to control the regulation of certain drugs. Moreover, dwindling regulative resources enabled Purdue to engage in predatory advertising schemes, harassing doctors and patients alike in order to sell OxyContin at unprecedented rates.⁴⁵ The privatisation of universities and research organisations similarly played a role, tethering scientific research to the whim of big pharma.⁴⁶ All of these factors within the crisis’ supply side have become part of the ‘pathological normality’ of American society wherein private profits take precedence over public safety.

⁴² ‘Small government’ is something of a fallacy. At the same time that Presidents like Nixon and Reagan were deregulating the health sector, they were expanding America’s police presence.

⁴³ Harriet Washington captures the ways pharmaceutical companies distort the drug testing process: “In this era of evidence-based medicine, pharmaceutical manufacturers not only pay experts for favorable opinions but have also adopted and sponsored strategies to appropriate or undermine the medical-reviewing and publishing process itself. In some cases, corporations have controlled and distorted the conduct of clinical trials and of medical investigators to produce favorable results or to hide troubling or dangerous features of their patented medications.” Harriet A. Washington, *Deadly Monopolies: The Shocking Corporate Takeover of Life Itself—and the Consequences for Your Health and Our Medical Future* (Anchor Books: New York, 2011), 136.

⁴⁴ A lack of government funding led to the introduction of user fees for any company seeking FDA approval: “The introduction of user fees has meant that commercial values are replacing public health as a priority for organizations such as the FDA. In the process, drugs are approved with increasingly weaker evidence, and the result is poor-quality therapy and more safety problems associated with the drugs that are marketed.” Joel Lexchin, “The Pharmaceutical Industry in Contemporary Capitalism,” *Monthly Review* 69, no. 10 (2018): 48-9.

⁴⁵ Barry Meier lists a few of Purdue’s predatory schemes: “[T]he showering of favors on doctors, the lavish spending on consultants and experts ready to back a drugmaker’s claims, the funding of supposedly independent medical interest groups, the creation of publications to serve as industry mouthpieces, and the outright expropriation of scientific research for marketing purposes.” Meier, *Pain Killer*, 50.

⁴⁶ For example, patent laws enabled greater corporate control over public researchers and universities: “[P]ublic assets were freely passed over into the private domain. Many of the key breakthroughs in pharmaceutical research, for example, had been funded by the National Institute of Health in collaboration with the drug companies. But in 1978 the companies were allowed to take all the benefits of patent rights without returning anything to the state, assuring the industry of high and highly subsidized profits ever after.” David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 52. For a brilliant investigation into the impact of patent laws on American healthcare, see: Washington, *Deadly Monopolies*.

Demand

But a major gap in the literature lies in ignoring the demand side of the crisis in favour of an emphasis on supply. Such an approach ignores both the individual and social factors that contribute to drug dependency. With this in mind, the question must be asked: why were so many people drawn to these extremely potent drugs in the first place?⁴⁷ And what does this tell us about the despair-ridden 'structure of feeling' of 21st century neoliberalism as communicated in emo rap?

When thinking about the opioid epidemic, it is too easy to focus simply on the scandalous (and criminal) behaviour of Purdue Pharma in creating and marketing lethal drugs in a quest for greater profits. The purely pharmacological (drug chemistries) and commercial (marketing to doctors and the public) are both crucial aspects of this story. However, to remain fixated on these is to ignore a third angle: the victims themselves. In *Happy Pills in America*, David Herzberg argues that the popularity of minor tranquilizers in the 1950s and '60s owed to the anxiety of the contemporary moment, an anxiety borne of: the strain of housewifery; the pressures of upholding an invulnerable masculinity; the double shift of working mothers; the anxiety of consumer culture requiring constant accumulation; and the ever-present threat of nuclear apocalypse.⁴⁸ As Herzberg explains:

[P]otential patients were not simply pawns of drug advertisers, tricked into imagining anxiety and emotional suffering that did not actually exist. Even the white middle classes comfortably ensconced in prosperous suburbs, colleges, malls, and other key locales ... were not guaranteed freedom from emotional hardship. Not everyone lived happily in the officially encouraged 'nuclear' suburban family; parents did genuinely worry about juvenile delinquency and teenage pregnancy; and white-collar work could produce anxiety and stultifying conformity as well as good wages.⁴⁹

All these stressors (combined with the threat of nuclear apocalypse) contributed to what poet W.H. Auden labelled, in his Pulitzer Prize winning poem of the same name, the 'age of anxiety'.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ I must also stress that drug-use does not always require explanation. It would be a mistake to assume that all people turn to drugs to cope with trauma.

⁴⁸ "The flush of enthusiasm surrounding Miltown needs to be understood within this political ambit. When journalists in the United States announced the discovery of minor tranquilizers, they broke the news in a culture suffused with atomic anxiety and striving to find a means of attenuating and containing it." Andrea Tone, *The Age of Anxiety: A History of America's Turbulent Affair with Tranquilizers* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 94.

⁴⁹ David L. Herzberg, *Happy Pills in America: From Miltown to Prozac* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 43-4.

⁵⁰ Auden, *Age of Anxiety*.

Just as drugs such as Miltown appealed to the *anxious* 'structure of feeling' of the post-War moment, I argue that OxyContin speaks to the *despair* of a late neoliberal modernity. But the obvious question remains: what despair? As noted earlier, many of the opioid crisis' victims (and many of emo rap's exponents) are suburban white Americans, those not often associated with the kind of despair that would draw someone to the numbing effects of opioids. If the age of anxiety was fuelled by the threat of nuclear apocalypse (amongst other things), what accounts for the age of despair? As I understand it, the answer is two-fold, one more general and speaking to the realities of late modernity, and the other more specifically tied to the declining economic and social lives of poorer white Americans. On the general level, I borrow from Marshall Berman:

[Modernism's] characteristic energies, insights and anxieties spring from the drives and strains of modern economic life: from its relentless and insatiable pressure for growth and progress; its expansion of human desires beyond local, national and moral bounds; its demands on people to exploit not only their fellow men but also themselves; the volatility and endless metamorphosis of all its values in the maelstrom of the world market; its pitiless destruction of everything and everyone it cannot use ... and its capacity to exploit crisis and chaos as a springboard for still more development, to feed itself on its own self-destruction.⁵¹

It is a combination of this perpetual drive – the very mentality Kendrick Lamar chastised for its divisiveness – and over-abundance of stimuli that leads many to the numbing effect of opioids. Understood this way, opioids are the archetypal anaesthetic, called upon to soothe the sense of chaos that characterizes the present historical moment. It is the sense of hopelessness and despair deriving from these structuring ideologies that, I believe, emo rappers illuminate.

On the second, more specific, level, it is useful to engage with sociologists Anne Case and Angus Deaton.

Deaths of Despair

The second part of the answer to the question posed above – i.e. what despair? – is illuminated in Case and Deaton's 2020 book *Deaths of Despair*. The sociologists describe the socioeconomic conditions that account for the horrific increase in three forms of death for midlife, white, and uneducated (they emphasise the lack of a Bachelor's degree as a significant metric) Americans into

⁵¹ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 121.

the 21st century: suicide, drug overdose, and alcohol related ailments.⁵² They label these deaths: ‘deaths of despair’.

Much of the despair experienced by these demographics seems attributable to the forces of American racial capitalism.⁵³ Declining real wages, longer working hours, extended periods of unemployment, minimal labor protections, failing health-care, and all the psychological effects that go along with these phenomena create a working-class despair. Working-class Americans, it seems, have been cast aside in a perpetual drive for profit maximisation, and it is the despair that arises from these conditions that often leads to suicide, drug-overdose, and/or alcoholism.

For the rural Appalachian towns that once subsisted on various industries, a loss of jobs through mechanization and offshoring created the perfect conditions for despair to flourish (remember that these were the same towns hit by the crisis’ first wave). Sam Quinones provides an illuminating case study of this history in reference to the state of West Virginia: “Democrats ... created a legal and political system supportive of coal and railroad interests. ... Yet West Virginia sent its raw materials elsewhere to be transformed into profitable, higher-value products. Parts of the South threw off this third world model of economic development. West Virginia did not. Resource extraction mechanized and jobs left. Railroads declined and economic turbulence set in. But the state’s political system prevented a robust response or new direction.”⁵⁴ The opioid crisis was, in a very real sense, built on the sore backs of poor, semi-skilled workers. Anaesthetics initially kept labourers performing day after day without feeling the effects of physically demanding work, and then, once the jobs left, opioids became a way to cope.⁵⁵ Anaesthetics in the form of opioids have become a necessary tool for the working-class to continue in their role as exploitable labor, and then as the left behind population whose services are no longer needed and whose futures often lie in insecurity, anxiety, and deaths of despair.

⁵² Case and Deaton describe the extent of these deaths: “Deaths of despair among white men and women aged forty-five to fifty-four rose from thirty per one hundred thousand in 1990 to ninety-two per one hundred thousand in 2017. In every US state, suicide mortality rates for whites aged forty-five to fifty-four increased between 1999–2000 and 2016–17. In all but two states, mortality rates from alcoholic liver disease rose. And in every state, drug overdose mortality rates increased.” Case and Deaton, *Deaths of Despair*, 40.

⁵³ Not wishing to misrepresent Case and Deaton, I should note that they are both overt capitalists. Their concern lies less with capitalism than with the specific manifestation of modern American capitalism, one that siphons money away from the poor into the hands of the wealthy.

⁵⁴ Quinones, *Dreamland*, 18.

⁵⁵ Max Haiven summarises the role of opioids in capitalist reproduction: “OxyContin and other prescription painkillers were widely prescribed by army doctors for the same reason that they were to athletes, financiers, surgeons and travelling musicians: they allowed for the continued extraction of skilled and specialised labour-time beyond the body’s conventional limits, working through the pain. ... [C]apitalist accumulation has always relied on, perhaps even been defined by, the incorporation of narcotics, which dull the pain of its toll on the body and render workers ready for ever-greater levels of exploitation.” Haiven, “Our Opium Wars,” 666-7.

But Case and Deaton go even further, expanding on the economic determinants of despair to include the social. For them, the rise in these deaths cannot be explained through economics alone – if they could, we would expect to see people of color disproportionately represented in the deaths of despair numbers. Rather, the social lives of Americans are crucial to this story: “The gulf between the less and the more educated has widened, not only in the labor market but also in marriage, in child rearing, in religion, in social activities, and in participation in the community.”⁵⁶ Despite their often conservative family politics, Case and Deaton are correct to point towards a loss of social capital as a primary feature of late neoliberal despair.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, accompanying this despair was a deregulated and predatory pharmaceutical industry ready and willing to treat it with some of the most powerful prescription drugs in human history.

Although seemingly detached from emo rap, these histories of despair are echoed in the music of Lil Peep and his emo rap contemporaries. We hear in this music the isolation and hopelessness that accounts for the demand side of the opioid epidemic, feelings borne of a society brought closer to collapse by neoliberal logics of individualism, exploitation, and alienation.

Drugs in Rap Historically

Rap’s engagement with drugs has historically been diverse. Growing out of deindustrializing conditions and the crack epidemic, it is perhaps unsurprising that much early rap adopted a clear anti-drug message.⁵⁸ Classic songs such as ‘White Lines (Don’t Do It)’ and ‘The Message’ by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five are two often cited examples of the abstinence message of early rap. Even into the 1990s, positive depictions of hard drugs (especially drug-use) were rare.⁵⁹

But as rap entered ‘the mainstream’, this abstinence messaging gave way to a more permissive view of drugs. Most noteworthy was an emphasis on drug dealing. Prior to the gangsta era, it was rare to

⁵⁶ Case and Deaton, *Deaths of Despair*, 167.

⁵⁷ The following excerpt reflects their conservatism: “We tell the story not only of death but of pain and addiction and of lives that have come apart and have lost their structure and significance. For Americans without a bachelor’s degree, marriage rates are in decline, though cohabitation and the fraction of children born out of wedlock continue to rise. Many middle-aged men do not know their own children. They have parted from the woman with whom they once cohabited, and the children of that relationship are now living with a man who is not their father.” Case and Deaton, *Deaths of Despair*, 4. Although I disagree with this assumption regarding the superiority of traditional heteronormative structures, I do agree with the wider point that despair is both socially and economically determined.

⁵⁸ Calvin J. Smiley, “Addict Rap?: The Shift from Drug Distributor to Drug Consumer in Hip Hop,” *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 4, no. 1 (2017): 55.

⁵⁹ When drug consumption was promoted, it was usually centred on marijuana or alcohol, not harder drugs. See: Sarah Diamond, Rey Bermudez and Jean Schensul, “What’s the Rap About Ecstasy?: Popular Music Lyrics and Drug Trends Among American Youth,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 21, no. 3 (2006): 280.

hear rappers discuss the distribution of drugs to any great degree, but the hustling gangsta character seemed perfectly suited to fantastical tales of underground drug economies. However, the effect was something quite different from what might be assumed. Although increasingly a target for social criticism, drug themes in rap were largely centred on empowerment and agency through hard work. Far from simplistic kingpin mythologies, rappers engaged with crack dealing in a way that prioritized images of cramped spaces, long hours, dangerous and scary work where ‘grinding’ harder than everyone propels you from street corner to executive suite. By depicting these spaces through a language of graft, not luxury, ‘legitimate’ capitalist ideals were imposed over the ‘illegitimate’ space of drug economies.

Although in many ways capitalistic, such stories reflected (and even contested) the declining conditions of post-industrial America and the powerlessness experienced by many African American youths. “Fundamentally,” Dimitri Bogazianos argues, “both crack and rap are conceived of similarly—as ways to create spaces of nonhumiliating work in the face of severe social disruption.”⁶⁰ Crack-dealing – like rap itself – provided an avenue to entrepreneurialism and autonomy in a world where such things were often out of reach. Therefore, the emphasis on drug-dealing spoke to a sense of social betrayal, as many rappers commented upon the necessity of entering criminal economies due to the absence of well-paying, ‘legitimate’ alternatives.⁶¹

With the growth of subgenres such as emo rap, the 21st century has witnessed a profound shift in the relationship between drug and rapper. A primary characteristic of drug references in this most recent period is an emphasis on drug consumption – not distribution. Where in the past the drug-user was always the ‘other’, the exploitable and almost shameful victim, in recent rap, “[t]he consumer is no longer an unfamiliar face that is indistinguishable from the next, nor is it the third person narrative. Rather the dialogue has been reinvented (remixed) so that the drug user is from the first person perspective.”⁶² This transition, according to much of the secondary literature, is owed to Lil Wayne’s 2007 song ‘I Feel Like Dying’.⁶³ “While previous rap songs established the rapper as a distributor of drugs, in control of the chaos that surrounds him, Lil Wayne ... revealed his status

⁶⁰ Dimitri A. Bogazianos, *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 27.

⁶¹ “[E]thnographic portrayals of crack dealing have consistently shown that dealers themselves view crack as an alternative to the humiliations of low-wage labor. Given such a history, it should be no surprise that rap artists also call crack ‘work.’” Bogazianos, *5 Grams*, 54.

⁶² Smiley, “Addict Rap?,” 56-7.

⁶³ Lil Wayne, “I Feel Like Dying.”

as a consumer reliant on drugs and the relief they provide and set the example for the generation of emo rap stars who would follow him.”⁶⁴

In the second decade of the 21st century, another significant shift in drug themes occurred. Not only did the relationship to drugs change (from distributor to consumer), but the drugs of choice also changed. Remembering that rap is not detached from the world in which it exists, it is perhaps unsurprising to learn that the popularity of prescription drugs among the general public has translated into a relative ubiquity of prescription drug references in rap music – with Xanax being especially common.⁶⁵ Furthermore, these drugs are most frequently invoked in order to numb a general sense of despair. Prescription drugs provide the *numbness* thought necessary to exist in today’s world. As Lil Wayne states: “Only once the drugs are gone, that I feel like dying”. As opposed to the hustling, entrepreneurial ‘structure of feeling’ of old, today’s structural problems are best medicated.

But even as the drug of choice has changed, and as the perspective from which drugs are engaged with has been inverted (i.e. from distributor to consumer), the wider political message remains consistent. The prominence of crack spoke to the failures of the state to provide meaningful, financially adequate employment – as well as providing an avenue for fun and comradery in defiance of the criminalization of Blackness. Crack-dealing, therefore, symbolized an entrepreneurial response to the state’s abandonment of Black people and spaces.⁶⁶ Just like gangsta rappers, although more implicitly, emo rappers engage with drugs such as Xanax in ways that comment on a feeling of social betrayal. Emo rappers turn to drugs in order to numb the sense of alienation and despair that arises in the absence of opportunities for meaningful, joyful existences. To repeat a phrase from earlier, the genre’s obsession with drugs reflects the ‘pathological normalcy’ of society, not the ‘pathology’ of the individual.

SoundCloud Rap

Much of the literature on this genre, both popular and academic (the little that exists), argues for it as either a negative influence on youths or a valuable space for the open discussion of mental illness.

⁶⁴ Palattella, “‘We all Wanna Die, Too’,” 43.

⁶⁵ References to codeine cough syrups, Xanax, and Adderall have grown exponentially over the past decade. This is in stark contrast to rap music of the twentieth century where prescription drugs were entirely absent. See: Denise Herd, “Changes in drug use prevalence in rap music songs, 1979-1997,” *Addiction Research & Theory* 16, no. 2 (2008): 167-80.

⁶⁶ Eithne Quinn explores gangsta rap’s entrepreneurial sensibilities in *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*. See: Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*.

This first argument is instantly problematic in that it rehashes the “rap as dangerous” rhetoric that has blighted the genre since its inception. It seems that when rappers talk about drugs, it is often perceived as a form of promotion, all the while genres like rock are given a free pass.⁶⁷

Much of this literature makes pretty standard observations linking the amount of time youths listen to rap to the potential for drug use, often assuming some causation. Unfortunately, in adopting narrow content analysis (that simply involves counting the number of drug references in a given song without analysing the context of these references), much of this literature ignores the ‘structures of feeling’ around drug-use.⁶⁸ Rather than condemn rappers for their preoccupation with drugs, Michael Brownrigg explains, we instead need to understand

what leads these artists to reference them in the first place and the reasons why millions are attracted to the genre. Emo rap reflects on and critiques the larger, structural problems plaguing society and the attendant psychological pain underpinning the national opioid crisis. Above all, SoundCloud rap articulates the anguish and hopeless frustration felt by many Americans struggling under the oftentimes unbearable weight of socioeconomic and emotional distress.⁶⁹

Quantitative content analysis fundamentally detaches drug references from the society in which they exist. In the process, the true significance of these references is lost. When viewed qualitatively and contextually, drug-use is less about glorifying individual pathologies, and more about illuminating the ‘pathologically normal’ conditions that give rise to drug dependency. Drugs in emo rap are a reaction to despair, not a cause of it.

The second tendency within the literature is to stress the value of the genre in creating spaces for forthright discussion of mental health in a wider culture generally averse to these issues. This is

⁶⁷ “Hip Hop’s relationship with drugs is magnified by the intersections of race, gender, class, and respectability. ... [B]ecause of the politicized nature of Hip Hop, coming from the inner city, mainstream White America has traditionally viewed this art as ‘bad’ or ‘criminal.’ Consequently, the representation of drugs in Hip Hop culture is not seen as a form of experimentation of artistry as other musical genres, but rather reinforces stereotypes and myths of a deviant community.” Smiley, “Addict Rap?,” 51-2.

⁶⁸ Curtis and Daniel Hanba acknowledge this flaw in their own review of drug references in popular music: “[O]ur study does not aim to contextualize any of the references identified. It is possible that the discovered lyrical increase has been a promotional plea for listeners to be wary of the dangerous effects of recreational drug use”. Curtis Hanba and Daniel Hanba, “Opioid and Drug Prevalence in Top 40’s music: A 30 Year Review,” *The Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine* 31, no. 5 (2018): 765.

⁶⁹ Michael Brownrigg, “SoundCloud Rap and the Opioid Epidemic: In Defense of a Genre,” *Points: The Blog of the Alcohol & Drugs History Society*, July 21, 2020, <https://pointsadhs.com/2020/07/21/soundcloud-rap-and-the-opioid-epidemic-in-defense-of-a-genre/>.

especially important and refreshing in the context of rap music, a genre often derided for its glorification of problematic masculinities.⁷⁰

While both of the above debates are important, I believe the genre's greatest insights lie elsewhere, namely in its portrayal of the age of despair's pharmacological 'structure of feeling'. But it is here that a peculiarity of the subgenre comes to the fore. Emo rap is not only characterised by an emphasis on despair and addiction, but also by an absence of analysis of these conditions. None of the aforementioned themes are especially new to rap. In recent times, Schoolboy Q's *Oxymoron* (2014), Danny Brown's *Atrocity Exhibition* (2016), J. Cole's *KOD* (2018), Chynna's *in case i die first* (2019) – to name a few – have also delved into themes of depression and self-medication. The difference between these examples and emo rappers are the causes of despair.⁷¹ Brown, Q, Cole, and Chynna locate their anxieties within the context of living as African Americans in a structurally racist society. In other words, the despair permeating the storytelling of these rappers is racially determined. However, we do not see a similar diagnosis in the work of Lil Peep (who was white), for whom depression seems a simple fact of existence. In an effort to highlight these contrasting readings of despair, anxiety, and drugs as anaesthetics in the present century, the remainder of this chapter juxtaposes the work of Danny Brown with that of Lil Peep. By doing so, I seek to capture: the expansion of the rap genre into new (and whiter) spaces; the sheer scope of modern despair; and the anaesthetic dependent 'structure of feeling' resulting from this despair.

Danny Brown's Urban Despair

As a point of comparison to SoundCloud rap's engagement with themes of drug addiction and modern despair, I will first discuss Danny Brown's 2016 album *Atrocity Exhibition*. Born in Detroit in 1981, Danny Brown's path to rap popularity offers a valuable insight into the issues of drug addiction and modern despair that frame this chapter. Growing up in the midst of an economic collapse leading to Detroit's reputation as the archetypal deindustrialized city, Brown endured a series of personal crises that effected his relationship with drugs. Speaking about the climate of gang violence in his hometown, Brown explains that "Detroit is really crazy. It was worse back then but it's more fucked up now, economically. ... When I was a kid it was a lot of money floating around, so it was just

⁷⁰ "This music is a subversive tangent from the classically hyper-masculine stereotypes of rap, attacking the taboos of mental illness and its consequences with a brash sense of self-assuredness." Clara Scott, "The Sad New Guard of Emo Rap," *Michigan Daily*, Apr 4, 2018, <https://www.michigandaily.com/section/arts/sad-new-guard-emo-rap>.

⁷¹ Danny Brown, *Atrocity Exhibition*, Fool's Gold Records and Warp Records, 2016; Schoolboy Q, *Oxymoron*, Top Dawg Entertainment and Interscope, 2014; J. Cole, *KOD*, Dreamville, Roc Nation, and Interscope, 2018; Chynna, *in case i die first*, TWIN, 2019.

a lot more contract killing. Now it's just random; somebody smacked somebody's glasses and they get killed."⁷² Even within the home, violence and substance abuse was ever-present. As he explains of his granddad, who emigrated to Detroit from the Philippines in the 1960s: "[H]e ended up being a crazy alcoholic [and] abusive. He used to beat [Brown's grandmother] and shit. He got super wasted and died of alcohol poisoning."⁷³ Despite being in a relatively stable financial position, Brown's childhood amongst these conditions left an indelible mark.⁷⁴ By the age of 18, Brown started selling drugs. By 19, he was charged with possession with intent to distribute. Now on probation, Brown continued to deal. Soon after, he was again caught with possession but this time skipped his trial date. Once caught, he served an 8-month stint in prison.

It was only upon his release that rapping became a career for Brown, leading to mainstream success with his 2011 album *XXX* (a double entendre referencing both his age at the time of release and the kinds of themes he would explore in the album). This album, and his 2013 follow-up *Old*, carved out a unique space in the rap landscape – both stylistically and thematically – leading to widespread acclaim. As he began entering mainstream popularity, Brown became known for his unique, high-pitched, trumpet-like rapping style, as well as his primary lyrical theme: drug addiction. Although he has since begun to change his drug-fuelled image, Brown has previously explained how his public persona was constructed to align with the drug consumer character: "Back then it was like, how can I be edgy? ... Everyone was talking about gangster shit and shooting or gangbanging, so talking about opioids and pills was my way to be different. I knew people could relate to that."⁷⁵ In doing so, Brown was certainly a pioneer of a new era of drug-heavy rap music, taking familiar back-drops of poverty and violence and augmenting them with a central focus on drug consumption.

These trademarks would eventually culminate in 2016's *Atrocity Exhibition*, an album that offers a more introspective and critical reading of the same themes that were often treated casually in his earlier work. Although not technically part of emo rap due to an absence of the mumbled, lo-fi sound, *Atrocity Exhibition* is an interesting case study both due to its contemporaneity with emo rap and its primary focus on addiction. In contrast to the empowering and fun sentiment surrounding

⁷² Insanul Ahmed, "Who Is Danny Brown?," *Complex*, Jan 19, 2012, <https://www.complex.com/music/a/insanul-ahmed/who-is-danny-brown>.

⁷³ Ahmed, "Danny Brown?"

⁷⁴ Brown has explained in interviews that his family had assets which many others in his neighbourhood did not: "My grandma—my mom's mom—worked at Chrysler pretty much all her life. Through working at Chrysler, she bought like four or five houses. I came from Chrysler/GM money. To this day we still got those houses. She owns three houses in a row on that block and she owned them since the '70s, so it's really our block. If we didn't have those houses, I don't know what we'd do." Ahmed, "Danny Brown?"

⁷⁵ Thomas Hobbs, "Xanax: the drug that defined the decade and changed rap," *Dazed*, Dec 17, 2019, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/47214/1/xanax-the-drug-that-changed-rap-lil-peep-juice-wrld-end-of-decade>.

drugs in previous eras, most drug-use in *Atrocity Exhibition* occurs in isolation and feeds into a sense of alienation. Brown pops pills in hotel rooms or in the back of limousines, often alone, and, importantly, out of *necessity* – Brown does not want to be consuming drugs, but needs to in order to assuage a sense of despair. But thematically distinguishing this album from emo rap is Brown’s insight into the origins of his addiction. *Atrocity Exhibition* takes a self-reflexive look at Brown’s personal relationship with drugs, ultimately placing his dependency within the context of psychological trauma emerging from a childhood in structurally racist conditions.

The album opens with a sense of confusion and chaos. ‘Downward Spiral’ depicts Brown waking up after a bender and coming to terms with the paranoia and nightmarish depression that seems to characterise his life: “I’m sweating like I’m in a rave / Been in this room for 3 days / Think I’m hearing voices / Paranoid and think I’m seeing ghost-es, oh shit / Phone keep ringing but I cut that shit off / Only time I use it when I tell the dealer drop it off / ... Been grinding on my teeth so long it’s swelling up my jaw / Nothing on but my bathrobe and pinky ring / Your worst nightmare for me is a normal dream”.⁷⁶ This opening passage sets the paranoid tone that resonates throughout the remainder of the album. The next verse links these feelings to drug-use, which Brown seems increasingly unable to control: “Everybody say, you got a lot to be proud of / Been high this whole time, don’t realize what I done / Cause when I’m all alone, feel like no one care / Isolate myself and don’t go nowhere / Smoking blunt after blunt, ‘til my eyes start burning / Hennessy straight got my chest like a furnace / Drowning frustrations in a ocean of sin”.⁷⁷ We end ‘Downward Spiral’ with a sense of the numbing potentials of these drugs and their increasingly habitual presence in Brown’s life.

Directly following this opening song is an insight into the origins of Brown’s drug dependence. This is an important moment in that it distinguishes *Atrocity Exhibition* from the often analysis-light nature – and suburban locale – of much emo rap. ‘Tell me What I don’t Know’ opens with some reflection on Brown’s past:

Street smart, Ph.D
Dropped out for a slanging degree
9 on me, keep the devils off me
'Cause we was living in hell, couldn't afford property
Lil nigga gettin' frontin' from OGs
Oz of reggie bagged up in the Pelle

⁷⁶ Danny Brown, “Downward Spiral,” track 1 on *Atrocity Exhibition*, Fool’s Gold Records and Warp Records, 2016.

⁷⁷ Danny Brown, “Downward Spiral.”

In a school hallways on a burnout celly
Leaving out of class early, caught a sale for 20
How long will it last?
Never ending race, chasin' cash
One lane going wrong way 'til I crash⁷⁸

Brown explains in the opening lines that drug-dealing derived from a poverty-stricken existence (“we was living in hell, couldn’t afford property”). Furthermore, the hook of the song refers to a disproportionately Black experience of loss and despair: “Tell me what I don't know / Last night homie got killed at the liquor store / Shot my nigga on the way to get a Swisher / Breaking down the weed when the call got received”. Within two songs, we gain an insight not only into how drugs function for Brown in the present (as anaesthetic), but also the reason as to why drugs are needed.

But Brown is no longer living this life. In *Atrocity Exhibition*, he is a celebrity. Track 3, ‘Rolling Stone’, depicts this reality and how drug-use is intensified in such an environment. The interesting thing about this song in particular – and a trope that continues throughout the rest of the album – is the setting in which drugs are consumed. Unlike rap’s past, drugs in this album are frequently taken in isolation, without comradery or a sense of empowerment: “Riding around with the windows up / Smoking like it's ten of us / Just me in the back seat / With the driver bumping them Isleys / I'm walking on this long road / Will I come back? / Homie, I don't even really know”.⁷⁹ He ends the song by describing a sense of hopelessness and quest for numbness:

Feeling like I'm not alive
But I know I'm not dead
Living lies but can't hide
Deep inside, the truth dies
Bought hope, can't get change
Lost my brain, going insane
Self-medicate is how I cope
Leave my body, soul go afloat⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Danny Brown, “Tell Me What I Don’t Know,” track 2 on *Atrocity Exhibition*, Fool’s Gold Records and Warp Records, 2016.

⁷⁹ Danny Brown, “Rolling Stone (feat. Petite Noir),” track 3 on *Atrocity Exhibition*, Fool’s Gold Records and Warp Records, 2016.

⁸⁰ Danny Brown, “Rolling Stone (feat. Petite Noir.)”

The veneer of fun and positivity that characterized Brown's relationship to drugs earlier in his career is dropped in songs such as 'Rolling Stone'. Anxiety, despair, and pain define his current existence.

Songs 4 and 5 are far more braggadocios. Here – perhaps indicating the up and down instability of his celebrity life and the potential fun of drug consumption – Brown engages with drug-use in more classically empowering ways. But before the listener is carried away in this facade of positivity, Brown again descends. Songs 6, 7, and 8 subvert this positivity as the album takes a swift, distressing turn into drug dependence, paranoia and a need for numbness:

Can't quit the drug use
Or the alcohol abuse
Even if I wanted to
Tell you what I'm gonna do
I'ma wash away my problems
With this bottle of Henny
Anxiety got the best of me
So popping them Xannies
Might need rehab
But to me that shit pussy
Pray for me y'all
Cause I don't know what coming to me⁸¹

As I describe in greater detail below, this song ('Ain't it Funny') is a noisy, haunting take on the predominant themes of the album, functioning as a climactic representation of Brown's inner turmoil. With the sense that salvation is out of reach, that despair is closing in all around him, Brown concedes and accepts the inevitability of a death of despair.

The first two thirds of the album, songs 1 to 10, depict Brown's life in the chaotic and anxiety-ridden present captured in the above passage. The final act then travels backwards in time to the urban locale of Detroit. In this final third, drugs are generally absent. Instead, we hear stories detailing the traumas of living in the archetypal deindustrialising city. This third act provides the context for the drug-fuelled nightmare of the album's opening two thirds.

Brown opens track 11 with a nostalgic verse depicting the insecurities of life before making it as a famous musician:

⁸¹ Danny Brown, "Ain't it Funny," track 6 on *Atrocity Exhibition*, Fool's Gold Records and Warp Records, 2016.

I deserve the finer things
Told myself back then
When I used to ride a Schwinn
Now I'm on a tour bus
Going places I ain't never been
Wrote my rhymes down on a paper bag
That was way back
Having dreams of a Cadillac
Dog, I had to bounce back
Locked a nigga up
Why they do me like that?
Now I'm on the Jack in the county
Asking mommy for some money
Swear to God she'd do anything for me
Now we out the hood and the nightmare is us going back
So I won't go to sleep 'til I finish that⁸²

Instantly, the listener gains a sense that the narrator's chaotic present is tied to an insecure past. His history growing up in troubled areas as well as a personal history of prison time foregrounds his drug abuse. And yet, there is a triumphant element to this, as the hook explains: "You turn around, and now I'm winning / I built it up, from the ground / You stay asleep, I'm gonna get it". We witness here a reversion to the more empowering 'structures of feeling' typical of '90s rap. Brown acknowledges where he is now and the place he came from, and even though the present is riddled with anxiety, he still lives a life he could not have imagined as that teen writing "rhymes down on a paper bag".

To further emphasise the relationship between drugs as a necessary anaesthetic to the realities of urban despair and structural racism, song 12 returns to the social context of urban Detroit:

Living every day like it's the end
Just waking up, feelin' like a sin
Gotta keep a eye on your friends
Cause everybody hungry in them streets
Nigga rob ya grandma for something to eat
Know it's fucked up, that's how it be

⁸² Danny Brown, "From the Ground (Ft. Kelela)," track 11 on *Atrocity Exhibition*, Fool's Gold Records and Warp Records, 2016.

Growing up living everyday in the D
And it don't seem like shit gon' change
No time soon in the City of Boom
Doomed from the time we emerged from the womb
So to cope, drugs we consume
...
No umbrella, we stuck in the rain
Dark clouds hanging all over our head
No sunshine and them showers be lead
Lighting up squares and them dots be red
Now ya best friend gets shot in the head, damn⁸³

This depiction of a decaying city is the context out of which drugs become necessary. Again, this kind of external focus, this explanation as to why he uses drugs, is solely situated in the third act, essentially accounting for all the drug-based exploits of the first two thirds of the album. It is this analytical perspective that ultimately enables a path forward as the album ends with the upbeat 'Hell For It'. Brown's self-reflexivity and willingness to engage in critique offers the potential for salvation – something which is not attempted by Peep for whom despair is simply a fact of life.

But while drug abuse, for Brown, is tied directly to an urban despair, his song 'Ain't it Funny' – and its accompanying music video – points toward a different kind of despair that echoes drug themes in emo rap. In particular, this video provides a unique insight into the expansion of despair from urban to suburban spaces.

Constructed as a parody trailer for a lily-white suburban sitcom, the video to 'Ain't it Funny' opens with an establishing shot of an idyllic suburban home. There is no music at this point. We then hard cut to a wide shot of Danny lying side-by-side in bed with a woman, both of them smoking cigarettes and with Danny holding a 40-ounce malt liquor bottle. This is significant because as the video continues, this bottle is replaced with different anaesthetics in the form of Xanax and a prescription drug bottle. As I understand it, the anaesthetic substitute is a subtle indication of both the progression of the rap genre and the transition to an opioid-dependent 'structure of feeling'. 40s were the drink of choice for gangsta rappers and – similar to crack – symbolically functioned as a site of entrepreneurship.⁸⁴ Today, the more empowered 'structure of feeling' symbolised by 40s has

⁸³ Danny Brown, "When it Rain," track 12 on *Atrocity Exhibition*, Fool's Gold Records and Warp Records, 2016.

⁸⁴ Eithne Quinn highlights gangsta rap's entrepreneurial relationship with 40s: "[G]angsta (more than other rap subgenres) was at pains to expose and critically engage its own commercial impetus and commodified status. There is a frank assertion in gangsta of the need and desire for profit and of the entrepreneurial basis of pop-

literally been replaced by the numbing effects of opioids. Danny, still lying in bed, remarks that he's "empty inside", upon which a young boy enters the room, walks up to the side of the bed and rambunctiously proclaims "Oh Uncle Danny", which elicits laughter and applause from the "live studio audience." This sets the tone for the rest of the video. A prominent sentiment of the video lies in the way the very same destructive behaviours, thoughts, and feelings that characterised the urban context of *Atrocity Exhibition* have today penetrated suburbia. But when met with laughter, not compassion, these spaces perpetuate the factors that lead to a widespread despair (the very same that plague emo rappers like Lil Peep).⁸⁵

We then cut to a classic sitcom opening sequence as the frantic, siren-like music of 'Ain't it Funny' begins. Five characters – all of whom (minus Brown) are white – are introduced one-by-one, entering through the back door of the video's suburban home with captions at the bottom of the screen introducing the character and actor's name. First enters 'Dad' (played by filmmaker Gus Van Sant) coming home in his sweater and tie, holding a briefcase. 'Mom' is next (played by Joanna Kerns, best known for her role as the mother on late-'80s sitcom *Growing Pains*), smiling to the camera, dressed in vintage '80s athletic clothing. Then enters 'Daughter' (the same woman in bed with Danny earlier) who angrily shrugs, rolls her eyes, and ignores the camera. Fourth, the same kid we met earlier enters. The caption comes up only as 'kid', played by "this fucking kid". The commentary is quite clear. These environments are dehumanising and banal. The parents provide a veneer of happiness through their smiling personas, but they are caricatures without names, personalities of their own, or any characteristic that couldn't be said of dozens of '80s/'90s suburban sitcoms. By also parodying the conventional gender roles of the Dad 'bringing home the bacon', Brown is complicating the often romanticised depictions of suburbia. Even in these 'ideal' suburban locales, despair is unavoidable. Finally, Brown (playing "Uncle Danny") enters by kicking the door down, drunkenly stumbling in while holding a cigarette and the same mock-40 bottle he was holding earlier.

The scene cuts again to the bedroom set as the voices of the characters are now muted (allowing the song to be the only sound heard). First, the 'Daughter' (with her voice muted but with subtitles entering for the first time, which is the way dialogue is presented for the rest of the video), turns to

music production. Instead of incurring the common accusation of 'selling out' from its core audience, the promoting of St. Ides actually worked to enhance rappers' 'keepin' it real' image." Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 5.

⁸⁵ There is a second reading of 'Ain't it Funny' wherein Brown feels that his life is becoming a spectacle for voyeuristic fans. As Brown himself discussed in an interview: "I meet a lot of fans and they just be like, they care more about, like, my actual lifestyle than the actual music, so it started making me feel like a spectacle or something. Like people was taking it for a joke, but everybody expects to get around me and I'm just gonna be happy and it's all going to be hunky-dory and we're gonna do drugs together and have a party, but that's not what I'm about you know. Time to turn it down a little bit." "On Track with The Needle Drop – Danny Brown," posted by "theneedledrop," Dec 15, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-U-BG_zpJU.

Brown, saying: "I'm really worried about you, Danny." We then cut to Danny, who proclaims "I'm all fucked up and everyone thinks it's a joke." Danny looks up at the audience, who burst into laughter at Danny's cry for help. Cut to the living-room couch where the family are watching TV. The parents are sitting, again smiling vapidly, as the Dad says "I love this show." Hearing this, the Daughter rolls her eyes and says "Stop watching TV and pay attention to Danny's illness." Cut to the table in front of them where there sits a rolled up bill, balls of a white substance, a medicinal looking capsule and a crack pipe. We see a close-up of Danny's face for less than a second. In contrast to the parents sitting directly next to him, Danny is in a daze and on the verge of tears. Danny picks up the pipe and starts smoking. He again looks straight to the audience, puts his hands out and pleads: "I have a serious problem." Both the audience and parents burst into laughter. Danny tries again: "Please stop laughing." He looks up again to the crowd who are clapping and laughing increasingly aggressively.

Cut again to the bedroom set where Danny is joined in bed by both the Daughter and Mom. While the two women stare blankly into the distance, Danny appears to be spiralling out of control, flailing his arms around and mouthing the words to the chorus. As opposed to the stationary shots in the rest of the video, here, the camera is moving in and out, angling from side to side and with the occasional fish-eyed lens, communicating a sense of chaos. Interspersed throughout, we see multiple, very quick shots of the same scene, but now with the Mother and Daughter lying dead, their bodies and the room covered in blood as a large knife sits at the foot of the bed. Accompanying this traumatising image is a human-sized bottle of prescription drugs and a human-sized Xanax pill on the either side of the bed. The significance of these images speaks to the violent ramifications of Brown's drug addiction that is enabled under these 'ideal' suburban conditions.

We then see a kind of intermission as the music cuts out and we return to the traditional sitcom aesthetic of the opening sequence. Danny is urinating over flowers and photos of the family in the living room. The Dad enters, again with briefcase in hand, demanding that Danny stop. They sit down together as Danny attempts to explain himself: "I've been destroyed," Danny explains, "and if I destroy, maybe I'll feel ok." The Dad pauses for a moment, reaches out to touch Danny's hand and says "none of us feel ok." Just as we witness a true moment of introspection, engagement with seemingly universal destructive feelings and a potential path to recovery through familial love, the kid enters and repeats his catchphrase, "Oh Uncle Danny", to raucous laughs. Suddenly, all the insights into the kind of ethereal, despair-ridden existence of these characters is undermined by a banal catchphrase. Danny's despair, and that of these suburban characters, is set to continue in perpetuity.

Soon after, we see Danny again in the living room but this time standing alongside the human-sized drugs. Danny, smiling and noticeably high, puts his hand on the Xanax bar: “You guys are my only friends. I need you.” The Xanax bar responds: “We’ll kill you and everyone you love.” It then pulls out a large knife and forcefully stabs Danny in the stomach as the prescription bottle urges it on. We now see Danny lying on the floor, blood gushing from his stomach as the drugs celebrate and the crowd erupt with laughter. The kid again enters, walking towards the camera and saying “He’s DYING and you people are LAUGHING. You DISGUST me.” All the while the studio audience continue to cheer and whoop in the background. We then cut to Danny on the floor, lying in a pool of his own blood. He looks to camera and says: “I’m glad you found my pain entertaining. Goodbye.” The video ends with close-ups of crowd members as they laugh and give a standing ovation. The final shot is a return to the bedroom set, still covered in blood but with the three characters absent. The human-sized drugs have been replaced by two large men holding large knives.

The significance of this video lies in the way it satirises the ‘90s sitcom. While much of *Atrocity Exhibition* addresses crises of Black urbanity, this video reframes despair within the historically white suburbs. Suburbia is no longer a site of aspiration. The veneer of the video is one of a wholesome, private-propertyed, heteronormative, middle-class ideal, but it is this very structure that Brown chastises for its role in enabling despair-ridden, *homeless* lives and the kinds of depressive episodes that opioids provide an escape from. The effects of late modernity, with its various racialized and classed components evidenced in everything from neoliberal ideology to the Global Financial Crisis and deaths of despair, have extended crises beyond their former confines. There is something about modernity itself, not just structural racism, that creates the kinds of feelings that necessitate anaesthetics. It is this more ubiquitous sense of despair that I now seek to uncover in relation to Lil Peep.

Lil Peep

Unlike *Atrocity Exhibition*, with its structured (albeit nonlinear) narrative, Lil Peep’s discography is far more narratively eclectic, with each song functioning as a standalone vignette. But despite a lack of *narrative* coherence, Peep’s music is characterised by its *thematic* consistency, with each song centred on feelings of alienation, isolation, despair, and self-medication. The rest of this chapter focusses on these themes and how Peep’s aesthetic qualities buttress a general sense of despair and quest for numbness, all of which provides an insight into the pharmacological ‘structure of feeling’ fostered in the age of despair.

Born in Allentown, Pennsylvania on November 1, 1996, Lil Peep's upbringing is in stark contrast to that of Brown. The child of an American mother and Swedish father – both of whom are Harvard graduates – and grandchild of former professor of Latin American history at Harvard University John Womack, Peep spent a majority of his childhood in a suburban neighbourhood of Long Island. Despite excelling academically, Peep despised high-school and his fellow students whom he described as “the stereotypical high schoolers from the movies”.⁸⁶ Feeling an intense sense of alienation in his hometown, Peep moved to LA in 2013. It was here where Peep's career took off. Meeting rappers who shared an affinity for vulnerable lyricism and genres such as emo rock, Peep joined a collective known as GothBoiClique, a collective “built to create a space for like-minded rappers who shared the same niche interests within the genre, allowing Lil Peep to find a place of his own”.⁸⁷ With the support of GothBoiClique, Peep released a series of mixtapes from 2015-17 (including popular works *Live Forever*, *Crybaby*, and *Hellboy*), quickly gaining a large following of young people drawn to the thematic foci – on anxiety, despair, and alienation – that defined Peep's music.

It was also around this time, though, that his relationship with drugs worsened. A weed smoker since his early teens, Peep very quickly shifted to more dangerous drugs, explaining in an interview just months before his death: “I have horrible anxiety. That's why I took a Xanax before this interview. I used to abuse it really badly, like 20 pills a day, having seizures in my sleep, waking up in my own shit. I don't abuse it anymore. It's just, when I have something like a concert or an interview... if I'm nervous, I'll just do one and I'm chill.”⁸⁸ Months later, Peep would succumb to these addictions, dying in exactly the same way he had predicted throughout his career.

Lil Peep engages with many of the same themes as Brown, including a primary emphasis on drug abuse and loneliness. However, Peep takes these themes to a level of obsession. Very few songs in Peep's discography engage with anything outside the four walls of his bedroom, instead retreating inwards to describe a growing sense of isolation. Take Peep's aptly named ‘ghost boy’: “Leave me alone, just leave me alone / I'm growin' so tired of this / How do you fight the feelin'? / How do you fight the feelin', bitch? (Bitch) / She callin' my phone, she callin' my phone / I put it on quiet quick (Quick) / I ain't never gon' answer it / I ain't never gon' pick up my phone girl”.⁸⁹ The overwhelming

⁸⁶ Colin Joyce, “Meet Lil Peep, All-American Reject,” *Fader*, Aug 2, 2017, <https://www.thefader.com/2017/02/08/lil-peep-gen-f-interview-hellboy-crybaby>.

⁸⁷ Tatiana Tenreiro, “A Timeline of Lil Peep's Career,” *Billboard*, Nov 17, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/lil-peep-career-timeline-8039377/>.

⁸⁸ Frankie Dunn, “an interview with lil peep from september 2017,” *i-D Magazine*, Dec 22, 2017, <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/wjpd95/an-interview-with-lil-peep-from-september-2017>.

⁸⁹ Lil Peep, “ghost boy,” track 8 on *Lil Peep; Part One*, self-released, 2015.

sentiment expressed by Peep is one of alienation, self-imposed isolation, and social betrayal. It is in response to these feelings that Peep turns to drugs.

When speaking of the anaesthetic turn in response to late modernity's despair, the question inevitably arises: what ailments are emo rappers self-medicating? Brown contextualizes his turn to drugs in reference to the despair of Black urbanity, but what about these white, often suburban rappers? Interestingly, the answer for Peep is intentionally vague. Only once does he engage in the sort of social analysis we see with other rappers:

I know that it hurts sometimes, but it's beautiful
Working every day, now you're bleeding through your cuticles
Passing through a portal as you're sittin' in your cubicle
Isn't life beautiful? I think that life is beautiful
...
You wanna see your friends, but you're stuck inside a hospital
Doctor walks in and he tells you that it's terminal
Tumor in your brain and they're sayin' it's inoperable
Isn't life beautiful? I think that life is beautiful
They'll kill your little brother and they'll tell you he's a criminal
They'll fucking kill you too, so you better not get physical
Welcome to America, the type of shit is typical
Isn't life beautiful? I think that life is beautiful⁹⁰

Apart from this passage, Peep's turn to self-medication is rather ambiguous. This is, I believe, a strength rather than a weakness. It is one thing to pin pain and sadness upon a specific memory or personal scar, but for the pain to remain without origin is an indictment on life itself. Lisa Miller's understanding of a general despair is particularly insightful: "'What's going to happen to me?' is anxiety's quiet whisper, its horror-show crescendo the thing Xanax was designed to suppress. Three and a half years of chronic economic wobbliness, the ever-pinging of the new-e-mail alert, the insistent voices of prophet-pundits who cry that nuclear, environmental, political, or terrorist-generated disaster is certain have together turned a depressed nation into a perennially anxious one."⁹¹ What we hear in Peep's music is an auditory representation of (his take on) this historical moment, a period riddled with uncertainty leading to chronic anxiety and depression.

⁹⁰ Lil Peep, "Life Is Beautiful," track 7 on *Come Over When You're Sober, Pt. 2*, Columbia Records, 2018.

⁹¹ Lisa Miller, "Listening to Xanax," *New York Magazine*, March 16, 2012, <https://lisaxmiller.com/listening-to-xanax/4646>.

Two features of Peep's work strongly contribute to the portrayal of this 'structure of feeling' requiring retreat from the 'real world': his lo-fi, genre-bending sounds and his personal aesthetic – most notably his face tattoos. Thus, much like other rappers explored in this thesis (though in less overt ways), we witness in Peep's work an exploration into the feelings engendered by 21st century racial capitalist crisis.

Emo rap's sonic numbness and outsiderism

A primary feature of Peep's outsiderism is his unique sonic arrangement. In contrast to the frantic pace and whirring paranoia of Brown, Peep's aesthetic is much more down-tempo, lo-fi and introspective, three qualities that help amplify the anaesthetic significance of drug-use. Not only do drugs such as Xanax hold a prominent lyrical place in the genre, but emo rap's sound is designed to replicate the effect of these drugs. Brownrigg explains: "SoundCloud rap's soundscape, comprised of distorted, woozy compositions, depicts the subjective experience of drug consumption not only lyrically but also tonally through the languid, sluggish delivery typical of the form."⁹² The sonic qualities of the genre transfer the numbing effect of Xanax to the listener, thus engaging us in the same sense of numbness chased by Peep and his cohorts.

But more than sonically recreating the feel of anaesthetics, the musical qualities of the genre exhibit an overt and deliberate outsiderism. Much of the literature on rap music defines the genre through characteristics like flow, lyrical themes, and musical stylings.⁹³ However, these categorisations risk turning a dynamic art-form – which is especially true of the 21st century, a moment in which rap has permeated many different spaces – into a static one. SoundCloud rappers, seemingly intentionally, subvert these narrow categorisations to the point that their mumbled flow often fails to comply with rap's foundational characteristic: "a distinct form of vocal articulation based on rhythmically driven spoken words."⁹⁴ While one argument might be that these sedated, 21st century styles aren't 'real' rap or signify its white appropriation – and there is some merit to the latter argument – I would also note that this re-working amplifies the outsiderism and alienation that characterizes emo rap.

⁹² Brownrigg, "SoundCloud Rap and the Opioid Epidemic."

⁹³ Adam Krims offers an illustrative example of restrictive definitions. Based on criteria such as 'flow', 'style', 'layering', and 'topics', Krims identified four primary rap genres: party, mack, jazz/bohemian, and reality. In doing so, Krims fundamentally differentiates between, for example, 'party' rap – "designed for moving a crowd, making them dance, or perhaps creating or continuing a 'groove' or mood" – and that of mack – a more controversial genre centred around the 'pimp' character "whose confidence, prolificness, and (claimed) success with women mark him as a 'player'". The assumption underpinning these categories is that they are mutually exclusive. Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 55, 62.

⁹⁴ Jonathan R. Pieslak, *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 138.

A notable example of emo rap's alienated re-working of conventions is its genre-bending sound. As evidenced by the 'emo rap' title, many of the subgenre's biggest stars, Peep included, borrow heavily from the non-rap world: "Emo rap is often lauded for its incorporation of numerous, seemingly discordant, influences. Those who celebrate the scene point to the genre's versatility, arguing that the SoundCloud era has significantly altered the musical landscape by infusing hip hop with elements of pop punk, emo and grunge rock, R&B, and ... country music."⁹⁵ This drawing on varied influences and intentionally finding space beyond norms and expectations functions as a kind of self-imposed isolation. Outsiderism and a ritualistic isolation in response to a worldly alienation define the subgenre, reflecting a seeming need to create distance between oneself and a painful 'real' world.

As well as sound, the visual elements of the subgenre – and of Peep specifically – contribute to a sense of social betrayal and isolation. Perhaps the most controversial and recognisable characteristic of emo rap is found not in the music but in the appearance of the rappers themselves. In particular, face tattoos have become a trademark. The little analysis that exists on face tattoos assumes a commercial motivation.⁹⁶ In reference to an early-2000s phenomenon of 'tat-vertising' wherein companies payed civilians to tattoo advertisements on their faces, Kaitlyn Tiffany argues that just as 'face ads' were for money, "[f]ace tattoos — on YouTube, Instagram, or any platform that demands differentiation through shock and clickbait — are for attention, which is for money."⁹⁷ While it is undoubtedly true that face tattoos make for a successful marketing strategy, I believe this perspective to be limited as it ignores their symbolic power.

In the American context, face tattoos have an innately 'outsider' quality, having originated in prisons. Therefore, the acquiring of these tattoos by emo rappers is a symbolic rejection of the outside world: a (kind of) avowed disavowal. The process of taking a taboo and transforming it into a rite of passage not only fosters an us (outsiders) vs them (real world) mentality, it also reaffirms the need to create distance from the very spaces that cultivate their despair. These rappers are aware of the impact face tattoos will have on their lives, but this is the point. It is the very same despair-

⁹⁵ Brownrigg, "SoundCloud Rap and the Opioid Epidemic."

⁹⁶ In the popular sphere, face tattoos are often an opportunity for derision. For example: "Face tattoos and unnatural hair colors are almost required to break out. ... There's a definite correlation between drug use and putting stupid permanent artwork on your face. Evidently any negative stigma surrounding face tattoos is gone, considering they're almost as frequently seen as pink, purple, and blue hair. Tattoos and dying your hair have always been phony attempts at illustrating your uniqueness, but such appearance alterations are equivalent to wearing a hat in the modern rap game." Michael Gursky, "The Rise of Emo Rap," *Medium*, May 5, 2017, <https://michaeltgursky.medium.com/the-rise-of-emo-rap-53cb773d003c>.

⁹⁷ Kaitlyn Tiffany, "Face value: How tattoos on foreheads and cheekbones turn unknown teens into internet stars," *Vox*, Feb 28, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/2/28/18243480/face-tattoos-soundcloud-rap-youtube-justin-bieber>.

ridden world that forces them to retreat to their bedrooms and narcotics that they seek distance from through face tattoos. As Peep's Grandmother explained in a documentary on his life: "I think that it was partly an identification with oppressed people. He, I think, really wanted to make himself an outsider."⁹⁸

We witness the outsiderism of face tattoos as well as their isolationist consequences (leading to anaesthetics) in the following lines from Peep's 'praying to the sky':

Bitch, I'm tatted out my shirt, so I can't work, I make it flip
Pour my 40 in the dirt, then light my dutch and take a sip
I hear voices in my head, they tellin' me to call it quits
I found some Xanax in my bed, I took that shit, went back to sleep
They gon' miss me when I'm dead, I lay my head and rest in peace⁹⁹

Face tattoos, in this context, affirm a detachment from the racial capitalist 'real' world because they hinder employment opportunities. Highly visible self-markings ensure that Peep's life can never be 'normal'. Incapable of fulfilment *in* the world, Peep *retreats from* the world.

Despair and a vulnerable masculinity

As well as a form of retreat, Peep's tattoos represent a vulnerability and 'softness' that is best evidenced by his famed forehead tattoo spelling "crybaby". In defining himself around ideas of vulnerability, emotional despair, and the need to self-medicate the consequences of this pain, Peep raises interesting questions about masculinity in a genre tainted with accusations of sexism. For example, Calvin Smiley observes a prominent masculinist thrust in commercial rap of the past decade:

Based on my reading, two themes emerged ... which embodied forms of hyper-masculinity, particularly issues of 'gangsterism' and hyper-sexuality. The former, indulges in the traditional sense of 'gangster' rap where the narrator asserts their power through dominance over others and showcases their masculinity in their ability to be violent or engage in criminal activity, if necessary. The latter, engages in ideas of masculinity weaved through forms of hyper-sexuality and ability to attract and seduce women.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ *Everybody's Everything*, directed by Sebastian Jones and Ramez Silyan (Gunpowder & Sky, 2019).

⁹⁹ Emphasis added. Lil Peep, "praying to the sky," track 1 on *Lil Peep; Part One*, self-released, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Smiley, "Addict Rap?," 53.

Although rap is extremely diverse, Smiley is correct to observe a general adherence to such problematic masculinities in the genre's mainstream history. However, while such masculinities remain present, emo rap inverts these archetypes.¹⁰¹ Emo rap expresses a unique masculinity from much of the rest of the genre, a masculinity where 'hardness' has completely given way to 'softness', where emotional impenetrability has given way to a sense of violability – or of having everything affect or penetrate one's psyche. Peep reworked the invulnerability of previous rap subgenres into a new identity best expressed in the tattoo above his right eye.

In emo rap, drug-use is often framed less as an appeal to masculine ideals of dominance than to a sense of concession. It speaks to the overwhelming effects of the outside world and the depression, isolation, and utter despair that comes as a result.¹⁰² In Peep's work, there is a profound sense of violability and suffering that cuts against the masculine hardness of gangsta (and masculinities generally). The authenticity Peep helped mould is not one of a detached invulnerability, but of feeling too much. Existential crises come not from exploiting others, but from being unable to give enough in a world where despair seems ubiquitous.

The question is often asked of Peep and his emo rap peers: what is the point? And are they political? Many argue no, assuming a lack of recognizable resistance or any kind of explicit political comment to be a sign of simplicity at best or the degeneration of an entire genre at worst. If we understand resistance as only the act of carving out spaces from which to protest, then this perspective is sound. However, this is not the sole characteristic of 'political'. The political sentiment of emo rap may not be as entrepreneurial or 'positive' as other subgenres, nor does it make the liberatory moves offered by Kendrick Lamar and Janelle Monáe, but that does not render it apolitical. Despair and a quest for numbness are themselves indicative of a deeply political condition – of a 'pathologically normal' society. Peep communicated (not created) the increasingly anxious, depressive, anaesthetic dependent 'structure of feeling' that characterises life for all of neoliberalism's 21st century subjects.

¹⁰¹ Which is not to say that emo rap is immune to sexism. As many of the songs explored throughout this chapter indicate, emo rap is still tainted by objectification and violence against women. As a particularly obscene and egregious example: "I got drugs in my coat, I put love in my coke / Everywhere I go, hoes wanna give me throat / I got mud, I got blow, I get lonely on my own / 'Til my plug hit my phone and yo' bitch give me dome / Back to the drugs, pop a pill, fall in love / With a stripper in the club, I got demons in my mud / Red drop cups, baby, I don't give a fuck / Red drop cups, baby, I don't give a fuck / Coke in her nose and my dick all in her butt / Red drop shawty, baby, I don't give a fuck." Lil Peep, "red drop shawty (Ft. KirbLaGoop)," track 10 on *Hellboy*, self-released, 2016.

¹⁰² This reading is aligned with that of Lauren Levy, who argues for the appeal of Xanax to emo rappers: "Because of the way it reduces tension, restlessness, paranoia, and anxiety, 'popping a Xan' has become the signifier of choice for disillusioned musicians checking out of a disappointing world or attempting to transform the hellscape of reality into something more bearable". Lauren Levy, "These Are the Drugs Influencing Pop Culture Now," *Vulture*, Feb 6, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/02/the-drugs-influencing-pop-culture-right-now.html>.

Even in this seemingly 'apolitical' subgenre, rap continues to offer insights into racial capitalism's failings.

Conclusion

Feelings of despair are not novel – by which I mean that all people, at some point or another, feel a sense of hopelessness. What is novel is that these feelings have been warmly greeted by a pharmaceutical industry tainted by decades of deregulation. Given tremendous freedom to manufacture and market drugs of unprecedented strength, companies like Purdue Pharma profited from the very 'structures of feeling' that define late neoliberal modernity. Here again, as with the Global Financial Crisis and War on Terror, the effects of neoliberal capitalism have been dire.

Emo rappers depict a palpable relationship with pain: emotional pain wrought by relationships or a sense of meaninglessness; mental pain brought on by a life of crippling anxiety and mental health struggles; and, ultimately, an existential pain as these young artists attempt to discover themselves in a world that seems to provide little other than despair. Emo rap exposes the *age of despair*, an age where modernity's ever-persistent drive for advancement fails to provide for its subjects, pushing them instead towards self-medication. Rather than carving out spaces of agency, SoundCloud rap concedes: it refuses to engage. Rather than distribute, SoundCloud rappers consume and are consumed by a belief that life is not worth living. If modernity is incapable of providing answers to these feelings of isolation and despair, drugs provide a fleeting relief.

Chapter 5

“We hate po-po / Wanna kill us dead in the street fo’ sho’”: Rap Music, Anti-Prison Critique, and Abolitionist Re-Birth in the era of Mass Incarceration

Got to watch my back or just like that
I'm bound to get locked up
The law's watching me, constantly
Too close and way too much
Looking over my shoulder and checking in the rear view mirror
Cuz I'm never not but a moment from getting taken to jail
They're knocking at my door, down my door
They're shining lights in my eyes
Exactly what do they stand for

- 'Klink' by Death Grips¹

One girl missin', another one go missin'
One girl missin', another one
Yo, but little did I know all my readin' would be a bother
It's trans women bein' murdered and this is all he can offer?
And this is all y'all receive?
Distracting from the convo with organizers
They talkin' abolishin' the police
And this the new world order
We democratizin' Amazon, we burn down borders
This a new vanguard, this a new vanguard
I'm the new vanguard

- 'Song 33' by Noname²

Introduction

Chapters 3 and 4 offered analysis of a neoliberal violence that is largely immaterial. Based in ideologies that create division, self-hate, and alienation, the neoliberal regime has contributed to the emergence of despair as a prominent 'structure of feeling' of the present moment. But the violence of neoliberalism is also experienced in other, more visceral ways. The final chapter of this thesis examines another source of despair characterizing the 21st century: mass incarceration.

The 21st century has been marked by an extensive list of Black deaths at the hands of the carceral regime. Michael Brown, Mya Hall, Philando Castille, Freddie Gray, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd,

¹ Death Grips, "Klink," track 7 on *Exmilitary*, self-released, 2011.

² Noname, "Song 33," 2020.

Daunte Wright, Sandra Bland are just some of the names that have become inscribed into global discussions of police violence. Far from a new phenomenon, these deaths reflect a violent trend in American punitivity underway since the 1960s. Drawing on a burgeoning ‘law and order’ logic, successive post-Civil Rights presidents expanded law enforcement and constructed hundreds of prisons in the process of creating the largest carceral regime in human history. By 2016 there were an estimated 2.2 million people in American jails and prisons.³ But the prison regime is even larger, “encompass[ing] the more than eight million people—or in one in twenty-three adults—who are under some form of state control, including jail, prison, probation, parole, community sanctions, drug courts, immigrant detention, and other forms of government supervision.”⁴ Not only is this carceral regime the largest on Earth, it is also deeply racist. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, by 2016 the imprisonment rate for Black men (2,417 per 100,000) far outweighed that for white men (401 per 100,000).⁵ The statistics are similarly disproportionate for women. By 2016, “[t]he imprisonment rate for black females (97 per 100,000 black female residents) was almost double that for white females (49 per 100,000 white female residents).”⁶

Even for those who have “done their time”, the stain of incarceration lingers:

Those released from prison on parole can be stopped and searched by the police for any reason—or no reason at all—and returned to prison for the most minor of infractions, such as failing to attend a meeting with a parole officer. Even when released from the system’s formal control, the stigma of criminality lingers. ... The ‘whites only’ signs may be gone, but new signs have gone up—notices placed in job applications, rental agreements, loan applications, forms for welfare benefits, school applications, and petitions for licenses, informing the general public that ‘felons’ are not wanted here.⁷

The prison regime not only incapacitates ‘the criminal’ temporarily: it punishes them forever.

But even this account of incarceration’s stickiness does not capture its full reach. The description fails to account for the countless lives disrupted or forever scarred by the removal of loved ones, the missing parent/child/partner/sibling/friend, the lost income, the complex array of fines handed out

³ Marie Gottschalk, *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 1.

⁴ Gottschalk, *Caught*, 1.

⁵ U.S. Department of Justice, “Prisoners in 2016,” *Office of Justice Programs Bureau of Justice Statistics* (2016); 15.

⁶ Department of Justice, “Prisoners in 2016,” 13.

⁷ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the age of Colorblindness*, rev. ed. (New York: The New Press, 2012), 141.

by police for minor infractions, the collapse of communities as members enter a state of incapacitation, the shame that comes with a regime that justifies itself on the assumption that those brought within its grasp are somehow too in-human to be free, the fear of being watched, the knowledge that state violence is imminent. The reach of the prison regime thus extends well beyond the prison walls, shackling everyone criminalized under its central logics.

With these various forms of violence as context, this final chapter turns to rap music as extending a voice for prison abolitionism. Despite the size and seeming incontestability of the carceral regime, the 2010s witnessed concerted resistance against it – a resistance most obviously evidenced by the Black Lives Matter movement and its abolitionist goals.⁸ Abolitionism holds as a core principle the idea that reforming oppressive systems – systems that function on the basis of ideologies such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia – is wholly unconvincing as a revolutionary imagination.⁹ Structures such as prisons are not oppressive because of a glitch in the system, something solvable through minor tweaks: they are oppressive to their core.¹⁰ The only comprehensive answer to such regimes of terror, according to abolitionists, is destruction as part of a longer-term constructive vision of rebuilding – of creating a world in which police and prisons are unnecessary.

By focussing on instruments of state violence, this chapter draws on Achille Mbembe's theorization of necropolitics. Necropolitics, Mbembe explains, refers to "the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are

⁸ Throughout this chapter, I use Black Lives Matter (BLM) as something of a catch-all, bringing together many disparate activist communities. This is not an attempt at homogenization but a recognition of shared values. As such, I conceive of BLM as more a set of ideas than a centralized organization. As Wesley Lowery argues: "While the phrase is now the name of an organization and is often used to describe the broader protest and social justice movement, Black Lives Matter is best thought of as an ideology. Its tenets have matured and expanded over time, and not all of its adherents subscribe to them in exactly the same manner". Wesley Lowery, *They Can't Kill Us All: The Story of Black Lives Matter* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 87.

⁹ This is not to say that reform does nothing, just that reform does not fix fundamentally flawed institutions. Abolitionists speak of the difference between 'reformist reforms' (reforms that do little to unravel systems of oppression, e.g. build more prisons to lessen overcrowding) and 'non-reformist reforms' (reforms that unravel the system, e.g. decarcerating). The latter slowly unravels systems of oppression while the former instantiates them. For more on this idea, its origins, and recent explications, see: André Gorz, *A Strategy for Labor* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); Dylan Rodríguez, "Weaponized Study in a Moment of (Counter)Insurgency: The Gathering Anti-'American' of American Studies," *American Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2022): 199-212.

¹⁰ "Policing is ... not a broken system in need of repair. It is a highly accurate and efficient means of protecting state interests and maintaining social control. The goal must not be to help policing become more efficient, but rather to erode the power policing has over our lives. ... Understanding the function of policing then requires recognizing that when cops persistently harass members of a local community for loitering, when they follow young Black people because they deem them suspicious, when they use maximum force to resolve routine matters even when that force results in death, these are not the acts of bad apples, cops taking matters into their own hands, or exceptional incidences of policing. This is what policing *is*." Rachel Herzing, "The Magical Life of Broken Windows," in *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, ed. Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton (London: Verso, 2016), 275.

subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.¹¹ Furthermore, in understanding American racism through the production of death, this chapter borrows from Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism: "Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to *premature death*, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies."¹² This chapter centres analysis of the carceral regime in reference to this 'premature death', the trauma such deathliness provokes in criminalized communities, and some of the ways rappers contest this violence as part of an abolitionist vision.

But abolishing the carceral regime is not straightforward. Not only have prisons become hegemonic as material 'solutions' to economic crises, they are even more hegemonic as ideological structures. Prisons are taken to represent safety and protection. They function as an arbiter of morality, enabling a false sense of superiority for those not caught within their web. Their violence enables state hegemony. Prisons, in other words, have cemented themselves as 'common sense' – to borrow a term from Antonio Gramsci – through performing significant ideological work. This is one of the problems this chapter confronts. How can one envision life beyond something so heavily ingrained in the public's 'common sense'?

The first half of this chapter argues that rap music's depiction of a 'structure of feeling' of being *close to death* – the phrase I use to capture the sense of being forever vulnerable to instruments of state violence – destabilizes the prison regime's 'common sense'. Following an anti-prison tradition dating back at least as far as N.W.A.'s 1988 classic 'Fuck tha Police', the music of this half details the acute bodily violence inflicted by the necropolitical carceral regime.¹³ Not stopping at the physical, though, this thread also communicates the psychological costs associated with criminalization resulting from: witnessing the footage of police killings; the knowledge that one's skin color renders one an 'acceptable' target of state violence; knowing that death is near. I argue that by capturing the feeling of *closeness to death*, this music problematizes the regime's central logic of protection and its

¹¹ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 40.

¹² Emphasis added. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Race and Globalization" in *Geographies of Global Change: Remapping the World*, ed. R. J. Johnston, Peter J. Taylor, and Michael J. Watts (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 261.

¹³ N.W.A., "Fuck tha Police," track 2 on *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless Records, 1988. In recent times, YG's single 'FTP' ("Fuck the police, that's how I feel / Buy a Glock, break down the block / That's how I feel (That's how I feel) / Murder after murder after all these years / Buy a strap, bust back after all these tears ... / It's the Ku Klux cops, they on a mission / It's the Ku Klux cops, got hidden agendas") and JPEGMAFIA's "i just killed a cop now I'm horny" continue this retributive response to the visceral violence of the police. YG, "FTP," track 12 on *My Life 4Hunnid*, Def Jam, 2020; JPEGMAFIA, "i just killed a cop now i'm horny," track 12 on *black ben carson*, self-released, 2016.

resultant dehumanization of criminalized populations.¹⁴ Once its structuring logics are shown to be flawed, the carceral ‘common sense’ is destabilized and alternatives are given room to prosper.

However, such an engagement with the state’s mechanisms of violence is too limited. For all their insights, rappers following in this NWA-inspired tradition often prioritize forms of violence that disproportionately affect cis-men. Anti-prison music and activism offers stories of spectacular run-ins with the police, of police killings and slain bodies, but remains blind to the many other ways ‘premature death’ befalls marginalized communities. As Shatema Threadcraft rightly argues, “blacks do not have to be physically injured by police to be brought closer to death.”¹⁵ ‘Premature death’ derives not only from the state killing people, but from abandoning them. It is a product of the less spectacular but more pervasive gendered violence of structural racism. ‘Premature death’ occurs when women are targeted for different forms of sexual violence and domestic abuse. By limiting analysis of violence to the police, these other sources of ‘premature death’ – sources which disproportionately target women of color – are rendered invisible.¹⁶

Drawing on anti-carceral and Black trans abolitionist analysis, then, the second half of this chapter engages in a queering of the necropolitical in such a way that accounts for these other forms of violence. If much rap of the late 20th century was highly critical of police and prisons, a number of recent musicians have turned to a concept of police and prison abolitionism in such a way that seeks solutions to the many and varied sources of ‘premature death’ that befall women of color. Turning from the implicitly masculine analysis of anti-prison music to music that captures the fundamentally gendered nature of ‘premature death’, this second half parallels the growth of 21st century abolitionist movements – movements that have built upon the anti-prison activism of previous

¹⁴ This chapter is not an expression of how rap has opened ‘our’ (white) eyes to the realities of police violence for, as Deondre Smiles states, the eyes of the marginalized have always been open: “I refuse to subscribe to the sentiment which some politicians have expressed that George Floyd’s death is a form of noble sacrifice that has opened our eyes to the realities of police violence and racial inequality in the United States. For Americans of color, we’ve always had our eyes open to these things. I’d like to believe that the work that is being done through organizing, protesting, and building consciousness and awareness of these issues is not in response to some ‘sacrifice’, but it is instead building toward a potential future where killings such as what happened with Philando Castile, George Floyd, Daunte Wright, Breonna Taylor, Botham Jean, and many others do not need to occur at all.” Deondre Smiles, “George Floyd, Minneapolis, and Spaces of Hope and Liberation,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11, no. 2 (2021): 169. Following Smiles, this chapter centres on rap as a kind of praxis, challenging the in-built logics of punitivity in such a way that makes abolitionist futures legible.

¹⁵ Shatema Threadcraft, “North American Necropolitics and Gender: On #BlackLivesMatter and Black Femicide,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 555.

¹⁶ I borrow here from Treva Lindsey: “When documentation and activism fail to encapsulate violence against Black trans* people, queer people, and women and girls, then we further marginalize and render invisible those surviving and living on the margins of marginalization. The push toward being more inclusive in our documentation and our activism surrounding anti-Black state violence opens up a dynamic space in which we can intentionally and collectively make visible and legible all victims of state and state-sanctioned violence.” Treva B. Lindsey, “Post-Ferguson: A ‘Herstorical’ Approach to Black Violability,” *Feminist studies* 41, no. 1 (2015): 237.

generations to construct an abolitionist vision seeking to reimagine all aspects of society from punishment to economics to gender itself. In doing so, abolitionist music offers an answer to every issue explored in the course of this thesis, providing space – creatively, at least – for (a) something else to be built in the place of neoliberal racial capitalist modernity.

The ‘changing same’ of counterhegemonic rap music, I argue throughout this chapter, can be central to abolitionist projects. As prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba suggests: “The problem has been all along, is that we have taken a system, a carceral system, one way of addressing harm, and we’ve made that the only way we do it. So if you have a hammer, everything is a nail. And that’s the problem, right. And that’s not what a vision of PIC abolition calls for. It’s actually a collective project and that whole process of that is so much about creativity. So much about imagination and we’re going to have to build it together”.¹⁷ I locate rap as a critical feature of the creative side of abolitionism, something which not only destabilises ‘common senses’ (both of the prison and broader instruments of violence) but also constructs the intellectual frameworks necessary to imagine worlds freed from these oppressions. In doing so, this thread of rap music extends the Black radical tradition’s transformative politics into this most topical and visceral space.

History of Mass Incarceration

Before engaging directly with music that challenges the ‘common sense’ of the carceral regime, we must first understand how such a regime of violence came to be. This requires that we return to the birth of mass incarceration. Though often attributed to the neoliberal turn, Ronald Reagan, and the War on Drugs, mass incarceration has its roots in a set of ideas common to both political parties in the 1960s.¹⁸ Scholars including Elizabeth Hinton, Naomi Murakawa, Mary Gottschalk, Jordan Camp, and Vesla Weaver all provide useful accounts of this pre-neoliberal, bipartisan punitive turn which set the precedent – culturally, economically, and ideologically – for mass incarceration.

¹⁷ NPR Music, “Making Revolution Irresistible,” *Louder Than A Riot*. Podcast. Dec 16, 2020.

¹⁸ Of course, even limiting this history to the 1960s is too narrow. While I do not analyse the immediate post-WWII period, it should be noted that “[l]aw and order first took center stage in national politics as early as the 1940s, not the mid-1960s, as is commonly understood”: Gottschalk, *Caught*, 143. For a detailed analysis of this earlier, progressive-led punitive turn, see: Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2014). A truly comprehensive history should go back even further, with Lisa McGirr and Claire Bond Potter pointing to the 1920s and ‘30s as significant decades in the development of American punitivity. See: Lisa McGirr, *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016); Claire Bond Potter, *War on Crime: Gangsters, G Men and the Politics of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

I have divided this history into three sections. The first centres on the ‘cultural’ side of mass incarceration, noting how fears around Black insurrection and pathology primed politicians and civilians alike for the punitive turn. Section Two turns to the effect of these cultural ideas on policy, observing the bipartisan acceptance of ‘law and order’ politics. Section Three turns to economics. Drawing on Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s description of the economic crisis central to the expansion of the prison regime, I describe how prisons functioned as a spatial fix to the early-1970s economic crisis. In this era of social distress and economic crisis, the nation came together to institute a regime of violence that would become a central feature of American society’s ‘common sense’.

1. Cultural side of the punitive turn

Central to both the construction of the neoliberal carceral regime and its eventual acceptance as ‘common sense’ was a widespread belief linking Black people to insurgent and pathological behaviour.¹⁹ Though assumptions of violent Blackness already existed (one need only think of the logic justifying segregation), the unrest of the 1960s exacerbated perceptions of Blackness as an internal threat to the nation’s stability. Everything from Civil Rights activism to urban riots was understood not as a reaction to racism, but as proof of the inherent violence of Blackness that would, if left unattended, spread like a contagion. In order to keep this insurrectionist threat at bay, an extensive punitive regime was thought necessary.²⁰ Any analysis of the history of mass incarceration thus requires an appreciation of how Blackness came to be redefined, through the language of ‘culture’, as in need of punitive control.

The social unrest, class anxieties, and moral panic of the Civil Rights era legitimized a ‘common sense’ linking Blackness to insurrection and violence. Though aware of the structural determinants of Black poverty, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations legitimized a pop-sociology characterizing ‘Black culture’ as a deviant threat to a normative white society. Perhaps the most popular ‘cultural’ explanation for Black criminality was found in the Moynihan Report. Sociologist

¹⁹ Insurgency was a central rhetoric justifying the punitive turn. It was not only important that Black people be considered violent, but that their violence be deemed an internal threat to the nation. The urban riots of the mid- to late-‘60s alongside the growth of Black militarism were used as ‘evidence’ of the lurking Black threat, stoking fears which helped garner broad consent for the construction of the neoliberal carceral regime. See: Jordan T. Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

²⁰ Loïc Wacquant succinctly outlines the link between social unrest, ideas of Black criminality and the birth of mass incarceration: “[T]he prison ... offered itself as the universal and simplex solution to all manners of social problems. Chief among these problems was the ‘breakdown’ of social order in the ‘inner city,’ which is scholarly and policy euphemism for the patent incapacity of the dark ghetto to contain a dishonoured and supernumerary population henceforth viewed not only as deviant and devious but as downright dangerous in light of the violent urban upheavals of mid-sixties. As the walls of the ghetto shook and threatened to crumble, the walls of the prison were correspondingly extended, enlarged and fortified”. Loïc Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the ‘Race Question’ in the US,” *New Left Review* 13 (2002): 52.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report on the subject of Black poverty, *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, located Black poverty in histories of oppression. Though rooted in this history, Moynihan argued, the persistence of Black poverty and crime lay not in structures but in 'Black families': "High nonmarital birth rates, divorce and separation, and single-parenthood, in Moynihan's analysis, all contributed to ghetto poverty, crime, and other dislocations."²¹ According to this logic, crime and poverty were not a product of oppression, but of faulty, non-normative, and female-led families/cultures. From the beginning, the carceral regime was built on heavily gendered narratives of Black pathology.

In the public consciousness, 'pathological cultures' came to be understood through images of poverty-stricken, welfare-dependent, and violent Black peoples and spaces. Yelena Bailey describes some of these characterizations and their dependence on segregationist housing policy: "[T]he creation of Black urban spaces through segregationist policies led to a proliferation of anti-Black ideologies and sentiments. By 1990, 62 percent of non-Black Americans believed Black people were lazier than others, more than half felt they were more violent and less intelligent, and almost 80 percent thought they were prone to live off welfare."²² These racialized perceptions would justify the punitive turn.²³ When pathology becomes the defining characteristic of an entire group of people, transmitted through time (from parent to child) and space (learned in 'the streets'), then a heavily militarized security state is needed to halt the contagion that is 'Blackness'.²⁴

Though initially thought to be alterable through a combination of social welfare and punitive programs, the tide soon shifted in favour of the punitive. If, the logic went, pathology was an

²¹ Bruce Western and Christopher Wilderman, "The Black Family and Mass Incarceration," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621, no. 1 (2009): 221-2.

²² Yelena Bailey, *How the Streets Were Made: Housing Segregation and Black Life in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 16.

²³ "[B]y the first decades of the postwar period, much of white America had come to see the presence of African Americans, and their concentration in inner cities in particular, as inherently threatening and it advocated policing them accordingly." Heather A. Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History," *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (2010): 707. It is also important to stress the gendered nature of these narratives. For as universal as the idea of 'violent Blackness' was: it was generally masculine. Black women were criminalized in other ways i.e. as being welfare-dependent, 'bad' mothers.

²⁴ Lisa Marie Cacho's description of the (presumed) temporal and spatial transmissibility of pathologies (e.g. gang membership) is especially relevant: "The fictive underlying 'condition' that sometimes manifests as the sociopathic behavior of gang members has been imagined and managed as if it were inherited genetically and/or transmitted spatially. ... Contemporary gang membership ... has been inextricably linked not only to the body of the family and its ancestors but also to the segregated spaces where impoverished people of color live." Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 72.

insurgent threat to the nation ready to spew forth from ‘the streets’ and into the stability of white America, then the answer was not to be found in welfare but in surveillance.²⁵

2. The politics/ideology of ‘law and order’

With the ‘cultural’ foundations in place, the scene was set for a series of policies that instantiated mass incarceration. Drawing on the pop-sociology of figures such as Moynihan, presidents from Johnson to Clinton routinely distanced themselves from economic readings of Black inequality and crime in favour of ‘cultural’ interpretations. Consequently, urban governance became mired in the logic of ‘law and order’. Popularized by 1964 presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, ‘law and order’ appealed to and “elaborated a white populist conception of liberty and security defined through the militarized containment—and ultimate liquidation—of the lurking urban/mob/jungle threat.”²⁶ Only by keeping said threat under punitive control could a normative white civil society be safeguarded. Without this core logic of the need for a consolidated carceral regime to protect white America from a violent and insurgent Black populace, the carceral regime would have neither grown to its current size nor received the bipartisan support it continues to garner. The racialized logic of ‘law and order’ is thus central to the growth of the carceral ‘common sense’.

To help illustrate the growth of ‘law and order’ ideology, I return to Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty and its eventual metamorphosis into the War on Crime. This transition illuminates the process by which the big government of public expenditure gave way to the big government of the security state, ultimately paving the way for mass incarceration.

As the first president of a post-Civil Rights America, Johnson took seriously the issue of racism and its effects on poverty and crime. Acknowledging that the passage of Civil Rights alone was insufficient to overturn centuries of oppression, Johnson committed to a War on Poverty program designed to overcome racial disparities. Despite advertising itself as a radical response to inequality, the reality of Johnson’s War on Poverty was underwhelming. Centred less on structures than on individuals, Johnson embraced “vocational training and remedial education programs in the absence of job creation measures or an overhaul of urban public schools.”²⁷ Such programs fundamentally

²⁵ Indeed, many argued that welfare exacerbated pathology: “The case for welfare reform, then, was an argument that receiving government benefits was so deviant that it warped and deformed the children. ... These poor, stunted children had no choice but to eventually go on welfare themselves, completing a cycle of multigenerational dependency”. Laura Briggs, *How all politics became reproductive politics: From welfare reform to foreclosure to Trump* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 56.

²⁶ Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 20.

²⁷ Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 54.

misunderstood the realities of racism in the 'colorblind era'. Implicit in the logic of these programs was that Black people had proven themselves unable or unwilling to take advantage of the opportunities Civil Rights had afforded them. Thus it was pathological individuals, not 'pathologically normal' structures, that these programs targeted. Adopting this logic, Johnson implanted the concept of 'Black pathology' into the burgeoning 'law and order' era.

But despite embracing problematic logics, Johnson's original conception of the War on Poverty downplayed punitivity in favour of welfare initiatives. However, moral panic around urban unrest – most notably the 1965 Watts rebellion – proved to many politicians the need for a short-term answer to the threat of 'Black insurgency'. Anti-poverty measures were, it was believed, viable in the long-term but utterly underwhelming in the immediate – where a punitive presence was now thought necessary.²⁸ Johnson, therefore, increasingly conceived of a bipartite approach to the War on Poverty: adopting punitivity in the now to create the foundations for 'cultural' improvements in the long-term.

Soon, though, with 'law and order' increasingly part of a political 'common sense', a focus on the punitive overtook social spending. If Blackness was inherently criminal, then the answer to halting criminality lay not in ending structural racism but in policing the individual. Rather than engage in a doomed battle for the humanity of Black people, the 'logical' thing (logical within the flawed logic of 'law and order') was to incapacitate and patrol as many insurgents as possible. This reasoning facilitated the shift from the War on Poverty to the War on Crime.

A Crime Commission appointed by Johnson in 1965 reflected many of the president's desired punitive shifts – shifts that were eventually implemented under his War on Crime.²⁹ Not only recommending the construction of several criminal justice agencies at the local, state and federal levels, the Commission also "urged federal policymakers to support community-based crime control

²⁸ "The sentiment among Johnson and other liberal policymakers was that the social conditions of the inner city furnished a breeding ground for crime Urban disorder and crime were symptoms of black pathology and familial disorganization, federal officials argued, and in order to contain these problems—which could not be remedied quickly—a punitive intervention that increased surveillance and patrol in segregated urban areas was a necessary complement to the existing self-help and development programs of the War on Poverty, both of which were part of a decisively long-term set of policies." Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 86.

²⁹ Heather Thompson outlines some of the Johnson administration's carceral policies: "[T]he Johnson administration created the largest crime-fighting bureaucracy the nation had ever seen. Soon after taking office, Johnson oversaw passage of the Law Enforcement Assistance Act (LEAA) and created a national crime commission staffed by a blue-ribbon panel that was committed to probing 'fully and deeply into the problems of crime in our nation.' ... In 1968 the Johnson administration passed the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968. Even though Johnson had grown increasingly ambivalent about this piece of legislation as its more rehabilitative components were watered down in committee, when the time came to sign it he did so most willingly." Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters," 730.

institutions staffed by social workers, municipal employees, and law enforcement officers that provided social welfare services and that operated outside of the formal criminal justice system”.³⁰ Fulfilling this final recommendation, the War on Crime established itself in the wreckage of the War on Poverty, resulting in the construction of a complex network of surveillance over criminalized communities. Consequently, the space between Black individuals and a rapidly militarizing and swelling police force shrunk.³¹

The War on Crime’s characteristic close proximity and perpetual surveillance became central building blocks for mass incarceration. Though War on Poverty measures were still in place, the final years of Johnson’s presidency evidenced an increased adherence to a ‘law and order’ orthodoxy that his successor would exacerbate, culminating in the carceral ‘common sense’.

Though *broadly* similar to Johnson’s War on Crime, the *specifics* of Richard Nixon’s punitive governance differed from his predecessor’s in significant ways. Under Johnson’s Great Society programs, battling crime and poverty were (initially, at least) assumed to be linked. In the short term, the maintenance of ‘law and order’ was imperative, but these short-term goals were pursued in conjunction with a long-term vision seeking to better the economic lives of African Americans. Under Nixon, these long-term goals were abandoned, favouring instead a short-term punitive approach. Rather than expend resources to confront the determinants of crime, it made more sense – in an administration that had fully accepted ‘law and order’ ideology – to simply patrol and preemptively incapacitate those who would imminently turn to crime.³² Wielding this fundamentalist understanding of ‘Black pathology’, Nixon furthered a trend initiated by Johnson by channelling resources away from the welfare sector and into punitive institutions.

Under the presumption that Blackness constituted an imminent criminal threat requiring forceful containment, Nixon – contradicting his ‘New Federalist’ guiding principles – transformed the prison regime into a federal set of institutions.³³ For this reason, Nixon was largely responsible for the first

³⁰ Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 100.

³¹ “Whereas in the rest of the country police most often came into contact with civilians in response to emergency calls or specific incidents, in low-income African American neighborhoods, law enforcement authorities would become a ubiquitous part of the social and political landscape”. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 97.

³² This shift, Hinton explains, derived from a fundamentalist reading of the ‘culture of pathology’ thesis: “The problem”, according to Nixon and advisors such as James Wilson, “was that Johnson had launched the War on Crime from an untenable premise: that federal policies themselves could eventually obliterate crime. ... Suggesting that the national law enforcement program shift its emphasis from prevention to deterrence and incapacitation, Wilson argued that the surety of punishment itself was a far more effective means to control crime than social programs.” Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 186.

³³ Fundamentally a backlash against Johnson’s ‘big government’, New Federalism purported to give power back to the states by disinvesting from programs such as the War on Poverty. However, even as Nixon shrank federal funding for social programs, he used many of the War on Crime initiatives established by Johnson to

infrastructural drives toward mass incarceration.³⁴ Moreover, Nixon's punitive policies (most notably the District of Columbia Court Reorganization Act of 1970), established a dangerous precedent of pre-emptive policing, harsher sentencing, and further criminalization of urban residents.³⁵ Hinton explains: "Although the federal government and most state governments did not embrace preventative detention practices until the 1980s, ... the practice of incarcerating individuals believed to be dangerous to the public went on to become widely sanctioned during the wars on drugs and terror as a mechanism to detain suspects."³⁶ The significance of Nixon thus lies less in specific policies than in the legitimization of an understanding of criminality that required ongoing surveillance and pre-emptive force.

With instruments of state violence engulfing Black spaces, the physical distance between Black citizens and police continued to shrink: "During the 1970s, the diffusion of crime control techniques into the everyday lives of low-income African Americans intensified as all urban social programs were increasingly integrated into the bureaucracies, institutions, and industries at the heart of the carceral state."³⁷ State-sanctioned violence increasingly became common-place for America's criminalized.

3. Economic decline and the 'spatial fix'

Following Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the growth of mass incarceration must also be understood within the context of early-1970s economic decline and its resultant accumulation of surpluses. This materialist reading understands prisons as a 'spatial fix' to economic crisis, one that allowed the state to utilize surpluses accumulated over several years of instability.³⁸

In *Golden Gulag* (2007), Gilmore explains how the economic crisis of the early 1970s led to an accumulation of surpluses that found use in the burgeoning prison industrial complex. Retreating

enable greater federal oversight in the punitive realm. In other words, Nixon's New Federalism shrunk the big government of the War on Poverty while simultaneously expanding the big government of the War on Crime.

³⁴ Seth Blumenthal outlines Nixon's expansion of the carceral regime: "During Nixon's presidency, spending on criminal justice as a percentage of US GNP increased from 1.0 percent (\$10.5 billion) to 1.4 percent (\$15 billion) from 1971 to 1974 alone. Over the same short period, federal spending on the judicial system grew by 62 percent and on policing by 52 percent, while the number of police nationally grew 13.6 percent, from 575,000 to 653,000 personnel." Seth Blumenthal, *Children of the Silent Majority: Young Voters and the Rise of the Republican Party, 1968-1980* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 56.

³⁵ "Despite the questionable constitutionality of the legislation, ... the administration set a precedent for state and local governments to endorse a more punitive approach to patrol, arrest, and sentencing and the wider adoption of mandatory minimums and preventative detention." Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 158.

³⁶ Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 158.

³⁷ Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 16.

³⁸ "[T]he expansion of prison constitutes a geographical solution to socio-economic problems". Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Globalisation and US prison growth: from military Keynesianism to post-Keynesian militarism," *Race & Class* 40, no. 2-3 (1999): 174.

from a Keynesian emphasis on spending, full employment, and social protections, the growing neoliberal order accumulated tremendous surpluses in: 1) finance capital, 2) land, for when capital migrates it leaves behind devalued land, 3) people, as crisis ensures cycles of unemployment rendering many people surplus to capitalist economies, and 4) state capacity. Combined, these surpluses amounted to a crisis of American capitalism for which prisons were *a* – not, as Gilmore stresses, *the only* – fix.³⁹

But why prisons? These surpluses could have been absorbed in a number of ways, so why the punitive turn? The answer speaks to the increasingly ‘common sense’ logic of racialized ‘law and order’. Not only could prisons utilise surpluses, they also drew widespread support by appealing to ‘racial’ anxieties: “[T]he power bloc that emerged from the 1980s onward faced the political problem of how to carry out its agenda The new bloc, having achieved power under crisis conditions, consolidated around a popular anti-crime campaign that revived Richard Nixon’s successful law and order pitch.”⁴⁰ The dual effects of racialized criminalization and economic crisis garnered consent for decades of punitive violence centred in decaying (and presumed insurgent) spaces increasingly populated by unemployed, welfare- or underground economy dependant- ‘surplus humans’. In sum, the ‘spatial fix’ of the prison depended not just on economics but on there being an already criminalized group for whom the prison could be built.⁴¹

This history of cultural, political/ideological, and economic transformation ultimately instituted a carceral ‘common sense’. In the following decades, presidents from Reagan to Clinton to Bush and Obama would further the reach of the carceral regime, finding ‘answers’ to social and economic crises in the War on Drugs, the 3-strikes policy, the War on Terror, and an unprecedented regime of deportation. A punitivity centred on racialized logics of ‘law and order’ became the answer *par excellence* for every social issue. Punitivity has truly become ‘common sense’.

³⁹ “[P]rison building was and is not the inevitable outcome of these surpluses. It did, however, put certain state capacities into motion, make use of a lot of idle land, get capital invested via public debt, and take more than 160,000 low-wage workers off the streets.” Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 88.

⁴⁰ Gilmore, “Globalisation and US prison growth,” 183.

⁴¹ I would also like to stress that prisons not only mop up crises: they create their own: “[M]ass incarceration increased poverty, increased urban poverty led to even more urban incarceration, and so on. According to analysts, as many as 70 percent of the children whose parents were imprisoned at the close of the twentieth century would end up behind bars themselves, and African American children were more than eight times more likely to have a parent in prison than were white children in major cities such as Chicago. ... Mass incarceration was ... a historical phenomenon that – like deindustrialization and white flight – *Itself* caused crisis and collapse in Americas inner cities.” Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters,” 716.

The Ideological Work Performed by the Prison – and the Prison as ‘Common Sense’

The prison, as described above, is simply an institution: a collection of buildings that incapacitate ‘bad people’. A materialist reading of the prison goes slightly further, understanding it as an institution designed to fix economic crisis. But for the purposes of this chapter, I want to spend some time reflecting on the ideological work performed by the prison regime – primarily because it is this ideological work that anti-prison rap re-narrativizes. Specifically, I want to highlight two of the prison’s ideological effects: 1) prisons perpetuate white supremacy by both masking the effects of structural racism and ‘proving’ links between criminality and Blackness; and 2) prisons legitimize the state’s hegemony. By depicting itself as *the* barrier between a deserving ‘us’ and pathological ‘them’, the state makes itself appear coherent. The result is that the prison becomes ‘common sense’: an invisible, taken-for-granted part of everyday life for those not brought within its grasp.

Prisons rationalize a (multicultural) white supremacist society⁴²

White supremacy, here, refers less to blatant acts of extra-judicial violence than a “socially ordering logic”⁴³ that “produces regimented, institutionalized, and militarized conceptions of hierarchized ‘human’ difference.”⁴⁴ In arguing that prisons perpetuate white supremacy, I am making three points: 1) Prisons mask the effects of structural racism by rendering all inhabitants individually pathological. ‘Law and order’ assumes that every prisoner is individually flawed, thus rendering invisible the structural determinants that lead to disproportionately Black incarceration. 2) As a result of this individualized reading of imprisonment, prisons ‘prove’ Black inferiority, leading many to believe that Black people must simply be predisposed to crime. 3) In its broad characterisation of a Black ‘criminality’ and ‘threat’, a white (multicultural) ‘we’ develops a sense of superiority.

First, the prison regime masks the violence of structural racism. This masking occurs in multiple ways. First, imprisoned peoples are absent from unemployment statistics, providing an inaccurate account of structural inequality. “Claims of low unemployment rates”, Angela Davis argues, “make sense only if one assumes that the vast numbers of people in prison have really disappeared and thus have no legitimate claims to jobs.”⁴⁵ The true costs of structural racism under neoliberal capitalism are thus hidden through incarceration. Second, since prisons purport to function on a

⁴² White supremacy, Dylan Rodriguez argues, is a multicultural endeavour wherein: “‘people of color’ are selectively and incrementally solicited, rewarded, and absorbed into the operative functionings of white-supremacist institutions (e.g., the military, police, and school) and discourses (e.g., patriotism).” Rodriguez, *Forced Passages*, 25.

⁴³ Rodriguez, *Forced Passages*, 14.

⁴⁴ Rodriguez, *Forced Passages*, 11.

⁴⁵ Angela Davis, “Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex,” *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 4, no. 27 (2000): 7.

neoliberal logic of individual punishment for individual failing, the prison hides the causes of 'crime'.⁴⁶ If the prison exists to incapacitate 'bad' people for the sake of public safety, then those caught in the web of punitivity are not victims of racial capitalist exploitation or neoliberal state formation, but of flawed cultures. Structures become invisible.

Second, prisons reinforce (highly gendered) racist understandings of people of color. Once structural racism is masked, disproportionately high numbers of Black prisoners 'prove' an inherent Black criminality.⁴⁷ Not only does this logic validate perceptions of a flawed Blackness, it similarly protects the prison regime from critique:

[B]lack mass incarceration and the daily depictions of black predators in the news media have helped construct ideas about black mass incarceration that shield it from opposition on racial grounds. The development described here has helped construct a link between blacks and criminality in the public's mind, and as long as criminality and not bias is at the root, America's black mass incarceration of its previously enslaved population stands legitimated and inoculated from potential challenge.⁴⁸

Racist symbols and image-environments thus ensure that any structural critique of carcerality is rendered unintelligible.

Third, by simultaneously masking structural racism and reinforcing racist stereotypes, the prison regime reaffirms the belief that 'we' (those on the outside) are 'good' and 'they' (those on the inside) are 'bad'. As Lisa Cacho argues, human value itself is framed in relation to the prison:

"Because the law is presumed to be both ethical and irreproachable, the act of law-breaking reflects poorly on a person's moral character. If following the law (legitimate or not) determines whether a person is moral or immoral, it is all but impossible for people assigned to certain status categories to represent themselves as moral and deserving."⁴⁹ Personhood, identity, and a sense of self is awarded to a normative 'us' at the expense of a non-normative, violent 'them'. Later in this chapter, I focus on this de-valuing process, arguing that rap's re-narrativization of the regime's targeted

⁴⁶ For example, 'law and order' assumes gang members to be violent threats, masking the reality that gang economies were a natural outgrowth of neoliberal abandonment and the absence of alternative employment.

⁴⁷ "By marking large numbers of young men with an official record of criminality, the criminal justice system may inadvertently reinforce and legitimate long-standing assumptions about blackness and crime." Devah Pager, "The 'Stickiness' of Race in an Era of Mass Incarceration," in *Beyond Discrimination: Racial Inequality in a Post-Racist Era*, ed. Fredrick C. Harris and Robert C. Lieberman (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013), 257-8.

⁴⁸ Vesla M. Weaver, "Unhappy Harmony: Accounting for Black Mass Incarceration in a 'Postracial' America," in *Beyond Discrimination: Racial Inequality in a Post-Racist Era*, ed. Fredrick C. Harris and Robert C. Lieberman (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013), 246.

⁴⁹ Cacho, *Social Death*, 4.

peoples subverts the 'common sense' of carceral violence by humanizing those who have been de-humanized in public narratives of criminality.

Prisons affirm the state's hegemony

As well as serving white supremacist social purposes, the prison serves an important political function: affirming the hegemony of the state. As Dylan Rodriguez explains, the prison regime is a central feature of statecraft in that it makes coherent the state's authority and dominion over its populace: "[T]he ascendancy and authority of the state must be enacted, ritualized, and signified through the prison regime—and massively performed on target bodies—to become 'real.'"⁵⁰

Violence against a criminalized population is thus central to a state's hegemony.

Furthermore, by incapacitating those rendered surplus to modern economies, the state rids itself of culpability for perpetuating poverty and 'criminal conditions'. As a result, according to Davis, the state deflects critique of its own governance and the failings of neoliberalism:

Imprisonment has become the response of first resort for far too many of the social problems that burden people who are ensconced in poverty. These problems are often veiled by being conveniently grouped together under the category 'crime' and by the automatic attribution of criminal behavior to people of color. Homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness, and illiteracy are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human beings contending with them are relegated to cages.⁵¹

Prisons thus 'solve' the very problems the state is responsible for creating – a select few of which have provided the basis of chapters in this thesis.

As a result of all this ideological (and material) work, the prison regime has become 'common sense'. It is this taken-for-granted-ness, this sense that the regime is both 'natural' and 'necessary', that anti-prison activism and music confronts. As Davis argues:

[T]he jail or prison is not only material and objective but it's ideological and psychic as well. We internalize this notion of a place to put bad people. ... Why is that person bad? The prison forecloses discussion about that. What is the nature of that badness? What did the person do? Why did the person do that? If we're thinking about someone who has committed acts of violence, why is that kind of violence possible? Why do men

⁵⁰ Rodriguez, *Forced Passages*, 145-6.

⁵¹ Davis, "Masked Racism," 4.

engage in such violent behavior against women? The very existence of the prison forecloses the kinds of discussions that we need in order to imagine the possibility of eradicating these behaviors.⁵²

These questions begin to chip away at the foundations of a regime that has instantiated itself in the political unconscious. As this chapter continues, I will analyse a number of songs within a continuum of Black radical critique that – by questioning the violent logics of the carceral regime – begin to unpack the function of these systems in much the same way Davis does here. In doing so, anti-prison rap destabilizes the ‘common sense’ of the prison and makes intellectually possible abolitionist alternatives.

Closeness to Death and Anti-Prison Rap: Undoing the Carceral ‘Common Sense’

Though now ‘common sense’, the prison regime is increasingly subject to critique. Due largely to the work of Black Lives Matter and other such activist communities, the 2010s witnessed growing mainstream acceptance of arguments opposing the carceral regime. Rap, I argue, is one such source of critique. Rappers frequently re-narrativize the prison regime as a source not of peace and safety but of terror and death. Every movement, action, thought, feeling, when accompanied by the prison regime, is tainted by the threat of imminent demise. When the regime is understood in these terms, its ‘common sense’ – and the ideological presumptions highlighted above – is confronted and space opens up for the imagining of alternatives.

Locating mass incarceration in this deathliness evokes Mbembe’s theorization of necropolitics. In the name of securing hegemony, Mbembe argues, the state wields its death-dealing capabilities against groups deemed to be in a constant ‘state of exception’ – meaning that the (so-called) rules of democracy do not apply to them. However, this section reaches slightly beyond Mbembe’s theorization, centring analysis on a violence more diffuse than – though still related to – the physical violence of necropolitics.⁵³ The violence depicted in much of the music I analyse is felt less physically

⁵² Angela Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (New York: Haymarket Books, 2016), 21-2.

⁵³ Police killings are only the visceral face of the regime’s violence: not its totality. Naomi Murakawa explains: “It makes sense that people organize around police murders, because they are so horrifying. But when people mobilize around them it doesn’t mean that they are only protesting police murders. ... Activists do not see these murders as the outer extreme. Rather, they see these murders as representations of the core logic of policing—the logics of regulating the poor, of segregating, containing, and disciplining poor people of color, and quite often using them as a revenue source.” Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, “How Liberals Legitimate Broken Windows: An Interview with Naomi Murakawa,” in *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, ed. by Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton (London: Verso, 2016), 233.

than psychologically, stemming less from direct encounters with the state than from the knowledge that such encounters may be imminent. One need never personally experience necropolitical violence to feel its psychological effects. One need only know the names of the dead; see the footage; witness the expendability of Black life; be taught through a life of criminalization that one's skin color permits state violence. *Closeness to death* stems from the knowledge that while necropolitical violence is not *constantly* used against specific individuals, it *could* always occur. By capturing this diffuse violence in horrifying detail, the music of this section offers a powerful rebuttal to the prison regime and its structuring logics of protection and dehumanization.

Re-narrativizing

A primary tool of resistance utilised by rappers is re-narrativization. In the context of the prison regime specifically, rap music engages in a kind of rhetorical conflict, challenging the accounts seen on *Cops* or on the daily news or on any number of voyeuristic prison-based TV shows, providing accounts from those subject to the violence of these institutions. In so doing, rap calls into question the dominant logics of carcerality as highlighted in the 'Prison as Common Sense' section above.

This re-narrativizing of the carceral regime occurs in many ways and across many songs. We witness it in Kendrick Lamar's refrain observing the homicidal intent of the state: "We hate po-po / Wanna kill us dead in the street fo' sho".⁵⁴ We hear it in Floridian rapper Denzel Curry – who has deeply personal ties to state violence after his older brother died following an altercation with police in 2014⁵⁵ – and Terrace Martin's 'Pig Feet', a song challenging the 'public-protector' logic of policing: "Helicopters over my balcony / If the police can't harass, they wanna smoke every ounce of me / Breath is alchemy, see how the life converted / You tell me life's a female dog, well I'm perverted / Go to jail or get murdered".⁵⁶ We also hear it in moments of sullen reflection, moments that capture the exhaustion of criminalization: "I see blue lights, I get scared and start runnin' / That shit be crazy, they 'posed to protect us / Throw us in handcuffs and arrest us / While they go home at night, that shit messed up / Knowing we needed help, they neglect us".⁵⁷ These songs narrate the regime's deathliness, characterizing the police as an occupying force responsible for feelings of fear and pain. Consequently, the idea that the police provide safety is subverted.

⁵⁴ Lamar, "Alright," track 7 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

⁵⁵ Lee Castro, "Denzel Curry on Taser Death of His Brother, Treon Johnson, in Hialeah Police Incident," *Miami: New Times*, May 7, 2014, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/music/denzel-curry-on-taser-death-of-his-brother-treon-johnson-in-hialeah-police-incident-6464586>.

⁵⁶ Denzel Curry and Terrace Martin (feat. Daylyt, Kamasi Washington, & G Perico), "PIG FEET," 2020.

⁵⁷ Lil Baby, "The Bigger Picture," 2020.

A visceral example of re-narrativization communicating feelings of *closeness to death* comes from industrial rap group Death Grips and their 2011 song 'Klink'. Consisting of vocalist MC Ride (real name Stefan Burnett), drummer/producer Zach Hill, and keyboardist/producer Andy Morin, Death Grips have developed a reputation as a fiercely unique group fusing discordant sounds from glitch to punk and from rap to industrial. Forming in Sacramento in 2010, the group delves into lyrical themes of paranoia, mental health issues, and a general sense of fear resulting in violent outbursts, all of which is supported by an abrasive sound described by one music reviewer as "a bludgeoning slab of hostility".⁵⁸ As opposed to most of the artists explored throughout this thesis, Ride's lyricism is rarely literal, instead favouring abstract imagery delivered in a quasi-heavy-metal scream – take the following lines from 2011's 'Guillotine': "Out of the shadows barrage of witch tongue / Cobra split over apocalyptic cult killer cauldron smoke / Stomp music seriously yeah".⁵⁹ As Hill explains: "We're unfamiliar for some fans of rap, because mainstream rap tends to concern itself with literal things. ... Stefan's words have total meaning behind them – but for us it's as much about who is saying them, and how they're doing so, as much as the explicit message. The words work as symbols, the emotion behind them really important, as is the musical foundation around them."⁶⁰ The power of Death Grips, therefore, comes in their disconcerting production style and Ride's performative chaos.

A provocative example of this musical style is found in the group's song 'Klink'. Unique – for Death Grips, at least – in the way it offers a fairly clear narrative, 'Klink' takes us into the mind of Ride as he depicts the daily anxieties and paranoias that accompany criminalization. Set to a sample of punk band Black Flag's 'Rise Above', the song opens with a swift challenge to the supposed utility of the police, rapping with a guttural yell: "What ya gonna do when they come for you? / A gang of hatin' pigs / What have they ever really done for you? / Ain't never done shit / Stash what you got cause they're comin' through / Best get rid of that quick / Cause when they get here you know what they're gonna do / All they ever do is trip."⁶¹ Linking the police's presence with the inevitability of violence, Ride goes on to explicitly describe the feeling of deathliness this power relation provokes:

Try to hem me up like for life
Stuck in the klink, haters in blue
How they set me up? Should I test my luck?
Here they come, they're in pursuit (Agh)

⁵⁸ Nate Patrin, "Album Review: Exmilitary by Death Grips," *Pitchfork*, June 30, 2011, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15583-exmilitary/>.

⁵⁹ Death Grips, "Guillotine," track 2 on *Exmilitary*, self-released, 2011.

⁶⁰ Mike Diver, "Suspicious Minds – The Resolute Mission of Death Grips," *Clash*, May 3, 2012, <https://www.clashmusic.com/features/suspicious-minds-the-resolute-mission-of-death-grips/>.

⁶¹ Death Grips, "Klink."

What did I do? What haven't I done?
You want to see my I.D.? Um
Well, okay, where I'm coming from? Just on my way, not on the run
What you want me to say? Are you just 'bout done?
Power trippin', asshole lickin' haters
Notice how they strut through the spot
Like anybody wants to see a cop
Man, everybody knows they suck
I got to be somewhere, man, fuck
...
Got to watch my back or just like that
I'm bound to get locked up
The law's watching me constantly
Too close and way too much
Looking over my shoulder
And checking in the rear view mirror
Cause I'm never not but a moment
From getting taken to jail⁶²

The police, here, are an occupying force, a constant source of fear and symbol of imminent violence. This institution isn't a peace keeper: it creates trauma. I should also acknowledge some of this song's problematic images as it indicates a blindspot common to many anti-prison critiques – something corrected in the abolitionist work explored later in this chapter. Delivered as an insult, the line “asshole lickin'” reflects an anti-queer, hyper-masculinity that leads Ride to perpetuate some oppressions (i.e. homophobia) even as he contests others (i.e. police violence). As I show later, such a critique – a critique that reinforces certain marginalities in the process of confronting others – is overcome through abolitionist readings of state violence.

Songs such as 'Klink' show the logics of protection and service – logics which uphold the carceral regime as both idea and institution – to be falsehoods. When reframed with the regime's victims in focus, the various forms of violence it inflicts lose their shroud of legitimacy, resulting in the destabilization of the regime's 'common sense'. But 'Klink' is just one example of a much larger anti-prison thrust in popular rap of the current century. The rest of this section engages with some of the specific techniques used by rappers to flesh out their critiques of the carceral regime. I argue that

⁶² Death Grips, “Klink.”

rap achieves a more forthright re-narrativizing of the regime by: dwelling on the sheer terror and visceral horrors of its violence; adopting confronting sounds that replicate the feeling of criminalization; and re-valuing the lives of the criminalized. These three techniques, each an act of re-narrativization, effectively confront the regime's ideological foundations.

Re-narrativizing part I: The feeling of criminalization

Re-narrativization is performed in many ways. One example is the way in which rappers describe, often in horrifying detail, the sheer terror that the police evoke in both physical and psychological victims. By capturing these experiences, rappers destabilize a foundational logic of punitivity: the idea that the carceral regime provides peace and safety to citizens. In other words, by capturing the *feeling* of necropolitical violence, these rappers make profound critiques of the *function* of said regimes.

The feeling of criminalization is captured beautifully in Kenneth Whalum's melodic, soul-inspired account of the trauma of police violence for those who witness it:

Police brutality is all in your mind
And the tactics that they use only look worse in rewind
And people die everyday, you should get used to it
Hands behind yo' back, face down, and still say you shootin'
Can't breathe
Knee where your neck be like why you movin'?
Kids in your car, headed home like what you doin'?
Like why you chillin'? Fuck yo' feelin's
Why you smilin' when I'm so serious?
I hate patrolling your space, like why you livin'?
Stop asking questions, why you filmin'?
You look suspicious, I think you dealin'
Step out the car, fit the description
Someone I fear, I need to kill it⁶³

Whalum captures the hopelessness that the carceral regime elicits: "I won't tell you that it's gon' be ok / And I can't see the sun through all the darkened rays / I don't claim to have the answer, it's more than some can say / I won't tell you that it's gon' be ok / It might not be ok".⁶⁴ Whalum need

⁶³ Kenneth Whalum (feat. Big Krit), "Might Not Be Ok," track 6 on *Broken Land*, Broken Land Records, 2016.

⁶⁴ Kenneth Whalum (feat. Big Krit), "Might Not Be Ok."

not be personally attacked to feel the regime's effects. The knowledge that it exists, the ghostly presence lost lives have for those who have seen the footage, is enough to render him hopeless and unsafe.

But even more effective in capturing the pervasive, at times acute and at times diffuse violence of the carceral regime is clipping.'s 'Knees on the Ground.' Consisting of Daveed Diggs – a rapper and actor best known for his portrayals of Marquis De Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson in the musical *Hamilton* – and producers William Hutson and Jonathan Snipes, clipping. are another experimental rap group known for their unique take on the genre. All college-graduates from Los Angeles, the members of clipping. (but most importantly Diggs, as the lyricist and only African American member of the group) offers histories of criminalization that go beyond the working-class spaces that define most of the other songs in this chapter. This expansion of the site of premature death is largely achieved by the group's cinematic style often described as 'horror-core'. 'Horror-core', as it manifests in clipping.'s discography, refers to a sound-scape characterized by atmospheric, horror-film-like arrangements where the looped drum breaks typical of much rap is replaced by cultish chants, and where soul samples are swapped out for droning sounds. But this approach to world-building is not simply aesthetic. Instead, Diggs explains, 'horror-core' is a direct response to histories of discrimination: "To take the idea that music made by Black folks or made by poor people is inherently scary, then be like 'alright! Let's make it scary. ... [I]f you're gonna be afraid of this, if you're gonna slap parental advisory stickers on my shit, then alright, I'll make it an R-rated movie for you.' So I think that that spirit of politics is always woven into even the kind of silliest examples of it, right, because it was, it is, in a way, a response to ... and a lot of rap music works this way ... is in response to an outside perception of it."⁶⁵ The result of this approach to music-making is something that Paul Lester of *The Guardian* describes as "a series of high-frequency sounds like a dentist's drill run amok Expect the sort of shrill thrills you imagine could function as incidental soundtrack music for a documentary about abattoirs or might conceivably be the work of a young band intent on twisting industrial metal into brutal new shapes. With rapping on top."⁶⁶

Much like Death Grips, clipping.'s lyrical focus is deeply sinister, often describing horrifying scenes through extremely vivid imagery. However, their approach is much different to Death Grips. Whereas MC Ride recounts stories through a paranoid first-person lens, Diggs instead provides

⁶⁵ "clipping. - Performance & Interview (Live on KEXP at Home)," Youtube Video, posted by "KEXP," Dec 18, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPKTwSbxvHM>.

⁶⁶ Paul Lester, "New Band of the Week: Clipping (No 1,448)," *The Guardian*, Feb 8, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/feb/08/clipping-new-band>.

documentary-style overviews of both real and imagined scenarios. This unique perspective leads to what Snipes has described as 'primary source' music. He explains:

It's like if we want to tell a story, we almost never do it from the perspective of, like, a narrator who has an opinion about that story, right. We try to do it in, sort of, like, practical pieces. Even on our science-fiction record, the sounds are even, sort of, story-telling mechanisms because we tried to make everything sound as if it was, like, practical, concrete sounds in the world of that story and you are hearing this narrative not through a retelling of the narrative later but in the actual events as they were happening, to a certain degree.⁶⁷

In doing so, clipping. is extremely well placed to capture the feeling of criminalization as they do not explain or directly critique histories of criminalization as much as they provide sound-scapes that transport the listener into criminalized environments.

Similar to Death Grips, clipping.'s approach to the topic of police violence in 'Knees on the Ground' is unnerving, with the group adopting an abrasive sound that pairs moments of silence with bursts of noise combining the sound of gun shots and tyres screeching. Between bursts of intensity, Diggs flowingly raps about a police killing and its consequences not only for the dead, but for all those who witness it. The first verse provides the atmosphere in which violence will occur:

Cumulus clouds sitting up high
Shape-shifting aimless and slow
The breeze is easy, it moves by
Timid, more whisper than blow
Telephone wires, they buzz live
Blackbird is frozen in flight
Low-hanging sun makes a orange sky
Silhouettes in a backlight
Black shingled roofs are all bright-trimmed
The trim the same on the windows
8-year-old girl, color caramel skin
Pink barrettes and color pencils
Stares, her mouth open and eyes wide
As the crowd gathers below

⁶⁷ "clipping. - Performance & Interview," Youtube Video.

They heard the shouts and they knew why
Grab cellphones pressing record
Blue uniform and a badge on
Showing no fear in his eyes
Stands in the street with his gun drawn
Military issue .45⁶⁸

Note how the song opens quite peacefully. Aside from the sounds of gunshots that meet the end of each bar and the swelling droning sound in the background as the verse progresses, Diggs depicts a generally peaceful scene. Indeed, until the final 8 lines, the image portrayed evokes a Rockwell-esque suburban idyll. Such idyllic scenes make for a profound juxtaposition with the ensuing violence. The resultant feeling, for the listener, is one of a kind of hijacked serenity in which the police's presence transforms peace into chaos. This is the *feeling* of carcerality. It is also significant that we enter the story with a focus on the observer, as it is the observer who must deal with the aftermath of state violence, an aftermath that will psychologically linger for the rest of her life.

Diggs continues in the second verse with the direct bodily violence of police murder. As the verse progresses, Diggs' rapping quickens, becoming more urgent as the background music slows, ultimately dying away after the final line:

Brown boy sitting on his knees with his eyes shut
Hands behind his head, fingers woven, pinkies up
Saying he ain't even doin' nothing what you want
They threw him on the ground when he called them all punks
Retro blue and white Jordans, tongues out
Over the black jeans cuffed just the right amount
To make them bunch by the calves how he like
Just ran out of boxer briefs so he wearing tighty-whities
With a white T-shirt and the breeze catch it just so
Pressing it tight against his chest so the red hole
Is getting wider and the blood is soaking in the fabric
And pooling on the ground, he looks down automatic
And the dark pavement gets darker when it's wet
He's losing balance slow with his hands on his head
So his face hits first and his eyes go dead

⁶⁸ clipping., "Knees on the Ground," 2014.

And the air is sucked out of the world with his last breath⁶⁹

This verse takes the audience into the acute terror of policing from the observer's perspective. The third-person, cinematic view continues to situate the listener on the outside of this violence, capturing the psychological effects of carcerality. The song ends by returning to the 8-year-old mentioned in the opening verse: "8-year-old girl crying loud at the window / Not a single cloud within sight".⁷⁰ The song is thus bookmarked by this observed violence. While the centerpiece is a police killing, its effects are relayed to us through the trauma it causes in the bystander, a bystander who will likely live the rest of her life with the knowledge that her skin color means a similar violence is imminent.

By capturing both the physical impact of the carceral regime and its diffuse psychological violence – violence that stems from the witnessing of anti-Black terror – songs like 'Knees on the Ground' re-narrativize the carceral regime. These songs communicate the horrors that accompany this regime for both physical and psychological victim, a far cry from the sense of 'safety' citizens are supposed to feel. The presumed 'naturalness' of the regime is destabilised as a result.

Re-narrativizing part II: Real/harsh sounds

Another technique that unravels the regime's presumed naturalness is the use of both 'real sounds' – i.e. authentic recordings of actual instances of police violence – and frightening, aggressive sounds. This is not the kind of topic that evokes the jubilation of Afrofuturism or the moroseness of emo rap. State violence is often captured through the harshness of more experimental, industrial sounds. These aural qualities are a profound part of this music's power, capturing the anxious 'structure of feeling' that typifies criminalization. Furthermore, the use of 'real' sounds and voices is a particularly direct example of re-narrativizing, allowing victims of state violence to contest 'official' narratives.

Throughout the music of this chapter, a general intensity and experimental sensibility is often evident. Songs from 'Klink' to 'Knees on the Ground' to 'Pig Feet' employ aggressive sounds that evoke the fear, anger, and confusion induced by state violence. These feelings re-imagine the carceral regime, illuminating traumatic 'structures of feeling' that directly contest the carceral as it is often portrayed to the world. But such sounds do more than just capture the feeling of criminalization: they enable unfettered emotional expression. As Chanté Joseph argues of 'Pig Feet': "[T]he rappers rile up listeners in a no-nonsense, unadulterated anger-driven collaboration. ... It opens with gunshots and a woman screaming that the police shot another unarmed black man – this

⁶⁹ clipping., "Knees on the Ground."

⁷⁰ clipping., "Knees on the Ground."

isn't a call for hope and peace, but gives space to express the anger experienced by communities."⁷¹ This is not about appealing to the sensibilities of a white audience. It is about the formation of safe spaces for expressions of Black anger.

But others go even further. Not only do certain musicians insist on an intensity in their production style, many go as far as to sample moments from real life that transport the listener to a specific experience of violence. Dua Selah book-ends their song 'body cast' by playing a recorded altercation between police officers and a civilian whose home the police are attempting to raid: "There's nothing going on here and you are violating my rights, sweetheart. Now, tell me that I'm fucking wrong. You can't 'cause I'm not wrong. You violating my rights as a— shut up! Shut your mouth! You must be crazy, coming up in here talking about you heard something. You heard me talking. I talk loud and I'm aggressive. And guess what? You did not knock on my door".⁷² Here, Selah both extends the reach of state violence to include the supposedly private sphere and allows the criminalized to talk back.

J. Cole's song 'Be Free' similarly incorporates a moment of real life, interrupting the song on two occasions to play an extensive recording of Dorian Johnson, witness to the shooting of Michael Brown:

So now it was like the officer is pulling him inside the car and he's trying to pull away. And at no time the officer said that he was going to do anything until he pulled out his weapon. His weapon was drawn and he said, 'I'll shoot you' or, 'I'm going to shoot' and in the same moment, the first shot went off. And we looked at him and he was shot and there was blood coming from him, and we took off running—

...

As we took off running I ducked and hid for my life, 'cause I was fearing for my life, and I hid by the first car I saw. My friend, he kept running, and he told me to keep running 'cause he feared for me, too. So as he was running the officer was trying to get out of the car, and once he got out the car he pursued my friend—his weapon was drawn. Now he didn't see any weapon drawn at him or anything like that, us going for no weapon. His weapon was already drawn when he got out the car. He shot again, and once my friend felt that shot, he turned around and put his hands in the air, and started

⁷¹ Chanté Joseph, "YG, Che Lingo, Kendrick Lamar: the protest songs of Black Lives Matter 2020," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jun/10/yg-che-lingo-kendrick-lamar-protest-songs-of-black-lives-matter-2020-george-floyd>.

⁷² Dua Selah, "body cast," 2020.

to get down, but the officer still approached with his weapon drawn and he fired seven more shots and my friend died.⁷³

These ‘real-life’ interpolations of police violence re-narrativize by re-framing the power dynamics between state agent and victim. Dorian Johnson’s account captures the reckless violence of the police officer in this moment and the sense of fear necropolitical violence elicits. Hegemonic narratives around necessary state force are threatened when the victims (and witnesses) are given the platform to speak.

Re-narrativizing part III: Valuing lives and contesting necropolitical labels

Too often, victims of state violence are rendered faceless. When stories of their death or incapacitation are told in (white) public spheres, they are depicted not as human beings but as ‘thuggish’ threats requiring immediate neutralization. Consequently, the violence inflicted upon them is legitimized as an act of public protection. Put another way, state-sanctioned violence requires justification, only becoming ‘common sense’ when assumed to be necessary for the safe-keeping of a normative populace. Shatema Threadcraft explains the significance of labelling to this justification process: “[T]he successful operation of necropower requires the work of assigning meaning to the bodies of the dead. The state expends effort, uses its resources, to define how the subject lived and therefore what the subject was, thereby labeling a given subject as deserving of death, a subject whose proper embodiment is, in fact, a deceased body.”⁷⁴ Labels such as thug, terrorist, criminal define the target of necropolitical violence as less-than, as lacking (a kind of) personhood, as, ultimately, being “the ‘right kind’ of dead.”⁷⁵

However, this devaluing process does not go uncontested.⁷⁶ Throughout histories of racialized violence, artists – as well as family, friends, and activists – have remembered the dead in ways that humanize them and delegitimize the necropolitical labelling process. Death, in this sense, is not

⁷³ J. Cole, “Be Free,” 2014.

⁷⁴ Threadcraft, “North American Necropolitics and Gender,” 558.

⁷⁵ Threadcraft, “North American Necropolitics and Gender,” 553.

⁷⁶ For example, following the 2014 killing of Michael Brown, Black Twitter users adopted the hashtag #iftheygunnedmedown as a way of confronting this labelling process. “The mainstream media framing of Michael Brown frequently used multiple racist stereotypes and images from old antiblack elements of the dominant white frame, in effect justifying his being shot by Officer Darren Wilson. This media framing portrayed the black teenager as criminal, delinquent, and dangerous, and with language such as ‘he was no angel’. Countering this mainstream approach, the hashtag #iftheygunnedmedown was utilized by many as a discursive technique that highlighted the differences between the negative pictures of Brown in the mainstream media versus more positive school photographs these media utilized for white victims or white mass shooters. These social media users explicitly reframed the African American teenager as a contributing member of society and a college student.” Jozie Nummi, Carly Jennings and Joe Feagin, “BlackLivesMatter: Innovative Black Resistance,” *Sociological Forum* 34, no. 1 (2019): 1054.

absolute.⁷⁷ Remembering the dead is a subtle but profound act of contesting the processes by which the state legitimizes death. By remembering a deceased loved one fondly, the narrative of justifiable death is contested. By speaking their name, the narrative is contested. By mourning them, the narrative is contested. When these bodies are re-valued and humanized, the violence that led to their death is delegitimized.

The re-valuing of victims of state violence is commonplace in rap. H.E.R.'s neo-soul inspired tribute to George Floyd, 'I Can't Breathe', re-values by illustrating the trauma police violence creates for loved ones of the dead: "The structure was made to make us the enemy (Yeah) / Prayin' for change 'cause the pain makes you tender / All of the names you refuse to remember / Was somebody's brother, friend / Or a son to a mother that's crying".⁷⁸ By couching the victim in a language of love and humanity, the necropolitical labelling process is subverted. This re-valuing is similarly found in Lil B's 'I Am George Floyd':

I'm George Floyd with the beard and the dreadlocks
Forget the dreads, just locks, don't stop
I'm Eric Garner, John Crawford
Michael Brown, Ezell Ford, Dante Parker
Michelle Laquan McDonald, George, man
Tanisha Anderson, Akhee, that's my fam
We all kin, no matter the color of your skin
Tamir Rice
Jermaine Read, Matthew, AJ
Frank Smart and Natasha
Give it up for the ones that's gone, not forgotten
I'ma keep it going, they feel me stopping
Tony Robinson, Eric Hill, Mya Hall
Phillip White, Walter Scott, please stop⁷⁹

⁷⁷ As Ethan Blue and Patrick Timmons explain: "[I]n the memories of friends, family members, and social movements, the dead, whom the state attempts to silence, continue to speak. In stories and oppositional practices, the dead become martyrs, and their presence haunts the oft-tormented dreams of those who inflicted violent death. Their dismembered bodies can become more powerful than they had been when they were alive." Ethan Blue and Patrick Timmons, "Punishment and Death - Editor's Introduction," *Radical History Review*, no. 96 (2006): 5-6.

⁷⁸ H.E.R., "I Can't Breathe," 2020.

⁷⁹ Lil B, "I Am George Floyd," 2020.

The dead are no longer (rendered) invisible. “You in this song now, immortalized”, Lil B exclaims.⁸⁰ When we compare the narratives of the state with those of rappers such as Lil B, the disjuncture between the two chips away at the state’s justification for violence. If the dead cannot be dismissed as threats, how can their deaths be accepted?

But it is not only important that the dead are remembered; it also matters *how* they are remembered. There is a danger in proving the dead’s worth through an appeal to social norms. For example, if one seeks to prove that a deceased cis-man is not a thug because he had a wife, or because he was God-fearing, or because he resembled the middle-classes, then these qualifiers are affirmed. We essentially say, “no, he wasn’t a ‘*real*’ thug; those other people (queer, atheist, working-class, gender non-conforming, etc.) are the *real* thugs.” One person is removed from the ‘thug’ category, but the logic of labelling is reinforced and a politics of respectability is reified. Cacho captures this dilemma:

Contemporary progressive politics must rely not only on what dominant groups find palatable (i.e., the family, legality) but also on the ‘value practices’ that will make social statuses recognizable as valuable For me, this means suspending the impulse to reject criminalizing stereotypes precisely because the mere chance to recuperate social value is contingent on that rejection. ... Dismembering social value by refusing ‘the lure of legibility’ re-members the other because it gives us the space to be more critical of the automatic, understandable impulse to deny and be offended by criminalizing stereotypes.⁸¹

This politics, a politics that rejects the appeal of a white public’s acceptance, characterises the approach of much rap to re-valuing. Rappers frequently reject a politics of valuing as it currently exists, instead reassessing the social-/racial-/gender-based nature of value in the first place.

The third verse of ‘Klink’ offers an example of this non-normative re-valuing. Following the expressions of paranoia highlighted earlier, Ride directly challenges the state’s authority. Crucially, he does so not by claiming innocence, but by admitting to criminality:

They're knocking at my door, down my door
They're shining lights in my eyes
Exactly what do they stand for?
Ever asking more of I, man, why? (Agh)

⁸⁰ Lil B, “I Am George Floyd.”

⁸¹ Cacho, *Social Death*, 31.

Like it matters why I chose to ignore
All the laws I've been told to abide (Rise above! We're gonna rise above!)
Think I'm on parole, thinking I just stole
Some shit, you got an A.P.B out on-
But no, you're wrong as usual
Hell no, it wasn't me
Have the nerve to ask me if I'm drunk
*When I'm pissing in the middle of the street*⁸²

Rejecting the appeal of the normative, Ride instead confronts the very logic of criminalization. His position is less “I’m doing nothing wrong” than “who are you to determine what is and is not wrong?” The kind of violence inflicted by the police, and the fear, trauma, and paranoia such violence elicits, is not justified through criminalizing labels. ‘Wrong-doing’, in other words, is irrelevant. Admitting to criminality seeks not to appease or conform, but to re-value.

These songs depict the pervasive physical and psychological violence of the carceral regime and the ideologies that justify punitivity. In so doing, the music confronts the ‘common sense’ of the carceral regime, demystifying an institution that subjects racialized others to feelings of imminent death. But re-narrativizing in rap goes well beyond the anti-prison critiques explored so far. For all its insights into the feelings associated with carcerality, much of this music has grappled with criminalization independent of gender, gender-identity, and sexuality (which, in effect, equates to masculine). Consequently, violence is framed as affecting Black cis-men almost exclusively. Drawing on the insights of anti-carceral feminists – and paralleling intersectional movements such as BLM – the next section examines music that extends histories of state violence beyond the police in order to capture the many forms of violence that disproportionately target queer, cis- and trans-women of color. This Black (radical) feminist tradition reworks the critiques of anti-prison activists and musicians as part of an abolitionist re-building that liberates *all* Black people from the yoke of ‘premature death’.

Anti-Carceral Feminism and Abolition Democracy

Though successful in challenging the ‘common sense’ of the carceral regime, much of the music discussed above uncritically adopts images of state violence that prioritize the experiences of cis-

⁸² Emphasis added. Death Grips, “Klink.”

men.⁸³ When state violence is limited to police killings and profiling alone, cis-men become the normative victim for they constitute the vast majority of those targeted by the police.⁸⁴

But the police are not the only source of 'premature death' facing people of color. In her song 'Casket Pretty', rapper and activist Noname explores 'premature death' as a more ubiquitous phenomenon:

All of my niggas is casket pretty
Ain't no one safe in this happy city
I hope you make it home
I hope to God that my tele' don't ring
...
Ashes to Ashes, dearly departed, regarded as Holy
Don't hold me, don't hold me when niggas is dying and dying
And I'm afraid of the dark, blue and the white
Badges and pistols rejoice in the night
And we watch the news, and we see him die tonight
Tonight, the night, the night his baby said goodbye
Roses in the road, teddy bear outside, bullet there on the right
Where's love when you need it?
Too many babies in suits
Too many babies in suits
Dark before the dawn, ricochet the pawn
Bullet in the chest, you ain't mean no harm
Collecting your checkmate, I know you in love with the power
It's flowers at every occasion⁸⁵

⁸³ Consequently, women's lives are often obscured in discussions of state violence: "[T]he myopic focus on men and boys of color in the effort to address structural racial inequalities illustrates the extent to which women of color's lives continue to be marginalized and devalued." Xhercis Méndez, "Which Black Lives Matter?: Gender, State-Sanctioned Violence, and 'My Brother's Keeper'," *Radical History Review* 126, (2016): 100.

⁸⁴ The Washington Post's Police Shooting Database offers statistics on recent police killings. Of the 7,802 killings recorded between 2015 and late October 2022, roughly 95% have been men. See: The Washington Post, "Fatal Force." <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>. Consequently, women's lives are often obscured in discussions of state violence: "[T]he myopic focus on men and boys of color in the effort to address structural racial inequalities illustrates the extent to which women of color's lives continue to be marginalized and devalued." Xhercis Méndez, "Which Black Lives Matter?: Gender, State-Sanctioned Violence, and 'My Brother's Keeper'," *Radical History Review* 126, (2016): 100.

⁸⁵ Noname, "Casket Pretty," track 7 on *Telefone*, self-released, 2016.

In this song, violence comes from multiple directions. While the police (“badges and pistols”) are certainly a source of the feeling of *closeness to death*, they are not alone. Furthermore, the victims are shrouded in obscurity. Noname does not clarify exactly who is in the casket nor her relation to them. Instead, *everybody* is ‘casket pretty’ (“Ain't *no one* safe in this happy city”).

The diffuseness of the violence depicted in ‘Casket Pretty’ and the expansion of who is considered a target of violence – i.e. everyone – indicates the direction of the remainder of this chapter. By confronting the carceral ‘common sense’, the music explored in the previous section certainly functions to liberate those targeted by police killings, but does it emancipate everyone? Does it protect women (both cis and trans) or queer or non-binary people from the violence of domestic abuse? Or rape? Or sexual assault? Or structural racism? Or even the violence of denying oneself in order to fit social norms? In other words, is ‘premature death’ in all its forms overcome through the destabilization of the carceral regime’s ‘common sense’? The answer to all these questions is no.

Though still defined by a feeling of *closeness to death*, the music I engage with for the rest of this chapter evidences a feminist retelling of necropolitics, extending deathliness beyond the police/prison to include these many other forms of violence. Doing so allows for an examination into the anti-carceral feminist and abolitionist sensibilities of (some) 21st century rap. Abolitionism takes the ‘common sense’-destroying qualities of anti-prison music and extends it, seeking not just to undo prisons but to completely reimagine the world in which we live. Consequently, abolitionist visions offer a project of building that liberates *all* Black people (all people, in fact), not just those for whom carceral violence is most heavily felt. Abolitionist visions offer the truest expression of the Black radical tradition: the construction of a something else.

Anti-carceral feminism

Prioritizing women’s lives and experiences in histories of anti-Black violence draws on an analytical and activist tradition known as anti-carceral feminism. Beginning in the 1970s, anti-carceral feminism developed as an intersectional analytic confronting the blindspots of both mainstream (white) feminism and anti-racist activism (an activism within which the previous section’s music can be located). Though significant in their own right, each tradition envisioned anti-violence in ways that ignored the unique oppressions facing women of color. I will briefly outline some of the shortcomings of each movement, for it is in response to these failings that anti-carceral feminists developed their intersectional, abolitionist politics.

White feminism of the 1960s and ‘70s made public the ongoing violence committed against women. Though certainly important in publicizing the kind of violence often relegated to private spheres,

white feminist solutions to gendered violence were often problematic. Uncritically accepting the ideology of carcerality, white feminists conceived of ‘safety’ through appeals to a swelling carceral regime.⁸⁶ As the anti-carceral feminist organization INCITE! argues: “[t]he anti-violence movement has been critically important in breaking the silence around violence against women and providing much-needed services to survivors. However, the mainstream anti-violence movement has increasingly relied on the criminal justice system as the front-line approach toward ending violence”.⁸⁷ White feminist responses to gendered violence thus bound themselves to the carceral ‘common sense’.

A primary reason for mainstream feminism’s embrace of the punitive was its implicitly white analysis. While it may be true that ‘normative’ (i.e. white, heterosexual, gender-conforming, middle-class) America feels protected by the carceral regime, the same is often untrue of the ‘non-normative’ (i.e. Black, queer, gender non-conforming, poor).⁸⁸ As Cathy Cohen argues: “[W]hen most think about violence against women, the traditional response in the mainstream domestic violence movement has been to involve the state But this response doesn’t take into account the fact that the state is the oppressor in many communities of color and poor communities.”⁸⁹ Less protector than oppressor, the carceral regime inflicts its own violence on Black women. Therefore, white feminism’s inability to extend solutions beyond the carceral ‘common sense’ ensured a further oppression of Black women.

But while mainstream feminism’s colorblind analysis resulted in a political imagination wedded to the carceral ‘common sense’, anti-racism activists frequently generated their own blindspot: gender. Robin Kelley speaks to the ‘gender-neutrality’ (i.e. masculinity) of such activism:

⁸⁶ For an insight into the complex relationship between white feminists and mass incarceration, see: Aya Gruber, *The Feminist War on Crime: The Unexpected Role of Women’s Liberation in Mass Incarceration* (California: University of California Press, 2020).

⁸⁷ INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, *Gender Oppression, Abuse, Violence: Community Accountability within the People of Color Progressive Movement* (July 2005): 28.

⁸⁸ I say “feels protected” because the logic that police equals safety for women is faulty. INCITE! explains: “Despite an exponential increase in the number of men in prisons, women are not any safer, and the rates of sexual assault and domestic violence have not decreased.” INCITE! *Gender Oppression, Abuse, Violence*, 28. But not only do prisons not prevent violence against women: they actually inflict it: “During the past fifteen years, the numbers of women, especially women of color in prison has skyrocketed. Prisons also inflict violence on the growing numbers of women behind bars. Slashing, suicide, the proliferation of HIV, strip searches, medical neglect and rape of prisoners has largely been ignored by anti-violence activists. The criminal justice system, an institution of violence, domination, and control, has increased the level of violence in society.” INCITE! *Gender Oppression, Abuse, Violence*, 28.

⁸⁹ Cathy J. Cohen and Sarah J. Jackson, “Ask a Feminist: A Conversation with Cathy J. Cohen on Black Lives Matter, Feminism, and Contemporary Activism,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 41 (2016): 777-8.

The black community is too often conceived as an undifferentiated group with common interests. The men and even many of the women who lead these movements see the yoke of race and class oppression and accordingly create strategies to liberate the race, or black working people in particular. This ostensibly gender-neutral conception of the black community (nothing is really gender neutral), presumes that freedom for black people as a whole will result in freedom for black women.⁹⁰

As INCITE! argues, assumptions of homogeneity within Black communities ensured that “activists/movements that address state violence (such as anti-prison, anti-police brutality groups) often work in isolation from activists/movements that address domestic and sexual violence.” Accordingly, “women of color, who suffer disproportionately from both state and interpersonal violence, have become marginalized”.⁹¹ Ignoring the gender-specific nature of violence, such movements offered limited solutions to the issues afflicting Black women.

In response to the blindspots of each movement, anti-carceral feminists synthesized feminist and anti-racist activism. The result was the growth of modern abolitionism.⁹² Anti-carceral feminism is thus a political imagination that simultaneously extends sites of anti-Black violence beyond the ‘public’ and ‘masculine’ while also destabilising carceral logics. It offers abolitionist alternatives to the kinds of radical visions – such as those explored earlier in this chapter – that perpetuate some marginalizations (sexism) even as they contest others (police violence).

The (gendered) limits of necropolitics and the #SayHerName Campaign

Attuned to anti-carceral feminist critiques, I think it is necessary to problematize the masculine depictions of state violence offered in the first half of this chapter. Throughout the 2010s, various activist communities have reimagined who constitutes a victim of necropolitics. Perhaps best exemplified by the *Say Her Name* Report, a 2014 study detailing female victims of police violence, activists have challenged the invisibility of state violence against women.⁹³ *Say Her Name*, Derick

⁹⁰ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 136-7.

⁹¹ INCITE! *Gender Oppression, Abuse, Violence*, 28.

⁹² As Emily Thuma argues: “[A]ntiracist feminist activists ... developed and circulated arguments against a criminal justice-centred approach to gender violence that reflected an intersectional understanding of the sources of violence in women’s lives, as well as a nascent prison abolitionism.” Emily Thuma, “Lessons in Self-Defense: Gender Violence, Racial Criminalization, and Anticarceral Feminism,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3/4 (2015): 55.

⁹³ Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie, “Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women,” *African American Policy Forum* (July 2015 Update). For more on how non-cis-men are effected by police violence, see: Joey L. Mogul, Andrea J. Ritchie and Kay Whitlock, *Queer (In)justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* (Boston; Beacon Press, 2011); Andrea J. Ritchie, *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Colour* (Boston; Beacon Press, 2011); Eric A. Stanley, *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, expanded 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2015).

Clifton explains, “seeks justice for women like Rekia Boyd, Sandra Bland, and Mya Hall, a trans woman killed by police in Baltimore in April 2015. And for all the other black women and girls—queer or straight, cis or trans—who are subject to police and state violence but whose stories aren’t often told.”⁹⁴

Some rap augments this goal. Janelle Monáe’s ‘Hell You Talmbout’ directly contributed to the #SayHerName campaign, not only using the phrase repeatedly but also extending public knowledge of non-cis-male victimization by repeating the names of cis- and trans-women who have died at the hands of the police.⁹⁵ Noname similarly incorporates women and trans people into this history of violence – while simultaneously criticising other rappers, specifically J. Cole, for their refusal to utilise their art in the service of social change – stating: “One girl missin', another one go missin' / One girl missin', another one / Yo, but little did I know all my readin' would be a bother / It's trans women bein' murdered and this is all he can offer? / And this is all y'all receive? / Distracting from the convo with organizers / They talkin' abolishin' the police / And this the new world order / We democratizin' Amazon, we burn down borders”.⁹⁶ Here, Noname expands on the masculine-focus of anti-prison critiques, noting how women are also subject to necropolitical violence.

Though undoubtedly important, a singular focus on police *killings* runs the risk of prioritizing cis-men. As Threadcraft argues:

[B]lack women will be disadvantaged in trying to win recognition by arguing that the same thing that happens to black men happens to them, as that is not entirely the case. Far fewer black women, for example, than black men are killed by police #BlackLivesMatter activists have derived benefit from the stark simplicity of their most memorable and widely disseminated goal—ending the disproportionate murder of blacks by police. Black women will benefit from no such simplicity, as the issues of police violence and murder themselves are far more complex for women.⁹⁷

Consequently, movements such as #SayHerName – and the broad anti-carceral feminist perspective – have extended readings of state violence beyond the public and spectacular to include other forms that are (perhaps) lesser known. Not simply killed, Black women also constitute a growing

⁹⁴ Derrick Clifton, “Queer women are shaping Chicago’s Black Lives Matter movement,” *Chicago Reader*, Apr 7, 2016, <https://chicagoreader.com/news-politics/queer-women-are-shaping-chicagos-black-lives-matter-movement/>.

⁹⁵ The song is structured around the hook “Hell You Talmbout” chanted in unison by a congregation of voices, bookmarked each time by a guest speaker (including Alicia Garza, Beyoncé, and Kimberlé Crenshaw) repeating the name of a Black female victim of police violence.

⁹⁶ Noname, “Song 33.”

⁹⁷ Threadcraft, “North American Necropolitics and Gender,” 569.

proportion of America's incarcerated.⁹⁸ They are frequently raped and sexually assaulted by police and prison guards.⁹⁹ Queer and trans people also suffer disproportionate violence when trapped in prisons, violence that ranges from "physical and sexual assault by staff and other prisoners to administrative neglect and complacency with that violence to experiences of isolation and constant fears of death. ... [T]rans, queer, and gender-nonconforming people face a particular kind of violence because of their queerness and gender nonconformity that other (straight and gender-conforming) incarcerated people do not have to face."¹⁰⁰ Outside of the prison, trans and non-binary people's often fragile economic and living conditions further render them targets for the carceral regime.¹⁰¹ By accepting the implicit masculinity of necropolitics as conventionally defined, the kinds of anti-prison critiques offered in the first half of this chapter risk ignoring these varied forms of state violence.

Gendering/queering necropolitics: Structural racism and private sphere violence

Despite the many female victims of state violence, and notwithstanding the admirable work of the #SayHerName campaign, cis-men continue to be prioritised when these histories are publicly told. But why should definitions of state violence remain limited to that which involves carceral institutions? Marginalized communities are not only killed, they are also left to die, abandoned by a neoliberal economics of austerity and 'small government'.¹⁰² Such economics renders people of color

⁹⁸ "Incarceration rates have increased much faster for women than for men In 2001, a woman's chance of being sent to prison was six times greater than in 1974; for men, the increase was threefold. In 2012, about 7 percent of inmates in state and federal prisons were female, up from just 3 percent in 1970." Gottschalk, *Caught*, 122. And while women remain a relatively small proportion of America's incarcerated, the gendered nature of criminalization makes them susceptible to other forms of incapacitation: "Studies indicating that women have been even more likely to end up in mental facilities than men suggest that while jails and prisons have been dominant institutions for the control of men, mental institutions have served a similar purpose for women. That is, deviant men have been constructed as criminal, while deviant women have been constructed as insane." Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 66.

⁹⁹ "In November, The Associated Press published a story following a year-long investigation that found that 1,000 officers across the country had lost their licenses over six years for sexual crimes, including rape, sodomy, possession of child pornography, and sexual misconduct." Chagnion Antoine, "The color of lawlessness: Sexual abuse by police, nationwide," *Women's Media Center*, May 4, 2016, <https://womensmediacenter.com/women-under-siege/the-color-of-lawlessness-sexual-abuse-by-police-nationwide>.

¹⁰⁰ Elias Walker Vitulli, "Queering the Carceral: Intersecting Queer/Trans Studies and Critical Prison Studies," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19, no. 1 (2013): 118.

¹⁰¹ "Trans and gender-nonconforming people are particularly affected by police profiling, harassment, and violence as well as mass incarceration. Trans populations are disproportionately poor, unemployed, and homeless because of discrimination, family rejection, and barriers to accessing school, medical treatment, and social services. To survive, many trans and gender-nonconforming people turn to illegal economies, particularly sex work, that produce and reinforce high levels of criminalization." Vitulli, "Queering the Carceral," 120.

¹⁰² Neoliberal abandonment is its own form of state violence. As Kelley notes: "[N]eoliberal policies (i.e., dismantling the welfare state; promoting capital flight; privatizing public schools, hospitals, housing, transit, and other public resources; investing in police and prisons,) are a form of state violence that produces scarcity,

vulnerable to unemployment and the kinds of economic, social, and psychological conditions that inflame mental illness and ‘deaths of despair’. Trapped in these conditions, people of color (especially women) are forced to expend tremendous emotional and physical labor in the process of caring for communities devastated by the dual process of state-abandonment and punitivity.¹⁰³ Though unspectacular, structural racism and a capitalist economics that accounts for such racism, is itself an act of violence resulting in ‘premature death’.¹⁰⁴

But this *classing* of state violence should be extended further. Even for people within the same (class) community, violence and ‘premature death’ is not distributed evenly. Most significantly for the purposes of this chapter, ‘premature death’ is an inherently gendered phenomenon. The rest of this section focusses on one specific form of violence that comes into view when the necropolitical is gendered: domestic violence.

Extending criticisms beyond the spectacle of police killings not only highlights the effects of structural racism, it also permits us to explore other forms of violence that remain largely relegated to private spheres, and thus often ignored by male-centric liberation movements. For example, women “represent 63.1 percent of those killed by intimates and 81.7 percent of those killed in sex-related murders. ... Women are killed in private, without witness or only witnessed by politically voiceless minors; they are killed in the home, that space long considered a man’s castle.”¹⁰⁵ One

environmental and health hazards, poverty, and alternative (illegal) economies rooted in violence and subjugation.” Robin Kelley, “Why We Won’t Wait,” *CounterPunch*, Nov 25, 2014, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2014/11/25/why-we-wont-wait/>.

¹⁰³ Patrisse Khan-Cullors captures the psychological effects of structural racism: “[T]here are no stats to track collateral deaths, the ones that unfold over months and years spent in mourning and grief: the depression that becomes addiction to alcohol that becomes cirrhosis; or else addiction to food that becomes diabetes that becomes a stroke. Slow deaths. Undocumented deaths. Deaths with a common root: the hatred that tells a person daily that their life and the life of those they love ain’t worth shit, a truth made ever more real when the people who harm you are never held accountable.” Patrisse Khan-Cullors and asha bandele, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), 187.

¹⁰⁴ Alicia Garza describes some of these more complex forms of violence: “When we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. It is an acknowledgement Black poverty and genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgment that 1 million Black people are locked in cages in this country – one half of all people in prisons or jails – is an act of state violence. It is an acknowledgment that Black women continue to bear the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families and that assault is an act of state violence. Black queer and trans folks bearing a unique burden in a hetero-patriarchal society when they want to buy a cheap generic Viagra that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us is state violence; the fact that 500,000 Black people in the US are undocumented immigrants and relegated to the shadows is state violence; ... Black folks living with disabilities and different abilities bear the burden of state-sponsored Darwinian experiments that attempt to squeeze us into boxes of normality defined by White supremacy is state violence.” Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza,” *The Feminist Wire*, Oct 7, 2014, <https://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.

¹⁰⁵ Threadcraft, “North American Necropolitics and Gender,” 573.

consequence of this 'private' death is that women's stories often go unheard, relegated to a 'private sphere' without the spectacle that arouses public condemnation.

The general 'invisibility' of 'private violence' adds to the significance of rap that engages with such issues. Continuing a tradition that extends as far back as 1920s blues music, much rap narrates a history of racial violence centred on and around women.¹⁰⁶ For example, where any number of rappers find a lineage between the bodily violence of slavery and that of the prison regime, Haviah Mighty's 2019 song 'Thirteen' feminizes this continuity.¹⁰⁷ Not only does Mighty link slavery to the prison ("Then came the 13th amendment / Written in 1865 / It said slavery is over, except it's pay for doing crime / And then the things that they made illegal / Are things you associate with people / Who now, education isn't equal / And they ain't getting paid enough to eat so / We stealing and juggin' and shit / ... The system, the new slave master, brought in to stop us and bully and shit"), she also identifies the gendered nature of bodily control throughout American history. In the context of slavery, Mighty indicates that not only were Black people expected to "feed the economy, creep all the crops but then feed on it modestly", but women also experienced a unique form of bodily control: "So you in the house taking whips, and probably dick, 'cause well, you a fetish now".¹⁰⁸ Not confined to the past, this form of violence lingers into the present: "Cause slavery showed black youth, for mad years, that whiteness is right / Your ma getting fucked, your dad getting whipped - but white is the light / And sometimes master blesses you for being a good slave / And kills you off if you a bad one / So black mothers tell their daughters fuck a master and they tell their sons they can't run".¹⁰⁹ Here, Mighty re-imagines histories of bodily control. Police killings and rape become two sides of a similar experience of bodily control without the former rendering the latter invisible. Once acknowledged, such violence can be confronted and, maybe, abolished.

Sexual violence of the kind discussed by Mighty extends beyond institutions like slavery to include intra-Black violence and, specifically, familial violence. The Roots' 'Return to Innocence Lost', featuring spoken word poet Ursula Rucker, provides a moving account of such violence, its economic

¹⁰⁶ "The performances of the classic blues women – especially Bessie Smith – were one of the few cultural spaces in which a tradition of public discourse on male violence had been previously established." Angela Davis, *Blues legacies and Black feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 25.

¹⁰⁷ When thinking of songs that link the racial violence of slavery with that of the carceral regime, KRS-One's "Sound of da Police" stands out: "Take the word overseer, like a sample / Repeat it very quickly in a crew, for example / Overseer, overseer, overseer, overseer / Officer, officer, officer, officer / Yeah, officer from overseer / You need a little clarity? Check the similarity! / The overseer rode around the plantation / The officer is off, patrollin' all the nation / The overseer could stop you, 'What you're doing?' / The officer will pull you over just when he's pursuing / The overseer had the right to get ill / And if you fought back, the overseer had the right to kill". KRS-One, "Sound of da Police," track 7 on *Return of the Boom Bap*, Jive Records, 1993.

¹⁰⁸ Haviah Mighty, "Thirteen," track 5 on *13th Floor*, independent, 2019.

¹⁰⁹ Haviah Mighty, "Thirteen."

determinants, and its lingering effects on the poor and Black. Set to a lullaby-like backing track, 'Return to Innocence Lost' tells the story of a physically, sexually, and emotionally abusive relationship and its generational consequences. Rucker quietly and slowly details a story of abuse:

Muffled sound of fist on flesh
Blows to chest
No breath
Air gasps
'You ain't nothing but white trash, bitch!'
With each hit, each kick, each broken rib
Crack, Crack!
Bones are crying
Mommy's crying and bleeding
And pleading
And then
Daddy wants to fuck
Dick hard, swelled with power rush
And as if all that wasn't enough
Mommy's seven months heavy with birth
As Daddy grunts and cursed drunk nothings in her bloodied ear
First...lullaby
First...Son...will...ever...hear
And never forget¹¹⁰

Not only is this violence horrific, it lingers generationally, defining both this woman's life and that of the child growing up to it: abuse is the first lullaby he will ever hear. The remainder of the song depicts the consequences of this violence on the son, whose trauma leads him to a life of addiction, crime, and eventually, 'premature death':

Brown bottles housed his swift descent
Phones called cops on block frequent for his shenanigans
Now Daddy and him twins in addiction
Driven to false-hearted heavens and friends
By liquefied demons
Had become what he despised from conception 'til end

¹¹⁰ The Roots, "The Return to Innocence Lost," track 17 on *Things Fall Apart*, MCA Records, 1999.

Destined for a demise
Survived nine lives of staying high
Conning, jewelry-pawning, arrests, theft
Womanizing, only for money, never for sex
Bullet in chest, baseball bat to the head
Left for dead
...
Shots were fired by the gray man
With shaky hand
But not shaky enough to miss
Hit Lost Boy in back
So-called Friend runs for door
Leaves First Son blood-born
Lying alone in blood on cold floor
Death was the cost of...
Returning to Innocence Lost¹¹¹

One form of violence – domestic violence – is thus shown to extend outwards, creating more ‘premature death’ in the form of gang activities and alcoholism. The argument put forth by Rucker is one of interconnecting and cyclical forces of ‘premature death’ which too often result in violence against women. The kind of violence exhibited by the son is the very same displayed by his father: the very behavior which is responsible for the mother’s despair. The world around the characters fosters a violence that has inter-generational consequences, especially for women and children.

‘Return to Innocence Lost’ ends with a sound that is all too familiar in the music of this chapter: weeping. Over the weeping, Rucker concludes: “Baby ‘Sis awake for dawn on Christmas morn / To Mommy’s sobs and shakes / Daddy’s silhouettes of regret / All past, omitted, and absolved by loss / As they clung to each other / Knowing...”¹¹² The effects are the same as those of police killings, but the source is different. Consequently, this song communicates a sorrow that extends beyond the forces of necropolitics as conventionally defined, recognizing the diffuse violence experienced by more vulnerable sectors within communities.

Kendrick Lamar’s moving ‘Mother I Sober’ from his deeply introspective 2022 album *Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers* continues with this theme of gendered violence, though with a particular focus on

¹¹¹ The Roots, “The Return to Innocence Lost.”

¹¹² The Roots, “The Return to Innocence Lost.”

its inter-generational consequences.¹¹³ Accompanied by a sombre piano loop and rapped in a sorrowful tone, the song works through a generational trauma that manifests in feelings of anxiety, self-hate, and most importantly, cycles of gendered violence.

Seemingly on the verge of tears throughout the song's near 7-minute duration, Lamar mazes his way through various autobiographical stories of close proximity to gendered and sexual violence. He speaks of the aftermath of familial violence: "Mother's brother said he got revenge for my mother's face / Black and blue, the image of my queen that I can't erase". He tells stories of sexual violence: "Mother cried, put they hands on her, it was family ties / I heard it all, I should've grabbed a gun, but I was only five". Significantly, these events are shown to have tremendous personal consequences for Lamar, resulting in many of the anxieties he voices throughout the album. But this inter-generational violence has even more direct consequences. On multiple occasions in the song, Lamar references an incident from his childhood wherein his mother repeatedly inquired as to whether he had been sexually assaulted by a relative – to which Lamar, truthfully, always answered 'no'. Though a source of confusion for a younger Lamar, his mother's suspicions eventually become intelligible: "I asked my momma why she didn't believe me when I told her 'No' / I never knew she was violated in Chicago, I'm sympathetic / Told me that she feared it happened to me, for my protection / Though it never happened, she wouldn't agree". The pain of sexual violence is shown to pass to future generations, resulting in the feelings of anxiety, paralysing fear, and general toxicity Lamar details throughout the album.

But the origin of this trauma goes back even further beyond Lamar's mother, being located in the bodily control of slavery. Echoing the idea of "soul murder" – Nell Painter's concept referring to "the violation of one's inner being, the extinguishing of one's identity, including sexual identity," that resulted from slavery's various forms of violence – Lamar observes the cyclical nature of sexual violence:¹¹⁴

A conversation not bein' addressed in Black families
The devastation hauntin' generations and humanity
They raped our mothers, then they raped our sisters
Then they made us watch, then made us rape each other
Psychotic torture between our lives, we ain't recovered
Still livin' as victims in the public eyes who pledge allegiance

¹¹³ Kendrick Lamar, "Mother I Sober," track 17 on *Mr. Morale & The Big Stepper*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2022.

¹¹⁴ Nell Irvin Painter, "Soul Murder & Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," in *Southern History across the Color Line*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 14-5.

Every other brother has been compromised
I know the secrets, every other rapper sexually abused
I see 'em daily, buryin' they pain in chains and tattoos
So listen close before you start to pass judgement on how we move
Learn how we cope, whenever his uncle had to walk him from school
His anger grows deep in misogyny
This is post-traumatic ¹¹⁵

The violence of rape, a foundational feature of American racism that Lamar – like Mighty – links to slavery (“*they* raped our mothers, then *they* raped our sisters”) is a pain that is transferred across generations, a pain then sublimated onto others within ‘the’ Black community (“made us rape each other”). The internal pain that dominates this entire album is shown here not only to have an extensive history, but to be a primary cause of the violence that keeps women – and children – unsafe (“His anger grows deep in misogyny”).

But ‘Mother I Sober’ is a quest for healing. As the song reaches its conclusion, Lamar’s flow quickens as the music swells. He ends the song by speaking to the transformation this confrontation with a cyclical, sublimated violence has inspired:

So I set free myself from all the guilt that I thought I made
So I set free my mother all the hurt that she titled shame
...
So I set free the power of Whitney, may she heal us all
So I set free our children, may good karma keep them with God
So I set free the hearts filled with hatred, keep our bodies sacred
As I set free all you abusers, THIS IS TRANSFORMATION!

Confronting histories of gendered violence emancipates everyone subjected to the inter-generational trauma of ‘soul murder’. The song ends with the voice of Kendrick’s partner Whitney and their daughter exclaiming: “You did it, I’m proud of you / You broke a generational curse / Say ‘Thank you, dad’ / ‘Thank you, daddy, thank you, mommy, thank you, brother’”. Both the psychological and the physical violence of a gendered, inter-generational trauma stops with Lamar.

The forms of violence confronted in ‘Mother I Sober’ and ‘Return to Innocence Lost’ are issues largely ignored in much rap and anti-prison activism, giving voice to an experience no less deadly but infinitely less visible than police killings. True emancipation necessitates that these forms of violence

¹¹⁵ Lamar, “Mother I Sober.”

lie central to anti-racist critiques for they continue with or without the carceral regime. In other words, more than just destabilizing the carceral regime, true abolitionist visions are needed in order to confront the array of forces resulting in ‘premature death’.

Abolition democracy: The “Vision for Black Lives” and Black trans feminism

By expanding the scope of anti-Black violence beyond the carceral regime to include structural racism and domestic violence, artists from Lamar and Noname to Haviyah Mighty and Ursula Rucker illuminate the need for an abolitionist politics. Abolition democracy, as described by Angela Davis, seeks to undo not just the prison, but the many and varied structures that ‘necessitate’ the prison:

Prison abolitionist strategies reflect an understanding of the connections between institutions that we usually think about as disparate and disconnected. They reflect an understanding of the extent to which the overuse of imprisonment is a consequence of eroding educational opportunities, which are further diminished by using imprisonment as a false solution for poor public education. Persisting poverty in the heart of global capitalism leads to larger prison populations, which in turn reinforce the conditions that reproduce poverty.¹¹⁶

Abolitionists – and the many musicians who communicate abolitionist ideas – fundamentally seek to reimagine the everyday structures and economics of the world in which we live.

This abolitionist perspective is captured in a document titled the “Vision for Black Lives”.¹¹⁷ Endorsed by more than 50 organizations within the broad Movement for Black Lives, the Vision for Black Lives outlines a “comprehensive and visionary policy agenda for the post-Ferguson Black Liberation movement”.¹¹⁸ The document offers a long-term vision of transformation that contests the full breadth of anti-Black violence, setting out six demands for radical change including: simultaneous disinvestment from the police and investment in Black communities, economic justice for all, and a vision of community control allowing the most marginalized communities to regulate “the laws, institutions, and policies that are meant to serve us”.¹¹⁹ Such demands envision safety for *all* Black people through a collective project of building. The goal is to construct a society in which violence of

¹¹⁶ Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 73.

¹¹⁷ The Movement for Black Lives, “Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom & Justice,” Aug 2016, <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/>.

¹¹⁸ Movement for Black Lives, “Vision for Black Lives.”

¹¹⁹ Movement for Black Lives, “Vision for Black Lives.”

all kinds – from imperial war to housing discrimination, from neoliberal ideology to corporate malfeasance, and from carcerality to domestic violence – is impossible.

To what extent can this vision reach further? As queer and trans studies scholars repeatedly note, violence is not only physical and economic: it is also ontological, embedded in the norms that frame all our lives. Norms, Marquis Bey argues, are “a coercive mechanism for livability by only certain means, falling outside of those means relegating one to a nonlivable life. Whiteness and cis genders, for instance, are normative endeavors not because they are purely descriptive of most people in a given environment but because they determine who and what counts as valid, ideal, normal, and representable”.¹²⁰ In other words, categories themselves are violent. They stifle, forbidding certain experiences and expressions. They enforce certain modes of being that need to at all times fit within a narrow window of acceptable behaviour if one is to avoid punishment. When violence is understood as extending to the level of categories, then neither the eradication of prisons nor the transformation of economic conditions is sufficient. Halting all forms of violence “require[s] that we reach toward abolition, not just of prisons, and for some of us, police, but of the systems that produce them, and which replicate systems of policing and punishment beyond prison walls.”¹²¹

Recognizing categories such as gender to be their own form of carcerality, Bey theorizes a comprehensive, norm-destroying abolitionism through what they call ‘Black trans feminism’. As they explain:

Abolition can be succinctly defined as a modality and orientation to life and livability that is not reactive against ‘bad’ prisons but a way to make forms of carcerality impossible. Abolition is not one spectacularized event but a quotidian working toward eradicating carceral logics as predicates for sociality and relationality. ... [A]bolition in a broad sense [demands] the making impossible ... of carcerality, any form of captivity, which can include categorical taxonomies, agential circumscription, and the like.¹²²

Delegitimizing all hegemonic identifiers, Black trans feminism is a departure from the world as it currently exists, enabling a path to an unknown but wholly liberating future. Moreover, Black trans feminism is a praxis: something to be enacted and worked through. It is enacted through an embrace of the non-normative.¹²³ It is enacted when breaking the confines of ‘respectable’

¹²⁰ Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 38.

¹²¹ Stanley, Spade and Queer (In)Justice, “Queering Prison Abolition,” 122.

¹²² Bey, *Black Trans Feminism*, 22.

¹²³ Black trans feminism is a praxis of non-normativity, not counter-normativity for ‘counter’ still reacts to the normative: “The nonnormative must be carefully distinguished from the ‘counter’ or the ‘oppositional’ inasmuch as these, to me, express a reaction to what has been established. To counter or oppose, which is not without meaning and efficacy, is simply insufficient in the final instance as an abolitionist gesture because it

behaviour. It is enacted when someone – whether they identify as trans or not – is able to simply be, able to live beyond the norms that frame the world.¹²⁴

Adopting an ontological trans-ness of the kind described by Bey, Janelle Monáe and Tyler, the Creator engage with categories such as gender and sexuality in subversive, abolitionist ways.¹²⁵

Monáe's Afrofuturist inspired post-humanism defies categorization in ways that imagine wholly new identities. As Natalie Aghoro argues of Monáe (and Erykah Badu):

Monáe's gender-bending performances deconstruct or rather overwrite female/male dichotomies. What their individual visions on gender have in common is a shared sense of renewal and self-expressive potential that resides in the process of constant becoming. Their versatile artistic personas can be understood as a reminder that identities are multilayered, complex, and fluid and therefore resist one-dimensional examination and easy categorisation.¹²⁶

Liberation, for Monáe, comes from embracing a something else, an identity not restricted to that which currently exists. Monáe's process of becoming looks beyond the violence of gender, instead finding liberation in the unknown.

Tyler, the Creator similarly contests hegemonic categories, publically transforming himself from an artist frequently labelled homophobic – due to ongoing use of homophobic slurs – to someone with an intentionally hazy sexuality.¹²⁷ In his 2017 album *Flower Boy*, Tyler began divulging aspects of his sexuality, stating "I've been kissing white boys since 2004."¹²⁸ When asked why he decided to reveal information about his sexuality after a decade in the public spotlight, Tyler took the opportunity to

maintains the logics imputed by that which is countered or opposed The nonnormative, thus, does not accept or decline ... ; the nonnormative is an operation on other grounds and by other means not predicated on legitimizing identities, knowledges, or sense-making apparatuses already in place." Bey, *Black Trans Feminism*, 39.

¹²⁴ Trans-ness, as Bey conceives of it, refers not only to being trans-gender but also a trans-politics. This is a politics that can be enacted by all people. Bey expounds on the difference between being trans-gender and engaging in trans-politics: "Ungrounded and opposed to any notion of a 'proper' object of study, the conjoining of trans and feminism inducts all who wish to bring about world transformation. Transness and feminism place a demand on all of us who wish to bring about an abolished world, forcing us to put our proclivities and ourselves in service of gendered disruption irrespective of corporeal positionality." Bey, *Black Trans Feminism*, 55.

¹²⁵ They are not alone in this. I should also add to the list musicians such as Yves Tumor, Big Freedia, Lil Nas X, and Venezuelan-American EDM musician Arca.

¹²⁶ Nathalie Aghoro, "Agency in the Afrofuturist Ontologies of Erykah Badu and Janelle Monáe." *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 339.

¹²⁷ For a thought-provoking analysis of Tyler's simultaneous homophobia and queerness, see: Benjamin Lee, "Is Tyler, the Creator coming out as a gay man or just a queer-baiting provocateur?" *The Guardian*, July 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/jul/25/tyler-the-creator-flower-boy-gay-man-or-queer-baiting-provocateur>.

¹²⁸ Tyler, the Creator, "I Ain't Got Time!" track 9 on *Flower Boy*, Columbia Records, 2017.

problematize hegemonic identities and muddy categorization: “I don’t know. ... It’s a literal question and the thing about humans is we hate not having an answer. We hate not being in the know. So people will bullshit answers, make shit up, instead of being just, like, ‘I don’t know’. There are some things that are just unexplainable.”¹²⁹ Tyler’s critically acclaimed 2019 album *Igor* continued to complicate his sexuality with the entire album narrating a love triangle between Tyler and an unnamed man who is currently in a relationship with a woman.¹³⁰ Navigating his own sexuality and the closeted bisexuality of his love interest represents another profound shift in Tyler’s identity, further unravelling the ‘tough’, homophobic exterior of his early career. Tyler is thus engaging in a sense of constant becoming, embracing fluidities in a way that renders identity itself hazy. Tyler, like Monáe, turns to the unknown and undefinable, for it is from such spaces that comprehensive emancipation may be possible.

Paired with a more ‘material’ abolitionism, an abolitionism that seeks to overcome the economic violence of racial capitalist economies and the physical and psychological violence of the carceral regime, Black trans feminism offers a vision of comprehensive change. Challenging norms in this way is part of an abolitionist praxis that finds liberation beyond the categories of this world. “[A]bolition gratuitously expands the ambit through which subjects might become subjects in ways that do not carry with them the normativities of worlds and histories past, which then means we will have the possibility to become something or somethings that have never been permitted to arise.”¹³¹ Monáe and Tyler perform this abolitionism by refusing to be identified through the labels gay or straight, man or woman, instead finding salvation in the possibility of the non-normative.

Conclusion

Decades into its existence, the neoliberal carceral regime continues to exercise a dominant hold over too many Americans. It incapacitates millions while also permitting legal discrimination – in housing, employment, voting – against millions more. Its dehumanizing logic justifies the surveillance of millions more still, turning Black spaces into open-air prisons.¹³² It kills, maims, and sexually assaults. Perhaps even more concerning, this violence is presumed necessary for public safety.

¹²⁹ Paul Flynn, “Tyler, THE CREATOR,” *Fantastic Man*, Autumn and Winter 2018, <https://www.fantasticman.com/features/reread-tyler>.

¹³⁰ Tyler, the Creator, *Igor*, Columbia Records, 2019.

¹³¹ Bey, *Black Trans Feminism*, 66-7.

¹³² I borrow this phrase from Robin Kelley: “Mass arrests, obscene numbers of young Black and Brown people corralled into jails and prisons, habeas corpus suspended through plea bargains, and the maintenance of a racial political economy that keeps the poor in a precarious state are all tactics to which the current system is well suited. ‘Zero tolerance’ policing turns select neighborhoods into open-air prisons and strips vulnerable

This is one of the many problems anti-prison activism encounters. How can something so central in collective imaginations, so central that it is presumed to be necessary, be overcome? This chapter has argued that in order for the prison to be confronted and replaced, its 'common sense' needs to unravel. Rap music, I have argued, performs this task. By re-narrativizing the regime with an emphasis on *closeness to death*, rap contests the logic of 'public protection' while simultaneously challenging the dehumanizing logic that justifies necropolitical violence. Consequently, the regime is destabilized and abolitionist alternatives are given room to blossom.

But like many radical imaginations, anti-prison critiques are prone to blindspots. When violence is conceived of as that targeting cis-men – as has been the case with much rap into the 2010s – the many other forms of violence that oppress queer, cis- and trans-women of color may go uncontested. Drawing on anti-carceral feminism and Black trans analysis as a guide, the second half of this chapter centred on music that examines the 'diffuse' violence that follows Black people in ways that are not so easily tied to the carceral regime. Overcoming violence from domestic abuse to sexual harassment to norms themselves requires not just a destruction of the carceral regime and its racist, dehumanizing logic, but a complete reimagining of the world. Abolitionists imagine liberation through the rebuilding of everything from economics to governance to norms in their totality. Consequently, abolition democracy liberates *all* people.

Abolitionism is fundamentally an act of creativity. Where reform confines itself to a 'common sense', abolitionism makes room – intellectually, at first – for worlds beyond that which currently exists. As Angel Riddle shows us: “[W]hile anti-prison activists draw attention to the human rights of prisoners, they often do not allow themselves to envision solutions beyond the prison. When faced with the question of whether or not we can abolish prisons, many are incredulous towards the idea that the abolition of prisons is a possibility.”¹³³ Abolitionism refuses to confine itself to the realities of late neoliberal modernity, arguing instead for a social safety net built on a solid social wage, on the abolition of institutions that function on a logic of racialized criminalization, on a challenge to gender and sexual norms. Abolitionists call to remake the world, undoing all the varied forms of oppression traversed throughout this thesis.

residents of habeas corpus, freedom of movement, and even protection from torture.” Robin D.G. Kelley, “Thug Nation: On State Violence and Disposability,” in *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, ed. Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton (London: Verso, 2016), 17.

¹³³ Angel Milagros Riddle, “The Responsibility of An Artist: Black Contemporary Music and Empowerment in the Age of Black Lives Matter,” (Honors Thesis, Wesleyan University, 2019), 62.

Conclusion The Future Changing Same

But the ‘protest’ is not new. Black people's songs have carried the fire and struggle of their lives since they first opened their mouths in this part of the world. They have always wanted a better day.

- Amiri Baraka in “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)”¹

At the 2015 BET Awards, Kendrick Lamar gave a moving performance of ‘Alright’. Following its release earlier in the same year, ‘Alright’ became a definitive feature of the Black Lives Matter movement, with protestors across the country chanting its hook (“we gon’ be alright!”) as they faced down riot police. ‘Alright’, and its subsequent life as voice of an activist generation, is a testament to rap’s ability to re-narrativize histories too often caught within a racist ‘common sense’ – while also performing into existence a community in opposition to the forces of ‘premature death’. Lamar’s performance also offers an example of a structuring idea of this thesis: the ‘changing same’. Amiri Baraka described the ‘changing same’ of African American musical cultures as a dialectical and cyclical process in which artistic forms respond to – and influence – contemporary historical conditions.² The furore around Lamar’s performance – and the way Lamar repeatedly spoke back to this furore – illustrates the power of Baraka’s theory when analysing the Black radical tradition’s ongoing response to prevailing social issues in the 21st century.

Lamar’s televised performance of ‘Alright’ added another beat to the song’s counterhegemonic moves. Performing on a stage littered with two police cars defaced with graffiti and reclaimed by dozens of background dancers acting as protestors, Lamar tore down prominent symbols of anti-Blackness. Standing atop one of the cars, Lamar began by evoking histories of anti-Black violence through a reference to the famous line from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*: “Alls my life I had to fight”. As Lamar reached the chorus, the vitality rose as background dancers exploded into energetic movement evoking the passionate musings associated with BLM protests. Lamar then jumped from the car, taking his place amongst the symbolic protestors as they – and the audience – chanted in unison: “we gon’ be alright! we gon’ be alright!”. With this, Lamar transformed a song that *broadly* spoke to (and interpolated) histories of Black survival – hence the Walker reference – into one that

¹ Amiri I. Baraka, “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music),” in *Black Music* (Da Capo Press: New York, 1998. Originally from 1966), 207.

² “[M]usic changed as [Black people] changed, reflecting shifting attitudes or (and this is equally important) *consistent attitudes within changed contexts*.” Amiri I. Baraka, *Blues people: Negro music in white America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1963), 153.

spoke *directly* to contemporary activism. Reaching across artistic forms and multiple generations, Lamar linked his own subject position as member of the Black radical tradition with those who came before him, drawing on histories of Black hope as a primary tool of survival.

Reflecting the complex relationship between the Black radical tradition and white America, Lamar's performance was not accepted by all.³ The following day, FOX News ran a segment commenting on the previous night's performance. Eric Bolling began by repeating a now famous line: "Lamar stated his views on police brutality with that line in the song; 'and we hate the po-po, wanna kill us in the street fo' sho'". The segment then cut to fellow presenter (and future advisor to President Donald Trump) Kimberly Guilfoyle who shook her head and added: "oh please. Ugh, I don't like it. ... I get it. That's his right to express himself. Let the free market decide. Personally, it doesn't excite me. It doesn't turn me on. Doesn't interest me. I'm not feeling it." More than simply an expression of disapproval, these comments functioned as an effort to return to the hegemonic, seeking to disempower Lamar and the protestors who turned to the song for inspiration in times of distress. Through the delegitimizing rhetoric of FOX News, historical narratives would return to their former state: the police on top and Black people thrust into a position of presumed wrong-doing and silence – for Fox News audiences, at least. In keeping with the cycle of expression and appropriation theorized by Baraka, a song designed for the oppressed was hijacked by the oppressors.

Following Guilfoyle's expression of disgust, Bolling turned to a third panellist, Geraldo Rivera, remarking "Geraldo, not helpful with those song lyrics", to which Rivera made quite a remarkable statement: "To say the least. Not helpful at all. This is why I say that hip hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years." Which begs the question: how could a song which inspired and supported protestors in a time of need, a song that drew on a legacy of Black resistance to overwhelming subjugation, a song that brings struggles that are often silenced to light, be a form of wrongdoing? The FOX presenters' performative disgust was, evidently, related to Lamar's refusal of a 'common sense' assuming the state and its representatives to be protectors. It was related to the threat of counterhegemonic histories and performances. Lamar's threat, ultimately, lay in daring to challenge a white supremacist status quo.

But again reflecting Baraka's 'changing same' – this dialectical revision of Black expression and protest – FOX News would not have the final word. In his next album, 2017's *DAMN.*, Lamar directly confronted his critics and again illustrated the transformative power of the Black radical tradition. The album's opening song, 'BLOOD.', concludes with all background sound dropping out, allowing

³ White, I must stress, does not simply refer to white people but to structures and logics that perpetuate white supremacy.

Bolling and Gulfoyle's indignation to play in isolation. Then cut swiftly to the following song 'DNA.', whose burst of aggression sounds like a direct challenge to the comments that came just before it. Following a long and braggadocios opening verse, the music again dies away as Rivera's comments are played in full. The song subsequently breaks into an even more aggressive second verse which directly challenges Rivera – and like-minded critics: "This is my heritage, all I'm inheritin' / ... Tell me somethin' / You mothafuckas can't tell me nothin' / I'd rather die than to listen to you / My DNA not for imitation / Your DNA an abomination".⁴ More than just individualist bragging, this repost speaks to Blackness itself as a form of power. By referring to a superiority embedded in his DNA, Lamar finds power in a history of Black resistance. His ability to contest, to find a way out of no way is, as he explains, 'an inheritance' that finds voice in and through music.

Throughout this dialogic conflict, Lamar and his music performed a profoundly counterhegemonic function. At stake was more than just aesthetics and pleasure (though aesthetics and pleasure are certainly part of it). At stake was a rhetorical contest that has for centuries been dominated by those in positions of power, those seeking to define Black people as beasts, rapists, mammies, jezebels, gangsters, fiends, criminals, thugs, pathological, wrongdoers, unhelpful. When Lamar sang atop a primary symbol of African American marginalization and subsequently confronted the hegemonic response to this performance, he inverted this problematic logic. It was no longer Lamar, nor the protestors, nor their collective ancestors who were the thugs: but the representatives of the state themselves. It was not the protestors who were responsible for perpetuating hate, but a 'common sense' that blames people of color for their marginalization. Inverting these labels transformed the seemingly powerless into the powerful, the oppressed into the self-emancipated, the silenced into the public voice. 21st century rap music continues to stand as a primary example of the 'changing same' of Black radicalism in its confrontation with American racism.

Each chapter of this thesis has explored a feature of the 'changing same' of American racism in the 21st century. Approaching six decades since the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the various institutions and forces responsible for racial marginalization continue to exist. Though distinct from one another, these oppressions have common origins. They grow out of racial capitalist histories of subordination and exploitation, histories that devalue Black lives and brush them aside (or, as in the War on Terror, bring them into the fold) for the sake of white America's economic, political, social, and psychological prosperity. They grow out of a post-Civil Rights, neoliberal ideology that interprets life circumstances, be they misfortunes or fortunes, 'successes' or 'failures', through an individualist

⁴ Kendrick Lamar, "DNA.," track 2 on *DAMN.*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2017.

lens. They grow from a belief, if often masked, in the idea that certain people deserve to be poor, should be incarcerated, are the “right kind of dead”.⁵ However, marginalization is never uncritically accepted. Whether or not material change is forthcoming, marginalization is always contested. Throughout every history traced in this thesis, Black expressive cultures have shown a recurring ability to resist: to find a way out of no way.

As explored in Chapter 1, rap music provides insights into the deeply complex – at times contradictory – experience of African Americans in the War on Terror. Exploiting structurally racist conditions on the home-front – conditions that force many into a ‘choice’ between incarceration or military service – the imperial war machine ironically ‘proves’ America’s exceptional status. The very presence of Black people in overseas theatres functioned as evidence of America’s ‘colorblind’ success, ‘proving’ an exceptionalism that lay central to imperial conquest over an Orientalized foe.

By both conforming to and occasionally subverting the logics – primarily exceptionalism and Orientalism – that justified neoliberal expansion, 4th25 illuminate the contradictory space of Black Americans within these histories. On the one hand, 4th25 highlight the ways in which Black people are recruited in the service of white supremacy.⁶ Understandably swayed by a sense of patriotic belonging, Neal Saunders accepts an exceptionalism which in turn justifies control over the Orientalized Other. On the other hand, false claims to exceptionalism are never uncritically accepted. By becoming imperial foot-soldiers, by being the ones expected to perform the dirty work, 4th25 also contest well-trodden claims to American exceptionalism. Once shown with the brutality imperialist warfare deserves, exceptionalist claims can be broadly challenged.

As Chapter 2 explored, Afrofuturism frequently functions as a speculative force seeking *home* out of the *homelessness* of ‘ontological (in)security’. As one 21st century source of this *homelessness*, the Global Financial Crisis exposed the precarity of African American housing. The site of refuge, wealth, privacy, existential security and possibility for many white Americans, the house takes on wholly different meanings when filtered through histories of racism, structural and otherwise. What is for some a refuge is for others a site of insecurity and criminalization. What is often an opportunity for wealth accumulation is a symbol of disparity, of the inter-generational effects of discrimination. What is private for some is far from private for others. A supposed symbol of possibility is, for many,

⁵ Shatema Threadcraft, “North American Necropolitics and Gender: On #BlackLivesMatter and Black Femicide,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 553.

⁶ “White supremacy is an equal opportunity employer; nonwhite people can become active agents of white supremacy as well as passive participants in its hierarchies and rewards. One way of becoming an insider is by participating in the exclusion of other outsiders.” George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, rev. and expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), viii.

proof of life's impossibility: the impossibility of safety, of access to well-funded public schools and adequate employment. The house, in other words, is not always *home*.

Afrofuturism does many things, but among them it looks upon these insecure conditions and imagines alternatives. *Deltron 3030* imagines a future with many similarities to our 21st century present but refuses to remain passive, instead imagining destruction as a form of radical agency. The playful destruction of Earth creates the potential for re-birth. In contrast, Janelle Monáe infuses her future with a norm-defying queerness that achieves something *Deltron's* cyber-punk fantasy fails to: imagine *home* for queer women of color. By embracing 'fugitive' sexualities and movement, Monáe successfully transforms the body from a vessel of racial capitalist exploitation into a site of pleasure and community.⁷ In doing so, she constructs the kind of *home* (or, at the very least, the feeling of *home*) that remains elusive in 'straight time'.

Imperial warfare and housing discrimination draw on histories of often very real physical suffering, but neoliberalism also has significant psychological and social consequences manifesting in: a language of meritocracy that explains away the disparities of this historical moment; a logic of competition and 'survival of the fittest'; a belief that value is tied to profit-margins. Chapter 3 examined Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* as a powerful illumination of the dangers such ideas pose. In *TPAB*, embracing neoliberal ideology transformed Kendrick (the character) from the modest and thoughtful – though still morally ambiguous – character he had been in previous albums into a selfish, consumeristic, individualistic, sexist antagonist. Caterpillar Kendrick is depicted as tearing down the very communities Lamar (the artist) feels the need to build up.

But how can one find a path out of these divisions? *TPAB* offers a narrative in which salvation, on both a personal and communal level, is found via a version of Black liberation theology. Though itself susceptible to an embrace of the neoliberal, Black Christianity is used by Lamar as a means to engage in struggle. The invested, political God of Black liberation theology guides Kendrick to turn faith into works, transforming divided communities – across generations, gender, 'gang-affiliation', class – into sites of love. The communalism of Kendrick's new-found perspective directly confronts a

⁷ This emphasis on community is itself a challenge to neoliberal logics insisting on individualism. As Henriette Gunkel argues of José Esteban Muñoz's conception of queer futurity (in a way that also applies to Monáe): "In his own conceptualization of queer temporality, then, Muñoz demands a political imagination that is inherently collective in nature and hence works against neoliberalism's push for competitive individualism – a political imagination that needs to be read relational to historically situated struggles that give us insights into alternative times and spaces." Henriette Gunkel, "Alienation and Queer Discontent," in *We Travel the Space Ways: Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions*, ed. Henriette Gunkel and kara lynch (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020), 388-9.

world that renders itself intelligible through individualistic ideologies. Kendrick's religiosity makes possible a different world, one defined by community, emotional fulfilment, and transformation.

Yet not all have been buoyed by the faith *TPAB* explored. Set against the backdrop of an unprecedented crisis of iatrogenic death, Chapter 4 analysed emo rap's nihilism as reflective of the 'age of despair'. Too often narrated simply as a consequence of predatory marketing or a decades-long process of deregulation, the opioid crisis is also a product of the psychological effects of neoliberal modernity. The social pain of neoliberalism provided fertile ground for a medical crisis that has taken well over half a million lives.

Emo rap's obsession with drug consumption as an answer to psychological pain provides a valuable insight into the conditions out of which both the subgenre and opioid crisis emerged. Emo rap's emphasis on despair over fun, pain over joy, consumption over distribution, is not meaningless: it is, I believe, reflective of a 'pathologically normal' society. Emo rappers make clear that the 'normal' of our contemporary moment is far from healthy – even for white suburbanites. SoundCloud rap, therefore, is a soundtrack to a generation for whom anaesthetics are a necessary means to keep despair at bay, a soundtrack that renders legible “the troubling condition that has become our ‘new normal’”.⁸

Another feature of society's 'new normal', the carceral regime, is directly confronted via the anti-prison critiques of modern rap. Over the course of the past half-century, the carceral regime has developed into a 'common sense' feature of society, now existing as a kind of catch-all 'solution' to any and all social issues from homelessness and immigration to underperforming public schools and unemployment. Chapter 5 analysed rap's re-narrativizing qualities as a form of critique that confronts the self-proclaimed 'naturalness' of an institution and ideology that violently incapacitates people deemed surplus to society. Once the logic of 'peace-keeping' and its resultant dehumanization is re-narrativized, incapacitation, beatings, forced transportation, and killings are reframed as less tools of 'protection' than instruments of racialized violence.

Not restricting themselves to carceral institutions, queer and Black trans feminisms help to broaden the anti-prison critiques of yesteryear into an abolitionist bloc confronting the world in its totality. This comprehensive vision remakes global economies, preventing the kinds of corporate exploitation that contributed to the global financial crisis and the opioid crisis. It creates new frameworks through which to relate to one another, undoing the ideologies that result in social isolation, pain,

⁸ Carl Ratner, "Overcoming Pathological Normalcy: Mental Health Challenges in the Coming Transformation," in *Health Care Under the Knife: Moving Beyond Capitalism for Our Health*, ed. Howard Waitzkin (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 211.

and division. It establishes its own norms freed from the stultifying logics that prohibit life in the present, allowing for a sense of becoming not confined to a gender binary or labelled sexuality. It makes impossible sexual and gendered violence. Abolitionism rebuilds the world in every conceivable – and presently inconceivable – way, undoing even the possibility of oppression and finding liberation in an as yet unknowable future.

Future Projections

This thesis has argued that 21st century rap music – like (numerous) forms of Black cultural expression before it – is a dynamic multiplicity of forms that play a pivotal role in confronting the ‘changing same’ of American racism in the late neoliberal moment. Rappers problematize logics of exceptionalism that justify and legitimize American empire expansion. Rappers confront the homelessness and absence of bodily autonomy characteristic of Black histories, allowing for the imagining of utopian alternatives. Rappers turn to liberation theology as a fix to the divisive effects of neoliberal ideology. Rappers illuminate the present moment’s despair-ridden ‘structure of feeling’. Finally, rappers confront every feature of state coercion, every ideology and institution that contributes to ‘premature death’ and offers a path out of this despair through abolition.

Rap, fundamentally and like innumerable expressions within the Black radical tradition before it, offers creative support in the construction of a something else. Rap can provide a critical voice – a voice that shifts and contorts to meet the specific marginalizations of the contemporary moment – lighting the way to revolutionary change. Prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba recalls hearing Public Enemy’s ‘Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos’ (1988) – a song depicting a prison break – as a transformative event in the formation of her political consciousness during an era of mass criminalization:

A ceiling is moved off of your imagination that all of a sudden it was not just something that happened to a bunch of people who looked like you. ‘Oh, there’s a targeting here of folks. Oh, racism is at work.’ Literally I can see it in a different way because of this music and because of these lyrics and because of this poetic. You don’t have to be compliant. You don’t have to be obedient. You can question, and not just question, you can take action. That’s huge.⁹

⁹ NPR Music, “Making Revolution Irresistible,” *Louder Than A Riot Podcast*, Dec 16, 2020.

Rap music continues to serve this function. Though Public Enemy are no longer leaders in the rap landscape, other musicians have taken their place in the struggle. Kendrick Lamar, Noname, Janelle Monáe, clipping. (and many, many more) bring these resistant and revolutionary analyses into the 21st century. The Black radical tradition as tied to expressive cultures continues to coalesce in movements opposing the changing face of American racism. The beats change, but the quest for freedom remains.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- 4th25. *Live From Iraq*. 4th25 Music Group LLC, 2005.
- A Tribe Called Quest. *We Got It from Here... Thank You 4 Your Service*. Epic Records, 2016.
- Bush, George W. "Bush: 'Freedom Will Be Defended'." *Los Angeles Times*, Sep 11, 2001.
<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-sep-11-ss-44622-story.html>
- . "President Bush Addresses the Nation." *The Washington Post*, Sep 20, 2001.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html
- Chynna. *in case i die first*. TWIN, 2019.
- clipping.. "Knees on the Ground." 2014.
- Danny Brown. *Atrocity Exhibition*. Fool's Gold Records and Warp Records, 2016.
- Denzel Curry and Terrace Martin (feat. Daylyt, Kamasi Washington, & G Perico). "PIG FEET." 2020.
- Death Grips. *Exmilitary*. Self-released, 2011.
- Deltron 3030. *Deltron 3030*. 75 Ark, 2000.
- Dua Selah. "body cast." 2020.
- Flying Lotus. *You're Dead!* Warp Records, 2014.
- Gil Scott-Heron. *A New Black Poet – Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*. Flying Dutchman Records, 1970.
- Haviah Mighty. *13th Floor*. Independent, 2019.
- H.E.R.. "I Can't Breathe." 2020.
- Immortal Technique. *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Viper Records, 2003.
- J. Cole. "Be Free." 2014.
- . *KOD*. Dreamville, Roc Nation, and Interscope, 2018.
- Janelle Monáe. *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*. Bad Boy Records, 2007.
- . *The ArchAndroid*. Wondaland Arts Society and Bad Boy Records, 2010.
- . *The Electric Lady*. Wondaland Arts Society, Atlantic Records and Bad Boy Records, 2013.
- "Janelle Monáe talks 'Pynk' Pants, Prince and Afrofuturism | Red Bull Music Academy." Youtube Video. Posted by "Red Bull Music Academy," Sep 25, 2018.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywiik_XEFH8.
- JPEGMAFIA. *black ben carson*. Self-released, 2016.
- Kanye West. *JESUS IS KING*. GOOD Music, 2019.

“Kendrick forgives his haters + says his album is not a classic YET!” YouTube Video. Posted by “HOT 97,” Apr 1, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkedvCA8330>.

“Kendrick Lamar Breaks Down Tracks From 'To Pimp A Butterfly' (Pt. 2) | MTV News.” YouTube Video. Posted by “MTV,” Apr 2, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hu4Pz9Pjoll>.

Kendrick Lamar. *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Top Dawg Entertainment, 2012.

———. *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.

———. *DAMN.*. Top Dawg Entertainment, 2017.

———. *Mr Morale & The Big Stepper*. Top Dawg Entertainment, 2022.

Kenneth Whalum (feat. Big Krit). *Broken Land*. Broken Land Records, 2016.

KRS-One. *Return of the Boom Bap*. Jive Records, 1993.

Lewis, Miles Marshall. “Kendrick Lamar Talks Politics, Spirituality, Music + More [INTERVIEW].” *Ebony*, Sep 18, 2019. <https://www.ebony.com/exclusive/kendrick-talks-politics-spirituality-music-more-333/>.

Lil B. “I Am George Floyd.” 2020.

Lil Baby. “The Bigger Picture.” 2020.

Lil Peep. *Lil Peep; Part One*. Self-Released, 2015.

———. *Hellboy*. Self-Released, 2016.

———. *Come Over When You’re Sober, Pt. 2*. Columbia Records, 2018.

Lil Wayne. *The Drought Is Over 2: The Carter 3 Sessions*. 2007.

Mos Def. *True Magic*. Geffen Records, 2006.

Neal Saunders. “Sgt. Neal Saunders in Phone Conversations with Jonathan Pieslak.” Interviewed by Jonathan Pieslak, 2006. <http://jon.pieslak.com/asom/NealSaunders.htm>

Noname. *Telefone*. Self-released, 2016.

———. “Song 33.” 2020.

Nosnitsky, Andrew. “Kendrick Lamar Talks Rap, Religion and the Reagan Era.” *MTV News*, July 11, 2011. <http://www.mtv.com/news/2694080/kendrick-lamar-talks-rap-religion-and-the-reagan-era/>.

N.W.A. *Straight Outta Compton*. Ruthless Records, 1988.

“On Track with The Needle Drop – Danny Brown.” Posted by “theneedledrop,” Dec 15, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-U-BG_zpjU.

Open Mike Eagle. *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream*. Mello Music Group, 2017.

Schoolboy Q. *Oxymoron*. Top Dawg Entertainment and Interscope, 2014.

“Talking with Janelle Monáe on sci-fi, androids and Slack (full interview).” Youtube Video. Posted by “CNET Highlights,” Jan 15, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLHAa-1D2WU>.

The Coup. *Pick a Bigger Weapon*. Epitaph Records, 2006.

The Movement for Black Lives. “Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom & Justice.” Aug 2016. <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/>.

The Roots. *Things Fall Apart*. MCA Records, 1999.

Tyler, the Creator. *Flower Boy*. Columbia Records, 2017.

———. *Igor*. Columbia Records, 2019.

YG. *My Life 4Hunnid*. Def Jam, 2020.

Secondary Sources

Aarons, K. “No Selves to Abolish: Afropessimism, Anti-Politics and the End of the World.” *Mute Magazine*, Feb 29, 2016. <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/no-selves-to-abolish-afropessimism-anti-politics-and-end-world>.

Aceves, Rusty. “We Travel the Spaceways: Afrofuturism in Music.” *SF Jazz*, July 8, 2019. <https://www.sfjazz.org/ontheCorner/we-travel-space-ways-afrofuturism-music>.

Aghoro, Nathalie. “Agency in the Afrofuturist Ontologies of Erykah Badu and Janelle Monáe.” *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 330-40.

Ahmed, Insanul. “Who Is Danny Brown?” *Complex*, Jan 19, 2012. <https://www.complex.com/music/a/insanul-ahmed/who-is-danny-brown>.

Ajalon, Jamika. “FAR SPACE-WISE – Without Edges a Center Cannot Exist in Stasis.” In *We Travel the Space Ways: Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions*, edited by Henriette Gunkel and kara lynch, 405-432. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020.

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the age of Colorblindness*. Rev. ed. New York: The New Press, 2012.

Allen, Shaonta' E. “Doing Black Christianity: Reframing Black Church scholarship.” *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 10 (2019): 1-15.

Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001.

Anderson, Reynaldo. “Fabulous: Sylvester James, Black Queer Afrofuturism and the Black Fantastic.” *Dancecult* 5, no. 2 (2013).

Antoine, Chagmion. “The color of lawlessness: Sexual abuse by police, nationwide.” *Women's Media Center*, May 4, 2016. <https://womensmediacenter.com/women-under-siege/the-color-of-lawlessness-sexual-abuse-by-police-nationwide>.

Auden, Wystan Hugh. *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*. London: Faber and Faber, 1948.

- Bacevich, Andrew J. *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Bailey, Julius D. "Existentialist Transvaluation and Hip-Hop's Syncretic Religiosity." In *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, edited by Bernard Freeman, Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn, 38-53. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015.
- Bailey, Yelena. *How the Streets Were Made: Housing Segregation and Black Life in America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020.
- Baptiste, Nathalie. "Staggering Loss of Black Wealth Due to Subprime Scandal Continues Unabated." *The American Prospect*, Oct 13, 2014. <https://prospect.org/justice/staggering-loss-black-wealth-due-subprime-scandal-continues-unabated/>.
- Baraka, Amiri I. *Blues people: Negro music in white America*. New York: W. Morrow, 1963.
- . "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)." In *Black Music*. 181-211. Da Capo Press: New York, 1998. Originally from 1966.
- Bell, Derrick. *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. New York: BasicBooks, 1992.
- Berman, Marshall. *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.
- Bey, Marquis. *Black Trans Feminism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.
- Blue, Ethan and Patrick Timmons. "Punishment and Death - Editor's Introduction." *Radical History Review*, no. 96 (2006): 1-8.
- Blumenthal, Seth. *Children of the Silent Majority: Young Voters and the Rise of the Republican Party, 1968-1980*. Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2018.
- Bogazianos, Dimitri A. *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs*. New York: New York University Press, 2012.
- Bould, Mark. "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF." *Science Fiction Studies* 34, no. 2 (2007): 177-86.
- Brackett, David. "Preaching Blues." *Black Music Research Journal* 32, no. 1 (2012): 113-36.
- Briggs, Laura. *How all politics became reproductive politics: From welfare reform to foreclosure to Trump*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.
- Brownrigg, Michael. "SoundCloud Rap and the Opioid Epidemic: In Defense of a Genre." *Points: The Blog of the Alcohol & Drugs History Society*, July 21, 2020. <https://pointsadhs.com/2020/07/21/soundcloud-rap-and-the-opioid-epidemic-in-defense-of-a-genre/>.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered." *October* 62, (1992): 3-41.
- Burd-Sharps, Sarah and Rebecca Rasch. "Impact of the US Housing Crisis on the Racial Wealth Gap Across Generations." *Social Science Research Council* (2015): 1-29.

- Burke, Ryan and Jahara Matissek. "The Illogical Logic of American Entanglement in the Middle East." *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 1 (2020): 1-25.
- Butt, Ahsan I. "Why did the United States Invade Iraq in 2003?" *Security Studies* 28, no. 2 (2019): 250-85.
- Cacho, Lisa Marie. *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*. New York: New York University Press, 2012.
- Camp, Jordan T. *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.
- and Christina Heatherton. "How Liberals Legitimate Broken Windows: An Interview with Naomi Murakawa." In *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, edited by Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, 227-36. London: Verso, 2016.
- . "The Bombs Explode at Home: Policing, Prisons, and Permanent War." *Social Justice* 44, no. 2-3 (2017): 11-30.
- Campion, Nicholas. "Utopianism and Just War: The Invasion of Iraq in 2003." *Libros de la Corte* 16, no. 10 (2018): 253-66.
- Case, Anne and Angus Deaton. *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.
- Castro, Lee. "Denzel Curry on Taser Death of His Brother, Treon Johnson, in Hialeah Police Incident." *Miami: New Times*, May 7, 2014. <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/music/denzel-curry-on-taser-death-of-his-brother-treon-johnson-in-hialeah-police-incident-6464586>.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). *Commonly Used Terms*. <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/terms.html>.
- . *Opioid Overdose: Understanding the Epidemic*. <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html>.
- . *Opioid Overdose: Understanding the Epidemic*. <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/epidemic.html>.
- . "Vital Signs: Overdoses of Prescription Opioid Pain Relievers — United States, 1999–2008." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 60, no. 43 (2011): 1487-92.
- Chang, Jeff. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005.
- Clarno, Andy and Salim Vally. "The Context of Struggle." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, ahead of print (2022): 1-23
- Clifton, Derrick. "Queer women are shaping Chicago's Black Lives Matter movement." *Chicago Reader*, Apr 7, 2016. <https://chicagoreader.com/news-politics/queer-women-are-shaping-chicagos-black-lives-matter-movement/>.
- Cobb, William J. *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic*. New York: New York UP, 2007.

- . "Willie Lynch Letter." In *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, 2nd ed., edited by Patrick L. Mason, 282-84. Boston: Credo Reference, 2013.
- Cohen, Cathy J. and Sarah J. Jackson. "Ask a Feminist: A Conversation with Cathy J. Cohen on Black Lives Matter, Feminism, and Contemporary Activism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 41 (2016): 775-92.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.
- . *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Commander, Michelle D. "The Space for Race: Black American Exile and the Rise of Afro-Speculation." *ASAP journal* 1, no. 3 (2016): 409-37.
- Cone, James H. *God of the Oppressed*. Rev. ed. New York: Orbis Books, 1997.
- Cooper, Brittney. "'Maybe I'll Be a Poet, Rapper': Hip-Hop Feminism and Literary Aesthetics in 'Push'." *African American Review* 46, no. 1 (2013): 55-69.
- Coscarelli, Joe. "Kendrick Lamar on His New Album and the Weight of Clarity." *The New York Times*, Mar 16, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/arts/music/kendrick-lamar-on-his-new-album-and-the-weight-of-clarity.html>.
- Cowen, Deborah E. "Fighting for 'Freedom': The End of Conscription in the United States and the Neoliberal Project of Citizenship." *Citizenship Studies* 10, no. 2 (2006): 167-183.
- Crawford, Richard. "On Two Traditions of Black Music Research." *Black Music Research Journal* 6, (1986): 1-9.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé and Andrea J. Ritchie. "Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women." *African American Policy Forum*. July 2015 Update.
- Crossney, Kristen B. and David W. Bartelt. "The Legacy of the Homeowners Loan Corporation." *Housing Policy Debate* 16, no. 3-4 (2005): 547-74.
- Cuevas, Ofelia O. "Welcome to My Cell: Housing and Race in the Mirror of American Democracy." *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2012): 605-24.
- Cunningham, Vinson. "The Argument of 'Afropessimism'." *The New Yorker*, July 20, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism>.
- Dalphond, Denise. "Black Detroit: Sonic Distortion Fuels Social Distortion." In *Black Lives Matter and Music: Protest, Intervention, Reflection*, edited by Fernando Orejuela and Stephanie Shonekan. 86-110. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018.
- Daughtry, Martin J. *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Davis, Angela. *Blues legacies and Black feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday*. New York: Vintage, 1999.
- . "Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex." *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 4, no. 27 (2000): 4-7.

- . *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003.
- . *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005.
- . *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement.* New York: Haymarket Books, 2016.
- Day, Iyko. "Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiracism, and Settler Colonial Critique." *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015): 102-21.
- Delaney, Samuel. *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction.* Rev. ed. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012.
- Deloria, Philip J. and Alexander I. Olsen. *American Studies: A User's Guide.* Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.
- "Deltron 3030: An Oral History." *Red Bull Music Academy*, Aug 12, 2014. <https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2014/08/deltron-3030-oral-history>.
- de Paor-Evans, Adam. "Mumble Rap: Cultural Laziness or a True Reflection of Contemporary Times?" *The Conversation*, Sep 2, 2017. <https://theconversation.com/mumble-rap-cultural-laziness-or-a-true-reflection-of-contemporary-times-85550>
- . "The Futurism of Hip Hop: Space, Electro and Science Fiction in Rap." *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 122-35.
- Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." In *Flame Wars: The Disclosure of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery, 179-222. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994.
- Diamond, Sarah, Rey Bermudez and Jean Schensul. "What's the Rap About Ecstasy?: Popular Music Lyrics and Drug Trends Among American Youth." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 21, no. 3 (2006): 269-98.
- Dimitriadis, Greg. "Hip Hop and Humanism: Thinking Against New (and Old) Fundamentalisms." In *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, edited by Bernard Freeman, Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn, 137-151. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015.
- "Dissecting Kendrick Lamar: Exploring To Pimp A Butterfly." Youtube Video. Posted by "88Nine Radio Milwaukee," Aug 31, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBSmEELNzF8>.
- Diver, Mike. "Suspicious Minds – The Resolute Mission of Death Grips." *Clash*, May 3, 2012. <https://www.clashmusic.com/features/suspicious-minds-the-resolute-mission-of-death-grips/>.
- Doran, Christopher. *Making the World Safe for Capitalism: How Iraq Threatened the US Economic Empire and had to be Destroyed.* London: Pluto Press, 2012.
- Dorman, Jacob S. *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

- Drew, Spencer. "Hebrew Israelite covenantal theology and Kendrick Lamar's constructive project in *DAMN*." In *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning*, edited by Christopher M. Driscoll, Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn, 321-333. New York: Routledge, 2020.
- Du Bois, William E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Originally from 1903.
- Duggan, Lisa. "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism." In *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, edited by Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson, 175-194. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Duménil, Gérard and Dominique Lévy. "Costs and Benefits of Neoliberalism. A Class Analysis." *Review of International Political Economy* 8, no. 4 (2001): 578-607.
- Dunn, Frankie. "an interview with lil peep from september 2017." *i-D Magazine*, Dec 22, 2017. <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/wjpd95/an-interview-with-lil-peep-from-september-2017>.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Emerson, Michael O. and Jason E. Shelton. *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: How Racial Discrimination Shapes Religious Convictions*. New York: NYU Press, 2012.
- English, Daylanne K. and Alvin Kim. "Now We Want Our Funk Cut: Janelle Monáe's Neo-Afrofuturism." *American Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013): 217-30.
- Eshun, Kodwo. *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. London: Quartet Books, 1998.
- Everybody's Everything*. Directed by Sebastian Jones and Ramez Silyan (Gunpowder & Sky, 2019).
- Faber, Jacob W. "Racial Dynamics of Subprime Mortgage Lending at the Peak." *Housing Policy Debate* 23, no. 2 (2013): 328-49.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1968.
- Floyd, Samuel A. *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Floyd-Thomas, Juan M. "A Jihad of Words: The Evolution of African American Islam and Contemporary Hip-Hop." In *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, edited by Anthony B. Pinn, 49-70. New York: New York University Press, 2003.
- Flynn, Paul. "Tyler, THE CREATOR." *Fantastic Man*, Autumn and Winter 2018. <https://www.fantasticman.com/features/re-read-tyler>.
- Fulton, Will. "The Performer as Historian: Black Messiah, To Pimp a Butterfly, and the Matter of Albums." *American Music Review* 44, no. 2 (2015): 1-11.
- Garza, Alicia. "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza." *The Feminist Wire*, Oct 7, 2014. <https://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.
- Gilman, Lisa. *My Music, My War: The Listening Habits of U.S. Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2016.

- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. "Globalisation and US prison growth: from military Keynesianism to post-Keynesian militarism." *Race & Class* 40, no. 2-3 (1999): 171-88.
- . "Race and Globalization." In *Geographies of Global Change: Remapping the World*, edited by R. J. Johnston, Peter J. Taylor, and Michael J. Watts, 261–74. New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
- . *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso, 1993.
- Gipson, Grace D. "Afrofuturism's Musical Princess Janelle Monáe: Psychedelic Soul Message Music Infused with a Sci-Fi Twist." In *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, edited by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, 91-108. Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016.
- Gordon, Jeremy. "Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright' Chanted by Protesters During Cleveland Police Altercation." *Pitchfork*, July 29, 2015. <https://pitchfork.com/news/60568-kendrick-lamars-alright-chanted-by-protesters-during-cleveland-police-altercation/>
- Gorz, André. *A Strategy for Labor*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.
- Gottschalk, Marie. *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited and Translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. International Publishers: New York, 1971.
- Gruber, Aya. *The Feminist War on Crime: The Unexpected Role of Women's Liberation in Mass Incarceration*. California: University of California Press, 2020.
- Gunkel, Henriette. "Alienation and Queer Discontent." In *We Travel the Space Ways: Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions*, edited by Henriette Gunkel and kara lynch, 387-404. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020.
- Gursky, Michael. "The Rise of Emo Rap." *Medium*, May 5, 2017. <https://michaelgursky.medium.com/the-rise-of-emo-rap-53cb773d003c>.
- Gussow, Adam. *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Hackworth, Jason. "Religious Neoliberalism." In *The SAGE Handbook of Neoliberalism*, edited by Damien Cahill, Melinda Cooper, Martijn Konings and David Primrose, 323-334. Los Angeles: Sage Publications Ltd, 2018.
- Haiven, Max. "Our Opium Wars: The Ghosts of Empire in the Prescription Opioid Nightmare." *Third Text* 32, no. 5-6 (2018): 662-69.
- Hall, Stuart. "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20, no. 1-2 (1993): 104-14.
- Hanauer, David I. "Being in the Second Iraq War." *Qualitative Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (2015): 83-106.
- Hanba, Curtis and Daniel Hanba. "Opioid and Drug Prevalence in Top 40's music: A 30 Year Review." *The Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine* 31, no. 5 (2018): 761-67.

- Hart, Carl L. and Malakai Z. Hart. "Opioid Crisis: Another Mechanism Used to Perpetuate American Racism." *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology* 25, no. 1 (2019): 6-11.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- . *Lose your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Macmillan, 2007.
- Harvey, David. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- . *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Hauso, Øystein. "'Caterpillars and Butterfly': The Process of Self-Realization and Unity in Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*." Master's Thesis. The University of Bergen, 2020.
- Hawkins, Daniel N. and Adam J. Maley. "The Southern Military Tradition: Sociodemographic Factors, Cultural Legacy, and U.S. Army Enlistments." *Armed Forces and Society* 44, no. 2 (2018): 195-218.
- Haylock, Zoe. "Everything We Know About Juice WRLD's Death." *Vulture*, Dec 21, 2021. <https://www.vulture.com/2021/12/how-did-juice-wrld-die-cause-of-juice-wrlds-death.html>.
- Hazard-Gordon, Katrina. *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.
- Henderson, Errol A. "Black Nationalism and Rap Music." *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 3 (1996): 308-39.
- Herd, Denise. "Changes in drug use prevalence in rap music songs, 1979-1997." *Addiction Research & Theory* 16, no. 2 (2008): 167-80.
- Herzberg, David L. *Happy Pills in America: From Miltown to Prozac*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.
- Herzing, Rachel. "The Magical Life of Broken Windows." In *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, edited by Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, 267-78. London: Verso, 2016.
- Hills, Darrius D. "Loving [you] is complicated: black self-love and affirmation in the rap music of Kendrick Lamar." In *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning*, edited by Christopher M. Driscoll, Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn, 175-190. New York: Routledge, 2020.
- Hinton, Elizabeth. *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.
- Hobbs, Thomas. "Xanax: the drug that defined the decade and changed rap." *Dazed*, Dec 17, 2019. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/47214/1/xanax-the-drug-that-changed-rap-lil-peep-juice-wrld-end-of-decade>.
- Hodge, Daniel W. *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010.

- Hollingsworth, Alex, Christopher J. Ruhm and Kosali Simon. "Macroeconomic conditions and opioid abuse." *Journal of Health Economics* 56, (2017): 222-33.
- hooks, bell. *We Real Cool: Black men and masculinity*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Hope, Clover. "The Overwhelming Blackness of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*." *Jezebel*, Mar 17, 2015. <https://themuse.jezebel.com/the-overwhelming-blackness-of-kendrick-lamars-butterfly-1691770606>.
- Hunter, Tera W. *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Hyman, Dan. "Mac Miller's Last Days and Life After Death." *Rolling Stone*, Nov 15, 2018. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/mac-miller-legacy-loss-756802/>.
- Immergluck, Daniel. *Foreclosed: High-Risk Lending, Deregulation, and the Undermining of America's Mortgage Market*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.
- INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence. *Gender Oppression, Abuse, Violence: Community Accountability within the People of Color Progressive Movement*. July 2005.
- James, Keturah and Ayana Jordan. "The Opioid Crisis in Black Communities." *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 46, no. 2 (2018): 404-21.
- Jenkins, Candice M. "Introduction: 'Reading' Hip-Hop Discourse in the Twenty-First Century." *African American Review* 46, no. 1, (2013): 1-8.
- Johnson, Walter. "To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice." *Boston Review*, Feb 1, 2017. <http://bostonreview.net/forum/walter-johnson-to-remake-the-world>
- Joseph, Chanté. "YG, Che Lingo, Kendrick Lamar: the protest songs of Black Lives Matter 2020." *The Guardian*, June 10, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jun/10/yg-che-lingo-kendrick-lamar-protest-songs-of-black-lives-matter-2020-george-floyd>.
- Joyce, Colin. "Meet Lil Peep, All-American Reject." *Fader*, Aug 2, 2017. <https://www.thefader.com/2017/02/08/lil-peep-gen-f-interview-hellboy-crybaby>.
- Keeling, Kara. "'I Feel Love': Race, Gender, Technē, and the (Im)Proper Sonic Habitus." In *We Travel the Space Ways: Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions*, edited by Henriette Gunkel and kara lynch, 245-250. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020.
- Kelley, Robin D.G. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: Free Press, 1996.
- . *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.
- . *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.
- . "Why We Won't Wait." *CounterPunch*, Nov 25, 2014. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2014/11/25/why-we-wont-wait/>.
- . "Thug Nation: On State Violence and Disposability." In *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, edited by Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, 15-34. London: Verso, 2016.

- Kestenbaum, Sam. "‘I’m an Israelite’: Kendrick Lamar’s spiritual search, Hebrew Israelite religion, and the politics of a celebrity encounter." In *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning*, edited by Christopher M. Driscoll, Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn, 274-299. New York: Routledge, 2020.
- Khan-Cullors, Patrisse and asha bandele. *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018.
- King, Jamilah. "The Improbable Story of How Kendrick Lamar’s ‘Alright’ Became a Protest Anthem," *Mic*, Feb 12, 2016. <https://www.mic.com/articles/134764/the-improbable-story-of-how-kendrick-lamar-s-alright-became-a-protest-anthem#:~:text=a%20Protest%20Anthem-,The%20Improbable%20Story%20of%20How%20Kendrick,Alright%22%20Became%20a%20Protest%20Anthem&text=It%20was%20a%20warm%20Midwestern,gathered%20at%20Cleveland%20State%20University.&text=The%20police%20responded%20by%20pepper,more%20protesters%20to%20the%20scene>
- Kirk-Duggan, Cheryl A. and Marlon Hall. *Wake Up! Hip-Hop Christianity and the Black Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011.
- Klare, Michael. *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict*. New York: Henry Holt, 2001.
- Kleykamp, Meredith A. "College, Jobs, or the Military? Enlistment During a Time of War." *Social Science Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2006): 272-290.
- Krebs, Ronald R. and Jennifer K. Lobasz. "Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq." *Security Studies* 16, no. 3 (2007): 409-451.
- Krieg, Gregory. "Maine Governor Blames Media for Racially Charged Language Dust-Up." *CNN*, Jan 9, 2016. <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/07/politics/paul-lepage-maine-heroin/index.html>.
- Krims, Adam. *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Kundani, Arun. "The racial constitution of neoliberalism." *Race & Class* 63, no. 1 (2021): 51-69.
- Lee, Benjamin. "Is Tyler, the Creator coming out as a gay man or just a queer-baiting provocateur?" *The Guardian*, July 25, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/jul/25/tyler-the-creator-flower-boy-gay-man-or-queer-baiting-provocateur>.
- Levy, Lauren. "These Are the Drugs Influencing Pop Culture Now." *Vulture*, Feb 6, 2018. <https://www.vulture.com/2018/02/the-drugs-influencing-pop-culture-right-now.html>.
- Lexchin, Joel. "The Pharmaceutical Industry in Contemporary Capitalism." *Monthly Review* 69, no. 10 (2018): 37-50.
- Linder, Matthew. "'Am I Worth It?': The Forgiveness, Death, and Resurrection of Kendrick Lamar." *Toronto Journal of Theology* 33, no. 1 (2017): 107-12.
- . "Kendrick Lamar's Collapsing of Hip Hop Realness and Christian Identity." *The Journal of hip hop studies* 5, no. 1 (2018): 123-55.
- Lindsey, Treva B. "Post-Ferguson: A 'Herstorical' Approach to Black Violability." *Feminist studies* 41, no. 1 (2015): 232-37.

- Lipsitz, George. *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place*. New York: Verso, 1994.
- . *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Rev. ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.
- Lipsitz, George and Barbara Tomlinson. "American Studies as Accompaniment." *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2013): 1-30.
- Lowery, Wesley. *They Can't Kill Us All: The Story of Black Lives Matter*. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017.
- Macon, Danielle S. "To Pimp a Caterpillar: Hip Hop as Vehicle to Spiritual Liberation Through the Decolonization of European Ideology." Master's Thesis. Temple University, 2017.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2004.
- Man, Simeon, A. Naomi Paik and Melina Pappademos. "Violent Entanglements: Militarism and Capitalism." *Radical History Review* 133, (2019): 1-10.
- Marable, Manning. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015. Originally from 1983.
- Marks, Jonathan H. "Lessons from Corporate Influence in the Opioid Epidemic: Toward a Norm of Separation." *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (2020): 173-89.
- Massey, Douglas S. and Nancy A. Denton. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Massey, Douglas S. and Jacob S. Rugh. "Racial Segregation and the American Foreclosure Crisis." *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 5 (2010): 629-51.
- Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40.
- McGirr, Lisa. *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.
- McGreal, Chris. *American Overdose: The Opioid Tragedy in Three Acts*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2018.
- . "Doctor who was paid by Purdue to push opioids to testify against drugmaker." *The Guardian*, Apr 10, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/apr/10/purdue-opioids-crisis-doctor-testify-against-drugmaker>.
- McLeod, James D. "If God Got Us: Kendrick Lamar, Paul Tillich, and the Advent of Existentialist Hip Hop." *Toronto Journal of Theology* 33, no. 1 (2017): 123-35.
- Meier, Barry. *Pain Killer: An Empire of Deceit and the Origins of America's Opioid Epidemic*. London: Random House, 2017.
- Melamed, Jodi. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- . "Racial Capitalism." *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015), 76-85.

- Méndez, Xhercis. "Which Black Lives Matter?: Gender, State-Sanctioned Violence, and 'My Brother's Keeper'." *Radical History Review* 126, (2016): 96-105.
- Mikayawa, Felicia. *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Millard, Drew. "Is Lil Peep's Music Brilliant or Stupid as Shit?" *Vice*, Dec 23, 2016. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/nznmag/is-lil-peeps-music-brilliant-or-stupid-as-shit>.
- Miller, Lisa. "Listening to Xanax." *New York Magazine*, Mar 16, 2012. <https://lisaxmiller.com/listening-to-xanax/4646>.
- Miller, Monica R. and Anthony B. Pinn. "Introduction: Context and Other Considerations." In *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, edited by Bernard Freeman, Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn, 1-8. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015.
- Miller, Monica R. *Religion and Hip Hop*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Mirowski, Philip and Dieter Plehwe, eds. *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Mittelstadt, Jennifer. *The Rise of the Military Welfare State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Mogul, Joey L., Andrea J. Ritchie and Kay Whitlock. *Queer (In)justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2011.
- Morales, Hollyann M. "'Codeine' the Lyrics: A Content Analysis of Prescription Medication References in Popular Rap Lyrics." Ph.D. Thesis. The Chicago School of Professional Psychology, 2017.
- Morgan, Joan. *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Murakawa, Naomi. *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Murch, Donna J. *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
- Murchison, Gayle. "Let's Flip It! Quare Emancipations: Black Queer Traditions, Afrofuturisms, Janelle Monáe to Labelle." *Women & Music* 22, no. 1 (2018): 79-90.
- Naifeh, R.S. "Kendrick Lamar's Real God." *Christ and Pop Culture*, Aug 7, 2017. <https://christandpopculture.com/kendrick-lamars-real-god/>.
- National Institute on Drug Abuse. *Overdose Death Rates*. <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>.
- Nelson, Alondra. "Introduction: Future Texts." *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 1-15.

- Nguyen, Duc Hien. "The Political Economy of Heteronormativity." *Review of Radical Political Economics* 55, no. 1 (2023): 112-31.
- Nielsen, Jack J. *The Afrofuturism Cyclicity of Past, Present, and Future in Kendrick Lamar's To Pimp a Butterfly*. Independently Published. 2018.
- NPR Music. "Making Revolution Irresistible." *Louder Than A Riot Podcast*, Dec 16, 2020.
- Nummi, Jozie, Carly Jennings and Joe Feagin. "BlackLivesMatter: Innovative Black Resistance." *Sociological Forum* 34, no. 1 (2019): 1042-64.
- Okie, Susan. "A Flood of Opioids, a Rising Tide of Deaths." *The New England Journal of Medicine* 363, no. 21 (2010): 1981-85.
- Olsen, Florian. "'Those About to Die Salute You': Sacrifice, the War in Iraq and the Crisis of the American Imperial Society." *Geopolitics* 16, no. 2 (2011): 410-37.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- . "Once More, with Feeling: Reflections on Racial Formation." *The Modern Language Association of America* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1565-72.
- Outhwaite, Colin. "'You Crossed My Mind... Before?': An Intertextual Analysis of songs from *To Pimp A Butterfly*." Honors Thesis. Edith Cowan University, 2020.
- Pager, Devah. "The 'Stickiness' of Race in an Era of Mass Incarceration." In *Beyond Discrimination: Racial Inequality in a Post-Racist Era*, edited by Fredrick C. Harris and Robert C. Lieberman, 257-74. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. "Soul Murder & Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting." In *Southern History across the Color Line*. 2nd ed., 13-36. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021.
- Palattella, Nina. "'We all Wanna Die, Too': Emo Rap and Collective Despair in Adolescent America." Honors Thesis. Kent State University, 2020.
- Paolucci, Paul. "Public Discourse in an Age of Deception: Forging the Iraq War." *Critical Sociology* 35, no. 6 (2009): 863-86.
- Parham, Jason. "Rap Will Continue to Dominate Music in 2018, Thanks to Its Distaste For Genre." *Wired*, Jan 19, 2018. <https://www.wired.com/story/soundcloud-rap-2018/>.
- Patel, Ishika, Lauren A. Walter and Li Li. "Opioid overdose crises during the COVID-19 pandemic: implication of health disparities." *Harm Reduction Journal* 18, no. 1 (2021): 1-5.
- Patman, Robert G. "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror." *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 6 (2006): 963-86.
- Patrin, Nate. "Album Review: Exmilitary by Death Grips." *Pitchfork*, June 30, 2011. <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15583-exmilitary/>.
- Peck, Gary R. "Black Radical Consciousness and the Black Christian Experience: Toward a Critical Sociology of Afro-American Religion." *Sociological Analysis* 43, no. 2 (1982): 155-69.

- Perkins, William E., ed. *Droppin Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.
- Peterson, James Braxton. "A PARTICULAR PAC: Ontological Ruptures and the Posthumous Presence of Tupac Shakur." In *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, edited by Bernard Freeman, Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn, 71-86. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015.
- Pew Research Centre. "Through Boom and Bust: Minorities, Immigrants and Homeowners." May 12, 2009.
- Pieslak, Jonathan R. "Sound Targets: Music and the War in Iraq." *Journal of Musicological Research* 26, no. 2-3 (2007): 123-149.
- . *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009.
- Pinn, Anthony B. "'Handlin' My Business': Exploring Rap's Humanist Sensibilities." In *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, edited by Anthony B. Pinn, 85-106. New York: New York University Press, 2003.
- Potter, Claire Bond. *War on Crime: Gangsters, G Men and the Politics of Mass Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998.
- Pough, Gwendolyn D. *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture and the Public Sphere*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004.
- Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. 10th Anniversary ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Quinn, Eithne. *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Quinones, Sam. *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2016.
- Rabaka, Reiland. *Hip Hop's Inheritance From the Harlem Renaissance to the Hip Hop Feminist Movement*. Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books, 2011. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/lib/uwa/detail.action?docID=686290>.
- Ramsey, Clark. *War Crimes: A Report on United States War Crimes Against Iraq*. Washington D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1992.
- Ramsey, Guthrie P. "Cosmopolitan or Provincial?: Ideology in Early Black Music Historiography, 1867-1940." *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1, (1996): 11-42.
- . *Race music: Black cultures from bebop to hip-hop*. California: University of California Press, 2003.
- Ratner, Carl. "Overcoming Pathological Normalcy: Mental Health Challenges in the Coming Transformation." In *Health Care Under the Knife: Moving Beyond Capitalism for Our Health*, edited by Howard Waitzkin, 211-223. New York: NYU Press, 2018.

- Riddle, Angel Milagros. "The Responsibility of An Artist: Black Contemporary Music and Empowerment in the Age of Black Lives Matter." Honors Thesis. Wesleyan University, 2019.
- Ritchie, Andrea J. *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Colour*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2011.
- Ritchie, Jessica. "Instant Histories of War: Online Combat Videos of the Iraq Conflict, 2003–2010." *History Australia* 8, no. 1 (2011): 89-108
- Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. Originally from 1983.
- Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972.
- Rodriguez, Dylan. *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- . "Weaponized Study in a Moment of (Counter)Insurgency: The Gathering Anti-'American' of American Studies." *American Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2022): 199-212.
- Rolsky, Benjamin L. "Hip-Hop and the Study of Religion." *Method Theory in the Study of Religion* 27, no. 2 (2015): 175-81.
- Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.
- . *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why it Matters*. New York: BasicCivitas, 2008.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. 25th Anniversary ed. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Saliba, Samia. "'We Know We Are Forgotten': Re-Centering Women in the Study of Economic Sanctions on Iraq, 1990-2003." Honors Thesis. Western Washington, 2020.
- Scott, Clara. "The Sad New Guard of Emo Rap." *Michigan Daily*, Apr 4, 2018. <https://www.michigandaily.com/section/arts/sad-new-guard-emo-rap>.
- Segura, Olga. "From 'Good Kid' to 'DAMN.' Kendrick Lamar shows faith is constantly changing." *America: The Jesuit Review*, Oct 19, 2017. <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2017/10/19/good-kid-damn-kendrick-lamar-shows-faith-constantly-changing>.
- Sexton, Jared. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *Intensions* 5 (2011): 1-47.
- Shane III, Leo. "Rappers deliver rhymes, 'Live from Iraq'." *Stars and Stripes*, June 19, 2005. <https://www.stripes.com/living/rappers-deliver-rhymes-live-from-iraq-1.36995>.
- Shapiro, Thomas M. *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Sharpley-Whiting, Tracy D. *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women*. New York: NYU Press, 2007.

- Sheehan, Rebecca. "A-lop-bam-boom: Little Richard's saucy style underpins today's hits." *The Conversation*, May 10, 2020. <https://theconversation.com/a-lop-bam-boom-little-richards-saucy-style-underpins-todays-hits-138263>.
- Sillyman, Jacob. "Loving You Is Complicated: The Aesthetics of Personal and Political Tension in Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*." Honors Thesis. University of South Carolina, 2017.
- Smiles, Deondre. "George Floyd, Minneapolis, and Spaces of Hope and Liberation." *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11, no. 2 (2021): 165-69.
- Smiley, Calvin J. "Addict Rap?: The Shift from Drug Distributor to Drug Consumer in Hip Hop." *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 4, no. 1 (2017): 50-73.
- Solis, M. "4th25 offers a hip-hop diary of a harrowing year in Iraq." *San Antonio Current*, Nov 17, 2005. <https://www.sacurrent.com/music/music-war-correspondents-2275059>.
- Sorett, Josef. "'Believe Me, This Pimp Game is Very Religious': Toward a Religious History of Hip Hop." *Culture and Religion: Hip Hop and Religion* 10, no. 1 (2009): 11-22.
- Soundtrack to War*. Directed by George Gittoes. Hopscotch Entertainment, 2004. DVD.
- Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1971.
- Squires, Catherine R. "Coloring in the Bubble: Perspectives from Black-Oriented Media on the (Latest) Economic Disaster." *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2012): 543-70.
- Stanley, Eric A., Dean Spade and Queer (In)Justice. "Queering Prison Abolition, Now?" *American Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2012): 115-127.
- Stanley, Eric A. *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. Expanded 2nd ed. Edinburgh: AK Press, 2015.
- Stielau, Anna. "Towards a Queer Futurity: The Utopian Impulse in the Work of Athi-Patra Ruga and Milumbe Haimbe." *Agenda* 29, no. 1 (2015): 127-39.
- Sugrue, Thomas J. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016.
- . *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019.
- Tenreiro, Tatiana. "A Timeline of Lil Peep's Career." *Billboard*, Nov 17, 2017. <https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/lil-peep-career-timeline-8039377/>.
- The Washington Post. "Fatal Force." <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>.
- Thomas, Michael. "Singing experience in *Section.80*: Kendrick Lamar's poetics of problems." In *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning*, edited by Christopher M. Driscoll, Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn, 51-66. New York: Routledge, 2020.

- Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1980. Originally from 1963.
- Thompson, Heather A. "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History." *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (2010): 703-34.
- Threadcraft, Shatema. "North American Necropolitics and Gender: On #BlackLivesMatter and Black Femicide." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 553-79.
- Thuma, Emily. "Lessons in Self-Defense: Gender Violence, Racial Criminalization, and Anticarceral Feminism." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3/4 (2015): 52-71.
- Tiffany, Kaitlyn. "Face value: How tattoos on foreheads and cheekbones turn unknown teens into internet stars." *Vox*, Feb 28, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/2/28/18243480/face-tattoos-soundcloud-rap-youtube-justin-bieber>.
- Tone, Andrea. *The Age of Anxiety: A History of America's Turbulent Affair with Tranquilizers*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.
- United States Drug Enforcement Administration. *Fentanyl*. <https://www.dea.gov/factsheets/fentanyl>.
- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. "Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968. P.L. 90-448." (Aug 1, 1968): 476-611.
- U.S. Department of Defense. *The Changing Profile of the Army*. 2008.
- U.S. Department of Justice. "Prisoners in 2016." *Office of Justice Programs Bureau of Justice Statistics*. 2016.
- Van Zee, Art. "The Promotion and Marketing of OxyContin: Commercial Triumph, Public Health Tragedy." *American Journal of Public Health* 99, no. 2 (2009): 221-27.
- Vitulli, Elias Walker. "Queering the Carceral: Intersecting Queer/Trans Studies and Critical Prison Studies." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19, no. 1 (2013): 111-23.
- Wacquant, Loïc. "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the 'Race Question' in the US." *New Left Review* 13 (2002): 41-60.
- Washington, Harriet A. *Deadly Monopolies: The Shocking Corporate Takeover of Life Itself—and the Consequences for Your Health and Our Medical Future*. New York: Anchor Books, 2011.
- Watkins, Ralph B. *Hip-Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011.
- Weaver, Vesla M. "Unhappy Harmony: Accounting for Black Mass Incarceration in a 'Postracial' America." In *Beyond Discrimination: Racial Inequality in a Post-Racist Era*, edited by Fredrick C. Harris and Robert C. Lieberman, 215-56. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013.
- Weiss, Keely. "'The Electric Lady': Janelle Monáe On Her New Album And An Exclusive Behind-The-Scenes Look Of Her Cover Art Photoshoot." *Elle*, Aug 29, 2013. <https://www.elle.com/culture/music/news/a23604/janelle-monae-interview-electric-lady/>.

- West, Cornel. *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988.
- Western, Bruce and Christopher Wilderman. "The Black Family and Mass Incarceration." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621, no. 1 (2009): 221-242.
- Westhoff, Ben. *Fentanyl, Inc: How Rogue Chemists Are Creating the Deadliest Wave of the Opioid Epidemic*. Brunswick: Scribe Publications, 2019. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/lib/uwa/detail.action?docID=5889500>.
- Wilderson, Frank. "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 225-40.
- . *Afropessimism*. New York: Liveright, 2020.
- Williams, Paul. "'I Could Smell the Dawn of Armageddon When this Dick Was Elected': Hip-Hop's Oppositional Voices in the War on Terror." In *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture: September 11 and Beyond*, edited by Matthew B. Hill and Andrew Schopp, 222-238. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Willis, Andre C. "Obama's Racial Legacy: The Power of Whiteness." *Critical Philosophy of Race* 5, no. 2 (2017): 183-197.
- Willis, Raquel. "To Pimp The Black Woman: On Kendrick Lamar's Limited Black Liberation." *Medium*, Apr 14, 2015. <https://medium.com/cuepoint/to-pimp-the-black-woman-on-kendrick-lamar-s-limited-black-liberation-26d63d94cad>.
- Winters, Joseph. "Unstrange Bedfellows: Hip Hop and Religion." *Religion Compass* 5, no. 6 (2011): 260-70.
- Woldu, Gail H. "The Kaleidoscope of Writing on Hip-Hop Culture." *Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 67, no. 1 (2010): 9-38.
- Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013.
- Wright, Geoffrey. "'I'm a Soldier, Not a Gender': Iraq War Literature and the Double Bind of Being a Woman in Combat." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 47, no. 5-8 (2018): 657-672.
- Wyly, Elvin, et. al. "New Racial Meanings of Housing in America." *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2012): 571-604.
- Young, Cynthia. "Black Ops: Black Masculinity and the War on Terror." *American Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2014): 35-67.
- Younger, Briana. "Introducing Chynna, the Ex-Model and Ex-Addict Who Can Rap Her Ass Off." *Pitchfork*, Jan 18, 2018. <https://pitchfork.com/features/rising/introducing-chynna-the-ex-model-and-ex-addict-who-can-rap-her-ass-off/>.

Zanfagna, Christina. *Holy Hip Hop in the City of Angels*. California: University of California Press, 2017.