Away from the End of Motherhood: Sites of Haunting in the Social Imaginary in Lemonade and The Handmaid's Tale

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AWAY FROM THE END OF MOTHERHOOD: SITES OF HAUNTING IN THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY IN LEMONADE AND THE HANDMAID’S TALE

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A Thesis
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by
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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the television series adaptation of The Handmaid's Tale, specifically the episode “A Woman's Place,” and Beyoncé’s Lemonade: A Visual Album. I argue that these cultural texts leverage representations of women’s lived experiences to scrutinize contemporary American anxieties about motherhood and reproductive justice. Lemonade, a celebration of Black womanhood, presents a counterpoint to The Handmaid's Tale's preoccupation with white motherhood in a way that speculates on the utopian potentials of a woman-centered society.

Using bell hooks’ film analysis, Avery Gordon’s “haunting,” and Luce Irigaray's “mimicry,” I examine two interconnected themes: feminist aesthetics and generational haunting. While The Handmaid's Tale evokes the fear of possible descent into a dystopic society, Lemonade reaches for a feminist futurity. Each text re-inscribes a worldview that tracks a contradiction or reaffirmation of expectations of who is allowed to be a mother in contemporary society within the social imagination of reproductive justice inseparable from our current moment in American culture.
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# Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction ................................................................. 1
Chapter Two: Aesthetic Accountability............................................... 13
Chapter Three: Reproductive Justice............................................... 21
Chapter Four: Cultural Work and the Social Imaginary....................... 30
Chapter Five: *Killing the Black Body* ............................................. 34
Chapter Six: Feminist Futurities ....................................................... 48
Chapter Seven: Presence of Absence.................................................. 61
Chapter Eight: Mimicry as Haunting............................................... 69
Chapter Nine: Conclusion................................................................. 79

Works Cited ..................................................................................... 83
Chapter One: Introduction

Ursula K. Le Guin writes, “The future, in fiction, is a metaphor,” a combining of something recognizable with something unrecognizable, an abstract comparison of one thing to another thing (xix). The fictional future sends a message. Maybe the world could be beautiful if we only. Maybe the world will end if we don’t just. A fictional future begs the question: could that really happen here? Does that dystopia look like our present? Can that utopia become our home?

This thesis analyzes Beyoncé's Lemonade: A Visual Album and the television series adaptation of The Handmaid's Tale. I argue that these visual texts participate in an anxious cultural moment in America by challenging the dystopian tradition that originally made Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel The Handmaid’s Tale such a chilling vision of the future. By putting these two works together, released only a year apart in 2016 and 2017, I argue that whereas The Handmaid’s Tale series aligns itself with the anxieties of the mainstream pro-choice movement, Lemonade aligns itself with the particular concerns of reproductive justice, which involves not only the ability to choose birth control or abortion (and therefore not reproduce), but also a freedom to choose motherhood with dignity. Because of this alignment, the two texts collide in their worldviews, tracking either a contradiction or reaffirmation of the expectations of who is allowed to be a mother. These expectations reflect our present social imaginary, the ideologies and norms
that construct and enable social practices, and appear as worldviews to be criticized within the worlds of the texts. (Taylor 1).

Both texts use the strengths of visual media to participate in the cultural space in which they were created. The Handmaid’s Tale and Lemonade are haunted by contemporary American anxieties about motherhood and bodily autonomy, many of which have roots in American racism and the legacy of American slavery. These anxieties have been made all too real in the present political climate as the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump has caused a resurgence in concerns over women’s rights over their own bodily and reproductive choices, as well as a resurgence in the American white supremacy movement (Elderkin). These two texts in particular approach this hostile political climate in very different manners: Lemonade participates in the creation of positive and celebratory representations of Black womanhood, while The Handmaid’s Tale moves to confront current political tensions head on by depicting the worst possible outcome—a future of what is essentially sex slavery masked as institutionalized compulsory surrogacy—without hardly departing from the horrors in Atwood’s 1985 novel.

In Lemonade and The Handmaid’s Tale series, metaphors for the future become less abstract. The hostilities of present politics appear in these contemporary visual texts, acting as both resistance to racist and sexist narratives, but also working within the increasing popularity of “resistance” as a marketing scheme to find an audience in a competitive market. With the parallel rise of feminism in popular media, feminist or “woke” audiences have become a budding but strong demographic and many artists and
producers have shifted towards marketing to a more feminist audience due to the increased demand for feminist content.\(^1\) It is possible for media to exist in both worlds—to sincerely critique oppressive political regimes while also capitalizing on the popular demand for these kinds of media. In this sense, *Lemonade* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* series exist on similar planes.

In April of 2016, Beyoncé released *Lemonade: A Visual Album* on HBO, a subscription-based network. Her second visual album after *Beyoncé*, which featured a different music video for each track on the album, *Lemonade* runs like a feature film at one hour and fifteen minutes of cohesive narrative across the twelve songs. More than just a music video, the visual album is the most current stroke of Beyoncé’s increasingly political brand, building on the celebration of Black womanhood that was the first single from the album, “Formation.” Melina Matsoukas, the director of “Formation,” reveals Beyoncé’s inspiration for the visual album in an interview. She says, “[Beyoncé] wanted to show the historical influence of slavery on black love, and what it has done to the black family… And black men and women—how we’re almost socialized not to be together” (Matsoukas qtd. in Okeowo). *Lemonade* was lauded for depicting Black women as they longed to be depicted—celebrating their strengths while also honestly working through the struggles of Black womanhood in America. While Beyoncé as a pop icon has been highly criticized for her “universal” branding (i.e. performing both Blackness and

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\(^1\) Take a look at Marvel (with *Jessica Jones*), which has harnessed the marketability of feminism but also translated the ideologies into a meaningful series, whereas musicians like Taylor Swift attempt to play the feminist game with limited success. Even Drake has made attempts with songs like “Make Me Proud” and most recently “Nice for What.”
whiteness), her work on *Lemonade* marks a decided turn away from her original “crossover”\(^2\) branding to create content that is considered radical because she embraces her identity as a Black woman in a society that thrives on post-racial marketing to massive, ever-changing audiences. As a major cultural influencer and a benefactor of capitalist decision-making, her choice to celebrate Black womanhood in a way that is purposefully inaccessible to white audiences is surely a radical stance within an industry that often prioritizes images of white women and their narratives (Arzumanova 423).

*Lemonade* is a feat of juxtaposition. To create the narrative of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé brings elements of utopia into play against scenes of outrage at infidelity, reflection on motherhood, and spatial and temporal anachronisms to ultimately reach forgiveness and redemption. A conglomeration of directors make up the aesthetic collage that is the visual album, collaborating to layer scene after scene, spanning time periods, settings, countless costumes, hairstyles, and film styles to depict a multi-faceted experience of Black womanhood. The striking opening visuals include a full color, slow motion scene of Beyoncé leaning against a Suburban in furs, a distorted rumbling echoing in the background, then viewers are transported to stand below a chain hanging from the apex of a barn in black and white—setting us in the present and feeling at once in the past—placing us in an America rife with contrasting visuals of Southern wealth and poverty. These visuals give us an intimate look into the much-rumored marital infidelity between Beyoncé and her husband Jay-Z and Beyoncé’s movement through the

\(^2\) Touré identifies Beyoncé as a “crossover sex symbol a la Halle Berry, a black girl who’s not so overwhelmingly Nubian that white people don’t appreciate her beauty” in his *Rolling Stone* cover story about her in 2004.
initial pain of being cheated on to her eventual pardoning him of his transgressions to keep their family together. This progression from rage to redemption explores themes of family legacies, loss, independence, self-love, and honest expression and features a diverse cast of Black women of all ages, backgrounds, and body types, including radical and recognizable activists, models, singers, and influential figures.

A year later, in April of 2017, the pilot and first three episodes of the newest adaptation of Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* were produced by Bruce Miller and released as “prestige television” on Hulu, a subscription-based streaming site. Riding the wave made popular by other “prestige” shows such as HBO’s *Game of Thrones* or Netflix’s *Orange Is the New Black*, Hulu aimed to capitalize on both the political climate that necessitated a return to Atwood’s dystopia while also throwing its hat into the ring of other media outlets creating original material. Though the producers had greenlit the show far before the results of the 2016 presidential election, the ultimate outcome and Trump’s positions on policies that impact women and mothers only helped the marketing capabilities of the adaptation and made the show feel timelier (Lee).

The series maintains Offred’s plot line from the novel in which the New England region of United States is taken over by Gilead, a totalitarian government based on Puritan-like strict and literal interpretations of the Bible. As fertility has declined due to environmental factors, Gilead abducts and indoctrinates women who have already “proven” their fertility by having had children in the past. These women are forced to serve the commanders of Gilead as “handmaids,” or compulsory surrogates, by becoming pregnant through a ritualized rape. The adaptation introduces new and effective world-
building to depict not only what the rest of the world might look like next to Gilead, but also how Gilead could become a reality in contemporary America. In particular, the sixth episode, “A Woman’s Place,” extrapolates far from Atwood’s source material to speculate about how other countries might interact with a totalitarian government while the world is on the brink of environmental collapse. The episode also offers a backstory for Serena Joy, the wife of Commander Waterford and the head of Offred’s household, and elaborates on her involvement in the creation of the new order. In “A Woman’s Place,” the President of Mexico, played by Zabryna Guevara, visits the home of the Waterfords to discuss trade opportunities with Gilead. When Offred realizes that President Castillo intends to trade for handmaids, she confronts Castillo, only to find that Mexico is so desperate for fertile women that they are willing to resort to the commodification of human fertility. This episode embodies many of the tensions between power, gender, sexuality, and motherhood at stake within the show and, in its depictions of the time before Gilead, creates an unsettling resonance with audiences who view the descent into a Gilead-like America to be a real possibility.

Working within the dystopian tradition to depict a specifically female nightmare, heightened by the contemporary battles being fought by protesters and politicians over bodily autonomy, the relevance of the show hinges on the specific intended audience: white feminists.³ This specific movement in American history has been characterized and

³ Ross and Solinger call this a kind of “single-issue feminism,” defining white feminism as a kind of feminism that focuses on the particular needs of one group of people, white women, and disregards the intersectional nature of the world we live in (114). White feminists often do not intentionally neglect other perspectives, but rather tend to
publicized by the abortion debate. This relevance sidesteps the history of reproductive and bodily oppression imposed on women of color from the inception of the United States such as forced sterilization, the use of birth control as population control, and other eugenic policies to focus more directly on twin fears of infertility and loss of individual reproductive autonomy. And while the show casts many Black actors, it does not go so far as to comment on the state of race within Gilead. As a show that not only marketed itself parallel to the political unrest of the 2016 presidential election, but also tackles major concepts relating to oppression as they are reflected in contemporary American society, the absence of the experiences of people of color in Gilead overlooks what could have been nuanced and intersectional speculation into how race operates in the Puritanical dystopia.

Black feminist scholar and film critic bell hooks writes in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, “In this age of mixing and hybridity, popular culture, particularly the world of movies, constitutes a new frontier providing a sense of movement, of pulling away from the familiar and journeying into and beyond the world of the other” (hooks 2). In her film criticism, she “found films to be the perfect cultural texts,” offering a way for audiences to access representations of different people and different lifestyles, which, by extension, creates the opportunity for audiences to better understand other types of lifestyles (5). Movies and other visual media, like television unintentionally privilege their own issues over those of women of color or people of color. For example, Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* advice books were often critiqued for being white feminist because her advice neglected to include the experiences of women of color in the workplace and therefore did not offer advice relevant to their needs.
series and visual albums, are vehicles that, when used in ways that challenge current or popular social imaginaries, have the power to create change. hooks refers to this potential in *Reel to Real* as “aesthetic accountability,” especially for female artists and artists of color who choose to produce work that challenges the hegemonic order of things, arguing, “thinking in a constructive way about accountability never diminishes artistic integrity or an artistic vision, it strengthens and enhances” (9). Thus, depicting marginalized communities and their lived experiences or challenging representations that typically rely on stereotypes can offer new visions and new ways of thinking.

Considering aesthetic accountability and depictions of Black motherhood, the absence of any reference to race in *The Handmaid’s Tale* series becomes especially suspect. Simply casting Black actors does not address the long history of reproductive violence against Black women. Rather, this becomes a “colorblind” silence on the manner, asserting a kind of “racelessness,” as Toni Morrison points to in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison argues that “the presence of a racial other” has had a lasting impact on the shape of American “imaginative and historical” culture (46). She maintains that “the act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act . . . race, in fact, now functions as a metaphor so necessary to the construction of Americanness” (46-47). For Morrison, this “metaphor” exists in every element of the American social imaginary, influencing both our consumption of media as audiences and the creation of media as artists. This metaphor essentially *haunts* the American psyche: first and foremost, “American means white,” and all other racial or ethnic understandings must hyphenate themselves to participate in this Americanness.
This white hegemonic understanding of “Americanness” is reinforced and reinforces conceptions within the social imaginary of who can access what, who can be represented in particular ways, and what stories are told to specific audiences.

Both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Lemonade* offer valuable insights into the contemporary American audience while the country is at one of its most politically polarized cultural moments. The embodied horrors and traumas presented against the female characters in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are sometimes hard to separate from today’s reality, as policies related to reproductive control seem to populate the news endlessly. As American culture continues to grapple with events like mass shootings and legislature that aims to defund programs like Planned Parenthood, the closeness of violence against American bodies feels more and more like a descent into a dystopia. Dystopian narratives, within literary tradition, take a current issue like bodily autonomy and extrapolate that issue to its most negative extreme as a way to steer audiences to social change. An element of the present dystopic familiarity comes from how bodies are *used* as sites for this extrapolation. On bodies in dystopia, Philip Abbott writes, “not only is the body a site that includes major social practices, it is a site that is congenial to one of the central features of utopian writing in general, the willingness to leave no practice exempt from imaginary experimentation” (876). As popular media continues to refer to the descent into dystopian conditions in American culture and politics, the dystopic body as

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4 Keith Spencer writes for *Salon*, “Atwood’s dystopian ‘Handmaid’s Tale’ resonated in 2017 for obvious reasons: the unrepentant trauma of patriarchy being persistent, women still suffer sexual abuse, assault and discrimination daily. The rise to power of clear
a site of experimentation and a potential site of violence enters our collective vocabulary for how we talk about our society.

Dystopia, as the most negative extreme of a particular issue, is a reflection of utopia, the most positive extreme. In "Should Utopians Have Perfect Bodies?," Abbott elaborates on the use of bodies in utopian narratives: “If the body as a site is one of the most intimate aspects of human existence in the sense that it includes naked, copulating, and pregnant bodies, then the efforts to regulate the body are reminiscent of totalitarianism,” therefore, "Utopian bodies are healthy, beautiful and admired (by both sexes). They are also inspected, prodded, watched and controlled" (876). In both dystopia and utopia, as extrapolations of cultural anxieties about bodies and power, bodies are admired, while they are also maintained through surveillance and discipline. Whereas in utopia, the perfect body has reached perfection because of the success of the control, in dystopia, the control is being exerted upon the body in a way that descends into terror.

As a vision of ascent towards a future woman-centered society (though some call it a fantasy), the potent utopic power of Lemonade works to ignite an emotional response through the aestheticized depictions of the joys and the woes of Black womanhood and Black motherhood as they are centered within the body. The Handmaid’s Tale, on the other hand, takes contemporary fears and preoccupations with controlling women’s bodies to both the furthest—in the sense of domination over bodies—and most familiar—in the sense of time and place—extreme. These works have become inseparable to this sexists like Trump and Ted Cruz made Atwood’s world feel like it was just a hop and skip away” (Spencer).
window of time in American history and the tumultuous experiences of being a woman in Trump’s America. In comparing the two, *Lemonade* looks forward to a utopic futurity in which women freely express themselves and their sexuality with dignity while *The Handmaid’s Tale* series peers into a dystopic descent into an explicitly American mode of totalitarian control over women’s bodies.

To further unpack how these anxieties are embodied by dystopian and utopian narratives, I bring in Avery Gordon’s “sociological haunting” and Luce Irigaray’s theoretical approach to female sexuality based in “mimicry.” I examine the themes of haunting and performance and how both of these visual texts enact social memory of past violence as a form of haunting. This haunting appears in spatial, temporal, and embodied signifiers such as setting and clothing. Moreover, the embodiment of performance—such as Beyoncé’s literal performance of characters and routines in *Lemonade* and Elisabeth Moss’s literal performance as Offred, as well as Offred’s performance of complicity in Gilead—can be considered a type of “mimicry,” or ironic performance. These performances reside within the haunting that leaks through these visual texts, making themselves felt in visual tropes of motherhood and through intentional branding and aesthetic choices.

By complicating this comparison, I hope to investigate the resonance of the dystopian descent and utopian futurity in these texts as they exist in contemporary America and especially how they converge on the topic of motherhood and freedom. As Jennifer Burwell emphasizes in *Notes on Nowhere*, "The utopian form in literature 'visualizes' certain logics in theories of social transformation," I am interested in how
these texts visualize social transformation through its two extremes—utopic futurity and dystopic descent (xii). In the following chapters, I will apply bell hooks’ film criticism to the ideological differences in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Lemonade*. I will investigate the cultural work and visual texts surrounding the American abortion debate, white feminism, and the oft-forgotten history of eugenics and forced sterilization of women of color. From there, I will consider how these histories appear to haunt the two texts through utopian and dystopian traditions as they appear in embodiments of time and place and through performance. How do these representations of reproduction and deferred reproduction perform the social imaginary of who should be a mother? How do the expectations of who should reproduce and who is unfit to reproduce haunt both the social and individual understandings of motherhood? How is motherhood performed or branded? And finally, how do demands for reproductive justice echo through the hauntings of these texts?
Chapter Two: Aesthetic Accountability

As works of visual media, Beyoncé’s *Lemonade: A Visual Album* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* series are rooted in political and ideological perspectives on feminism, womanhood, and motherhood through their aesthetics. bell hooks argues, “every aesthetic work embodies the political, the ideological as part of its fundamental structure” (228). Both works require the collaboration of teams of people to execute the intentions behind the visuals that contribute to the structure of their aesthetics, or the combination of the directing, camera composition, cinematography, costuming, casting, and all of the many elements that create a cohesive visual text. While these aesthetics contribute to the narrative, aesthetics also contribute to the tone, suggesting specific political commentary or ideological leanings based on the messages the creators want to convey to the audience.

When hooks talks about the “aesthetic accountability” of filmmakers in the mid 1990s in her chapter “Artist Integrity: Race and Accountability,” she asserts that most filmmakers can ignore race in their films. Assuming that most filmmakers are white (as most big-name filmmakers were and still are), hooks identifies race as an “opt-in” field of content for white filmmakers; they can choose to address it or they can choose not to address it:

“When white males make films with all white subjects or with people of color, their ‘right’ to do so is not questioned. No one asks a white filmmaker in the
United States or Britain who makes a film with only white characters if he or she is a white supremacist. The assumption is that the art they create reflects the world as they know it, or certainly as it interests them.” (69)

However, this is not the case, even after the 90s, for filmmakers of color:

“when a black filmmaker, or for that matter any filmmaker of color, makes a work that focuses solely on subjects exclusively black, or white, they are asked by critics and their audiences to justify their choices and to assume political accountability for the quality of their representations.” (69)

On this point, hooks maintains that the integrity of an artistic vision is seen as more valuable when the artist or filmmaker is white. This value judgment stems from the racist and sexist assumption that artistic vision is not as valuable to artists or filmmakers who are women and/or people of color, requiring that their artistic choices be questioned to a greater extent.

Because of this massive fissure in critic and audience expectations, “Marginalized groups—white women, people of color, and/or gay artists, for example—all struggle with the question of aesthetic accountability, particularly in relation to the issue of perpetuating domination” (70). Artists who belong to marginalized groups are thus caught in a double bind of creating art for mass success and a hegemonic audience and potentially relying on tropes that perpetuate oppression or creating art for a smaller,

5 bell hooks and other Black feminists have often pointed to Beyoncé as someone complicit in perpetuating oppression. During a talk called “Are You Still A Slave: Liberating the Black Female Body,” hooks referred to Beyoncé as a “terrorist” when discussing Beyoncé’s cover for *Time*. hooks suggested that Beyoncé, whether she had creative control of the cover or not, was “colluding in the construction of herself as a slave” and that Beyoncé is “a terrorist especially in terms of the impact on young girls” (Coker). hooks’ continued to be critical of Beyoncé after the release of *Lemonade*,
more specific audience and potentially remaining unknown. If they create art for the masses, like Beyoncé did in her early career,\(^6\) they are criticized for their artistic choices or labeled complicit in their own oppression (Celeste 147). However, hooks elaborates to point out, “although this struggle is most often seen solely in a negative light, it enhances artistic integrity when it serves to help the artist clarify vision and purpose” (70). In Beyoncé’s case, for example, her trajectory could have easily continued down a more mainstream route, but by working to politicize her brand to embrace her experiences as a Black woman and a mother, she leverages this sense of aesthetic accountability with her status as a pop icon to offer more nuanced representations of Black womanhood and motherhood for broader audiences.

The next step, hooks argues, it to further change the aesthetic itself: “More than ever before, black filmmakers realize that it is not enough to create images from a decolonized perspective, there must also be a new aesthetic of looking taught to audiences so that such work can be appreciated” (72). Again, writing in the mid 90s, it’s possible that the aesthetic hooks writes about has been transformed today. But an element of this change in aesthetics is a change in viewership—not just who is consuming the media, but how they consume it. Creating media for a specific audience is one thing, but training an audience to seek out specific kinds of aesthetic work is another thing entirely.

\(^6\) Considering the visual album a perpetuation of Black women as victims (“Moving Beyond Pain”).

\(^6\) For more on Beyoncé’s negotiation of race and class, see Aisha Durham.
On this, hooks emphasizes, “the process by which any of us alter the way we look at images is political” (72). Inna Arzumanova praises Beyoncé for her ability to create new aesthetics and new audiences in “The Culture Industry and Beyoncé’s Proprietary Blackness,” as she says, “Beyoncé has been a master of both operating within the culture industry and seemingly manipulating the culture industry to her own ends” (422). By utilizing the innovative genre of the “visual album” and altering the trajectory of her mainstream success, she changes not only her audience by gaining new fans who see themselves represented in Beyoncé’s media in ways they haven’t been represented before, but she also teaches her audience how to consume her media and continue to demand representations that they long to see.7

Because of this political moment popular media has been enjoying, and perhaps riding the coattails of it, The Handmaid’s Tale series was welcomed by audiences eager to see themselves and their politics reflected in Offred’s story. Especially after the success en masse of the 2017 Women’s March8 as widespread resistance to Trump’s inauguration, anxious and politically active audiences expected the kind of feminist satire that the novel was so notable for. However, while the casting of the show answered many

7 See Arzumanova for more on Beyoncé’s proprietary Blackness and Edgar and Toone for anti-racist practices of Beyoncé’s audiences.

8 Across the many locations of the 2017 Women’s March, women dressed as handmaids to point out the likeness between the Trump administration and the totalitarianism of the novel (soon to be show). The show also featured a march-like scene that was reminiscent of the Women’s March, but with the violence of the #BlackLivesMatter protests of 2014 and 2015. During the 2018 Women’s March, The Handmaid’s Tale series’ social media posted pictures of women dressed as handmaids at marches across the country.
of the current calls for diversity, the stories behind the characters remained the same. To return once more to hooks, “merely putting black characters in a film does not assure that the work acts, whether covertly or overtly, to undermine racism” (74). As Atwood’s metaphor for the worst possible future, *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel, with its distinct lack of commentary on the role race plays in Gilead, therefore misses (perhaps intentionally) an opportunity to comment on the role of race in the feminist movements that protested violence against women in the 1980s. Because race plays such an integral part of American power dynamics and representation of people of color has become an even greater topic of conversation in popular culture as well as intersectional feminist media and scholarship, this gap becomes even more striking in the 2017 series. Casting Black actors as June’s husband Luke and thus depicting an interracial couple with a mixed race child, the show still does not comment on the issues of race at stake in Gilead. Furthermore, Offred’s best friend Moira, played by Samira Wiley, a queer Black woman, goes about the world just as Moira did in the novel, when her race was not explicitly stated. Never is there any additional commentary on Moira’s experience as a Black woman or on Luke’s experience as a Black man. Nor is there any time given to the experiences of Black handmaids, nor are there any Black actors cast in the roles of Commanders or Wives.

With the rising public awareness of systemic racism and sexism and resistance movements like #BlackLivesMatter, audiences must wonder if *The Handmaid’s Tale* series will address these issues, which are closely tied to the intersections reproductive
injustice and totalitarianism as we see them operating today. Atwood, writing for the *NY Times* prior to the release of the series in “What *The Handmaid’s Tale* means in the age of Trump,” clarifies, "No, [the novel] isn't a prediction, because predicting the future isn't really possible: there are too many variables and unforeseen possibilities” (“Age”). However, she counters: “Let's say it's an antiprediction: If this future can be described in detail, maybe it won't happen” (“Age”). For audiences who long to see resistance and empowerment in an American era where we seem to be inching closer to a descent into a dystopian society, the bodily dystopia of *The Handmaid’s Tale* offers a glimpse at the effects of complacency, ideally spurring audiences into action towards the future they want to see.

On this phenomenon across visual media, hooks concludes, “Until everyone can acknowledge that white supremacist aesthetics shape creativity in ways that disallow and discourage the production by any group of images that break with this aesthetic, audiences can falsely assume that images are politically neutral” (73). The danger of this assumption is that white supremacist aesthetics, as hooks refers to them, will continue to be perpetuated without challenge. Writing in the early 2000s, Patricia Hill Collins cites American slavery as a major factor in the stereotypes, or controlling images, of Black women that circulate within aesthetic media and thus perpetuate negative depictions within the social imaginary. Collins argues, “these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (69). As part of the social imaginary of
white supremacist aesthetics, controlling images reinforce the practices of society, such as discrimination against Black women through policies, institutions, and representations. These images become “key in maintaining intersecting oppressions” imposed by those invested in maintaining white supremacy (or otherwise maintaining a status quo) and reinforced by practices deriving from the hegemonic social imaginary (69).

One of the controlling images that Collins defines—in addition to other images such as the Mammy, the Matriarch, or the Jezebel—is the “welfare mother” or welfare queen (similar to the welfare mother, but more “materialistic” and “domineering”)—the damaging image of a Black woman who has multiple children, typically out of wedlock, and does not work and therefore lives off of taxpayer dollars (80). Collins points out that this image is “essentially an update of the breeder woman image created during slavery,” which provided “ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women’s fertility to the needs of a changing economy” (78). Collins explains that the image of the breeder woman claimed “Black women were able to produce children as easily as animals” and this meant economic gain for slave holders because “every slave child born represented a valuable unit of property, another unit of labor, and, if female, the prospects for more slaves” (78). It is the trajectory of this controlling image—from American slavery to the contemporary welfare mother—that contributes to the racist assumptions within the social imaginary surrounding Black motherhood and the societal expectations of who is a “good” mother and how one performs “good” mothering.
These racist and sexist controlling images continue to be reproduced in new variations. While *The Handmaid’s Tale* continues to maintain a white supremacist status quo by omitting representations of Black motherhood so far in the series, Beyoncé’s representations of motherhood in *Lemonade* offer a new perspective through enacting hooks’ ideas of aesthetic accountability (Nair). In “Beyoncé and Blue: Black Motherhood and the Binds of Racialized Sexism,” Sonita R. Moss identifies that the new controlling images “are packaged differently in the post-racial, digital era: the Black Bitches, the Gold Diggers, the Video Hos . . . encapsulate the dangerous Black woman who is out of control, wayward, and immoral” (160). But Beyoncé moves away from the good/bad binary of these images to show the nuances of Black female sexual empowerment and self-love throughout the visual album. A wide range of blogs, think pieces, and articles laude her for the new representations she offers in *Lemonade*: “*Lemonade* Is the Ode to Black Motherhood We Didn’t Expect, But That We Deserve” (Petgrave), “Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* Is About So Much More Than Infidelity and Jay-Z” (Oluo), and “Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* Is Black Woman Magic” (Tinsely), all pointing to the excitement that surrounds these new, diverse, and positive images. As Black motherhood is so frequently omitted or under fire in popular media, aesthetic accountability for artists like Beyoncé and for adaptations of politically timely texts like *The Handmaid’s Tale* may contribute to familiar subjugation, can help create new visual possibilities for who can be a mother, or can create a space to critique structures that prevent certain people from being mothers.
Chapter Three: Reproductive Justice

Because Lemonade: A Visual Album and The Handmaid’s Tale series mirror contemporary American anxieties through the use of a sliding scale of utopic futurity or dystopic descent, the structuring of power dynamics in both texts offers insight into how bodies are perceived in the world and within the social imaginary. As noted earlier, in dystopian fiction, bodies are “healthy, beautiful and admired” but “also inspected, prodded, watched and controlled,” as a way of imagining how a dystopia will take over even the most intimate of bodily practices (Abbott 876). Therefore, by concentrating on how power structures influence women's bodies and how women's bodies influence power structures, Lemonade: A Visual Album and The Handmaid’s Tale series depict the striving reach towards utopia and the slippery slope towards dystopia to emphasize social concerns about reproductive justice. In considering how structures of power—such as totalitarianism, in the case of The Handmaid’s Tale, or a woman-centered society in Lemonade—can work to either limit or liberate women’s bodies, I also consider how reproductive justice as a framework can reimagine the relationship between women, mothers, and institutions of power.

These visual texts may seem dichotomous in their interpretation of the relationship between women’s bodies and power. In Offred’s world, the Puritanical control over the female body stems from a desperate need to populate Gilead and a fear
of the sexual power of female bodies. Whereas, in Lemonade, the implied liberation of the Black female body suggests a celebration of Black women coexisting happily after overcoming great personal and historical trauma. To explore these points more fully, I will elaborate on the cultural work being performed by representations of bodies and reproduction, as well as the reproductive violence perpetrated against Black female bodies in recent American history. Because, within the American social imaginary, white bodies are typically pictured when free bodies are discussed, a binary of white bodies thought of as free bodies and Black bodies thought of negatively as “not free” bodies continues to dominate in hegemonic culture. Historically, this binary continues to be perpetuated in both media depictions and social actions taken to oppress Black female bodies in particular. While The Handmaid’s Tale relies on the backlash against demands for reproductive choice made by the largely white feminist movement for reproductive freedom, Lemonade challenges this history by offering a new, utopic vision of reproductive justice.

Reproductive justice is defined by activist Loretta J. Ross and scholar Rickie Solinger in Reproductive Justice: A Introduction. They describe reproductive justice as “a contemporary framework for activism and for thinking about the experience of reproduction” (9). As a framework, it is “a political movement that splices reproductive rights with social justice to achieve reproductive justice,” intending to go “beyond the pro-choice/pro-life debate” (9). The three main principles are as follows: “(1) the right not to have a child; (2) the right to have a child; and (3) the right to parent children in
safe and healthy environments. In addition, reproductive justice demands sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being” (9). Reproductive justice as a movement is thus designed to consider the multifaceted needs of women and mothers as part of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including civil rights, political rights, social rights, and sexual rights (82). By looking at reproductive justice from a human rights framework to move beyond “pro-choice,” the conversation around womanhood and motherhood shifts to include any and all lived experiences that determine broader reproductive choices such as the destruction of families due to systemic racism, lack of healthcare access, lack of access to education and sexual health education, lack of access to healthy and affordable food options, among many others.

Ross and Solinger emphasize “past abuses of women’s reproductive bodies live on in contemporary harms and coercions, stimulating reproductive justice activists to define the arena of reproductive dignity and safety” (12). Whereas the focus on the pro-choice/pro-life debate ignores the lived experiences of many women, including reproductive violences of the past, framing reproductive justice in terms of dignity and safety allows for all women and people who may get pregnant to enter into the conversation. Here I would like to specify that not all mothers are women and not all people who identify as women can become mothers. Further, pregnancy cannot be conflated with motherhood nor motherhood with pregnancy. While this thesis focuses on Beyoncé and Offred, who are cis women who became mothers through heterosexual

23
biological reproduction, the intent is not to exclude the many diverse experiences of womanhood and motherhood from the conversation of reproductive justice.

Because there are so many more factors at play when making reproductive choices such as individual identities and values, personal health, economic access to safe and affordable medical care, and outside social pressures, the debate surrounding abortion is limiting, even as the right to terminate one’s pregnancy is absolutely important. Additionally, legislation and policies that seek to limit rights to abortion and birth control infantilize women, suggesting that women cannot be capable of making their own choices about their fertility and reproduction and must be regulated by the government. As Ross and Solinger point out, “Regarding sexuality and fertility, all women were subject, in fact, to this core condition of bondage” and when, as we have seen with the increase in new legislature limiting women’s reproductive freedom, the government regulation of abortion access and birth control only strengthens the systems of oppression at work against women’s bodies (44). This pattern of exerting systemic control over women’s bodies and reproductive autonomy extends beyond abortion and into policies related to health care, welfare, immigration, incarceration, education, employment, environmental regulations, and even zoning laws.

An important element of the reproductive justice framework is “that while every human being has the same human rights, not everyone is oppressed the same way, or at the same time, or by the same forces” (72). Ross and Solinger are careful to delineate that lived experiences related to oppression due to various intersecting identities such as
“race, ability, class, gender, sexuality, age, and immigration status,” among many others, are constants and cannot be compared qualitatively or quantitatively (72). Rather, these intersections, identities, and the lived experiences are valid and deserve equal attention in order to determine how to eliminate the causes of various oppressions in order to support women’s abilities to make choices about their reproduction with dignity and confidence.

One specific source of reproductive oppression resides in the policy decisions around reproductive choice and control. Ross and Solinger point specifically to *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) which “defined birth control as a matter or marital ‘privacy’” whereas “The *Roe v. Wade* decision (1973) that legalized abortion gave women individual reproductive ‘choice’ (not ‘rights’ or ‘justice’) while tying their decisions to a physicians permission and other limitations” (47). The language of these decisions put the emphasis on the individual women themselves, regardless of if the tools for enacting that privacy or choice are accessible to the women who need them. In this case, “choice” alone does not guarantee safety or affordability, and therefore cannot guarantee dignity to all women or all communities. “Choice,” too, is typically focused solely on prevention of pregnancy and motherhood and cannot support women and communities further than the “choice” to choose motherhood, one that involves far more decisions and dilemmas than the word “choice” deceptively suggests. However, “choice” remains heavily at the forefront of the conversations about reproductive rights and demands the most attention in media and cultural representations, continuing to perpetuate “choice” as the only subject at stake.
Sometimes “choice” is not an option, something that *Lemonade* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* explore in subtle ways through depictions of women who lost their children or women who wish to bear children but cannot. During the “Resurrection” chapter of *Lemonade*, to the mournful James Blake singing “Forward,” the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown hold pictures of their murdered sons and look through the camera and into the eyes of the audience (Fig. 1). These women, Sybrina Fulton, Gwen Carr, and Lezley McSpadden, did not have a choice when their children’s lives were taken. As an element of the reproductive justice framework, the oppression of racialized police brutality impedes their dignity as mothers who were unable to protect their sons from tragedy. In inhibiting these mothering from enjoying motherhood with the assurance of safety, the protection of due process, and freedom of movement for themselves and their children, reproductive justice is withheld from
Fulton, Carr, and McSpadden as well as their sons. In the Preface to Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines, Loretta Ross refers directly to the generational impact of police violence:

It is a radical act to nurture the lives of those who are not supposed to exist . . . Not supposed to walk across streets (Michael Brown). Not supposed to wear hoodies (Trayvon Martin) . . . Rethinking mothering from a radical point of view leads to considering survival as a form of self-love, and as a service and gift to others whose lives would be incalculably diminished without us. (Ross xviii)

By including these women and their immense tragedy in Lemonade and showing them in positions of grieving while also honoring them, Beyoncé acknowledges this need for radical mothering. Fulton, Carr, and McSpadden hold the place for the thousands of mothers who have lost their children to racist violence as Blake whispers the lyrics “It’s time to listen, it’s time to fight. Forward” (Beyoncé 00:44:29-33). As one of the most moving scenes in the visual album, “Forward” is also the most radical for portraying how racist violence affects everyone in the community. As a gesture towards the reproductive justice framework, Beyoncé’s inclusion of these mothers at this point in the album aligns her creative work with the need for structural change and highlights the reality that, for some, reproductive anxieties are not limited to choices about pregnancy, but continue throughout the entirety of motherhood.

Radical in a different way is the manner in which Serena Joy, the wife of Commander Waterford, is depicted in “A Woman’s Place” in The Handmaid’s Tale. This episode marks the first time the audience gets a look into Serena Joy’s backstory, revealing that she essentially created Gilead out of a desire to institutionalize “domestic
feminism” as she calls it, placing emphasis on the role of the mother in the household as a fulfilling lifestyle for women. Her approach, a perfect extrapolation of white feminism at its most powerful, accentuates the tragedy of her infertility, of course ignoring that it is likely Commander Waterford who is sterile, which would be treasonous to suggest in Gilead, another caveat of her implicit oppression. Her inability to conceive is outside of her ability to choose to become a mother. However, through her position of power, she does have the ability to institute policies that oppress women throughout Gilead, thus operating as a form of radicalism very different from the reproductive justice framework. Serena Joy may be offered up to the audience as villain, but “A Woman’s Place” also humanizes her in an attempt to show how the best intentions—as she believed she had good intentions for her version of “domestic feminism” as a way to increase reproduction in Gilead—can be the most oppressive forces working against women and their bodily autonomy.

By pausing on characters like Serena Joy or emphasizing the grief of mothers who have lost their children to racist police brutality, both of these texts linger on how deferral of motherhood and deferral of reproductive justice can be linked by the sheer lack of “choices” available. In “deferral,” motherhood as an option has been rescinded in some way—in these cases, through police violence or through infertility. Therefore, the idea of the end of motherhood appears in these texts as a major trauma and indignity in itself, posed in a way to incite emotion. In The Handmaid’s Tale series, the end of motherhood appears dangerously as a real biological possibility as infertility has become the norm,
but also the end of the social convention of heteronormative motherhood looms as a terrifying prospect for patriarchal systems. For the creators of Gilead like Serena Joy and her husband, the rigid social construct of motherhood as heterosexual biological reproduction must be institutionalized and reinforced through policy in order to maintain the conventions they see as not only valuable, but absolutely necessary. This is in stark contrast to *Lemonade*’s depiction of the end of motherhood as a hauntingly familiar tragedy; in *Lemonade*, the bereaved mothers are honored and their losses are depicted as outrages that must still be fought against. By depicting the end of motherhood, Beyoncé points to reproductive justice deferred and, through the direct eye contact of the mothers, implies a demand for action that resonates throughout the body of *Lemonade*. And though both texts perform different work in their depictions of the end of motherhood as something to be feared and fought against, these representations offer new ways to consider mothers, motherhood, and motherhood deferred.
Chapter Four: Cultural Work and the Social Imaginary

In *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, bell hooks emphasizes that representation matters deeply: “Movies make magic . . . They take the real and make it into something else right before our very eyes (1). Visual texts such as film, television shows, and music videos have the power to “give the reimagined, reinvented version of the real” (1). hooks states, “It may look like something familiar, but in actuality it is a different universe from the world of the real” (1). Visual texts have the power to reinforce or to challenge the social imaginary and therefore participate in maintaining or subverting cultural norms and ideologies. This cultural work performed by movies, literature, and music becomes even more potent when it exists in popular media that is consumed across many demographics and influenced by policies and political anxieties, reimagining the real to impose how the real ought to be.

Framing the relationship between bodies and cultural texts, Heather Latimer’s "Popular Culture and Reproductive Politics" outlines cultural shifts in representations of reproductive justice (and injustice) in *The Handmaid's Tale* (the novel), *Juno* and *Knocked Up*. Latimer identifies *Juno* and *Knocked Up* as successes of anti-abortion propaganda in their avoidance of the word abortion and use of negative depictions of abortion access. In comparing these films to the cultural work performed by *The Handmaid's Tale*, she interrogates the framing of "choice," "freedom," and "privacy" as
outlined in American abortion politics. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the novel, creates “a picture of what the world might look like if a woman's only reproductive 'choice' is pregnancy or death” (213). Latimer identifies this depiction of “choice” as “an ironic counter-narrative to the films, in that its futuristic setting satirizes the idea of reproductive 'freedom' by showing us a world where every pregnancy is a wanted one, and where foetal personhood is not only taken-for-granted, but sanctified" (213). That this satire of the pro-life rhetoric can only be imagined as a dystopia aligns *The Handmaid’s Tale* with the contemporary anxieties surrounding the loss of reproductive choices. At this point in American politics, these anxieties resonate with audiences, but still feel distant enough to only exist in a dystopic America as a component of a descent into a possible, looming totalitarianism.

Considering that cultural work is performed because media reflects and reinforces narratives of the social imaginary, these texts contribute to a “cyclical nature of reproductive politics” (214). When this pro-life, anti-abortion rhetoric is compared to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the importance of framing and representation within the social imaginary becomes clear. Atwood’s novel depicts “how choices become limited by circumstances, how rights are as easily taken away as given when based on concepts such as freedom and privacy” (213). While *Roe v. Wade* (1973) hinged on the “Fourteenth Amendment of the United States' Constitution to decide that the right to privacy 'is broad enough to encompass a woman's decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy,'” the debate surrounding this definition has continued to today by perpetuating the
conceptual split between the woman’s right to privacy and the fetus (215). Latimer reiterates, "The debate, both inside and outside the US, soon became framed within the parameters of this dichotomy: the woman's 'choice' vs. the fetus's life; the woman's 'privacy' vs. the fetus's vulnerability; the woman's reproductive 'freedom' vs. the fetus's freedom to live" (215). While Roe v. Wade defined the maternal-fetal split as it is commonly understood today, this split continues reinforce the view that the helpless fetus must be protected from the “irresponsible” women who cannot be trusted with their own choices.

By the 80s, “abortion was now the symptom of a morally weak society out of control and in need of a firm, patriarchal hand” (216). Latimer views The Handmaid’s Tale, then, as an imagining of how this hand would take shape: “Atwood addresses this climate by imagining a world where maternity is so tightly linked to state oppression that any move against the state, from an unlawful sexual interaction to contraception, is considered a radical one and punishable by death” (216). Part of the resonance of the novel, like dystopian novels such as 1984 or Fahrenheit 451, is how close that speculation feels to reality. In Atwood’s metaphor for the future, readers can glimpse how a subtle shift can allow that patriarchal hand to materialize for all women, heightening the contemporary fears of reproductive policy limiting bodily autonomy. As Latimer asserts: "what happens when terms like 'freedom' lose their social context: rights that are given in the name of freedom can just as easily be taken away in the name of another kind of freedom" (222).
And now, in 2017, under the guise of “making America great again,” contemporary American culture is facing large enough shifts in policy to fear for the “freedom” of the body again. Policies related to “religious freedom” such as employers not being required to offer healthcare coverage that includes birth control or abortion, waiting periods and counseling for abortion designed to shame women into choosing not to terminate their pregnancies, and sexual health education that focuses on abstinence rather than offering comprehensive and medically factual information has been approved by Trump’s 2019 budget for education (Scaccia). These attempts at creating institutions and structures aimed to limit women’s bodies begin to create the frame of Atwood’s stifling dystopia. Upon the coattails of this fear rides the media response to The Handmaid’s Tale series. A slew of articles unite the fear of Trump’s policies to the success of the show. Titles like "'Handmaid's Tale' Cast and Boss on Eerie Parallels to Trump's America" (Lee), "The First Episode of 'The Handmaid's Tale' Is a Feminist's Dystopian Nightmare" (Levkoff), and "'The Handmaid's Tale' Creates a Chilling Man's World" (Poniewozik) do the cultural work of conflating the legitimate fears of potential policy changes and concerns about bodily autonomy with the themes of the show. Through the marketing of the show and the real-life events publicizing the feminist struggle against the oppressive legislature of the Trump Presidency, Offred’s story has come to occupy a place in the frenetic cultural landscape of 2017 just as echoes of Trump’s administration slips into the fictional chaos of the series.
Chapter Five: *Killing the Black Body*

The horror of reproductive dystopia was not a fiction for American women who were exposed to the long and fraught eugenic history in the United States. To perpetuate the narratives of white feminism and the pro-choice movement alone is to be complicit in the silencing of Black women and the limiting of Black motherhood. Sherronda Brown in “White Women in Robes,” describes the reproductive rights movement as “central to the politics of white feminism” and “has always been understood as advocacy for the right to birth control and access to safe, legal abortion options as part of one’s ability to plan pregnancies on one’s own terms” (Brown). While these missions are not inherently negative, the focus on “able-bodied and able-minded white people,” assuming that all women and all families want to fight for the right to not be pregnant, ignores the needs and desires of those whose reproduction is limited by the effects of institutionalized racism in policy, societal pressure, or medical experimentation (Brown). Brown argues, “in the dominant social conversation about reproductive rights, issues specific to people of color are often omitted or simply glanced over” (Brown). Ultimately, Brown states, “the systematic sexual and reproductive violences on the show terrify those who view the story as a future dystopian (im)possibility for whiteness, when it is in fact as historical ghost for Black people who were enslaved” (Brown).
This dystopian (im)possibility was a reality not just for Black women. Throughout the history of the United States, Native American women, Latina women, and disabled women, among others, have been subjected to sterilization and eugenic experimentation. These histories cannot be ignored, but for the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on the lineages of reproductive violence against Black women in the United States. Dorothy Roberts’ excellent and comprehensive *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* tracks the development of reproductive violence against Black American women from slavery to the 1990s:

“from slave masters’ economic stake in bonded women’s fertility to the racist strains of early birth control policy to sterilization abuse of Black women during the 1960s and 1970s to the current campaign to inject Norplant and Depo-Provera in the arms of Black teenagers and welfare mothers.” (4)

Corroborating Brown’s point, she argues that “reproductive politics in America inevitably involves racial politics” through the interrogation of the abortion and birth control movements led by white feminists, which is presented as the major—if not the only—narrative about reproductive choice in contemporary American culture (9).

Tracking the structures at work in controlling Black female bodies and limiting Black reproduction, Roberts begins her history with the American institution of slavery and the legacy of violence against women in particular that helped to maintain it. In order to destroy the family, which was “the key transmitter of values,” and “to usurp slaves’ own moral independence, all sources of values other than the slave master had to be eliminated.” (38). Frederick Douglass recounts a version of this usurping in the infamous first chapter of his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,*
recalling being separated from his mother at a very young age and seeing her only a few times before her death. He writes, “For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result” (Douglass 13). Through the breaking and scattering of the family, the family unit as a source of values or moral development disappears, leaving only the moral values the enforced by slave master.

Hortense Spillers, in her oft-quoted “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” echoes the lasting impacts of American slavery upon the body and the family: “We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually ‘transfers’ from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?” (67). These indignities are further perpetuated in the slave system as Spiller reiterates Roberts’ similar notes:

“The destructive loss of the natural mother, whose biological/genetic relationship to the child remains unique and unambiguous, opens the enslaved young to social ambiguity and chaos: the ambiguity of his/her fatherhood and to a structure of other relational elements, now threatened, that would declare the young’s connection to a genetic and historic future by way of their own siblings.” (76)

As Melina Matsoukas, director of “Formation,” noted when she said, “we're almost socialized not to be together,” the exploration of the generational impact of the institution of American slavery resonates today. While this is not a new perspective on the legacy of slavery, this ambiguity and chaos is precisely what troubles Beyoncé’s visual album. As she explores the destruction of a Black marriage and a Black family, Beyoncé
imagines a utopic community in which Black women are not haunted by these legacies, even as the echoes of those legacies continue to reverb in their absences.

Spillers argues that the body of Black women “locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange” (75). Roberts fixates on this degradation of the family unit within the body of the mother by analyzing the implications of the maternal-fetal split, arguing that this split—a major contention in the contemporary abortion debate—occurs far before Roe v. Wade. She points to the practice of “slave breeding” as an economic endeavor over human life. Pausing on an account of a pregnant slave being beaten facedown while her childbearing belly was protected by a hole in the ground, she ruminates on the significance of the split of this pregnant body. She argues, “as far as I can tell, the relationship between Black women and their unborn children created by slavery is the first example of maternal-fetal conflict in American history” (Roberts 40). She describes the denigrating control slave masters exerted over slave women and their bodies:

The slave masters’ control of Black women’s reproduction, dictating when these women gave birth and then usurping their authority over their children, amounted to far more than the physical brutality it entailed. It also reinforced the entire system of slavery both literally and metaphysically. Slave-breeding generated more workers to restock the enslaved labor force. But controlling reproduction and child rearing also reduced slaves to objects created to fulfill the will of their masters. It produced human property without any claims of birth or connection to relatives, past, present, or future. (44-45)

The lasting implications of this breakdown of the family continue to haunt the structures that reinforce the white hegemonic social imaginary of the Black American family unit.
and how Black American families are represented in American culture and policy through damaging controlling images and white supremacist aesthetics.

Further, Roberts explores the “dark side of birth control,” connecting contemporary policies to the atrocities of American slavery (56). The continued attempts to control the reproduction of Black women, whether for the production of slaves or for the reduction of the Black population, suggest that the white hegemony believed “that Black women’s childbearing should be regulated to achieve social objectives” (56). From slavery to the birth control movement, initiated by a relationship between second-wave feminist Margaret Sanger and the American eugenics movement, “the movement to expand women’s reproductive options was marked by racism from its very inception” whether by white feminists ignoring the needs of Black women or by birth control being pushed on Black women as a way to intentionally limit their reproduction (56). She points to organizations like Planned Parenthood, which framed birth control as a route to empowerment and freedom from entrenched patriarchal gender roles and obligatory motherhood (56). However, the American Birth Control League, founded by Sanger as a way to negotiate the language of population control policy with her problematic goals of promoting birth control to poor women, advocated for “an explicitly eugenic policy of promoting birth control among the socially unfit” (75). Roberts points out, “the language of eugenics did more than legitimate birth control. It defined the purpose of birth control, shaping the meaning of reproductive freedom” (80). Rather than becoming a means for women to control their reproduction to gain greater autonomy socially and economically,
birth control became a tool for the government to control undesirable populations through policy decisions.

While the public face of the eugenics movement was destabilized post-WWII, medicalized population control was transformed into coerced or forced sterilization performed in hospitals across the nation. Approximately “100,000 to 150,000 poor women . . . had been sterilized annually under federally funded programs. A study discovered that nearly half of the women sterilized were Black” (93). These women (often Black, Latina, and Native women) were deemed “unfit” to reproduce due to arbitrary intelligence evaluations, socioeconomic status, or her current amount of children, and sterilized in prisons, institutions, coerced while in labor, or told that they must accept post-delivery sterilization in order to receive Medicaid (93). While the rationale for this rash of sterilizations was based in eliminating poverty by preventing poor women from reproducing and therefore creating a greater financial burden, poor Black women were specifically targeted for these programs. However, as Roberts argues, “blaming the birthrate for poverty ignores the structural reasons for people being poor” (138). By the 90s, this rationale transformed into the public funding of Norplant, a form of birth control implant that could last up to three years. Norplant was introduced to the public immediately upon being approved by the FDA and implemented widely by Medicaid-receiving organizations such as Planned Parenthood. While Norplant was seen as an ideal alternative to the pill or other riskier birth control methods, Black women
were still targeted for its use and Black women were not offered its removal, despite its severe side effects.

This brash turn to a new form of widespread population control spoke volumes about how Black reproduction was viewed by policymakers: “This willingness to pay for poor women’s birth control but not for their basic needs is strong evidence that the government is more interested in population reduction than in furthering poor women’s welfare” (138). Roberts highlights the grave implications of offering incentives for Norplant rather than addressing the problems of Black poverty: "they reinforce the belief that the solution to Black poverty is to curb Black reproduction,” leaning on the controlling image of the Black “welfare mother” rather than working to aid communities with resources and programs for families (138). As systems of oppression impact reproductive choices, aiding communities with better access to basic services like healthcare, education, or food choices and options like employment with maternity leave or childcare could all take steps towards greater reproductive justice in the communities targeted by eugenic policies. However, the inclination to limit reproduction rather than improve quality of life, and thus move towards reproductive justice, speaks to the value of poor Black communities in the eyes of American policy makers.

Building on negative controlling images of Black motherhood, the 80s and 90s brought the sensationalized media images of crack-addicted Black mothers to the forefront of the social imaginary: Black women gave birth in shackles, pregnant women went to prison, and trembling newborn babies were taken from mothers in the delivery
room. As images of reproductive justice deferred, “there is an eerie link between these degraded Black mothers . . . and their foremothers who were forced to breed for slaveholders less than two centuries ago” (167). The highly public nature of the crack epidemic reinforced harmful controlling images of Black women as incapable mothers. These images allowed the wholesale alienation of all Black women from the expectations of what appropriate motherhood should look like in the white hegemonic social imaginary. Consequently, Black women who were seen as unfit to be mothers according to white middle-class standards and Black women who did become mothers were seen as deserving of punishment for being unable to meet those standards. Roberts questions if there is any difference between the present and past when it comes to prioritizing the unborn fetus over the struggling mother:

A policy that attempts to protect fetuses by denying the humanity of their mothers will inevitably fail . . . We must question such a policy’s true concern for the dignity of the fetus, just as we question the motives of the slaveowner who protected the unborn slave while whipping his pregnant mother. Although the master attempted to separate the mother and fetus for his commercial ends, their fates were inextricably intertwined. The tragedy of crack babies is initially a tragedy of crack-addicted mothers. Both are part of a larger tragedy of a community that is suffering a host of indignities, including the denial of equal respect for its members’ reproductive decisions. (193-194)

Here Roberts posits clearly that the legacy of American slavery lives on in contemporary policies intent on limiting the dignities of reproductive choices for Black women. This tragedy continues to resonate in contemporary anxieties about reproductive access.

Whereas white women fear a limit in access to abortion and birth control, Black women
and women of color fear for their health, the health of their pregnancies, and for the lives of their children.

It is important to recount these injustices when delving into the cultural work being performed by texts like *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Lemonade*. Roberts notes, “It bears remembering that in our parents’ lifetime states across the country forcibly sterilized thousands of citizens thought to be genetically inferior” (59). As Atwood has pointed out since the publication of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, none of the violent brutalities against women were fictional. Every atrocity in the novel was perpetuated against women at some point in history. However, I lean on Robert’s account to focus on the proximity we as cultural consumers still bear to the haunting legacy of reproductive violence against Black women and that the whitewashing and fictionalizing of this violence only serves to erase its history. As Roberts chillingly stresses that this recent past, though often forgotten and overlooked, “should serve as a warning of the dangerous potential inherent in the notion that social problems are caused by reproduction and can be cured by population control” (59). The positioning of *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* premise—compulsory motherhood as enforced by a totalitarian government—ignores the dark history of birth control and the white feminist-focus of the pro-choice movement. The novel and the series speculate about a world where every baby is wanted, but build that world as a dystopia, forgetting that the choice of motherhood is not a choice freely granted to all.
However, Beyoncé explores the reality of the impossibility of choice in the chapter of *Lemonade* entitled “Emptiness.” From the very start of the sequence, a tragedy has already occurred: miscarriage. Kneeling in a red gown, Beyoncé slowly recites the poetry of Warsan Shire, whispering, “She dreams of you in both worlds. Tills the blood in and out of uterus . . . Grief sedated by orgasm, orgasm heightened by grief” (Beyoncé 00:20:57-21:31). She is surrounded by fire, alone, staring ahead blankly. The “you” she dreams of could be her unfaithful lover of the *Lemonade* narrative or could be a child lost to miscarriage. Centering on the theme of emptiness, the grief and the blood tilling in and out of uterus signals a lack of pregnancy, while the orgasm suggests an attempt to try again. The poem continues: “God was in the room when the man said to the woman I love you so much. Wrap your legs around me. Pull me in pull me in pull me in” (Beyoncé 00:21:34-42). The tone of her voice registers as mournful in its slowness, calculated in
her pronunciation. This is not an immaculate conception, but something messy, intimate, and human—maybe not a conception at all. Seething with pointed elocution and pounding on each hard syllable, she concludes, “Her hips grind pestle and mortar, cinnamon and cloves, whenever he pulls out” (Beyoncé 00:21:59-22:08). Crushing the cinnamon and cloves, grinding them down to dust, takes the fears left over from miscarriage and turns them into something tamable.

Darkness. A red-lit hallway with a single door at the end (Fig. 2). The door has a bright red flickering light in the center. Beyoncé whispers, “Loss. Dear Moon, we blame you for floods, for the flush of blood, for men who are also wolves, we blame you for the night, for the dark, for the ghosts” (Beyoncé 00:22:16-23:02). The camera tracks slowly towards the door as distant thumping bass increases in volume and intensity. The start of the scene incites anxiety and pulls the red of the dress from the previous scene, linking the themes of emptiness and loss with the tilling of blood, flush of blood, and the menstruation-reminiscent cycles of the moon within this birth canal-like red hallway.

This song, “6 Inch,” which features male R&B singer The Weeknd, stutters, pauses, and breaks down vocals and instrumentals to alienate this version of “6 Inch” from the album track. The heartbeat-like percussion lead-in to the song is disturbed by the sound of water. At the end of the hallway, the camera tracks closer and closer to the red flickering light—a window through which we cannot see—as the music escalates to a climax, then cuts to Beyoncé, still lit in red light, in the back of a limo. This scene embodies the

9 For more on reading the sounds of this scene, see The Lemonade Reader (forthcoming).
anxieties of trying to conceive after the trauma of miscarriage by combining the plodding bass line and the unreachable window to suggest the unpredictability of reproduction.

After this point, the video appears visually similar to Beyoncé’s earlier single “Partition.” “6 Inch” twins scene composition and lighting styles, and also takes place in a limo and features voyeuristic dance scenes. However, while “Partition” was a sensual and luxurious imagining of desire and desirability in a fraught marriage, “6 Inch” offers this repetition with difference as an account of vulnerability, defeat, and working to one’s physical and emotional limits. Within this video, there is a palpable sense of betrayal by one’s own body, a searching for someone, perhaps someone on which to place the blame. Unlike in “Partition,” where Jay-Z watches Beyoncé’s sensual burlesque performance and is within her reach, in “6 Inch,” there is no eye contact with men and there is no human within reach. This song, with its ghosts, its blood, and its fear, evokes the isolation after the loss of a pregnancy with a complexity not often seen in popular music.

The camera pans up a few stairs and into a room. Inside, Beyoncé stands in an antebellum gown, swinging a red light bulb like a lasso above her head. As the light bulb completes each rotation, the red light casts shadows in the room and across her face. Like phases of the moon, the red light waxes and wanes on each cycle, each rotation. Beyoncé, whispering, slowly recites the words “every fear…every nightmare…anyone has ever had” (Beyoncé 00:24:06-20). This is a site of reminiscence on her previous experience of miscarriage. The visuals dwells on the anxieties of the past, thus reproducing them in the present, potentially only making it more likely that she will miscarry again.
In the larger narrative of *Lemonade*, “6 Inch” comes at a turning point where the story shifts away from individual marital infidelity to a broader story about the inheritance of generations of difficult marriages. As a transition between the inconsolable rage of “Sorry” to the “I should have known” nostalgia of “Daddy Lessons,” “6 Inch” situates Beyoncé as a woman who “works for the money from the start to the finish” (Beyoncé 00:25:10-12). The chorus repeats, “She don’t gotta give it up, she professional” suggesting that her work is profitable, but something she has worked extremely hard to become successful at (Beyoncé 00:24:34-36). While the visuals and lyrics imply dancing or sex work, taken within *Lemonade*’s narrative, this “work” may also hint towards to Beyoncé’s career as a whole. This “working” devolves as the tone and visuals of the song slow to focus on Beyoncé lying in a bed, covering her face in defeat, and staring off vacantly, still cast under oppressive red lighting. Her fears from the past miscarriage resurface in these scenes. The final plea of “come back, come back, come back” radiates as Beyoncé walks down a flaming hallway, smoke rising behind her. As the flames lick up the walls, the small red window from before reflects the light, taking on the appearance of an ultrasound image of a fetus. Beyoncé glides down the hall in slow motion, her abject stare juxtaposed with the high point of the song’s climax. As the house is consumed by the fire, so too is the woman weighed down by the fears of miscarriage. After “6 Inch” culminates, the direction of the narrative turns to the joys and challenges of mothers and daughters—like a phoenix rising from the flames.
Beyoncé has admitted to experiencing a miscarriage in the past and documented her difficulties working while pregnant with her first child, Blue Ivy (*Life is But A Dream*). By devoting a major transition within *Lemonade* to the loss of an unborn child, Beyoncé offers a new, intimate representation of herself as a Black woman and a Black mother. She shows how deeply these experiences with reproduction and deferred reproduction—as noted previously with Fulton, Carr, McSpadden and Serena Joy—scar the individual.

Through the multifaceted depictions of Black motherhood, *Lemonade* takes initial, even stumbling, steps towards a new aesthetic that offers glimpses of a more reproductive justice-forward approach. While not mentioning America’s eugenic past, Beyoncé’s visual album makes her vulnerabilities public in ways that other texts have not. In *Lemonade*, what Spillers identified as the ambiguous “genetic and historic future” of the Black family gets recast in a way that emphasizes the utopic potentials of motherhood. Beyoncé’s depictions cannot be perfect or universal. Yet, when taken with the limiting depictions of white womanhood and white motherhood in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as they linger on the fear of the end of motherhood—an end of fertility and reproduction or the end of the freedom to reproduce with dignity due to systemic injustices—they offer an important entry into a possible new aesthetic and create new audiences for reproductive justice.
Chapter Six: Feminist Futurities

On January 21st, 2017, approximately 3.3 million to 5.2 million people took up signs, donned pink pussy hats, and joined the Women’s March, which was presumed to be one of the largest single-day demonstrations in United States history and was supported by sister demonstrations all over the world (Dejean). This massive protest followed the inauguration of Donald Trump and the outpouring of protesters made his inauguration crowd appear sparse in comparison. The marches, as a major show of resistance against the Trump administration, mark a turning point in American politics: now more women than ever before are running for political positions, donating to political campaigns, and showing interest in campaign training groups like Emily’s List (Dejean). This shift in activism has been mirrored in popular media industries as well as women’s stories and feminist ideologies have become marketable—and thus, commodifiable—qualities for industries to capitalize upon.

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10 The numbers of the women’s march have such a great disparity due to the complexities of counting crowds.

11 Pink “pussy hats” were created and popularized for the 2017 Women’s March after Trump’s comments regarding his own practices of sexual assault during a 2005. He claimed to be able to use his fame to approach women and “just grab ‘em by the pussy” (NY Times). In reaction to this comment, “pussy hats” were created as a symbol of the rising women’s movement against Trump and as an effort to destigmatize and reclaim the word “pussy” (PussyHatProject.com) However, the “pussy hat” movement has also been criticism for excluding trans women in their focus on genitals and has become associated with white feminists in a negative sense.
After the 2016 presidential election, as more women contribute their voices in political systems that have so often ignored or outright oppressed them, to some, the new activism may feel too little too late. The greatest sources of conflict during the Trump campaign were Trump’s sexist, racist, and ableist insults and the terrifyingly sexist and homophobic conservatism of his Vice President, Mike Pence. The tragedy of Trump’s presidential win was not just because of his politics, but also because of Hilary Clinton’s shocking loss, the first woman to run for president and a true career politician. That Trump’s bigoted, hateful campaign could win against the strategy of Clinton only added greater insult to the injury of American women who had already imagined having the first female president. Not only were Trump and Pence laughably incompetent compared to Clinton—who had, in fact, won the popular vote—but they also ushered in a reality that many people never thought they would see outside of an article on *The Onion*. Their near-dystopic politics were the impetus necessary to drive people, but especially women, to action.

In the stew of this cultural moment, major activist movements towards reproductive justice have bubbled to the surface. In addition to the Women’s March of 2017, the March for Science followed soon after, as did the massive uprising of the #MeToo movement near the end of 2017. As the Trump Administration continued to push legislation that targeted poor communities, immigrants, refugees, people of color, and women by making changes to environmental regulations, healthcare, education, and access to information, resistance to his regime has been spurred into action out of
necessity. While the unrest has already existed, such as with the mobilization of Black Lives Matter in 2014, through strategic use of social media to carry messages to millions of audiences globally, as well as the constant stream of outrages caused by the Trump campaign and administration, resistance rooted in feminist ideologies had gone mainstream for a large swath of Americans. The Women’s March was a pointed display of numbers and community.

Jay Newton-Small, writing for *Time Magazine*, argues that this turning point is evidence of women reaching “critical mass.” Newton-Small defines critical mass as a physics term for “the amount of material needed to sustain a nuclear explosion,” a term that has been used to sociology to describe tipping-point phenomena that initiates change (Newton-Small). According to this theory, when women make up 20%-30% of an institution, they can gain enough power to enact change (Newton-Small). Essentially, between 2016 and 2017, women have reached critical mass in industries across the country. This is evidenced by #MeToo in Hollywood, but also in the kind of content created by major media industries that are seeing more female creators who aim to produce television, film, and music for female audiences.

As films and television series include more diversity in their casting and wider representation of lived experiences in their stories, especially in stories about women, audiences who have craved more feminist media have finally seen themselves and their ideologies in mainstream content. On Netflix alone, shows like *Orange is the New Black*, *Jessica Jones*, *Sesn8*, *Dear White People*, and *Big Mouth* all work to offer more diverse
perspectives on stories that depict a wider range of characters and identities, which often coincide with feminist demands for nuanced and broader representations. And while these shows all take generous steps towards more inclusive narratives, on some plane, they each stay within the comfortable bubble of what has worked before (i.e. stories about white characters). For example, *Orange is the New Black* was lauded for it’s lively and raunchy depictions of women in prison, including women of color, lesbian relationships, and the sexual politics at play within the prison. However, the show still focused on two white women and wove all the characters of color around them. After the surprising death of Poussey Washington, a queer Black character who was a fan favorite, there was backlash against the show: fans saw her death as gratuitous and serving the white character’s plot. Prioritizing white characters, especially heterosexual white characters, is not exclusive to shows on Netflix, but is merely one example of this common trope throughout film and television. Even shows that strive to work towards diversity become comfortable with the familiarity of white characters and their narratives.

The 2017 Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* falls into this trap. Like Netflix, Hulu allows for a TV-MA\(^{12}\) content rating, which gives showrunners the opportunity to make their show as violently and sexually graphic as they wish. There is also enormous flexibility with swear words and language that refers explicitly to sex and violence—something that is impossible with the Standards and Practices of network

\(^{12}\) “TV-MA” means that the content was created for adult (ages 17 and older) viewing and therefore likely contains explicit language and depicts graphic sex and violence.
television. With these options available to the writers and directors, *The Handmaid’s Tale* series exposes audiences to the bodily violence of Gilead’s regime, the sexual violation of the monthly Ceremonies, and the dissociative word play of Offred’s internal dialogue. This flexibility with content creates broader opportunities to push against what is expected of mainstream television. But the show does not use this flexibility as a chance to push its content further in terms of representations. Rather, the series still prioritizes the narratives of their white characters—or rather, casts white actors in the major meaningful roles—while still casting a wide range of people of color to participate in the background as supporting characters. In a series inspired by feminist ideologies based in the need for bodily and reproductive autonomy, prioritizing white characters implicitly reinforces the limited narratives of mainstream feminism, restricting the show from expanding outwards toward a more inclusive representation of reproductive justice in all of its variations.

Through this reproduction of mainstream feminism, mainstream feminist audiences see themselves in Offred’s narrative in two ways: in Offred’s move to action and in the aesthetization of America’s decline into Gilead. As the forefront of the show, Offred delivers a representation of resistance that mirrors the movement to action we have seen in recently in the United States: women being spurred to participate in politics, marches, or activism in reaction to Trump’s election. However, a major draw to the show was the dystopic depiction of Gilead as the worst possible future for America, confirming the fears of Trump’s detractors. The 2017 version of Gilead as a destroyed contemporary
America acts as a sort of aestheticized catharsis for those who imagined that Trump’s America would decline into totalitarianism. While the show’s aesthetization of the political decline into Gilead was speculative and based in fear, the series resonated most strongly with audiences who recognized the unrest of Trump’s America in the series. This vision of America’s descent into dystopia points to a future without the possibility of activism as we know it now: activism supported by constitutional freedoms of expression. In Gilead, any step outside of the totalitarian society can be cause for execution or exile. This stark imagining of the direction of Trump’s politics points to a need for resistance now, before such freedoms are taken away.

Almost exactly one year prior to The Handmaid’s Tale series, Beyoncé released a much different kind of feminism in Lemonade: A Visual Album. Offering an imperfect utopic imagining of a woman-centered community, the visual album seeks to move towards what the future could look like with effective contemporary activism. As Beyoncé developed her feminism over the course of her career, her arrival at the feminism in Lemonade makes sense with her “girl power”-heavy past. From her early work in Destiny’s Child, which emphasized independence and solidarity, to songs like “Freedom,” “Forward,” and “Formation,” which similarly focus on solidarity, but also demand action, Beyoncé and her optimistic feminism have grown to fill contemporary America’s need for a new variety of easily consumable—but still woke—mainstream feminism.
*Lemonade* comes after more than ten years of extreme stardom and intense scrutiny. Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, cast from a very young age as a phenomenon of “crossover sex-symbol” potential, rose to stardom on a wave that identified the locus of her power as the mainstream marketability of her curvaceous body, her light skin, and often blonde hair (Touré). In an interview with *Vogue* from 2009, Beyoncé commented on her experiences as a Black woman, saying, “I’m universal—that no one’s paying attention to what race I am” (Beyoncé qtd. in Celeste 138). By recognizing herself as a universal figure, someone whose race does not register in the pop music consciousness, she also appears to negate the role that race plays in her reception as a pop star. In her 2011 article “‘Check on It’: Beyoncé, Southern Booty, and Black femininities in music video,” Aisha Durham describes Beyoncé’s “shifting on-stage identity” as “framed through the lens of region, race, class, and sexuality,” often in ways strategically targeted to be the most profitable representation for the current market (35). But as she participates in pop culture, her body takes up a large part of her identity and inspires much of the critical analysis of her image.¹³ Beyoncé, more than nearly any other pop star in the past decade, has defined and refined this image to become a brand that has transformed her into one of the most recognizable names, voices, and bodies producing music today. Through the detailed cultivation of how she is represented in the media, her brand appeals to a global audience and keeps her fans—both rabid and casual—interested

¹³ For more on the critical analysis of Beyoncé’s image, see Arzumanova, Celeste, and Durham.
in what she offers. She has become an icon through her music and social media, moving away from being solely defined by the desirability of her body to developing a multifaceted image as a performer, an activist, and a philanthropist, frequently making headlines for her cultural work\(^\text{14}\) outside of her music.

Beyoncé’s brand has been picked apart and analyzed extensively, as even before *Lemonade*, she was differentiating herself from other performers on the scene (Arzumanova). In 2009, in an emotional interview after performing at President Barack Obama’s inauguration, she says of President Obama, “he makes me want to be smarter, he makes me want to be more involved,” and speaks to how his campaign had inspired her to follow and eventually participate in the presidential proceedings (“Beyoncé ABC News”). Her increased involvement with President Obama’s politics over his eight-year presidency aligns with the eventual transformation of her brand into one of a political force. This move is epitomized in her controversial performance at the 2014 MTV Music Video Awards, which ended with her standing before a screen bearing “FEMINIST” in massive pink letters at the culmination of her song “Flawless,” which sampled Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s definition of “feminist.”\(^\text{15}\) Beyoncé’s positioning as a feminist was only the beginning of her major political moves in performances, followed

\(^{14}\) Beyoncé has publically donated to Black Lives Matter, created scholarships for Historically Black Colleges and Universities, performed volunteer work and donated to hurricane relief efforts, among many others.

\(^{15}\) “Flawless” features a large portion of Adichie’s TEDTalk “We Should All Be Feminists.” Adichie’s definition is “Feminist: the person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes” (“Flawless”).

Her 2016 Super Bowl performance was particularly notable for her simultaneous release of the music video and for her use of the Super Bowl as the ultimate site of “White America” to celebrate of her own Black womanhood and Black history. Melissa Harris-Perry writes in “Beyoncé: Her Creative Opus Turned the Pop Star into a Political Force,” “she used what may be America’s biggest unofficial holiday to affirm her preference for kinky hair and big noses, evoke Hurricane Katrina, signify the Ferguson protests and mark a history of African-American organizing” (Harris-Perry). Her gestures towards the Black Panther movement through stylized military uniforms and black berets did not go unnoticed in the backlash to her performance, which was seen as “outrageous” and “too political” (Harris-Perry). However, “Formation” forever changed Beyoncé’s position from a pop star who elides political messaging for the sake of maintaining her widespread fame to an artist who chooses to use her platform to embody her personal politics in ways that encourage her audience to take action as well.

A major element of this brand involves how Beyoncé presents her identity as a Black woman. Durham argues, “Beyoncé’s body and her body of work in music video have contributed to her popularity because she is able to perform competing Black femininities situated in hip hop culture” (41). Durham situates this competition of identities on the “hip hop booty,” which “defines classed femininity in music videos” (41). Manoucheka Celeste also returns to Beyoncé’s booty in her article “Black Women
and U.S. Pop Culture in the Post-Identity Era: The Case of Beyoncé Knowles.” In a passage that compares Beyoncé’s trajectory to that of Saartje Baartman, who was forced to be publicly displayed as the Hottentot Venus in the early 1800s, Celeste links Beyoncé’s rise to fame to white fascination with the Black body as an other. Citing tabloids and women’s health advice magazines, Celeste notes, “The black female body is fetishized in particular ways where it, particularly the butt, comes to represent our culture. . . in discourses about Knowles’s body, her body is admired and envied primarily for being curvaceous, while in other context the black female body is hated” (Celeste 149). Beyoncé’s early branding conflated all of these images and stereotypes into one, relying on stereotypical hypersexualized controlling images of Black women who were also accessible and comfortable to a white audience.

Beyoncé’s brand, her careful cultivation of how she wants to be depicted, is based in the strategic display of her public, celebrity identity. This brand transcends her music videos and stage performances and crosses into the territory of her social media and even her public appearances. However, with this kind of branding, one cannot escape the implications of the representation. bell hooks situates the power of aesthetics within a culture, writing, “No aesthetic work transcends politics or ideology” (hooks 228). In the case of Beyoncé, an aesthetic work can be as massive as Lemonade, or as pedestrian as her many Instagram posts promoting her clothing line, but all of her content strengthens and reflects her brand. Since her comment that “nobody cares” about her race in 2009, to performing at President Obama’s inauguration, to the dramatic release of “Formation” in
2016, Beyoncé has transformed her brand from a neutral pop artist to a political pop icon, capitalizing on her Blackness in ways that yield acclaim and condemnation from both Black and white audiences.¹⁶

An element of her brand involves her public performance of motherhood. In her self-produced documentary *Life Is But a Dream*, Beyoncé reveals her tumultuous pregnancy with Blue Ivy, her first daughter, which she had kept secret from the public. Blue Ivy eventually features heavily in later music and videos created by both Beyoncé and Jay-Z, including “Formation” and some scenes in *Lemonade*. More recently, she made her 2017 pregnancy very public, announcing that she would be having twins with a stunningly stylized Instagram photo. Riffing on religious iconography, she displayed her pregnant belly before a wall of flowers, a sheer green veil over her head. She went on to perform in a similarly styled costume at the 2017 Grammys and revealed that she had given birth to the twins in another posed Instagram post. These public performances of motherhood played off of an established feminine aesthetic, combining her political brand with notions of fertility goddess and Black Madonnas.¹⁷ These images bear aesthetic resonances within the social imaginary of motherhood, who is expected to be a mother, and what motherhood should look like, and what mothers should be allowed to do: all things that Beyoncé works against through carefully cultivated aesthetics, creating

¹⁶ For more on Beyoncé’s critics, see Arzumanova.

¹⁷ For more on Beyoncé’s use of religious iconography in her work, see Edwards.
truly beautiful images but also offering powerful contemporary depictions of Black motherhood.

While this complex dynamic of creative control is, in part, an element of contemporary branding, it contributes to the reflection of “good” and “bad” bodies within the social imaginary. While Black mothers are often represented in sensationalized ways based on controlling images such as a the welfare mother or the Matriarch, through her branding and through her casting in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé offers representations of Black mothers loving, fighting, and living in a woman-centered community, with the beauty of mothers and daughters as the focus. Within *Lemonade*, the context and the utopian possibilities of the world situates female bodies as inherently good and worth celebrating through the language of the camera lens. The eye of the camera lingers, admiring the bodies, holding the gaze, and noting even the imperfections. This camera gaze is different than the typical patriarchal gaze of the music video camera and, accompanied by Beyoncé’s narration of Warsan Shire’s provocative woman-centered poems, this gaze builds a utopia in which even the bodies typically considered “bad” in utopian traditions—the old and the broken—and those considered “bad” in American culture—the independent and sexually powerful female, the Black body—are all good bodies.

In contrast to the controlling images that both reinforce and are reinforced by the racist history of eugenic policies and reflected by the continued implementation of racist policies today, Beyoncé’s utopic vision gives her audience new representations of Black womanhood and Black motherhood, pushing back against the social imaginary that
dictates who can be imagined as an acceptable mother. In the chapter called “Redemption,” she recites, “So we’re going to heal. We’re going to start again…Pull the sorrow from between my legs like silk, knot after knot after knot” (Beyoncé 00:52:30-53:09). And while these lines could refer to the marital tensions referenced throughout the narrative, they also speak to a legacy of overcoming pain across generations. Each knot brings forth a new generation with new hope for the future. Through these representations, the reproductive justice framework is enacted with new aesthetics. New aesthetics yield new audiences eager to see not just aestheticized catharsis based in their fears, but multifaceted perspectives the potentials of feminist futurity based in hope.
Chapter Seven: Presence of Absence

By accessing new representations, both *Lemonade* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* series point forward and back, invoking resonances in ways that blur previously uncontested timelines. Before the hope is anger, emptiness, and loss. Beyoncé hisses the poetry of Warsan Shire: “The past and the future merge to meet us here. What luck. What a fucking curse” (Beyoncé 00:03:07-19).

Avery F. Gordon, in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, defines haunting as “one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied,” such as with American eugenics (Gordon xvi). While, as a country, we typically think of slavery and the eugenics movement as “over and done with,” their lasting influences appear in microaggressions between individuals, in doctor’s appointments, in public policy, and in personal identities. Specifying that haunting is not the actual experience of trauma or violence, but rather “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known” (xvi). This “animated state” takes many forms or no forms at all, sometimes being felt in what is not seen. In the “frightening familiarities,” “animated doubles,” and “involuntary repetitions,” haunting
makes itself known the presence of absence—in what is not there because of what was there once before, leaving its mark on both time and space. In calling to mind the haunting of violence, the violence appears again as echoes, even in the silence; in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Lemonade*, the violence perpetuated against people of color in the United States since the traumas of American slavery peek through even the contemporary political ideologies of feminism (Gordon 31). The image of the mother—the white mother in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the Black mother in *Lemonade*—and the fearsome potential of the end of motherhood—seeps through the generations and into these two texts. In depictions of mothers, daughters, and grandmothers, just as in historically violent places embedded with political significance, both texts stew in the past but look towards the future in different directions.

On the work feminist aesthetics must perform, Hilde Hein, in “The Role of Feminist Aesthetics in Feminist Theory,” asserts “Feminist artists face the dilemma that, having been acculturated in a male-dominated artworld, they have imbibed its traditions and values along with their artistic skills and aesthetic sensitivities” (451). Reacting to and rebelling against the grand tradition of male-dominated aesthetics and the violence against women it evokes, feminist artists use their own work against the worldview of the male gaze. Because of this interrelationship of feminist and male-dominated aesthetics, it comes as no surprise that “women are often irreverent to the rules set by phallocentric reasoning,” making them “free to write themselves out of the world that men have constructed and into another one” (451). Feminist artists thus, “face the challenge of
recasting these same experiences *as they are undergone by women*, so as to reveal an aspect of them that has been ignored” (451). Therefore, feminist art and media may involve the same violence as male-produced art and media, but the emphasis of the work is on the experience of the violence and the significance of the experience, rather than an aesthetization of violence against women. Their work creates new worlds and new worldviews, but is still simultaneously haunted by the violent traditions it reframes or rejects.

The dynamic between recasting and hauntng of violence is present in many forms in *Lemonade* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* but much of its presence is in the form of absence—what is not shown and what is not said. Beyoncé does not depict plantation slavery, but the resonances of American slavery are still felt merely in the setting of the scenes. Similarly, Episode Six of *The Handmaid’s Tale* never uses the word “slavery” or “sex slavery” to describe the condition of the handmaids, but the associations are implied. However, the haunting absence of slavery has very different implications in each text. In *Lemonade*, it suggests an anachronistic utopian potential—what would the world look like if women could coexist happily without the lasting legacy of American slavery? In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it reveals how far a dystopian America can be reimagined while still excluding/avoiding the history of slavery. There are no utopian potentials there.

Gordon points out that “ghosts are never innocent: the unhallowed dead of the modern project drag in the pathos of their loss and the violence of the force that made them” (22). These “sheets and chains,” as Gordon calls them, are the resonances that
remain lodged in places of violence or become enacted through social interactions. The ghosts are there for a reason and they represent the insidiousness of the atrocities that remain unsaid. *Lemonade* searches for these ghosts and brings them to light in setting and costuming—this is an intentional gesture to the “unhallowed dead.” Just as the women in *Lemonade* make direct eye contact with the camera and the audience, they seem to take on their ghosts directly, pointing towards the struggles each generation has had to overcome for the next. On the other hand, the entirety of *The Handmaid’s Tale* series sidesteps the racist history of eugenics in America in its conceit, focusing on the legacies of the abortion debate. The chains of American slavery followed by forced sterilization then rattle behind *The Handmaid’s Tale*, an ugly history that was easily neglected to capitalize on the white feminist audience that can relate to the fear of having their privileges taken away.

Katherine McKittrick’s *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* considers the importance of haunting and setting. She argues, “the production of space is caught up in . . . long-standing geographic frameworks that materially and philosophically arrange the planet according to a seemingly white, heterosexual, classed vantage point” (xv). This “production” of space organizes our social and cultural understanding of our world in both reality and in fiction. Furthermore, McKittrick argues that the present landscape for Black women is “both haunted *and* developed by old and new hierarchies of humanness” (xvii). In this case, “if past human categorization was spatialized, in ships and on plantations, in homes, communities, nations, islands, and regions, it also evidences the ways in
which some of the impressions of transatlantic slavery leak into the future, in essence recycling the displacement of difference.” (xvii)

In a sense, this is partly why the plantation scenes of *Lemonade* are so haunting: they depict this space of historicized violence without the difference one expects to be ascribed to it. The plantation scenes, typically a site of white power and violence, are shown as a celebratory space for Black women, what LaKisha Simmons calls an “impossible Black place” (Simmons). The plantation scenes, typically a site of white power and violence, are shown as a celebratory space for Black women (Fig. 3). But the difference here now resides in the depiction and in what is not depicted. The expectation of violence still haunts the scenes.

Fig. 3. One plantation scene from Beyoncé, *Lemonade: A Visual Album.*
Despite the aesthetic beauty of the plantation scenes in *Lemonade*, they create a sense of disorientation for the audience. Filmed at Madewood Plantation house near Napoleonville and Destrehan Plantation, these once-functioning plantations recall the legacy of American slavery, even as they are repurposed (Marshall). McKittrick, in her “Plantation Futures,” refers to the plantation as “an ongoing locus of violence and death that can no longer analytically sustain this violence” (2-3). As McKittrick calls for a reimagining of the violence of the plantation without recounting the inventory of violent acts that occurred there, Beyoncé repurposes the site of the plantation as a site of a utopic feminist community without references to the traumas of plantation slavery.

This site, as an imagining of the potentials of Black feminist futurities, brings together Black women of all ages and lived experiences to share the timeless space of these scenes. Beyoncé, Serena Williams, the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown, among many others, populate these scenes with grace and gravity. Now recognizable feminist actresses and activists occupy the plantation spaces with a grace that calls to mind both their activism and the centuries of separation between them and the ghosts of women like Douglass’ Aunt Hester and Harriet Jacobs. They are, as bell hooks says, “utterly aestheticized,” but to the effect of a silent juxtaposition to the traumas that bring them together—only adding a greater sense of haunting (“Moving Beyond Pain”). Through the subversion of the expectation of violence, the plantation scenes create an embodiment of place, a spatiotemporal positioning that encourages the “sheets and chains” to rattle into the understanding of the scene. The generations of Black
Americans impacted by the legacies of slavery appear in *Lemonade* as women without fear. Black women of all ages stare down the camera in the plantation scenes, dressed in white gowns à la *Daughters of the Dust* or other antebellum South clothing, creating a sense of timelessness through the anachronisms.

A reverse of this kind of disorientation occurs in Episode Six of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Set on and around Harvard’s campus, the New England setting and Puritan clothing similarly create a sense of instability and timelessness for audiences, but this timelessness is not celebratory; it is posed as a threat. On the use of Harvard as a major setting, Atwood writes,

> The immediate location of the book is Cambridge, Mass., home of Harvard University, now a leading liberal educational institution but once a Puritan theological seminary. The Secret Service of Gilead is located in the Widener Library, where I had spent many hours in the stacks, researching my New England ancestors as well as the Salem witchcraft trials. Would some people be affronted by the use of the Harvard wall as a display area for the bodies of the executed? (They were.) (“Age of Trump”)

The multi-valence haunting bubbles up through the spatial history of the institution. The use of a hallowed educational space as a site of mass violence (a display of executed bodies) is one complication that may register to contemporary viewers. However, the history of the Puritan seminary and witch trials allows for another type of haunting, one that constitutes a kind of “leakage,” as McKittrick says, or an “involuntary repetition” that Gordon describes. To place the violence of religion-based totalitarianism back on Harvard’s campus is only a return to a once-known and once-understood as commonplace expression of violence. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this cyclical repetition of
violence does different work than the haunted spaces in *Lemonade* by creating a
timelessness that viewers can understand as having a place in our world, rather than a
timelessness that feels like a fantasy. The sense of timelessness in Gilead remains
unquestioned because it repeats violence in ways that Americans have come to accept,
rather than imagining a once violent place without violence. Of motherhood, this suggests
that audiences can more readily accept a future of familiar violence against women and a
limiting of their reproductive decisions than imagine a world where women can choose
and celebrate their sexualities, reproductive choices, and experiences with motherhood.

Gordon identifies that “the ghost always registers the actual ‘degraded present’ in
which we are inextricably and historically entangled and the longing for the arrival of a
future” (207). In this entanglement, the ghost points both backwards and forward: to the
violent past but also to the potential for a less violent future. The ghosts in *The
Handmaid’s Tale* series point to violence in the past and track it through to the future, but
neglect the full complexities of their haunting by ignoring America’s eugenic past in
order to favor the already well-represented birth control and pro-choice movement.

*Lemonade*’s ghosts occupy space still haunted by violence in the social imaginary
understanding of plantation slavery. However, these ghosts linger in ways that point to a
new future aesthetic, one that can imagine these spaces without violence. Together, the
ghosts within these two texts overlap like spheres of a Venn diagram; they occupy a
space in the American consciousness of 2016 and 2017 that cannot be separated from the
present anxieties about women’s health in the United States.
Chapter Eight: Mimiery as Haunting

As a celebration of womanhood and motherhood in *Lemonade* and a descent towards dystopia in *The Handmaid’s Tale* series, both texts require that Beyoncé and Offred conjure pluralities of themselves through performance. In both visual texts, performance also summons a kind of haunting of oneself, as well as a reproduction of a past self. Beyoncé, making a career out of performance, plays with these kinds of ghosts to the most literal extreme. In addition to the brand she has cultivated, she performs as fictional characters, historical figures, and even created her own on-stage persona as Sasha Fierce. While fans and audiences typically only see Beyoncé when she is performing in some sense—whether on stage, in a music video, or on social media—behind her performance is the real Beyoncé, a woman who has a message to convey, who is also a mother, a wife, a daughter, and an activist.

As a character, Offred too, must perform. In the episode “A Woman’s Place,” Offred must perform her position as a handmaid who is happy to have “chosen” her role in Gilead. This type of performance is required of all the handmaids, but through Offred’s internal narration, the audience understands the difficulty of maintaining the façade. Offred’s narration constantly reveals her hesitation to know how to perform in each moment as every choice she makes can possibly yield terrible consequences for her. In the scene in which she is asked by President Castillo if she is happy as a handmaid, the
camera lingers on her face for an unbearably long moment as she decides if she will maintain the conceit of Gilead’s handmaids while surrounded by Gilead’s leaders. She hesitates for so long that it feels as though it should be obvious she is held against her will, but she finally speaks, claiming to be happy. This lie, while clearly painful for Offred, speaks to the continued performance she must maintain in order to avoid punishment in the oppressive regime of Gilead.

Both *Lemonade* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* rely on performance as a major element in their narratives. These performances, as intentional shifts in the way one wishes to be perceived by others, allow for both Beyoncé and Offred to continue their respective existence, though obviously in very different contexts. Their performances also mirror the kinds of performances often expected of women as “gender performance,” which is reinforced by and reinforces the social imaginary. Hilde Hein describes the social elements of gender:

> Gender must be viewed as a system of human relations that is deeply embedded in all other social relations . . . gender is complexly and interdependently entwined with all these other features of one’s identity. Gender must be thought of adverbially and not as a constant substrate. Women then, are doubly multiple . . . and individual woman’s subjectivity is also multiple, positionally variable, and contingent. (Hein 448-449)

Thus, these “doubly multiple” pluralities, performed based on social contexts that are “entwined” with identity, can be seen as a sort of haunting of oneself, a haunting that appears in gender performance in general, but specifically in gender performance that seeks to reach as a specific end, as in the case of Beyoncé and Offred—success or safety, respectively. While Beyoncé literally performs as a major part of her career as a pop
music artist, Offred must perform as though she has fully accepted her role as a handmaid in order to survive.

In *The Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray articulates this plurality as “mimicry.” Irigaray defines mimicry (*mimétisme*) as “an interim strategy for dealing with the realm of discourse (where the speaking subject is posited as masculine), in which the woman deliberately assumes the feminine style and posture assigned within this discourse in order to uncover the mechanisms by which it exploits her” (220). Irigaray describes this by saying, “They also remain elsewhere,” suggesting that women who enact mimicry are able to separate their bodies from the roles they take on and become plural (76). As both Beyoncé and Offred are mothers, their roles, even within their many different performances, are haunted by their position as mothers. Beyoncé can simultaneously be a pop icon on stage and create fictional narratives in her music videos while also featuring her daughter Blue as a major inspiration throughout *Lemonade*. Similarly, Offred, who was selected to be a handmaid because her first child showed evidence of her fertility, ultimately desires to find her daughter again while she must also participate in maintaining the power dynamics within the Waterford household. Within these conflicting roles, whoever the “true” woman is may remain deeply hidden. As a strategy, mimicry locates Beyoncé and Offred in positions of power without drawing the attention of the forces that seek to oppress them.

Building on these roles, Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor uses Irigaray’s mimicry to break down the “deliberate irony” of gender performance in *The Handmaid’s Tale* in "The Play
of Irony: Theatricality and Utopian Transformation in Contemporary Women's Speculative Fiction" (115). In Offred's case, gender is performed based on what is required to endure each day and the performance is recognized by her internal self in a way that is both dissociative and allows for sense-making. In Wagnor-Lawlor’s analysis, “female protagonists become, if they are not already, keenly aware of their own theatricality; over the course of their stories, they become aware of the political power of performance, not only in constructing--of deconstructing--gender, but also in creating both a personal and a social identity.” (114)

Therefore, "the irony theatricality exposes becomes a mode of agency and opposition" (114). Through a disassociation from her self, Offred gives herself a place to “remain elsewhere,” holding on to her memories from “the time before” and her name, which she reveals for the first time in Episode Six.

This mimicry is not only a deliberate performance of a stereotypically gendered role, but also “a playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language” (76). As Irigaray defines, “To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it” (76). Within performance, this mimicry is further revealed through the aesthetics, or the combined elements that make up an intentional visual aimed to produce a message of resistance. In Lemonade, the intentions behind these aesthetics reveal themselves in the setting, the clothing, the way she dances, the tempos of the songs, all of which culminate in the visual that conveys both her interpretation of one or more of her pluralities, but also conveys a message to the audience. In “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” for example, in a dark and dripping
underground parking lot, in furs and braids beside a Suburban, Beyoncé performs rage with the intensity and movement of a rapper. Staring down the camera, she laughs in the face of her cheating husband, tossing her wedding ring as a final ultimatum. Her audiences, both casual fans and fanatics, have no way of knowing if this performance is true to Beyoncé’s reality or another performance.

Offred, on the other hand, must perform complicity in the Waterford household. In Offred’s case, her audience is the Waterfords and the surveillance systems of Gilead. When Commander Waterford, annoyed at her inattention, tells Offred that his office is a privilege and asks her to leave, Offred very decidedly plays up her femininity in one of the first moments the audience sees her manipulate the Commander. A lengthy, close shot on her face in dark lighting conveys her decision without words (Fig. 4). Their dress—the Commander with rolled up sleeves and suspenders contrasted to Offred’s red dress and bonnet—heightens the intentional binary of their respective masculinity and
femininity and emphasizes Offred’s choice to perform the manipulation, both sexually and politically, that the Commander desires of her. This move towards agency through her mimicry brings Offred one step closer to her eventual confrontation later in the episode.

Wagnor-Lawlor refers to this intentional performance of mimicry as "critical distance" from oneself (116). Through this distance, Beyoncé and Offred can assert “a presence in their apparent absence, and thereby initiate a resistance to their (en)forced invisibility" (116). The most theatrical example of this is the Ceremony, the ritualized rape that is supposed to ensure the continued reproduction of those in power. In these scenes, as Wagnor-Lawlor points out, “the Gileadean ideologies would believe that at such moments the Handmaids, fulfilling their function, become most themselves, most essentially woman-ly; here we see that Offred experience such moments instead as one of dissociation” (121). Dissociation, as a type of mimicry, allows for a “dramatic gap between appearance and reality, authenticity and sham” (122). Wagnor-Lawlor concludes, “women like Offred, with a persistent residual awareness of their profound authenticity, begin to deploy a theatrical duplicity that defies their reduction to cyphers” (122). That self-awareness takes Offred to the “elsewhere” Irigaray refers to, a place where she can make choices for herself despite her limited freedom. Ultimately, through mimicry, as a haunting of herself from the time before Gilead, Offred can assert some semblance of agency within her performance of complicity. She is able to know she is not actually complicit, as shown again and again through tight close ups as she hesitates,
makes decisions, and manipulates her captors. Even here, her narration takes on a haunting feature in the series, a slow, ghostly reminder that she is still resisting.

These intentional performances of complicity or conventional femininity speak to an awareness of the self and how the self is perceived by others, an awareness that can be leveraged for political or ideological means. This plurality that encompasses the mimicry of performance is defined by the haunting of one’s self, as well as, for some, social roles such as motherhood. For Offred, her entire life in Gilead becomes a reproduction of complicity within the system in order to survive. Through her internal dialogue with her surroundings, Offred reveals her discontent and her terror. The audience senses each of her decisions that constitute her many different performances as she takes on different roles with different people. The space inside her head, as well as the environment in which she moves about, become “stages for scenes of irony that offer glimpses into utopian potentialities” (Wagnor-Lawlor 115). Whereas Offred’s existence is within her dystopic reality, through her narration, we as an audience also experience a disassociation from her world. This allows space to recognize the horrors of Gilead and imagine what could have allowed this slide into dystopia to occur, as well as understand the utopian ideals that led to the rise of Gilead. Lemonade, on the other hand, creates a far different glimpse into a possible utopia.

It is through the breaks in these scenes of utopia and dystopia that reality becomes recognizable to the audience. In the moments when the mimicry and performance breaks, the “true” woman appears. In Lemonade, the break in Beyoncé’s mimicry comes in the
video for “Sandcastles.” As a major tone shift from the narrative of *Lemonade*, “Sandcastles” departs from the version of Beyoncé’s brand we have come to expect. Reed Morano, who also directed the first three episodes of *The Handmaid’s Tale* for Hulu, served as the cinematographer for this video (Petersen). “Sandcastles” takes us away from the world Beyoncé had created and brings us in to an intimate moment between her and Jay-Z in a contemporary setting. Casual audiences may not find this disorienting, but viewers who have followed the rumors of Jay-Z’s infidelity will register the gravity of the moment Beyoncé sings “And your heart is broken because I walked away” into Jay-Z’s face at the camera tracks closely, invading the intimacy of the scene (Beyoncé 00:41:42-50). Here, more than anywhere else, one suddenly becomes unsure if we are looking at the real Beyoncé or not.

Whereas the majority of the visual album can be construed as a beautiful fictional utopia, “Sandcastles” brings us into the turmoil between Beyoncé and Jay-Z. “Sandcastles” also makes up a trio of songs that transition of the narrative of *Lemonade* from the individual to the political, implying that, in a sense, Beyoncé’s forgiveness of her adulterous husband is also a political choice, as is casting Jay-Z himself. This video enacts a kind of public humiliation for him whereas Beyoncé could have cast an actor in his role, or excluded a male presence in the video entirely. Regardless, audiences cannot help but be left to wonder: are we seeing the real Beyoncé and Jay-Z or simply the duplicitous mimicry of how they have cultivated their brands? This break marks a shift in the reproduction of Beyoncé’s character throughout *Lemonade*. As she has built herself
into an almost mythic icon by taking on personas throughout her music, video, and stage performance career, revealing such an intimate moment to her audience points towards a new performance of self: a reproduction of herself fully immersed in the ghosts of her true persona.

Similarly, at the end of “A Woman’s Place,” Offred confronts President Castillo concerning the truth of the handmaids’ captivity and demands action. This scene is one of the first public moments in which Offred disregards all consequences and reveals her true self and the true status of handmaids in Gilead. While Offred refers to herself as a prisoner and details the terms of her abuse and the other punishments she is threatened with, Castillo reveals the most dystopian truth of the episode: that regardless of the horrors of the handmaids’ position, they will still be traded as “goods” in order to allow for human reproduction in Mexico.

While this is a massive moment of resistance for Offred, who, throughout the episode, had been inching closer to this kind of political confrontation, it ultimately changes nothing in her reality, reinforcing the futility of her position as a silenced or invisible handmaid, the role she had been playing all along. This scene, however, finally gives the audience an opportunity to see Offred as she was: June (her name before Gilead). Through her act of resistance, even in its futility, the audience that had been so eager to see their feminism represented truthfully, can see Offred drop the guise of her complicity and, through her actions, show how important it is to resist. In a series that focuses on how complicity and inaction can lead to totalitarian regimes, finally seeing
Offred take steps towards resistance can inspire an audience who might feel trapped by the seeming futility of contemporary American politics.

The visual nature of both of these texts allows for mimicry to be enacted through multiple modes. Also haunting these visual modes are the intentions behind the aesthetics of each scene and within those aesthetics, the ideologies they stem from, all of which evoke specific messages about womanhood and motherhood. For Beyoncé, these elements work together to create political messages tailored to specific audiences. As a kind of haunting of oneself, her performances of the brand she has cultivated recall both the version of Beyoncé that audiences understand and expect and the Beyoncé that fans wish to know more about, the one who remains elsewhere and out of reach. Within *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the aesthetics work to create the terror Offred experiences regularly, while shaping Gilead into a fuller world than the novel allowed for. Her performances work to maintain the status quo in order to stay under the radar. Through her mimicry, Offred is haunted by her desire to resist and escape: she is trapped in Gilead while she longs to be elsewhere with her family from before. She remains haunted by her memories of them. As mothers, both must perform pluralities of themselves and simultaneously remain haunted by the reproduction of these pluralities.
Chapter Nine: Conclusion

As Le Guin says, “The future, in fiction, is a metaphor,” and that metaphor is not capable of predicting or creating what is yet to come, but rather speculates upon the possibilities (xix). This speculation sends a message about the state of the present or the state of the past. Maybe the future could be beautiful if we only could imagine reproductive freedom enacted in the world as it is in Lemonade. Maybe the world will end if we just remain complicit in the oppressions that maintain the status quo. A fictional future shows us the dystopic nightmare that looks all too familiar or a utopic possibility that we cannot reconcile with our present. But, it is through these fictions as metaphors that we must imagine new routes to better futures.

Both Lemonade and The Handmaid’s Tale series encourage their audiences towards some kind of social justice. The Handmaid’s Tale obviously points to the need for reproductive freedom and, while it is limited by its reliance on tropes of the pro-life/pro-choice debate, it also focuses on how quickly freedoms can be taken away when a society stops fighting for them. Lemonade, too, emphasizes the importance of these freedoms, but through modeling their utopian potential rather than focusing on how freedoms can be stripped away. When taken together, the two texts, though sometimes dichotomous, still give audiences glimpses into the future feminist potentials in contemporary American society.
These visual texts do cultural work because they spur their audiences into action. In their article “‘She Invited Other People into that Space’: Audience Habitus, Place, and Social Justice in Beyoncé’s Lemonade,” Amanda Nell Edgar and Ashton Toone perform an analysis of the audience’s affective experiences watching Lemonade. They found that of the participants they interviewed, many were inspired by Lemonade to create change in their own lives by way of finding language to enact social justice. Edgar and Toone refer to these participants as “anti-racist audiences” and consider their anti-racist perspective as a sort of threshold-crossing into a reality that now demands more anti-racist representations in the media they consume, the media they demand, and the media they create (4). They argue,

“beyond individual identity, . . . Lemonade offered a mediating step to unabashed public Black pride by both situating the visual album in spaces that have already been imagined through the lens of Blackness and by reimagining these spaces as fields that embolden anti-racist identity.” (7)

Through the use of place in Lemonade, such as the historically violent plantations, audiences were encouraged to imagine new perspectives on old spaces that were historically tied to anti-Black violence. As bell hooks called for with aesthetic accountability, the creation of old spaces as sites for anti-racist positioning leads to new aesthetics and welcoming new audiences.

However, no text can be perfect or can singularly encapsulate all the work that needs to be done to create a more just society. As Beyoncé continues to put out music, audiences must continue to engage with the meanings and intentions behind her performances. Similarly, as The Handmaid’s Tale continues to progress through the
series, audiences must hone a critical eye for the underlying messages and absences within the show. In order to continue to interrogate these modes deeply, Irigaray argues that audiences must “listen (psycho)analytically to [the] procedures of repression, to the structuration of language that shores up its representations, separating the true from the false, the meaningful from the meaningless, and so forth” (75). She calls for “an examination of the operation of the ‘grammar’ of each figure of discourse, its syntactic laws or requirements, its imaginary configurations, its metaphorical networks, and also, of course, what is does not articulate at the level of utterance: its silences” (75). Through haunting, performance, mimicry, reproductions, and repetitions the grammar and the silences between the grammar have the potential to move into new, more inclusive, more diverse, representations or they can continue to perpetuate the hauntings of violence as they are already familiar. Within the space of 2017, Lemonade: A Visual Album and The Handmaid’s Tale series both have their shortcomings, but build towards the new aesthetics and new audiences that this time of turmoil needs to see.

Still, as visual texts, both music and television series are economic endeavors just as they are creative endeavors. While both the visual album and the series may come from a place of social justice and feminist ideologies, they also are required by the constraints of their mediums to aim for financial success as a measure of their legitimacy. Their popularity may have originated from contemporary anxieties about reproductive freedoms, but their influence extends beyond than anxieties alone. In order to validate the creation of texts like Lemonade and The Handmaid’s Tale series, audiences must
continue to demand narratives that prioritize social justice messages and diverse representations in order to enact societal shifts towards reproductive justice. With the proven success of these texts and similarly popular films, series, and music, new social justice-based aesthetics are reaching broader audiences and further confirming the significance of aesthetic media in sparking social change.
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