


2018

Breaking Chains of Oppression: Popular Culture and the Plundering of Blackness

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Breaking the Chains of Oppression

Popular Culture and the Plundering of Blackness

Table of Contents

Introduction.....2

**1. Narrating White Supremacy: Inserting Black Voices into History in Colson
Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*.....13**

**2. The Impact of the Mainstream: Combating White Supremacy with JAY Z’s “The
Story of O.J.”.....32**

**3. Moving Forward: Breaking Chains of Oppression with Intersectional Feminism
and Beyoncé’s “Freedom”52**

Conclusion.....67

Works Cited.....79

Introduction

Plundering black bodies for financial gain began long before people migrated to the Americas. Since the birth of the United States, whites have enforced slavery and segregation through one form or another based on the idea that whites are absolutely superior to blacks and other people of color through the deployment of the ideology of white supremacy. Edward Said argues that this ideology emerged in the shadow of colonialism in “The Politics of Knowledge,” the “politics [of identity] has needed to assume, indeed needed firmly to believe, that what was true about Orientals or Africans was *not* however true about or for Europeans” (191). These separations based on social constructions of what an African or a European should be allowed for domination amongst European imperialists. Said argues that in the modern world people pay more attention to national differences than they did in the past:

Today a fantastic emphasis is placed upon a politics of national identity, and to a very great degree, this emphasis is the result of the imperial experience. For when the great modern Western imperial expansion took place all across the world, beginning in the late eighteenth century, it accentuated the interaction between the identity of the French or the English and that of the colonized native peoples. And this mostly antagonistic interaction gave rise to a separation between people as members of homogenous races and exclusive nations that was and still is one of the characteristics of what can be called the epistemology of imperialism. At its core is the supremely stubborn thesis that everyone is principally and irreducibly a

member of some race or category, and that race or category cannot ever be assimilated to or accepted by others — except as itself. Thus came into being such invented essences as the Oriental or Englishness, as Frenchness, Africanness, or American exceptionalism, as if each of those had a Platonic idea behind it that guaranteed it as pure and unchanging from the beginning to the end. (192)

The emphasis placed on difference by the imperialists allowed for their control and elevated their Western European or white race to the race which all others should strive to mimic. The idea of white supremacy strongly asserts a racial hierarchy in which whites are always at the top and black people, and other people of color, depending on the need, are placed at or somewhere near the bottom.

The idea of white supremacy was not born overnight as Ta-Nehisi Coates argues in *Between the World and Me*. Coates explains to his son how white supremacy, through the torture of black bodies, came to be one of the founding principles of the United States.

[T]he elevation of the belief in being white, was not achieved through wine tastings and ice cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and the various other acts meant, first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies. (8)

Here, Coates uses the term pillaging, and later uses the word plundering to explain the ways in which black people have continually lost their bodies and their freedom to white

supremacy. He argues that the plundering of the body is the same as losing the body and that this plunder occurs when people try to decide who should be included or excluded in society. Coates says, “I am black, and have been plundered and have lost my body. But perhaps I too had the capacity for plunder, maybe I would take another human’s body to confirm myself in a community. Perhaps I already had. Hate gives identity” (*Between* 59).

Throughout history there have been different phases of white supremacy, which have all sought to keep the black person subordinated and oppressed. First white people stole black bodies from Africa and then sold those black bodies into slavery keeping black people under white control. After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, whites needed a way to control and oppress the numerous black people, that they once bred like cattle. As bell hooks argues in *ain't i a woman?*, Jim Crow replaced slavery to “maintain white supremacy” because during the reconstruction years black people showed they could excel in the same areas as their white peers:

During the reconstruction years, manumitted black people had demonstrated that given the same opportunities as whites they could excel in all areas. Their accomplishments were a direct challenge to racist notions about the inherent inferiority of dark races. In those glorious years, it seemed that black people would quickly and successfully assimilate and amalgamate into the mainstream of American culture. White people reacted to the progress of black people by attempting to return to the old social order. To maintain white supremacy they established a new social order based on apartheid. The period in American history

is commonly known as the Jim Crow or “separate but equal” years, but both phrases shift attention away from the fact that separation of the races once slavery ended was a deliberate political move on the part of white supremacists. (59-60)

During slavery and throughout Jim Crow inequality was visible for all to see. No one debated whether or not a black person could rise as high as a white person, given the opportunity, because the United States simply would not let it happen. Although, as demonstrated for the brief period of time when there was no legal segregation, black people were as successful as their white peers. Whether white people owned blacks or legislation forced them to sit in the back of the bus or use a different bathroom or water fountain, signs let people know that black people were considered by the vast majority to be inferior to whites. While the signs separating races have been taken down, segregation and its ideology still exist. As Coates argues in *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* “The WHITES ONLY signs were not for decoration but to tell a certain tribe that, no matter their station in life, some part of the world, indeed the best part of the world, was carved out for them” (213). These signs reinforced the idea that whites were superior to blacks, and that being white, in and of it self, gave one a better position in life.

Most whites did not consider blacks as full people in the antebellum South. In fact, they only received designation as a person when the Southern politicians wanted to claim bigger populations in order to grab more power. As Coates notes, “Nearly one-fourth of all white Southerners owned slaves, and upon their backs the economic basis of America — and much of the Atlantic world — was erected” (*We Were* 182). Because of

this exploitation, the American Dream, the foundation of this country, is a baldfaced lie, embedded within in it the scar of historical trauma, a term that has been used to describe, as Thomas Hodge argues in *Intergenerational Trauma: The Ghosts of Times Past*, the ways in which trauma enacted in the past affects the way people interact in the present (6). As Hodge explains, “Historical trauma is the result of tragedies that have befallen a group of people resulting in maladaptive responses to later situations. Intergenerational trauma is escalated as the result of individuals perpetuating the trauma-related symptoms that came about as a result of historical trauma” (8). Even after the abolition of slavery and Jim Crow the United States found new ways to keep black people from gaining power, continuing the perpetuation of historical trauma to future generations. “To ignore the fact that one of the oldest republics in the world was erected on a foundation of white supremacy, to pretend that the problems of a dual society are the same as the problems of unregulated capitalism, is to cover the sin of national plunder with the sin of national lying” (*We Were* 198).

Michelle Alexander argues in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* that mass incarceration involves not only those who are currently locked behind bars, but those who are still affected by their label as a convicted criminal:

This larger system, referred to here as mass incarceration, is a system that locks people not only behind actual bars in actual prisons, but also behind virtual bars and virtual walls — walls that are invisible to the naked eye but function nearly as effectively as Jim Crow laws once did at locking people of color into a permanent second-class citizenship. The term *mass incarceration* refers not only to the

criminal justice system but also the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled criminals both in and out of prison. Once released, former prisoners enter a hidden underworld of legalized discrimination and permanent social exclusion. They are members of America's new undercaste.

(12)

In 2018, the United States still enforces both slavery and Jim Crow through mass incarceration and the prison-industrial complex. The prison-industrial complex works as a form of slavery by benefiting from cheap labor which further seeks to keep blacks under the control of the government. For example, William Quigley explains in "Prison Work, Wages, and Catholic School Thought: Justice Demands Decent Work for Decent Wages, Even for Prisoners" that UNICOR¹ "employs over 21,000 workers earning between \$.23 and \$1.15 an hour. These wages compare favorably to the average wages for federal prisoners who work in prison maintenance at \$.12 to \$.40 per hour" (1164). Even if a prisoner worked for 12 hours a day s/he would only receive at the most \$13.80 a day, and at the least \$1.44.

Not only do prisoners not receive a fair wage, but once they are released from prison all the forms of discrimination that were once illegal, as Alexander argues, are now legal, perpetuating the continuation of racial strife in this country:

Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color "criminals" and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind.

Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways

¹ A prison corporation that earns money from the cheap labor of prisoners.

that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination — employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service — are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.

(2)

This racial caste system paved the way for the creation of the prison-industrial complex creating what Alexander calls “The New Jim Crow.” In their report “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2017” Bernadette Rabuy and Peter Wagner state that “[t]he American criminal justice system holds more than 2.3 million people in 1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 901 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 local jails, and 76 Indian Country jails as well as in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, and prisons in the U.S. territories.” Those 2.3 million people only represent the people who are currently physically in jail or prison. These statistics do not take into consideration those living on parole or probation who are still under the rule of the criminal justice system. In fact, the NAACP’s *Criminal Justice Fact Sheet* states that 2.3 million African Americans — the same number of people in actual prison in 2017 — make up part of the 6.8 million Americans who are under some form of correctional control.

With the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and other civil rights legislation such as the Voting Rights Act, and later affirmative action bills, and finally the election of a black president, many people think that we have moved past race and issues of racism in this country. Racial divisions still very much exist, however, as one can see with the intensification of mass incarceration, lack of funding for education in inner cities, and the war on drugs. Furthermore, when one takes into consideration the prison-industrial complex, inner city crime, and police brutality, one can surmise that the United States allows for the continued perpetuation of trauma on black bodies, a situation that leads to the continued perpetuation of historical trauma. Because the idea of race did not end when the Civil War ended, white people continue to use race as a marker of difference. This marker creates inequalities, because imprisonment makes discrimination legal and black people are imprisoned at a much higher rate than white people. For example, “In 2000, one in 10 black males between the ages of 20 and 40 was incarcerated — 10 times the rate of their white peers. In 2010, a third of all black male high-school dropouts between the ages of 20 and 39 were imprisoned, compared with only 13 percent of their white peers” (*We Were* 230). Higher incarceration rates among black people continue the perpetuation of historical trauma through racism, guaranteeing racism passage from generation to generation, making it harder for each to achieve actual freedom.

In my thesis I address how the mass incarceration of black bodies helps reinforce white supremacy and the racial caste system in the United States. Then, I argue that contemporary novelist Colson Whitehead, and pop-culture icons JAY-Z and Beyoncé, have brought more awareness to the issues of racial disparities and mass incarceration in

the United States through their art forms which include narrative and visual components while using Critical Race Theory and Intersectional Feminism. First, I focus on Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Underground Railroad* to help give a historical background to the plundering of black bodies in United States history; as it is re-imagined in a novelized past. Whitehead's novel is important for the ways in which it depicts how deeply rooted racism and the practice of imprisoning black bodies is in the history of the United States. I argue giving a voice to a black female, Whitehead provides a more nuanced understanding of the ways black people dealt with slavery and fought for their freedom. Second, I examine JAY-Z's song, "The Story of O.J." and its accompanying music video to explore the artist's reaction to the injustices he sees and to examine the solution he offers for black freedom. Finally, I examine the songs "Forward" and "Freedom" from Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* giving special attention to this year's Pulitzer Prize winner, Kendrick Lamar, and his rap within "Freedom." Through their employment of Critical Race Theory, and Intersectional Feminism they show that perhaps the only way black people will gain freedom in this country is with the abolition of mass incarceration.

Instead of focusing on more traditional canonized literature, I decided to focus on a contemporary novel and two pop culture pieces to show the ways in which the popular and contemporary can address issues of systemic racism and reach broader audiences than those found in the university class room. As Sarah Kahn argues in "Queen of Kings: Beyoncé Politics and Pedagogy in the Juvenile Detention Center Classroom," "[Beyoncé's] willingness to make her audience uncomfortable resists our cultural

accommodation of sexism and racism in a way that no purely academic, theoretical, or activist movement can” (7). As Michelle Alexander, Ta-Nehisi Coates, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and others exemplify, writing academically about these issues helps, however, academics simply do not reach as many people as the pop-icon Beyoncé. *Lemonade* was not only the highest selling album in the United States in 2016, it was the highest selling album in the world that year (Parisi). Unfortunately, academic circles still cannot reach audiences in the way that Beyoncé can; luckily, both she and her husband JAY-Z make a concerted effort to show their huge audiences the injustices many black people face daily in the United States. Their massive fame makes them hard to ignore.

Finally, following in footsteps of Beyoncé, JAY-Z, and Whitehead, I will argue for the abolition of the prison-industrial complex. Because the United States incarcerates more people and people of color than any other industrialized democracy, a new approach must be formed when dealing with prison reform. For some, such as activist Angela Davis, prison reform is not enough, instead she argues in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* that the prison-industrial complex must be abolished entirely before we can reach any kind of equality in this country: “We need to reimagine security, which will involve the abolition of policing and imprisonment as we know them. We will say demilitarize the police, disarm the police, abolish the institution of the police as we know it, and abolish imprisonment as the dominant mode of punishment” (90). For Davis and for the purposes of this paper, we must also look at other forms of oppression when combating the prison-industrial complex or new forms of oppression will just take its place and a new form of

segregation will be created. Davis argues that acting as though racial inequality is in the past and no longer exists would be foolish:

[T]hose who assume that because slavery was legally abolished in the nineteenth century, it was thereby relegated to the dustbin of history, fail to recognize the extent to which cultural and structural elements of slavery are still with us. The prison-industrial complex furnishes numerous examples of the persistence of slavery. There are those who believe that we have definitively triumphed in the struggle for civil rights. However, vast numbers of Black people are still deprived of the right to vote—especially if they are in prison or former felons. Moreover, even those who did acquire rights that were not previously available to them did not thereby achieve jobs, education, housing, and health care. (88)

Because black men are more likely to be targeted by police and arrested than any other group in the United States, whites have successfully removed their presence from the social order by death or incarceration. We certainly have not “triumphed in the struggle for civil rights.” If anything, this country has taken a step in the opposite direction, legally allowing even less rights to those who have been to prison.

Narrating White Supremacy

Inserting Black Voices into History in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground*

Railroad

In *The Underground Railroad* (2016), Colson Whitehead offers up a fictional retelling of the Underground Railroad and argues in its narrative that black bodies have been plundered in this country through slavery, segregation, lynching, and sterilization. Whitehead shows how these acts have continued the perpetuation of plunder and how this plunder can easily leave lasting effects for the future generations of black people. Traditionally people in power silenced black voices in this country; the novel, however, is one avenue in which black people regained their voice and inserted themselves back into their history more accurately. As Lisa Woolfork argues in her book *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture* that “contemporary representations of slavery by African American writers imagine the slave past in an attempt to remember and reauthorize the enslaved” (3). Whitehead does an excellent job of reimagining the past in *The Underground Railroad* in which he makes Cora, a black runaway slave, the main narrator, not only inserting the retelling of history by a black person, but also he emphasizes the retelling of this history by a black woman.

In the novel, there are different chapters narrated by different characters, however, Cora narrates most of the novel and the story is mostly about her and her experience of escape. In the story Cora runs away from the Randall plantation with another slave, Caesar. Whitehead takes readers on Cora's horrifying journey in search for freedom using

the Underground Railroad, which in this novel is an actual railroad. Cora starts her journey in Georgia and moves through South Carolina where blacks are no longer slaves by name, but whites still exploit black labor while simultaneously planning the sterilization of black people. Realizing that South Carolina is no haven for her, Cora decides to leave and travels to North Carolina where white people kill any black person they find in “Friday Festivals.” Cora is forced to witness these weekly lynchings from the attic where a white couple has hidden her. After the couple’s Irish housekeeper realizes the couple is hiding a black woman in the attic she alerts the authorities. Just as Cora’s lynching is about to become the entertainment for the “Friday Festival,” Ridgeway appears and “saves” Cora because he can lawfully bring her back to her slavers, the Randalls. Cora finally gives in to defeat and thinks she will be returned to the Randalls, when three free black men attack Ridgeway and rescue her. These vigilantes take her to a farm in Indiana where she finds a false sense of security again — until Ridgeway finds her and tries to bring her back to the the Randall plantation. This time, however, Cora is resourceful and uses her shackles to attack Ridgeway and get away. Here the actual Underground Railroad ends, and Cora walks North by herself.

By focusing on atrocities inflicted on slaves in the past, Whitehead gives readers a way to understand how these atrocities might continue to oppress black people today. The trauma and plunder black bodies underwent for some 250 years of slavery allowed for whites to prosper and for the foundation of the United States. Without their plunder, arguably, Americans might not have the democracy or economic status the United States enjoys today (*We Were* 66). Furthermore, with the continued plunder of black bodies in

the prison-industrial complex, segregation and slavery continue to exist, just under a different name (Alexander 11). Throughout *The Underground Railroad* Whitehead gives fictional examples, based on actual events, that show the plunder that occurred during slavery. One such moment in the text shows how whites treated black people as objects instead of subjects by treating black people as though they were money instead of people: “A slave girl squeezing out pups was like a mint, money that bred money. If you were a thing — a cart or a horse or a slave — your value determined your possibilities” (Whitehead 6). White men bred their money using the bodies of black women as Whitehead suggests here. The new children made the slavers money through auction sales and free work, once old enough, allowing the white men to make even more money. If a slave showed little use or value that slave would most likely end up back on the auction block for sale, continuing to help the slave owner prosper off of the theft of black people.

Because the United States founded its democracy on the back of black labor, and black bodies carried the same weight as currency, as Whitehead argues, slave owners always tried to come up with ways they could make more money from their crops and the labor of their slaves. For example, Cora’s slave owners, the Randalls, feel financially secure because of their land and their slaves:

James contented himself with the security of a fashionable crop, the slow, inevitable accumulations of his estate. Land and niggers to tend it were a surety beyond what any bank could offer. Terrance took a more active hand, ever scheming for ways to increase the loads sent to New Orleans. He wrung out every

possible dollar. When black blood was money, the savvy businessman knew to open the vein. (Whitehead 23)

James Randall obtains wealth through the labor of black bodies, and with his accumulation of capital this wealth will help future generations of his family. Currently, owning the land and the slaves assures James, beyond having money in the bank, that he will be prosperous. By “opening the vein,” James, and other slave owners throughout the South, helped create the “democracy” that so many whites currently prosper in today. As Coates argues, this financial security would not exist for whites in the antebellum South if it were not for the fact that the “vending of the black body and the sundering of the black family became an economy unto itself, estimated to have brought in tens of millions of dollars to antebellum American” (183). In the novel, Whitehead argues that “The ruthless engine of cotton required its fuel of African bodies. Crisscrossing the ocean, ships brought bodies to work the land and to breed more babies” (161). Colonizers and slavery destroyed black lives and black families, as Coates argues, because white people used blacks as tools to earn money allowing white America to flourish, while blacks continued to suffer:

[Black] families lived under the threat of existential violence — in just the four decades before the Civil War, more than two million African American slaves were bought and sold. Slavery did not mean merely coerced labor, sexual assault, and torture, but the constant threat of having a portion, or the whole, of your family consigned to oblivion. In all regards, slavery was war on the black family.

(We Were 78)

Cora knows the war waged on the black family all too well from personal experience: she was separated from her mother who decided to fight in this same war by running away. Cora also knows that other slaves must fight in this war too. Cora, explains that, “A plantation was a plantation; one might think one’s misfortunes distinct, but the true horror lay in their universality” (Whitehead 102). While every slave experiences slave life differently, Whitehead’s novel makes clear the relationship between the universal and the specific under slavery as he makes clear the horror slaves faced every single day and the particularities that haunt Cora throughout the novel.

After witnessing a particularly brutal beating of a fellow slave during a birthday celebration, Caesar, another slave living on the same plantation, asks Cora to run away with him, effectively asking her to take a more active role in the war for the freedom of black bodies. Cora is hesitant at first, but after witnessing another slave being beaten to death she decides to go, and by doing so continues to fight for her freedom and life. During slavery, Coates argues that slaves fought for their freedom in different ways — some ran away, some rebelled and some broke rules:

African Americans understood they were at war, and reacted accordingly: running away, rebelling violently, fleeing to the British, murdering slave-catchers, and — less spectacularly, though more significantly — refusing to work, breaking tools, bending a Christian God to their own interpretation, stealing back the fruits of their labor, and in covert corners of their world, committing themselves to the illegal act of learning to read. (*We Were* 78)

When Caesar and Cora run away, they fight back; when a slave memorizes the Declaration of Independence on the Randall plantation, he fights back. When Cora kills a slave catcher she fights in the war for the freedom for black bodies that our forefathers started when they founded this country. Throughout *The Underground Railroad*, we see instances of slaves fighting back and trying to gain power and opportunity. Even though traditional slavery no longer exists for the reader of the novel, Whitehead fights in this war, as it continues into the present, by retelling a story and a history traditionally told over and over again by white men.

Once Cora and Caesar make it to the actual Underground Railroad, they board a boxcar, much like the box cars used to deport Jewish families during World War II. When the boxcar finally stops they find themselves in Whitehead's reimagined South Carolina, where black people work "freely" for whites making their own money. Of course, the employers take money out of their earnings for living expenses such as room and board and food leaving them with "scrip" (credit owed to the employer) to purchase other goods. This system forced them to be indebted indefinitely to their white employers, as Cora explains:

Money was new and unpredictable and liked to go where it pleased. Some of the girls owed months of wages and resorted to the scrip for everything now. Cora understood why – after the town deducted for food, housing, and miscellany like upkeep on the dormitories and schoolbooks, there was little left. Best to rely on scrip's credit sparingly. (Whitehead 101)

The new found “freedom” the black people experienced in South Carolina was a clever ruse created by the whites who lived there. Their employers garnish their wages first for rent, food, and upkeep, so the black people kept little or none of the money they earned. This may sound reasonable to some, of course, because adults must also pay these bills in order to live a productive life. The employers, however, charged more for rent, food, and upkeep than it cost them. Furthermore, if blacks found themselves spending scrip they continued to accrue debt owed to their “employers” trapping them in “employment” effectively making the “employers” slavers and the “employees” slaves further perpetuating their enslavement under the guise of freedom. Historically, the continuation of enslaving emancipated black people after the Civil War occurred through similar measures. As the novel exemplifies, if the “free” black person owed their “employer” any money at all, that employer legally forced them to work until they paid the debt. Likewise, the state could force a black person convicted of a crime to work for free. The same is true today, as Alexander argues: “The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution had abolished slavery but allowed one major exception: slavery remained appropriate as a punishment for crime” (31).

Because slavery via imprisonment remains an appropriate punishment for crime, the United States still legally discriminates against people of color through the vehicle of criminalization. The discrimination that started with slavery and imperialism led people in the United States to continue to discriminate against black people. As Alexander argues, “The notion of white supremacy rationalized the enslavement of Africans, even as whites endeavored to form a new nation based on the ideas of equality, liberty, and justice

for all. Before democracy, chattel slavery in America was born” (25). White supremacy deemed blacks as existing in a lower social position in the caste system than whites. Because this pernicious idea embedded itself early into American ideology, oppression gets passed along from generation to generation.

The American ideology of white supremacy is deeply embedded in the culture, as Alexander states: “Here, in America, the idea of race emerged as a means of reconciling chattel slavery — as well as the extermination of American Indians — with the ideals of the freedom preached by whites in the new colonies” (23). Similarly Coates argues that racism is the father of race (*Between 7*). By creating this hierarchy and saturating racial stigmatization throughout the United States it was easy for white people to believe they were and are the dominant race. Ridgeway, the bounty hunter exemplifies how the saturation of racism permeated all factors of life in antebellum and Jim Crow America in *The Underground Railroad*. Ridgeway like many white Americans of the time does not believe the United States should grant black people, or any minority for that matter, any rights. Ridgeway says, “If niggers were supposed to have their freedom, they wouldn’t be in chains. If the red man was supposed to keep hold of his land, it’d still be his. If the white man wasn’t destined to take this new world, he wouldn’t own it now” (Whitehead 80). His attitude is exactly the attitude that forced black people in to servitude and Native Americans off their lands all in the name of democracy. A democracy which surely did not exist with the founding of the republic, when many of its people, those making the money for the country, and those forced off of their lands, had and still have no say in the country’s proceedings. After all, as Alexander points out, “Under the terms of our

country's founding document, slaves were defined as three-fifths of a man, not a real, whole human being. Upon racist fiction rests the entire structure of American democracy" (26).

In *The Underground Railroad*, the mission of the prison-industrial complex metaphorically gets carried out through the cheap employment of black people in South Carolina and their need to use scrip since they are not really being paid. Slavery under a new name is not, however, the only atrocity occurring in South Carolina. Because slavery created so many black bodies, a real fear of black rebellion existed amongst slave owners. Whitehead shows this fear through a doctor who sterilizes black people in South Carolina:

America has imported and bred so many Africans that in many states the whites are outnumbered. For that reason alone, emancipation is impossible. With strategic sterilization — first the women but both sexes in time — we could free them from bondage without fear that they'd butcher use in our sleep. The architects of the Jamaica uprisings had been of Beninese and Congolese extraction, willful and cunning. What if we tempered those bloodlines carefully over time? The data collected on the colored pilgrims and their descendants over years and decades, the doctor said, will prove one of the boldest scientific enterprises in history. Controlled sterilization, research into communicable diseases, the perfection of new surgical techniques of the socially unfit — was it any wonder the best medical talents in the country were flocking to South Carolina? (Whitehead 122)

As Henry Louis Gates Jr. states in “Slavery, by the Numbers,” the black population grew to 4.4 million in the United States by 1860. Because of this massive population growth, whites were afraid of blacks being able to gain power and rebel. As Whitehead depicts in the novel’s reimagining of South Carolina, many whites sought to exterminate black people.

When Cora goes to the doctor, we find that the doctors sterilize the women in an attempt to eventually wipe out the black race in the United States. Cora depicts her doctor’s visit as follows:

After she dressed, Dr. Stevens pulled over a wooden stool. His manner remained light as he said, “You’ve had intimate relations. Have you considered birth control?”

He smiled. South Carolina was in the midst of a large public health program, Dr. Stevens explained, to educate folks about a new surgical technique wherein the tubes inside a woman were severed to prevent the growth of a baby. The procedure was simple, permanent, and without risk. The new hospital was specially equipped, and Dr. Stevens himself had studied under the man who pioneered the technique, which had been perfected on the colored inmates of a Boston asylum. Teaching the surgery to local doctors and offering its gift to the colored population was part of the reason he was hired.

“What if I don’t want to?”

“The choice is yours, of course,” the doctor said. “As of this week, it is mandatory for some in the state. Colored women who have already birthed more than two

children, in the name of population control. Imbeciles and the otherwise mentally unfit, for obvious reasons. Habitual criminals. But that doesn't apply to you, Bessie. Those are women who already have enough burdens. This is just a chance for you to take control over your own destiny." (Whitehead 113)

This conversation between Cora² and Doctor Stevens illuminates the ways in which black women were not seen as women, even if they are no longer slaves, and further showcases how this intersection of race and gender actually oppresses them more. Kimberlé Crenshaw argues in "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," that "violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class," (1242). Readers of *The Underground Railroad* witness how both gender and race play a part in the mandatory sterilization of some black women; a process that white women are wholly exempted from in the history of America. In the novel, doctors did not recommend white women at this time with more than two children be sterilized. Furthermore, mentally unfit white mothers existed in South Carolina too, without the threat of sterilization. If the practice sterilizing black women really benefited society through population control, then it would only make sense to sterilize white women too. White people in the novel, however, created the idea of population control, to support the idea of white supremacy, by exterminating or controlling the black race.

Cora understands the community's real interests, especially when the doctor explains the mandatory nature of the procedure for only black women:

² Bessie is the name used in the above section because Cora has changed her name to that of a free black woman's.

Then there was the matter of mandatory, which sounded as if the women, these Hob women with different faces, had no say. Like they were property that the doctors could do with as they pleased. Mrs. Anderson suffered black moods. Did that make her unfit? Was her doctor offering her the same proposal? No.

(Whitehead 114)

Cora's experience in Whitehead's novel exemplifies again how the intersection of race and gender makes oppression that much more intense. As bell hooks argues in *ain't i a woman*, "In a retrospective examination of the black female slave experience, sexism looms as large as racism as an oppressive force in the lives of black women.

Institutionalized sexism — that is, the patriarchy — formed the base of the American social structure along with racial imperialism" (15). Ironically, Dr. Stevens knows that black people are not biologically different from white people because he takes apart black bodies in order to learn medicine. Arguably, he would also know that sex organs only separate men from women, nothing else. So, even if he does not acknowledge or seek to make social change, he knows that blacks, including black women, display the same biology as their white counterparts, proving one is not better than the other.

During Dr. Steven's chapter we learn that he can obtain a black body to study more easily than a white body. Because he has studied black bodies more than white bodies he knows that biologically blacks are not different from whites. Dr. Stevens notes, "[W]hen his classmates put their blades to a colored cadaver, they did more for the cause of the colored advancement than the most high-minded abolitionist. In death the negro became a human being. Only then was he the white man's equal" (Whitehead 139).

However, even though Dr. Stevens knows no biological difference exists, he still continues to perpetuate racism because it socially and economically benefits him. Of course, no equality exists in death because equality does nothing for the dead, only for the living.

At the doctor's office, Cora notes that Mrs. Anderson, a black woman, who the people of South Carolina deemed mentally unfit, cannot choose if she wants to be sterilized or not. The state will mandate it. South Carolina could easily sterilize a newly freed slave because as Coates points out, "Plunder in the past made plunder in the present efficient" (*We Were* 207). Because these particular black people just discovered some new found freedom, whites were able to continue plundering black bodies for financial gain. Because many of these black people have not experienced true freedom, the whites in South Carolina found this form of plunder to be particularly easy to execute. When Cora recalls a memory of Mrs. Anderson, a "free" black woman, crying over the loss of her children, Cora realizes Mrs. Anderson's children were not taken by slavers, but by the people of South Carolina:

Cora thought back to the night she and Caesar decided to stay, the screaming woman who wandered into the green when the social came to an end. "They're taking away my babies." The woman wasn't lamenting an old plantation injustice but a crime perpetrated here in South Carolina. The doctors were stealing her babies from her, not her former masters. (Whitehead 123)

Cora sees the action of taking black women's children away, or taking away their right to procreate, just as damaging and troubling as slavery itself. These actions represent

another form of plunder that gives white people power while keeping black people subordinated.

Cora understands this plunder as she lives it. She understands that the United States is being built with slave labor, while the whites benefit, not the slaves, from such labor. She notes:

Stolen bodies working stolen land. It was an engine that did not stop, its hungry boiler fed with blood. With the surgeries that Dr. Stevens described, Cora thought, the whites had begun stealing futures in earnest. Cut you open and rip them out, dripping. Because that's what you do when you take away someone's babies — steal their future. Torture them as much as you can when they are on this earth, then take away the hope that one day their people will have it better. (Whitehead 117)

Today, we know that some black people live better lives than their ancestors. True freedom, however, is a rarity because the residual effects of slavery continue to affect black lives today. Blacks might obtain some upward mobility today to make better lives for themselves but the fact of the matter remains, the United States has not come that far in the race for equality. In *The Underground Railroad's* South Carolina, the blacks freed from whips and bondage, still wear chains that trap them in a white supremacist society as Cora discovers after visiting the doctor:

They had gone to bed believing themselves free from white people's control and commands about what they should do and be. That they managed their own affairs. But the women were still being herded and domesticated. Not pure

merchandise as formerly but livestock: bred, neutered. Penned in dormitories that were like coops or hutches. (Whitehead 124)

Because Cora and Caesar realize South Carolina tricked them into believing they achieved some sort of freedom, they decide to continue traveling North, to an authentic free state. Leaving, however, turns out to be more difficult than they expected; as Caesar is beaten to death by the townspeople in South Carolina, and Cora is forced to continue on her journey alone.

Upon reaching the train platform in North Carolina, a white man, Martin Wells, finds Cora and becomes extremely concerned because death is the only fate for black people in North Carolina. So, Martin, a former abolitionist, decides to take Cora home and hide her in his attic. On their way to her new hiding place, they travel down a road called the “Freedom Trail,” where hanging black corpses fill the trees. In her description of this horrendous road, readers get a glimpse into horrors of being black, free or not:

The corpses hung from trees as rotting ornaments. Some of them were naked, others partially clothed, the trousers black where their bowels emptied when their necks snapped. Gross wounds and injuries marked the flesh of those closest to her, the two caught by the station agent’s lantern. One had been castrated, an ugly mouth gaping where his manhood had been. The other was a woman. Her belly curved. Cora had never been good at knowing if a body was with a child. Their bulging eyes seemed to rebuke her stares, but what were the attentions of one girl, disturbing their rest, compared to how the world had soured since the day they were brought into it? (Whitehead 152)

When Cora witnesses these bodies hanging from trees the novel drives home the point that America was built on racism and white supremacy because those living in North Carolina could not even exist in the same state as blacks. Once Cora is safely hidden within the attic, life becomes increasingly more difficult, as any semblance of freedom she gained she loses entirely.

Not only does she hide in uncomfortable positions for hours at a time, she must watch lynchings that occur right outside of the house she hides in. As Cora notes the lynchings take place on stages and in parks that were built by black labor:

Colored labor had erected every house on the park, laid the stone in the fountain and the paving of the walkways. Hammered the stage where the night riders performed their grotesque pageants and the wheeled platform that delivered the doomed men and the woman to the air. The only thing colored folks hadn't built was the tree. God had made that, for the town to bend to evil ends. (Whitehead 176)

Here, Whitehead argues that even though the labor of black people built this country, they do not get to benefit from their own construction. Instead whites hang black people in the trees in the the parks and on the stages that blacks created. For Coates, the American story is a tragedy because white people fled to this continent to seek freedom from religious and political persecution, claiming the land was free for all, when in reality it was only free for those people who were white:

The American story, which was my story, was not the tale of triumph but a majestic tragedy. Pilgrims and revolutionaries fled oppression and dreamed of a

world where they might be free. And to pull the dream out of their imaginings, to bring the theory into reality, they broke our backs, taking up the very cudgel of oppression that had first sent them to flight. And I now knew that the line dividing black and white America was neither phenotypical, nor cultural, nor even genetic. In fact, there was no line at all, no necessary division of any kind. We were not two sides of a coin. We were not the photonegative of each other. To be black in America was to be plundered. To be white was to benefit from, and at times directly execute, this plunder. No national conversation, no invocations of love, no moral appeals, no pleas for “sensitivity” and “diversity,” no lamenting of “race relations” could make this right. Racism was banditry, pure and simple. And the banditry was not incidental to America, it was essential to it. (*We Were* 211)

We witness this banditry throughout the novel, but perhaps one of the novel’s clearest examples of banditry occurs when the Irish maid figures out Cora is hiding in the attic and tells the town’s leaders. She tells on the family she works for because as an Irish immigrant many other settlers look down on her, and even consider her a second class citizen. As Coates notes, “The Irish so victimized by Cromwell escaped to America, where they swiftly joined in violence against African Americans” (*We Were* 160).

Because she is white, she still obtains more rights than black people. Cora narrates: “At the foot of the porch, Fiona held forth to a group of girls from Irishtown. ‘A girl’s got to look after her interests if she’s going to get ahead in this country,’ she explained” (Whitehead 187). Only because she is white, however, does looking after her interests get her ahead in this country. Cora, too, looks after her interests in the novel and

continues to be severely punished for it, while the townspeople give Fiona high praise for turning Cora in.

Fiona's actions solidify the lie of the American dream. For freedom only exists for people who have the right skin tone. As Whitehead points out through his character

Lander:

“And America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all. The white race believes — believes with all its heart — that it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers. This nation shouldn't exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are.” (285)

The “here” stated above refers to the location black people find themselves in in the United States due to white supremacy. The idea of white supremacy carried into the present, as Alexander argues, perpetuating the racial caste system in this country:

The history of racial caste in the United States would end with the Civil War if the idea of race and racial difference had died when the institution of slavery was put to rest. But during the four centuries in which slavery flourished, the idea of race flourished as well. Indeed, the notion of racial difference — specifically the notion of white supremacy — proved far more durable than the institution that gave birth to it. (26).

The belief in white supremacy is the foundation of the United States and the use of white supremacy systemically embeds racism into American policy today. The first step to equality begins with the abolition of the prison-industrial complex, as well as ending the

war on drugs, which promotes racial profiling. Whitehead seeks to critique this system by rewriting history with a black woman's voice and highlighting the atrocities of slavery and cheap labor in *The Underground Railroad*. Not until white people admit our forefathers founded this country on white supremacy will we be able to end discrimination and modern day slavery in the prison systems.

The Impact of the Mainstream

Combating White Supremacy with JAY Z's "The Story of O.J."

While the government of the United States continues to ignore many of the issues that continue the plunder of black bodies, using them for social and economic gain, or even continues to heighten the problem by cracking down on drug offenses and promoting stop and frisk procedures, many cultural artists and celebrities have decided to take a stand against the mistreatment of minorities in this country instead of ignoring some of our nation's biggest problems. When police arrested Shailene Woodley for protesting at Standing Rock, she shone a spotlight on a situation that many major news corporations refused to report on. When Colin Kaepernick, who was recently named by Amnesty International the Ambassador of Conscience, took a knee, instead of standing for the National Anthem, because of the mistreatment of blacks in this country, he forced football fans to pay attention to a civil rights protest. Despite no one picking Kaepernick in the last two NFL drafts, taking a knee continued into the 2017 NFL football season. The practice of taking a knee forces people to recognize that black people continue to be treated as second class citizens in the United States. When Beyoncé performed "Formation" during the 2016 Super Bowl 50 Halftime Show she and her backup dancers dressed in what appeared to be Black Panther garb calling out to fellow black females to "get in formation." Here she addressed publicly the issues that exist this country regarding race and discrimination, showing that she sides with the current civil rights movement and #blacklivesmatter.

Even if people in academia are able to examine white supremacy and all the ways in which it is deeply ingrained into the American unconscious, it is hard to fathom them having a lasting impact like pop icons such as Beyoncé or JAY-Z who are making critical claims about racial disparity caused by the plundering of black bodies for the foundation of the United States. Particularly, Beyoncé may be a site of hope in the fight for equality, with the proclamation that she is a feminist, meaning she is an Intersectional Feminist who seeks to disband all forms of oppression. The attention given to the absence of black men, police brutality and extreme poverty in *Lemonade* shows her commitment to fight many forms of inequality. Likewise, fewer people are inclined to read pure theory like Alexander and Coates and would rather opt for fiction like Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, which is why it is so important that the novel include personal critical theory as well. JAY-Z and Whitehead are fighting these systemic problems in similar ways by putting the black body at the forefront of their art and showing that the black body is not a tool to be utilized or exploited. The argument made by Beyoncé, JAY-Z and Whitehead that black bodies are not tools is powerful because they display these issues for both contemporary literary criticism and the mainstream public. They do not sugar coat the black experience in this country and they highlight the ways in which, as Coates argues in *Between the World and Me*, that black people “lose their bod[ies]” (5).

While true that scholars study racial issues and mass incarceration through Critical Race Theory and Intersectional Feminism, they inevitably do not bring as much attention to these issues as celebrities with millions of fans and Twitter followers do. Many would like to believe that the United States mostly moved past racial oppression, after the United States ended slavery, passed the Civil Rights Act and a black man held the title of president for two terms. As one can

witness in the election of Donald Trump and the rhetoric used to win this election, however, we can clearly see how the United States still perpetuates systemic racism. Because plantations run by free black labor no longer exist in the South, nor does mandated segregation, many people believe discrimination only happens on the personal level and that it no longer occurs at the political level. This assumption, however, is incorrect. Unfortunately, slavery, segregation, and unconscious racism still thrive in the United States, continuing to make racial discrimination political and systemic as well as personal. When pop-culture icons like Beyoncé and JAY-Z stand against these systemic issues, they declare themselves allies in the fight for equality, and argue for racial awareness, whether Americans want it or not. By creating cultural documents that combat racism, mass incarceration, and police brutality in the homes of millions of viewers, these topics circulate in an important cultural arena of great scope and influence.

As the NAACP's *Criminal Fact Sheets* points out, when police arrest people for possession of drugs, they disproportionately arrest people of color. Many have prior convictions, many cannot afford to hire a lawyer, and many cannot afford bail so they must wait in jail until their court hearing as Bernadette Rabuy and Peter Wagner point out in their report *Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2017*. The prior convictions, the racial profiling the mandatory minimum sentences, and the lack of funding for attorneys create a cycle many cannot break out of once they enter the circuits that lead to the prison-industrial complex and mass incarceration of black and brown bodies. Further perpetuating white supremacy in the United States, these racial disparities, heightened by the war on drugs, prove, as Michelle Alexander argues, in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, that while Jim Crow legally ended in 1964 a

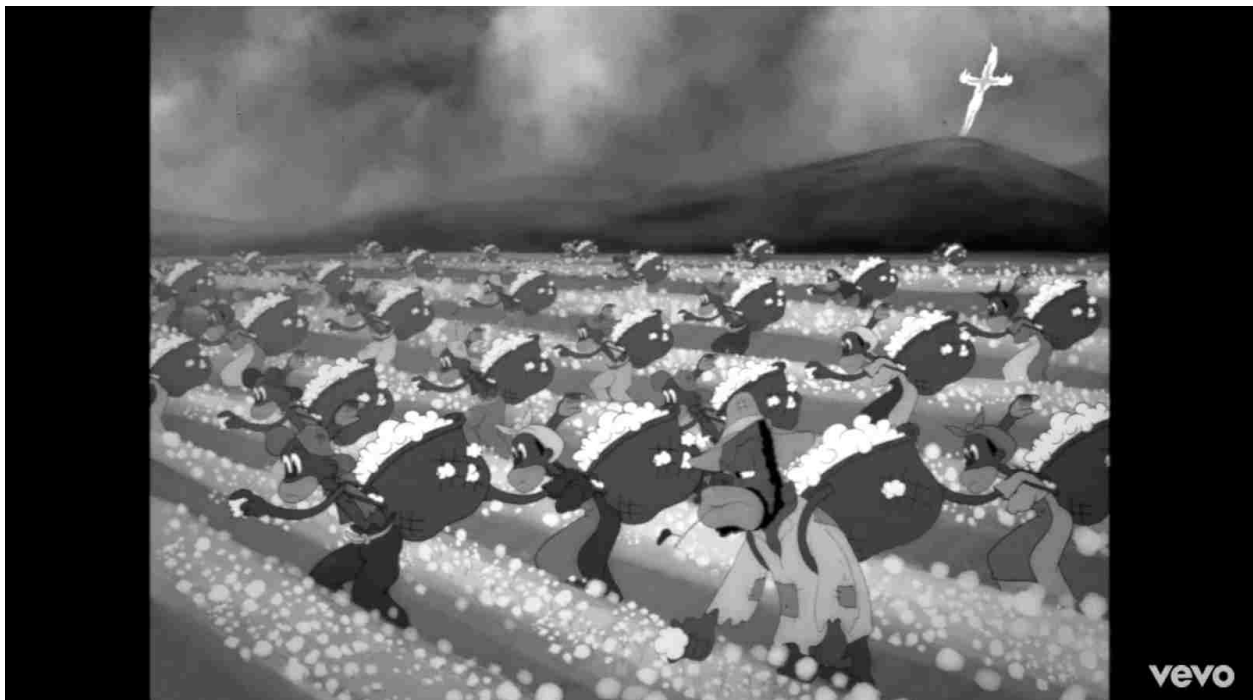
new form of systemic racism, or a “racial caste system” took its place and created the issue of mass incarceration (2).

JAY-Z examines this racial caste system in his song “The Story of O.J.,” the second song on his new album *4:44*. The lyrics and the animation explore the ways in which black people have been exploited and misrepresented in this country. This exploitation and misrepresentation leads to stereotypes that effectively keep black people on the bottom. “The Story of O.J.” exemplifies an instance where JAY-Z brings black issues into the homes of all of his listeners. The song starts out with JAY-Z rapping the chorus: “Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga/rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga/still nigga, still nigga” by repeating the word nigga and ending the chorus with the repetition of “still nigga” JAY-Z defines “nigga” as a person whose black body belongs to someone else, either through slavery or entertainment. In his chorus JAY-Z proclaims that no matter how far black people make it in the United States, their skin color, no matter what, remains one of their most defining qualities, not their work ethic, or the amount of money they earn in their lifetime. Then JAY-Z makes a reference to O.J. Simpson’s quote about not being black. “O.J. be like, ‘I’m not black I’m O.J.’/Ok” commenting on how even if Simpson did not want to label himself as black, the rest of the United States certainly did. Whites thought of Simpson as successful and their friend, and because of that they ignored the ways they were actually using Simpson as a prop to say, “Look, we have a black friend, we aren’t racist,” imprisoning him in the system as a caricature, of black exceptionalism proving JAY-Z’s point that despite not being black as Simpson proclaimed he was “still nigga,” or still a slave in the public’s mind, as JAY-Z argues.

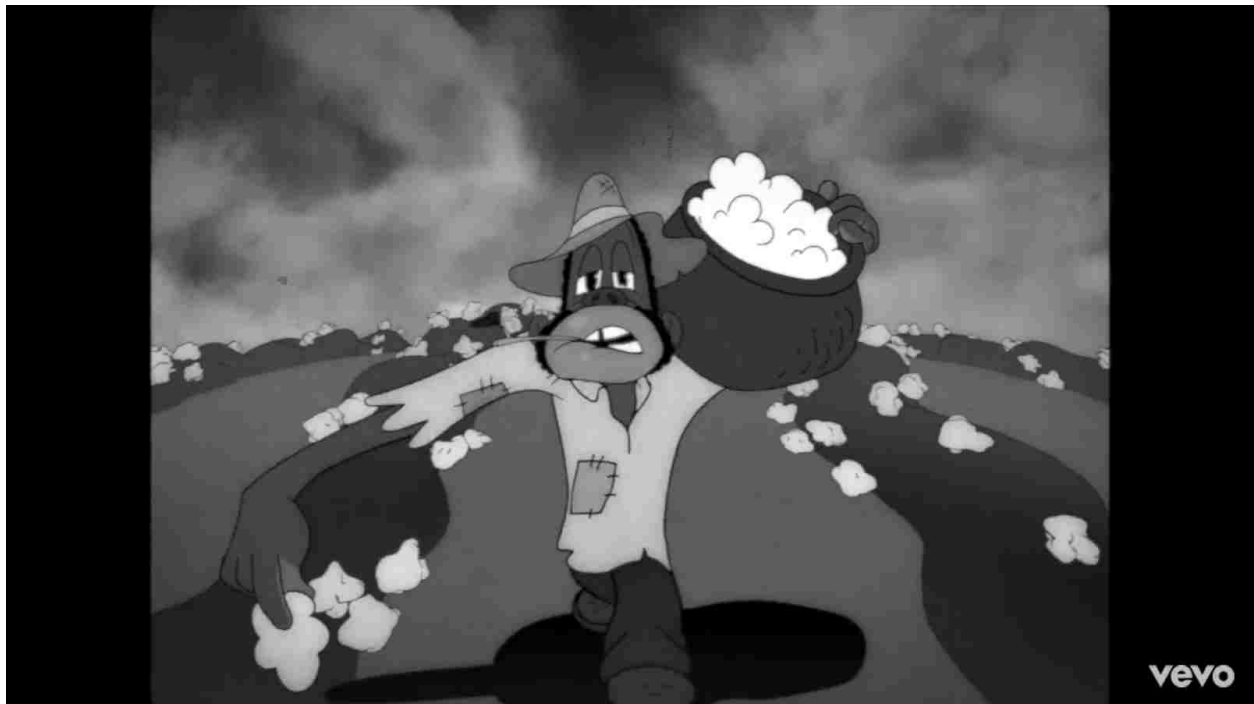
Our forefathers built the United States on the presumption of white supremacy, an idea that resulted in the easy exploitation of black labor by using blacks bodies as tools to make money. Today, black people, even after the abolition of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, find themselves trapped in a system that benefits from their imprisonment. As Coates argues in *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*, the oppression of black people in the United States started very obviously with slavery, and without slavery the United States would not exist. “[I]t was slavery that allowed American Democracy to exist in the first place. It was slavery that gifted much of the South with a working class that lived outside of all protections and could be driven, beaten, and traded into generational perpetuity” (66). Therefore, without slave labor, the United States would not exist today, at least not in the same way. For example, it would not exist as an economic powerhouse even during a recession. Furthermore, current slave labor in prisons still helps our economy function as I noted in the Introduction. As Coates contends, “America had a biography, and in that biography, the shackling of black people — slaves and free — featured prominently” (*We Were* 70). As we fill prisons with more black and brown bodies every year, this shackling continues systematically removing black and brown bodies from society and cutting off access to benefits that come with being a citizen or part of a community.

Even though the founders built the United States on the backs of black labor, blacks received no citizenship or voting rights, despite the fact that without black labor there would not be a democracy, as Coates argues, “America is literally unimaginable without plundered labor shackled to plundered land, without the organizing principle of whiteness as citizenship, without the culture crafted by the plundered, and without that culture itself being plundered (*We Were*

85). Through the denial of this plunder and the true nature of how our country came to be, whites can choose to ignore the current plunder that occurs today by forcing black men into prisons or ghettos. Austin Elias-de Jesus argues in “JAY-Z’s New Music Video Uses America’s Long History of Racist Cartoons to Deliver a Haunting Message,” that JAY-Z’s video for “The Story of O.J.” visually explores how this plunder affects black Americans, calling attention to, “America’s long history of racist cartoons from Fleischer Studios, Warner Bros., and Disney.” JAY-Z’s cartoon character Jaybo, who sings the song in the music video, moves from plantations to inner cities, showing how being forced into slavery forced people into the ghetto and prison and trapped them there through systemic forms of oppression. Perhaps one of the most compelling images in JAY-Z’s music video shows a burning cross on a hill looking down on the slaves picking cotton. This image reminds the audience that this country was founded on free black labor and white supremacy.



In JAY-Z's video we continue to see the residual effects of slavery, as Jaybo travels back and forth between the antebellum plantation, the modern day inner city, and the prison cell. In these two shots taken from JAY-Z's music video, "The Story of O.J.," he shows how the harsh realities of slavery and the terrible realities of being confined to the ghetto, leads black people towards prison. In the first image we see a slave working on a plantation looking miserable from having had his labor plundered all day. In the second image we can see a hustler on the corner with a homeless man next to him and a pimp and sex worker in the background, showing the ways in which many black people cannot pull themselves out of poverty because of the residual effects of slavery on today's society.





These images starkly remind us of how the United States was really founded and show us what many black people must face today as a consequence of their enslavement. The images show the way in which American democracy depended upon black labor as Coates explains, rich and poor whites alike owned slaves. “In the seven cotton states, one-third of all white income was derived from slavery. By 1840, cotton produced by slave labor constituted 59 percent of the country’s exports” (*We Were* 181). Through these illustrations and in Coates explanation people can begin to understand how first slavery constructed the black body as not-human. After the abolition of slavery, Jim Crow took its place, and now mass incarceration works to keep blacks poor, segregated, and oppressed.

Mass incarceration and confining most blacks to ghettos continues to perpetrate their oppression, as Coates states: “The sins of slavery did not stop with slavery. On the contrary, slavery was but the initial crime in a long tradition of crimes, of plunder even, that could be traced to present day” (*We Were* 158). Especially when one takes into consideration the amount of poverty and violence that exists in racially segregated spaces because of unfair housing

practices that existed during the 1930's through 1960's, as Coates notes, "black people across the country were largely cut out of the legitimate home-mortgage market through means both legal and extralegal" (*We Were* 168). The practice of refusing black people real and legitimate home loans effectively cut them off from resources available to most whites, turning the American Dream into a myth for black people. Of course while banks were denying black people home loans: "whites looking to achieve the American dream could rely on a legitimate credit system backed by the government. Blacks were herded into the sights of unscrupulous lenders who took them for money and for sport" (*We Were* 170). Without financial stability one does not live the American dream. As JAY-Z proclaims in "The Story of O.J." "You wanna know what's more important than throwin' away/money at the strip club? Credit." Here, JAY-Z tries to encourage black people to become more financially conservative and responsible. As the images in the music video and the chorus of the song, which repetitively states, "still nigga," suggest, however, it is difficult to obtain good credit when so many societal factors make it nearly impossible to save money, let alone build credit.

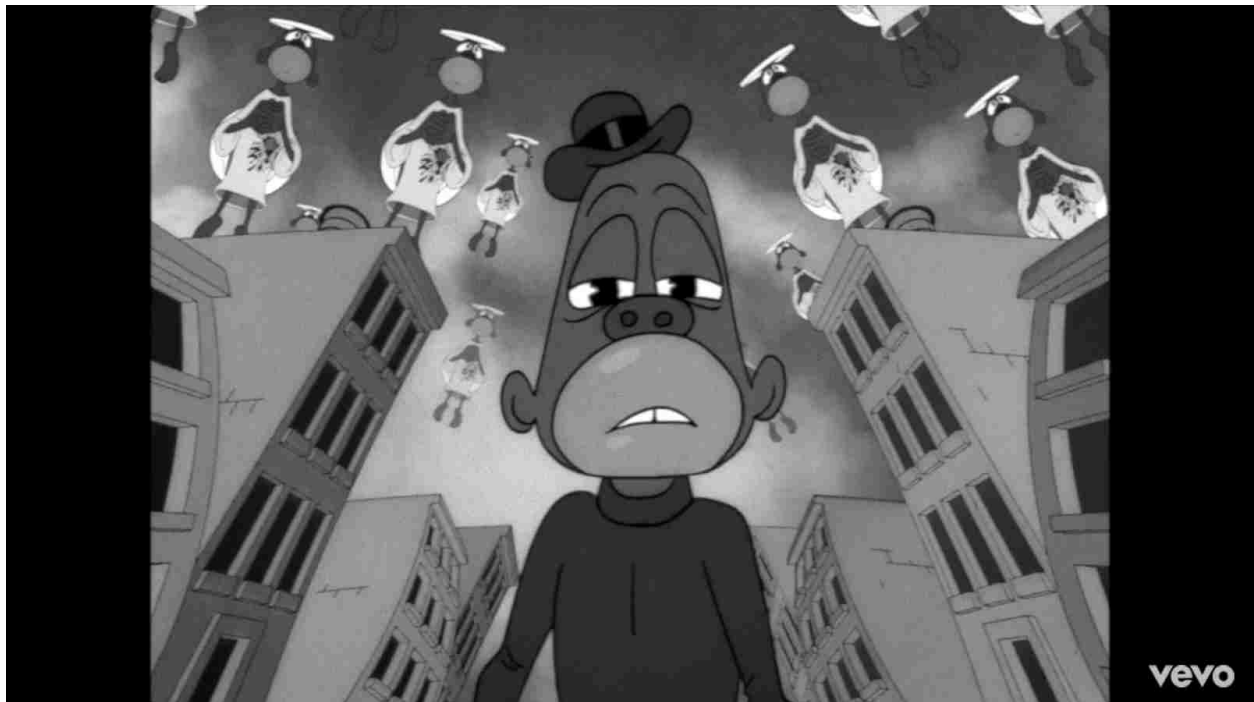
Even as Coates acknowledges, the progress towards equality made in the United States is not much. He observes that systems of oppression are still in place making it difficult for blacks to gain financial stability even today.

The lives of black Americans are better than they were half a century ago. The humiliation of WHITES ONLY signs is gone. Rates of black poverty have decreased. Black teen pregnancy rates are at record lows — and the gap between black and white teen pregnancy rates has shrunk significantly. But such progress rests on shaky foundation, and fault lines are everywhere. The income gap between black and white

households is roughly the same today as it was in 1970. Patrick Sharkey, a sociologist at New York University, studied children born from 1955 through 1970 and found that 4 percent of whites and 62 percent of blacks across America had been raised in poor neighborhoods. A generation later, the same study showed, virtually nothing had changed. And whereas whites born into affluent neighborhoods tended to remain in affluent neighborhoods, blacks tended to fall out of them. (*We Were* 173)

JAY-Z likely knows these exact statistics as his lyrics tell us that he knows many black people are living in poor segregated neighborhoods. Many of them do not own their house, as JAY-Z makes evident in the following lyrics:

I told him, “Please don’t die over the neighborhood
That your mama rentin’
Take your drug money and buy the neighborhood
That’s how you rinse it.”



Here, JAY-Z suggests that instead of fighting for a neighborhood that technically belongs to the government, as they live in poor neighborhoods or government sponsored housing projects, one should save their drug money and buy the neighborhood so they can defend their families and communities instead of fighting over neighborhoods that cause more harm than good. In the above image JAY-Z argues that many black people have died defending property that is not theirs when he shows the image of the angles flying out of the inner city.

JAY-Z takes into consideration how difficult a task buying the neighborhood would be. The first difficulty would be raising the money and the second would be not squandering the raised money on fancy items that capitalism encourages people to buy. JAY-Z admits in the song that when he first started earning money he wasted it on fancy cars, rapping, “I bought every V12 Engine/Wish I could take it back to the beginnin’” and that investing in real estate would have yielded him considerably more money. He laments,

I coulda boughta place in Dumbo, before it was Dumbo

For like 2 million

That same building today is worth 25 million

Guess how I’m feelin’, Dumbo

Because JAY-Z admits to wasting money on flashy cars instead of investing it, he shows his listeners that he actually has a more nuanced understanding of the confusing situation many black people find themselves in after becoming rich. Because they have been told by the media and capitalism at large that they need to buy flashy cars and diamond rings, to achieve status, the complexities of the situation black people making a lot of money find themselves in is a point of JAY-Z’s analysis.

Because white America enslaved black people in this country for over 200 years, generational wealth almost does not exist. In fact Coates argues that while whites usually inherit wealth, blacks usually inherit debt, making the American dream that much harder to achieve for black Americans than white Americans. Many believe that with a good work ethic black people will be able to pull themselves out of poverty, but this is a myth as Coates contends: “Whites in the middle class often brought with them generational wealth — the home of a deceased parent, a modest inheritance, a gift from a favorite uncle. Blacks in the middle class often brought with them generational debt — an incarcerated father, an evicted niece, a mother forced to take in her sister’s kids” (*We Were* 158). As a result, real economic advancement is difficult for black people to obtain, making upward mobility difficult. Furthermore, the lie that there are “separate but equal” demographics of whites and blacks continues to be perpetuated. This means, as Coates suggests, that blacks have a harder time reaching financial stability than whites, and once they reach that stability, they are not as stable as their white peers. This disparity proves that racism continues to be a systemic force driving this country. “As a rule, poor black people do not work their way out of the ghetto — and those who do often face the horror of watching their children and grandchildren crumble back” (*We Were* 174).

As a rap legend, JAY-Z uses his fortune and his art to reach his massive audience with the hope that he can help pull black people out of poverty by first acknowledging that a problem exists and then secondly by offering a solution — buying real estate, or investing one’s money instead of wasting it on commercial goods that will lose value instead of gain value. JAY-Z and Beyoncé are both committed to making sure their offspring do not fall back into the clutches of

the ghetto by investing their money in real estate as mentioned, and in art. This conviction to build “credit” comes through in his lyrics:

Financial freedom my only hope
Fuck livin’ rich and dyin’ broke
I bought some artwork for one million
Two years later, that shit worth two million
Few years later, that shit worth eight million
I can’t wait to give this shit to my children

Again, JAY-Z emphasizes the importance of investing money rather than spending money. Instead of living the craziest most lavish life he can (and let's face it, he and Beyoncé both live fantastic and lavish lives) he wants to be able to take care of his children so that his children can, in turn, take care of their children without falling into poverty. JAY-Z actively works to make sure his children will inherit wealth as opposed to debt.

By raising awareness of the black struggle in his music, JAY-Z proves he does not want only his family to benefit from society; instead, he wants all black families and black communities across America, who have been systemically oppressed, to be able to achieve the promise of the American Dream. Because black families, however, are subject to concentrated prejudice this task is probably more difficult than JAY-Z’s solution of investing money because, as Coates argues segregation, both during Jim Crow, and today continues to disadvantage African Americans:

With segregation, with the isolation of the injured and the robbed, comes the concentration of disadvantage. An unsegregated America might see poverty, and all its

effects, spread across a country with no particular bias toward skin color. Instead, the concentration of poverty has been paired with a concentration of melanin. The resulting conflagration has been devastating. (*We Were* 174)

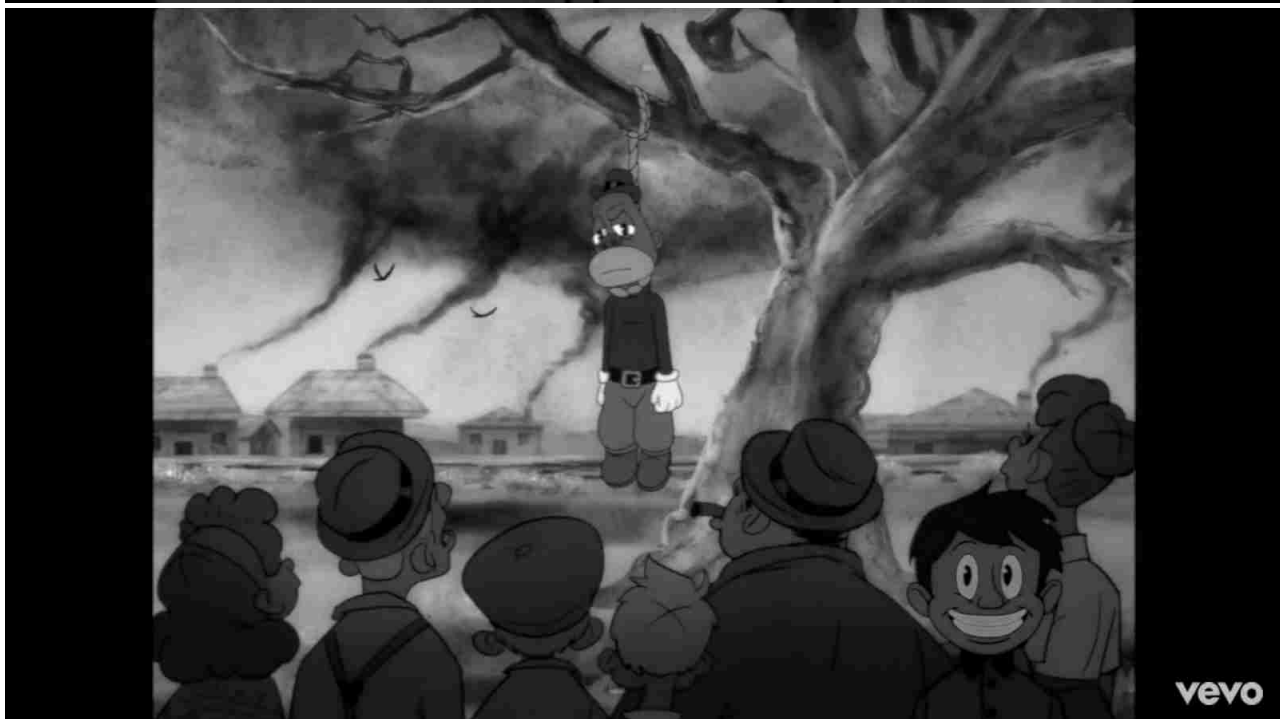
Because the combination of enslavement and subordination has been predicated on skin color the concentration of poverty finds itself wreaking havoc on people of color. As Coates explains, because the plundering of the black body continued after the end of slavery and continues today, many black people find themselves in a situation that denies them basic liberties.

Having been enslaved for 250 years, black people were not left to their own devices. They were terrorized. In the Deep South, a second slavery ruled. In the North, legislatures, mayors, civic associates, banks, and citizens all colluded to pin black people into ghettos, where they were overcrowded, overcharged, and undereducated. Business discriminated against them, awarding them the worst jobs and the worst wages. Police brutalized them in the streets. And the notion that black lives, black bodies, and black wealth were rightful targets remained deeply rooted in the broader society. (*We Were* 178)

We know that the practices explained above made it easy for blacks to be discriminated against. By making black bodies “rightful targets” the practice of lynching blacks after slavery the night before an election, to make sure the election turned out in favor of the whites, was common.

As Coates notes, “In the 1920s, Jim Crow Mississippi was, in all facets of society, a kleptocracy. The majority of the people in the state were perpetually robbed of the vote — a hijacking engineered through the trickery of the poll tax and the muscle of the lynch mob” (*We Were* 164). We know JAY-Z has not forgotten about the lynchings in the South and their horror. This is exemplified in the image above, when JAY-Z shows first an image of Jaybo being hanged

and then zooms out on the image below to show the lynch mob cheering on his death and smiling for the camera. These images capture the kind of fear, violence, and brutality that blacks faced during slavery and Jim Crow, and JAY Z clearly argues these practices of plundering are far from occurring only in the past.



Denying blacks the right to vote, herding them into prisons, and trapping them in the ghetto, are difficult enough, each on their own terms to be able to move past; when they are concentrated together it makes it that much more difficult to gain upward mobility. One must take into consideration the fact that even though the United States abolished slavery and it is no longer legal for businesses to discriminate against people based on the color of their skin, racial discrimination still exists in our society today so long as the person targeted has a criminal background or is currently in prison, as Alexander's work makes clear (2). According to Rabuy and Wagner, today black people make up thirteen percent of the American population but make up forty percent of the prison population, while white Americans make up sixty-four percent of the population and makeup only thirty-nine percent of the prison population. Currently prison populations continue to grow in the United States. In fact, as Luana Ross points out in *Inventing the Savage: The Social Construction of Native American Criminality*, "The United States has the distinction of incarcerating more of its people than any other country in the world" (13-14). Furthermore, as Alexander states, "No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid" (6). One only need look at the statistics Coates provides to see the truth of these facts:

From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, America's incarceration rate doubled, from about 150 people per 100,000 to about 300 per 100,000. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, it doubled again. By 2007, it had reached a historic high of 767 people per 100,000, before registering a modest decline in 707 people per 100,000 in 2012. In absolute terms, America's prison and jail population from 1970 until today has increased sevenfold, from

some 300,000 people to 2.2 million. The United States now accounts for less than 5 percent of the world's inhabitants — and about 25 percent of its incarcerated inhabitants. In 2000, one in 10 black males between the ages of 20 and 40 was incarcerated — 10 times the rate of their white peers. In 2010 a third of all black male high-school dropouts between the ages of 20 and 39 were imprisoned, compared with only 13 percent of their white peers. (*We Were* 230)

Mass incarceration is an epidemic in this country, and it is not because we have more criminals and more crime here than in other countries, it is because the United States shifted away in the mid-twentieth century from rehabilitation and toward retribution in prisons and jails. Coates argues that “[a]s African Americans began filling cells in the 1970s, rehabilitation was largely abandoned in favor of retribution — the idea that prison should not reform convicts but punish them” (*We Were* 235). Retribution for crimes was not enacted because people began committing more crimes or even more violent crimes, instead it was a way for the government to continue to enforce segregation and slavery legally, by removing black bodies from the community and herding them into prisons. White people are not entirely blind to this fact. As Ross examines, “Some Euro-American criminologists agree that the Euro-American justice system represents the interests of the powerful and is inherently oppressive” (32). Because many people think of criminals as people who should be shunned from society, however, fewer people think that criminals should be rehabilitated; so, we remain stuck in a country that continues to oppress minorities and benefit from their cheap labor.

As one can imagine, the disproportionate mass incarceration of black people has detrimental and lasting effects. Many of these effects, however, are hidden from the public by the

government. For example unemployment rates do not take those incarcerated into consideration when figuring out the numbers and percentages of those without jobs. Coates argues that leaving out those who are incarcerated makes it look as though the unemployment rates for blacks are lower than they actually are:

The emergence of the carceral state has had far-reaching consequences for the economic viability of black families. Employment and poverty statistics traditionally omit the incarcerated from the official numbers. When Western recalculated the jobless rates for the year 2000 to include incarcerated young black men, he found that joblessness among all young black men went from 24 to 32 percent; among those who never went to college, it went from 30 to 42 percent. The upshot is stark. Even in the booming '90s, when nearly every American demographic group improved its economic position, black men were left out. The illusion of wage and employment progress among African American males was made possible only through the erasure of the most vulnerable among them from the official statistics. (*We Were* 234)

That means at least 8 percent of the black male population is not being accounted for when discussing unemployment rates. This omission makes it appear as though more black men are employed. Even if those men do have jobs in prison, they make no money, as prison labor is cheap since the incarcerated are no longer viewed as citizens.

After these men are released from prison, finding a job becomes extremely difficult. In fact, as Coates points out, “the negative credential of prison impair[s] the employment efforts of both the black man and the white man, but it impair[s] those of the black man more. Startlingly, the effect was not limited to the black man with a criminal record. The black man without a

criminal record fare[s] worse than the white man with one” (*We Were* 239). The fact that a white person with a criminal record finds it easier to obtain a job than a black man without one highlights how discriminatory practices in employment continue to perpetuate white supremacy. Clearly giving unfair advantages to earn money to whites in effect helping them to achieve financial stability and white supremacy.

As exemplified by Coates, investing money and earning good credit, as JAY-Z suggests, can be helpful advice to pull oneself out of poverty, but it is easier to achieve for whites than it is for blacks. The advice could work for black people, too, but they will have to work harder and longer to achieve equal footing economically, and might still witness their family members struggle to achieve the same kind of equality. The fact of the matter is, it does not matter how successful a black person is, s/he could be president, s/he could be a billionaire, it does not change the fact that this country was built with a racist foundation creating all blacks to remain, as JAY-Z argues “still nigga.” “Throughout the criminal justice system, as well as in our schools and public spaces, young + black + male is equated with reasonable suspicion, justifying the arrest, interrogation, search, and detention of thousands of African Americans every year, as well as their exclusion from employment and housing and the denial of educational opportunity” (Alexander 199).

If people continue to buy into the myth of American freedom and continue to ignore that its foundations began with white supremacy then they continue to perpetuate the plundering of black bodies. For Coates this denial of the actual foundations of the United States is hypocritical, extremely harmful, and a lie. It erases the history that black experienced during the founding of the United States:

The lie ignores the fact that reducing American poverty and ending white supremacy are not the same. The lie ignores the fact that closing the “achievement gap” will do nothing to close the “injury gap,” in which black college graduates still suffer higher unemployment rates than white college graduates, and black job applicants without criminal records enjoy roughly the same chance of getting hired as white applicants with criminal records. (*We Were* 198)

The lie also ignores the many black and brown bodies that are caged in prison currently and that the number of bodies grows by the day. While a black person might be able to achieve financial freedom, as JAY-Z was able to, it is not just financial freedom that will end white supremacy in this country. Instead, we must look at the system that allows these inequalities to flourish — mass incarceration — and address that any form of oppression will lead to other forms of oppression. Only through abolishing mass incarceration can the United States begin to grant freedom to its black and brown and indigenous citizens.

Moving Forward

Breaking Chains of Oppression with Intersectional Feminism and Beyoncé's "Freedom"

On April 23rd 2016, Beyoncé released one of the most talked about albums of that year, *Lemonade*. The creative visual album explores black relationships and black female power in addition to exemplifying another way one might participate in social resistance against mass incarceration and police brutality — presenting the issues to a mainstream audience. With her visual album she artistically shows the public the ways in which black men and women continue to be disenfranchised in the United States, specifically in the songs "Forward" and "Freedom." While James Blake and Beyoncé ironically sing "Forward" as black women hold up pictures of young African American males who died at the hands of the police, Beyoncé argues that little progress has been made in this country when it comes to racial equality because black mothers are still losing their black sons to the agenda of white supremacy.

The absence of black male bodies starkly displayed during both the songs "Forward" and "Freedom" exemplifies the ways in which black women have to be strong for their future generations, despite the absence of their brothers, husbands, and fathers. Corey Miles argues in her article "Beyoncé's *Lemonade*: When Life Gave us Lemons, We Saved the World" that the visual album "speaks to the historical marginalized experience of black women by both society and hip-hop. However, black women have persisted, resisted, and used their literary creativeness to reshape notions of black

womanhood in both society and hip-hop” (136). When we see the black woman ballet dancing to the song “Freedom” we see how black women remain graceful under great pressure the same way ballet can look effortless and beautiful when aspects of it, especially pointe shoes, are incredibly painful. In this moment we see the beauty and the strength.



The focus on black women in “Freedom” highlights the absence of black men in society as the visual album depicts the absence of black men in real life due to death or mass incarceration. Their absence leaves black women to take care of themselves and their families. The rise of the war on drugs helped create the prison-industrial complex and the mass incarceration of black men. Their incarceration numbers increased dramatically after the creation of the war on drugs removing even more black people from society. Black male incarceration is highlighted in *Lemonade* when the producers do not include the 2018 Pulitzer Prize winning, Kendrick Lamar’s verse in the song “Freedom” on the visual album. Simply by having an all female cast during the songs “Forward” and “Freedom,” and by taking out Kendrick’s strong voice in “Freedom,” which is on the album, viewers see the absence of black men, and can assume these men are not just derelict absent fathers and husbands — as the system would like us to believe — instead they are absent not by choice, but because the system works to incarcerate them. Because Lamar’s verse is not included in the visual album but is on the musical album of *Lemonade*, I have included the lyrics here for examination.

Ten Hail Marys, I Meditate for practice
Channel 9 news tell me I’m movin’ backwards
Eight blocks left, death is around the corner
Seven misleadin’ statements ‘bout my persona
Six Headlights wavin’ in my direction
Five-O askin’ me what’s in my possession
Yeah, I keep runnin’, jump in the aqueducts

Fire hydrants and hazardous
Smoke alarms on the back of us
But mama, don't cry for me, ride for me
Try for me, live for me
Breathe for me, sing for me
Honestly guidin' me
I could be more than I gotta be
Stole from me, lied to nation hypocrisy
Code on me, drive on me
Wicked, my spirit inspired me
Like yeah, open correctional gates in higher desert
Yeah, open our mind as we cast away oppression
Yeah, open the streets and watch our beliefs
And when they carve my name inside the concrete
I pray it forever reads
Freedom!

Here the notion of white supremacy continues to be reinforced by mass incarceration which make Lamar's lyrics that much more significant. Many of the issues I raised prior to introducing this verse are tackled in Lamar's rap. When he proclaims, "Eight blocks left, death is around every corner," we can surmise that as a black man walking the street, perhaps in the ghetto, the song's persona, knows that police officers could be around every corner, and one misstep could get him arrested or worse, killed. The misleading

statements about his persona show the stereotypes still invoked when police deal with black men. The headlights in the lyrics belong to cop cars and the police ask him what is in his possession not because he statistically has a higher chance of carrying drugs or a firearm, but because the war on drugs specifically targets young black men. When Lamar shifts to rapping about his mother, asking her to fight for him and live for him, we can see again, how black women remain strong as their brothers, husbands, fathers, and sons are carried off to prison; prisons that are built in deserts, away from the general population, as the song suggests, so it makes it easier for people, especially those not affected by the prison-industrial complex to ignore the high rates of black men being sent away. Because the prisons are built in areas generally ignored by the public, as Lamar argues, and many arrests happen in the name of the war on drugs, the public at large can ignore the numerous amounts of people being incarcerated every year. Since many people, including black people, want criminals off the streets as a form of protection, people begin to see prisons as a standard form of punishment. As Davis points out, “Prisons are constituted as ‘normal.’ It takes a lot of work to persuade people to think beyond the bars, and to be able to imagine a world without prisons and to struggle for the abolition of imprisonment as the dominant mode of punishment” (100). Since mass incarceration has been the norm for so long, many people do not realize there is a problem, or if they do, they hardly see it in terms of race.

After the passing of the Civil Rights Acts, the United States government had to come up with another way to enforce legal segregation. As Alexander points out, when “Nixon called for a ‘war on drugs’ — an announcement that proved largely rhetorical as

he declared illegal drugs ‘public enemy number one’ without proposing dramatic shifts in drug policy. A backlash against blacks was clearly in force, but no consensus had yet been reached regarding what racial and social order would ultimately emerge from these turbulent times” (48). The war on drugs did not seek to end drug abuse, however, it sought to reinforce white supremacy. In the beginning, the war on drugs provided very few guidelines for what was to come, however, with the emergence of crack in 1985 and the passing of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 by Ronald Regan the target in the war on drugs became perfectly clear. This bill “included mandatory minimum sentences for the distribution of cocaine, including far more severe punishments for distribution of crack — associated with blacks — than powder cocaine, associated with whites” (Alexander 53). Because people think of crack as stereotypically belonging to black people and cocaine as belonging to white people, the penalties show the racial disparities in sentencing drug offenses (Alexander 53). While one could argue that this 1986 legislation is not specifically enforcing racial discrimination, this argument falls apart when made clear that people, specifically politicians and law enforcement, think of crack as a substance used by black people and cocaine as a substance used by whites.

Regardless of the fact that no hard evidence exists proving crack is more addictive than cocaine, as Alexander notes, the penalties for the possession of crack are much higher than those for cocaine (51). As the Drug Policy Alliance states: “Despite recent federal reforms of crack sentencing laws, much higher penalties still exist for possession and sale of crack, despite the fact that, pharmacologically, it is the same drug as cocaine. Possession of 28 grams of crack cocaine yields a five-year mandatory minimum sentence

for a first offense; it takes 500 grams of powder cocaine to prompt the same sentence.” To put this in a more contextual perspective, especially for Americans or people who do not sell drugs and thusly think of weight in ounces and pounds, 28 grams equals roughly one ounce while 500 grams is just over a pound and there are 16 ounces in a pound; or as Paul Butler explains in “Much Respect: Toward a Hip-Hop Theory of Punishment,” “the distributor of five grams of crack, which is enough for twenty-five doses and has a street value of approximately \$500, receives the same sentence as the distributor of five hundred grams of powder, which is enough for three thousand doses and is worth \$40,000” (535). Someone can be in possession of 16 times more cocaine than crack before receiving the same punishment for basically the same drug.

Not only will a small amount of crack put a person in jail, but after getting out of jail, that person will no longer be eligible to receive government support. If a person is arrested for crack possession, or even marijuana possession, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 makes it legal for public housing authorities to discriminate against tenants by “evict[ing] any tenant who allows any form of drug-related criminal activity to occur on or near public housing premises...and eliminated many federal benefits, including student loans, for anyone convicted of a drug crime” (Alexander 53). This means that if a tenant’s underage child brings a bag of pot back to the house and is caught, they can be evicted; this also means that being convicted of a drug crime makes it difficult for one to receive financial aid, and almost impossible to anyone who did not receive a deferred sentence.

Due to the war on drugs, by 1991 “one-fourth of young African American men were now under the control of the criminal justice system” (Alexander 56). This rate, and the ability to discriminate against convicted felons did not decrease with the election of Bill Clinton, a Democrat, but instead increased. As Alexander notes, “Clinton endorsed the idea of a federal ‘three strikes and you’re out’ law” (56), which was passed into law with majority support from both the Democrat and Republican sides:

The bill created dozens of new federal capital crimes, mandated life sentences for some three-time offenders, and authorized more than \$16 billion for state prison grants and expansion of state and local police forces. Far from resisting the emergence of the new caste system, Clinton escalated the drug war beyond what conservatives had imagined possible a decade earlier. (Alexander 56)

In addition to the “three strikes and you’re out” law, Clinton signed and passed into office the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act as well as changed the Aid to Families with Dependent Children to the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). “TANF imposed a five-year lifetime limit on welfare assistance, as well as a permanent, lifetime ban on eligibility for welfare and food stamps for anyone convicted of a felony drug offense — including simple possession of marijuana” (Alexander 57).

Because, as Alexander explains “three-fourths of all people imprisoned for drug offenses have been black or Latino” (98), these bills disproportionality affect people of color. Those people imprisoned for drug offenses can and will be denied federal aid upon their release, where they will be legally discriminated against because they are felons.

Legal discrimination hurts everyone and specifically the principle of justice as Richard Delgado argues in “Words That Wound: A Tort Action for Racial Insults, Epithets, and Name-Calling.” He explains, “Racism and racial stigmatization harm not only the victim and the perpetrator of individual racist acts but also society as a whole. Racism is a breach of the ideal of egalitarianism, that ‘all men are created equal’ and each person is an equal moral agent, an ideal that is a cornerstone of the American moral and legal system” (181). Even though the United States was founded on the premise that every man is created equal, in theory, in practice that is not how the country operated. In fact, as this thesis has, I hope, amply demonstrated, this country was founded on the premise that white people are superior. In fact, this country was originally founded on the idea that only white men are superior. Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* shows the need for feminism while fighting mass incarceration because the same patriarchal imperialist system that created the subordination of black people is the same system that created the subordination of women, even if to a different degree.

Beyoncé’s clear focus on feminism in this visual album, shows how feminism can also help reform other instances of oppression, including the prison-industrial complex and police brutality against young black men. As bell hooks argues in *aint i a woman*, “As people of color, our struggle against racial imperialism should have taught us that wherever there exists a master/slave relationship, an oppressed/oppressor relationship, violence, mutiny, and hatred will permeate all elements of life” (118). Because Intersectional Feminism seeks to focus on all forms of oppression it might be one of our greatest tools to help dismantle the prison-industrial complex. Similarly, as Davis argues,

for feminism to achieve equality in different areas of reform, it must recognize and address all forms of inequality. One way to take a step towards equality is through commitment to and practice of Intersectional Feminism. This feminism “involve[s] a consciousness of capitalism...and racism, and colonialism, and postcolonialities, and ability, and more genders than we can even imagine, and more sexualities than we ever thought we could name” (104). By being more inclusive, feminism shows that all forms of oppression operate in the same way, and stem from forms of domination to keep anyone who is not a white man in subordination. By recognizing all forms of domination stem from the same place, feminism can help multiple fights for equality, including mass incarceration and the fight against police brutality. A commitment to a musical theorization of intersectionality within feminism is important and a part of why *Lemonade* is so powerful.

With the insurgence of Intersectional Feminism which included poor women, queer women, women of color, and trans-people, more people could identify as a feminist and have their voices heard. In short, feminism no longer prioritizes the white middle class voice that dominated feminism for so much of the conversation. Beyoncé’s assertion that she is a feminist, made it easier for black women to identify as feminists, as well as created a space for many other women who have shied away from feminism in the past because it was considered too radical. With the inclusion of more people participating in the feminist fight against more injustices, people, especially people of color, may be able to gain some freedom within the boundaries of their oppression.

During the chorus of “Freedom” Beyoncé observes the ways in which historically the black body has been shackled by chains and cut off from freedom. Instead of automatically being granted freedom like whites were granted in the founding of this country, blacks had to constantly struggle and fight to gain freedom. This struggle sometimes involved the breaking of chains or running away, as exemplified in the section on Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, white people have forced black people to fight in a war for the freedom of their bodies. Beyoncé participates in her war for freedom with the creation of *Lemonade* most poignantly in the chorus to her song “Freedom”:

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

While the last line seems optimistic, because the idea of persevering and not quitting is highlighted, the rest of the chorus shows just how difficult it is not to quit. She calls out to “freedom” because figuratively, she cannot move unless she breaks the chains herself. Unfortunately, freedom is just an idea, and cannot help itself be achieved; instead, freedom must be achieved through hard work, usually by one’s self, because both racism

and sexism are systemically inherent and these ideas do not just reside in individuals. As Davis states, “People of color have had to unlearn the assumption that racism is individual, that it is primarily a question of individual attitudes that can be dealt with through sensitivity training” (107). Racism is not individual but systemic and tacitly passed along from generation to generation while often remaining hidden because many people try hard not to be overtly racist. Because many whites are no longer being overtly racist, the racism imbedded within the system becomes easy to ignore as blacks become criminals who can be legally discriminated against.

Beyoncé continued to fight systemic racism on April 14th and again on April 21st 2018 when she put her blackness on full display as the first black female to headline the Coachella Music Festival. In her world stopping³ performance, she argued for the importance of narratives created by black people and did so on a stage filled with black performers and musicians. By performing in front of a mostly white crowd, she asked her audience to participate in a culture few in the audience fully understood. Because her performance was so powerful, however, whites who were in attendance were forced to consider how this performance was created by a black woman for black women while taking her mostly white audience through a musical history lesson. “Thus Beyoncé played directly to her black audience, with every element of her show steeped in cultural meaning that showed a singer not just elevating her craft but going through great lengths to pay homage to those that came before her — a bold approach from a performer whose every move dominates the pop culture conversation,” Gerrick D. Kennedy argues in

³ This phrase is an allusion to her part in Nicki Minaj’s song “Feelin’ Myself” where Beyoncé proclaims she stopped the world with the digital drop of her self titled album in 2013.

“Beyoncé’s Refusal to Shrink her Blackness Made her Coachella Showing Revolutionary.”

According to Jenna Wortham in “BeyChella” an episode on the podcast *Still Processing* Beyoncé created not only a musical performance: Beyoncé scripted a play. “I just feel like we have to start talking about her like she’s August Wilson or…Julie Taymore…she’s not making a concert she’s scripting a play. This [performance] is Beyoncé Christ Superstar…It’s not a performance its theater as real life. And real life is black modern — I don’t know — everything.” By comparing Beyoncé to Wilson or Taymore, Wortham argues that Beyoncé is not simply a pop star, but a pop star who crafts artistic expression at the same level of two very prolific playwrights and screenwriters respectively. Wortham’s argument aligns with my thesis because by including Beyoncé with traditionally high brow artists like Wilson and Taymore scholars might take more seriously the impact of mainstream pop-culture, and not dismiss it as a passing phase. What Beyoncé created with the visual album *Lemonade* and then with this Coachella performance are artistic expressions that will be studied for years to come. Wortham even goes so far as to argue that Beyoncé should not only be included in the canon of literary works but that Beyoncé creates her own canon. “[Beyoncé’s performance] really clarifies and crystallizes, for me, that she’s building her own canon…at this point so much of Beyoncé is so self referential…She’s exploding the idea that even she could be in a canon” (“BeyChella”). Wortham even goes so far as to compare Beyoncé to Shakespeare, David Foster Wallace, and Toni Morrison when commenting on the fact that she could not consume the entirety of Beyoncé’s Coachella performance in one sitting. “You don’t

read *Romeo and Juliet* in a day...you don't try to get through a David Foster Wallace novel before breakfast...you don't try to read *Beloved* in an afternoon." By comparing Beyoncé to these important literary figures Wortham creates an academic space to examine Beyoncé.

During the entire Coachella performance Beyonce uses black bodies to depict black strength, however, she also uses their bodies to depict black vulnerability. Perhaps the strongest moment of depicting black vulnerability comes during her performance of the song "Flawless" originally off of her 2013 self-titled album. Beyoncé sits at the bottom of the bleachers on her set and sings the words, "I woke up like this," while black men on different levels of the bleachers become animated by her singing. As Wesley Morris argues, by combining these lyrics with the movement of the black male dancers Beyonce brings a entirely new meaning to the lyrics "I woke up like this" ("BeyChella"). Originally the lyrics referred to the way in which women wake up flawless and asked them to proclaim, "I woke up like this." Now, however, with the animation of the black dancers on the Coachella stage as she sings these same lyrics she argues black people "woke up like this," with their black skin, continuing to define them in many aspects of life, similar to JAY-Z's argument of "still nigga" in "The Story of O.J."

By including a marching band, step music, jazz and many different forms of hip-hop and R&B Wortham argues "[Beyonce] wanted us to understand that her music and in a larger way black music is a part of every genre of America music" ("BeyChella"). In fact white artists stealing music from black musicians was and is just another form of plunder enacted by white Americans. That is why, as Morris argues, with the inclusion of

the marching band, a traditionally black enterprise, Beyoncé celebrated “not only blackness and black music but the foundations of American music” (“BeyChella”). By incorporating so much blackness in her performances Beyoncé brings awareness to both black culture and black struggles that occur in this country. By delivering multiple performances that have been viewed millions of times she makes people pay attention to her and she allows for white people to re-evaluate the systemic racism many participate in. By performing her blackness Beyoncé invites her white audience to become part of the conversation surrounding race, and allows for a richer understanding of what black men and women face in this country. Her performance allows whites to think about the ways in which systemic racism has led to police brutality, the prison-industrial complex, and mass incarceration in the United States. Only by abolishing the prison-industrial complex and starting real conversations about race and oppression of blacks in the United States will we be able to end mass incarceration, and only then will we be able to work past the racial caste system embedded in the United States.

Conclusion

The problem of legal discrimination just becomes worse each year as more black men are arrested for drug crimes and locked away from society. Today, as the *Criminal Justice Fact Sheet* points out, 1 million of the 2.3 million people incarcerated are black men. The war on drugs, which still exists, creates a legal and colorblind system, creating a new caste that places black felons at the bottom. As Neil Gotanda argues in “A Critique of ‘Our Constitution is Color Blind,’” some claim that our system is colorblind and better off for it. “Advocates of the color-blind model argue that nonrecognition by government is clearly superior to any race-conscious process” (35). Because the American social order no longer discriminates solely on the basis of skin color, but instead, we discriminate against people on the basis a criminal record, we have entered an age of supposed colorblindness. Because racism has been deeply imbedded in the United States and mass incarceration created a new racial caste system this country does not operate as a color-blind nation (Alexander 2). Because the rate at which black men become incarcerated is much higher than the rate at which white men are incarcerated, racial disparities in the justice system continue today. Alexander argues this happens in two stages:

The first step is to grant law enforcement officials extraordinary discretion regarding whom to stop, search, arrest, and charge for drug offenses, thus ensuring that conscious and unconscious racial beliefs and stereotypes will be given free rein. Unbridled discretion inevitably creates huge racial disparities.

Then, the damning step: Close the courthouse doors to all claims by defendants

and private litigants that the criminal justice system operates in racially discriminatory fashion. Demand that anyone who wants to challenge racial bias in the system offer, in advance, clear proof that racial disparities are the product of intentional racial discrimination – i.e., the work of a bigot. This evidence will almost never be available in the era of colorblindness, because everyone knows — but does not say — that the enemy of the war on drugs can be identified by race. This simple design has helped to produce one of the most extraordinary systems of racialized social control the world has ever seen. (103)

Because there is no way to prove that a police officer is being motivated by unconscious racial stereotypes police officers make arrests, or worse kill people, based on these stereotypes, and this is one reason why “African Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites” (*Criminal*). The government has made discrimination legal again, it is just not as visible as slavery or Jim Crow.

Furthermore, police officers and courts legally discriminate against blacks by using and reinforcing stereotypes. Gregory S. Parks and Jeffrey J. Rachlinski explore this racial profiling and explain in “Implicit Bias, Election 2008, and the Myth of a Postracial America” how negative stereotypes further perpetuate racial profiling:

The research also shows, however, that these negative associations target black Americans who appear the most stereotypically black. For example, priming police officers with violent imagery causes them to make mistakes in a lineup that favor picking out suspects who are rated as more "stereotypically Black."

Similarly, juries are more likely to sentence black defendants who look more "stereotypically black" to death in capital cases than those who look less so. (202)

Even though our system operates under the guise of being colorblind, it still uses racial stereotyping as a way of justifying profiling black people and as a way of staking out black urban centers and other racialized zones in the map of America, instead of middle-class white neighborhoods where likely the same amount of drug crimes are occurring but certainly less people are being arrested.

Because there is no legal recourse unless one can specifically prove a police officer to be a racist, however, the United States legally can incarcerate any black person, for any reason they want because police officers have been given the discretion to decide if something looks suspicious, and they generally use stereotypes to back up their suspicions. Many people do not consider themselves to be overtly racist, and many consciously are not, however, unconscious and systemic racism still have a large effect on society today. "Contemporary racism tends to be subtle — even unconscious. Civil rights laws and jurisprudence are designed to combat overt discrimination but function poorly as remedies for subtle, unconscious racism" (Parks and Rachlinski 197). While overt racism seems to have curtailed, systemic racism continues to rule in the United States.

Alexander argues systemic racism is much more difficult to see than overt racism:

[M]ost people assume that racism, and racial systems generally, are fundamentally a function of attitudes. Because mass incarceration is officially colorblind, it seems inconceivable that the system could function much like a racial caste system. The widespread and mistaken belief that racial animus is necessary for the

creation and maintenance of racialized systems of social control is the most important reason that we, as a nation, have remained in deep denial. (183)

This denial allows for systemic racism to flourish and allows for people the continuance of segregation of black people from whites, this time in a legal form known as mass incarceration. As Alexander argues, our country legally enforces a racial caste system no different than Jim Crow or slavery, especially if one takes into account the labor prisoners must complete in prison.

Prisons are harsh and being a prisoner is not easy. Because of this, Alexander argues that mass incarceration might be more difficult than the social segregation that occurred during Jim Crow. She states, “In a sense, incarceration is a far more extreme form of physical and residential segregation than Jim Crow segregation. Rather than merely shunting black people to the other side of town or corralling them in ghettos, mass incarceration locks them in cages” (195). At least during Jim Crow blacks had access to a community, with houses, stores and schools. Now, with mass incarceration doing the job of Jim Crow, blacks are removed from their communities and put into concrete cells. Then, upon their release, they cannot reenter society because of the stigma of being convicted felons. As Alexander notes, “Mass incarceration thus perpetuates and deepens pre-existing patterns of racial segregation and isolation, not just by removing people of color from society and putting them in prisons, but by dumping them back into ghettos upon their release” (196). Once someone is labeled a felon, unless that person has other resources or privilege to fall back on, entering mainstream society can be difficult if not impossible. This person may find himself in and out of the judicial system for the rest of

his life, moving only from ghetto, to jail, to prison and back again, perpetually making it harder to reenter society.

As Alexander argues, today, because so many blacks are arrested, many people equate blackness with criminality, further perpetuating the stereotype that black people are criminals:

It is precisely because our criminal justice system provides a vehicle for the expression of conscious and unconscious anti-black sentiment that the prison label is experienced as a racial stigma. The stigma exists whether or not one has been formally branded a criminal, yet another parallel to Jim Crow. Just as African Americans in the North were stigmatized by the Jim Crow system even if they were not subject to its formal control, black men today are stigmatized by mass incarceration — and the social construction of the “criminalblackman” — whether they have been to prison or not. For those who have been branded, the branding serves to intensify and deepen the racial stigma, as they are constantly reminded in virtually every contact they have with the public agencies, as well as with private employers and landlords, that they are the new “untouchables.”

In this way, the stigma of race has become the stigma of criminality. (199)

Not only does this kind of stereotyping lead to the mass incarceration of black men, it leads to police officers killing young black men simply because being young and black is reasonably suspicious enough on its own to warrant a stop. Even if the black man holds his hands up and asks them not to shoot, many times, because of the stereotypes engrained in our culture, the police officers will shoot the black man anyway. The

procedure of shoot-and-ask-questions-later, even if the black person is posing no threat, is just one of the many reasons why blackness is related to criminality (Alexander 199). Extreme racial disparities still exist in this country and we are a long way from equality, even after the election of our first black president.

As I have argued, since the election of Barack Obama many argue that race is no longer an issue in this country. They use him, as well as other examples like Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, and even JAY-Z and Beyoncé to state that we have overcome racism in America, that all people are equal and as long as they work hard, despite the color of their skin, they can achieve anything in the United States that they want. Black exceptionalism is one reason why Beyoncé shows her white audience the struggle of being black in America. As Alexander's work demonstrates, however, this fallacy shows how black exceptionalism helps mask the problem of mass incarceration:

Highly visible examples of black success are critical to the maintenance of a racial caste system in the era of colorblindness. Black success stories lend credence to the notion that anyone, no matter how poor or how black you may be, can make it to the top, if only you try hard enough. These stories "prove" that race is no longer relevant. Whereas black success stories undermined the logic of Jim Crow, they actually reinforce the system of mass incarceration. Mass incarceration depends for its legitimacy on the widespread belief that all those who appear trapped at the bottom actually chose their fate. (248)

White people argue, the black men in prison for selling crack, are there, not because society discriminates against them, but because they chose to use and sell crack.

However, when a person looks at the disparities in sentencing when it comes to crack versus cocaine (as I discussed earlier in this paper), one can see this argument come apart. Studying how often cop cars patrol ghettos in contrast to middle-class neighborhoods breaks down this argument as well. When one understands the difficulty of finding a job after being labeled a felon, and realizes the felon might have to rely on selling drugs to feed his family, the argument begins to seem ludicrous. If someone continues to research, the way Alexander has, s/he will begin to understand how racially discriminatory the police, the courts, and the prisons are toward black men and s/he will realize that the abolition of the prison-industrial complex needs to occur in order to begin to dismantle this new racial caste system.

Reform of the prison-industrial complex is not enough Alexander argues. In order to get rid of these systemic racial inequities we must abolish the prison-industrial complex and meaningfully take race into consideration while doing so. Alexander also realizes that abolishing the prison-industrial complex is not be enough to end the racial caste system in this country if we do not take race seriously. She thinks if we continue to ignore race, Americans will figure out a new way to keep black people in subordination and oppression:

[I]f the movement that emerges to end mass incarceration does not meaningfully address the racial divisions and resentments that gave rise to mass incarceration, and if it fails to cultivate an ethic of genuine care, compassion, and concern for every human being — of every class, race, and nationality — within our nation's borders, including poor whites, who are often pitted against poor people of color,

the collapse of mass incarceration will not mean the death of racial caste in America. Inevitably a new system or racialized social control will emerge — one that we cannot foresee, just as the current system of mass incarceration was not predicted by anyone thirty years ago. No task is more urgent for racial justice advocates today than ensuring that America's current racial caste system is its last.

(258)

White America must closely examine the ways in which our system is silently racist when people contend that it is actually colorblind. We must force those who ignore race to realize that the mass incarceration of black men happens because the United States systemically oppresses and discriminates against people of color. White folks need to begin to realize that these systems of domination and subordination are the same systems of domination and subordination enacted not just on black men, but on women, on nature, on queers, on Muslims, on any form of Other that threatens America's dominant, white, patriarchal, and capitalistic society. Through this recognition we begin to use Intersectional Feminism as a way to dismantle unconscious racism, and also as a way to abolish the prison-industrial complex.

Davis argues, as I have argued in this paper, feminism can and should help with the abolition of mass incarceration in this country. As Davis points out domestic violence and violence used against black men have similar origins and work in similar ways to keep women and black men down, respectively. Davis argues that the people most affected by domestic violence and the people most affected by police violence should be working together to help end these forms of oppression:

[I]t seems to me that people who are working on the front line of the struggle against violence against women should also be on the front line of the abolitionist struggles. And people opposed to police crimes, should also be opposed to domestic — what is constructed as domestic — violence. We should understand the connections between public violence and private or privatized violence. (106)

Both public and private violence enforce oppression and create both domestic violence and the mass incarceration of black people in the United States. In order to fix the problem of mass incarceration we must abolish the prison system so that people of color can actually gain the kind of freedom promised to them with the passing of the Civil Rights Acts. Feminism, as Davis argues, is one way in which we can dismantle the systems that create and reinforce this systemic oppression.

When we understand and examine the harm in racism, we can see how it is just another form of violence used to keep a group of people oppressed. If we are to fight violence, we must fight violence in all forms. If we can understand this, then we can understand why we need to abolish the prison-industrial complex instead of just reforming it. Both Alexander and Davis advocate for the abolition of the prison-industrial complex, but they fear that even if we can somehow achieve this massive abolition, another racial caste system will come and take its place. If people do not begin to examine violence in all of its forms, including the violence inflicted by colonialism, racism, heteronormativity, capitalism, and sexism (to name just a few) we will continue to subordinate people with violence based on some form of otherness.

Until we begin to examine race and the systems of oppression that continue to produce racial caste systems, people (besides white, straight, rich, men) will never be free, and even their true freedom is contingent on everyone's freedom, for no one is truly free until everyone is free. People should not have to break out of chains to obtain freedom. Society, however, places many metaphoric chains on the freedom of black people: mass incarceration, racial profiling, the killing of innocent black men, the detriment of being labeled a felon, are all separate links in the chain of oppression that reinforces our current racial caste system.

By realizing that the same social structures that oppress women oppress other minorities, including incarcerated black men, Intersectional Feminism can begin to combat not just violence inflicted upon women, but violence inflicted on their brothers in prison. The United States' prison-industrial complex must be abolished before the chains of oppression can be broken. It is fabulous that Beyoncé breaks chains by herself, but she is another example of exceptionalism that silently reinforces the racial caste, but because she calls into question this racial caste, and brings it to the representational forefront of mainstream pop-culture, she addresses her own exceptionalism and the oppression of black individuals in a very real and powerful way. In doing so, she both helps break chains of those caught in the racial caste and performs against as well as brings awareness of these issues to her white audience.

Even though Beyoncé knew the message of her Coachella performance would be lost on many in her predominantly white audience she still felt the need to keep the performance, as Kennedy argues seeped in black culture, "instead, she took a risk and

built a visually grand set immersed in blackness — a performance about educating as much as it was a spectacle. It was a conscious decisions by the singer who, according to her mother, wanted ‘to do what’s best for the wold and not what is the most popular.’” Beyonce did what was best for the world with her live performance at Coachella and by creating her visual album *Lemonade*. JAY-Z did what was best for the world when he created the music video “The Story of O.J.” and Colson Whitehead did what was best for the world when he wrote his novel *The Underground Railroad*. Instead of allowing whites to feel comfortable within white supremacy each of their works seek to make white America feel uncomfortable and anxious about the racial relations in this country. By continuing to do “what is right,” which in my opinion is continuing to have an open conversation about race where whites must listen to black people’s voices and narratives, we can begin to achieve equality in the United States.

Beyoncé, JAY-Z, Kendrick Lamar, and Colson Whitehead add much to the conversation on racial politics and each, in their own way, highlights the injustices African Americans face in the United States both in the past and today. Jenna Wortham argues that Beyoncé “is very much in conversation with all of history, black past, black present, and black future” (“BeyChella”). Whether they highlight the lasting effects of slavery, or exemplify the ways in which mass incarceration continues to perpetuate segregation, they add to the story of the plunder black people experienced and still experience today. Until the we abolish the prison-industrial complex, and end mass incarceration and the war on drugs in the United States, racial profiling and racial inequality will continue to exist. While these inequalities continue to exist more

inequalities can be created by white supremacy depending on their perceived need for power. Beyoncé by creating a performance that exhibits, as Wortham argues, “Afro-everythingism” (“BeyChella”) Beyoncé argues against the notion of white supremacy and imperialism. Wortham says about Beyoncé, “She is trying to really help [black people] understand [to] both take pride in what it means to fully embody earth and the world in 2018 and not shy away from it and be so proud. [Black people] don’t have to escape to conquer or be free” (“BeyChella”). JAY-Z and Whitehead, in their own way promote “Afro-everythingism” as they all continue to fight for equality, justice, and ultimately freedom in the United States.

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