

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

2016

QUEEN OF KINGS: BEYONCÉ POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY IN THE JUVENILE DETENTION CENTER CLASSROOM

Sarah Kahn

University of Montana, Missoula

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Kahn, Sarah, "QUEEN OF KINGS: BEYONCÉ POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY IN THE JUVENILE DETENTION CENTER CLASSROOM" (2016). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 10645.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/10645>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

QUEEN OF KINGS: BEYONCÉ POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY IN THE JUVENILE
DETENTION CENTER CLASSROOM

By

SARAH ELIZABETH KAHN

BA, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, 2012
MFA, University of Montana, Missoula, MT, 2016

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master
in English Literature

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2016

Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Katie Kane, Chair
English

Robert Baker, Co-Chair
English

Elizabeth Hubble
Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Kahn, Sarah, M.A., May 2016

English Literature

Queen of Kings

Chairperson: Katie Kane

Co-Chairperson: Robert Baker

This paper explores the feminist and race politics of celebrity Beyoncé Knowles, focusing particularly on her recent single “Formation” from the album “Lemonade.” It argues that Beyoncé represents an example of radical politics using mainstream currency, and suggests that the compromises made to maintain public favor ultimately facilitate a deconstruction of the institution from within. The paper goes on to explore the ways that teaching pop media like Beyoncé’s “Formation” video in juvenile detention center settings can be an effective tool for affecting social change, and explores some of the most effective classroom approaches to working with incarcerated youth.

Contents

Queen of Kings Introduction.....	1
Formation.....	6
Female Sexuality: Beyoncé Claiming Feminism.....	24
Beyoncé in the Institution: Slay, Trick, Or Get Eliminated.....	41
Works Cited.....	48
Queen of the Halls Introduction.....	52
Identity Politics, Beyoncé, and Incarcerated Youth.....	53
Empathy, Prosocial Behavior, and the Study of Art.....	69
Agency: Education versus Discipline.....	71
Confidence and Role Performance: Art and Identity.....	78
Social Skills: Classroom Applications of Theories Behind Youth Aggression and Criminality.....	81
Teaching Art as Social Justice.....	85
Works Cited.....	89

Queen of Kings: Beyoncé’s Fourth-Wave Intersectional Feminism Navigates the Capitalist Patriarchy

Introduction

On August 24, 2014, Beyoncé Knowles stood on the VMA stage, her silhouette cast against a screen displaying “Feminism” in massive gold letters, as 8.3 million people watched. In that moment, she was a point of access and a conduit for critical theory, cultural criticism, popular culture, the entertainment industry, mass consumerism, and mainstream American culture. She was both the arbiter of the cultural conversation and its reflection and she took her place at the center of a political conversation that bridges the audiences of low- and highbrow, elite and mainstream, the intellectual and emotional, and the critical and passive consumer. The day Beyoncé’s “Formation” appeared online, over seven million viewers watched it.

In *Gaga Feminism*, Jack Halberstam proposes a new wave of feminism, one inspired by Lady Gaga’s irreverent rejection of institution and category, which “masquerades as naïve nonsense” but “brings together meditations on fame and visibility with a lashing critique of the fixity of roles for males and females” (135). Halberstam explores this intersection of pop and radical politics as a model both for mainstream Americans and for academics, for activists and for concert-goers. Halberstam, in the end, has little to say about the actual Lady Gaga, allowing Gaga Feminism to leave her behind. For Halberstam, Lady Gaga is a symbol of a new generation’s relationship to gender, but “Lady Gaga herself is certainly not an architect of a new gender politics” (14). Halberstam proposes that this new wave of feminism will reject the institution of

marriage rather than expand it to include queer couples, will embrace the Occupy movement and its anarchist tendencies, and will reject the social expectation that we assign and perform gender at all. This fierce rejection of institution—any system or social construct that maintains or even contributes to the capitalist imperialist patriarchy—is a dismantling of rules, a kind of social anarchy. Rather than challenge prejudice against queer and marginalized bodies, it rejects categorization of those bodies and also of normative bodies, imagining a world where neither the conformist nor the Other would be confined to a prescribed identity.

While this is an incredibly interesting and hopeful brand of feminism, it avoids some of the serious questions about navigating the real world. Gaga Feminism lacks intersectionality and bypasses the labeling of minorities necessitated by their oppression and persecution. In a Gaga Feminism world, there would be no gender; without gender, there could be no patriarchy. However, without gender there can also be no protection for female bodies and no feminism. Gaga Feminism's anti-establishmentarianism ultimately leaves little room for race, femme performance, monogamy, or any other identity functioning within the existing social institutions. The rejection of socially prescribed roles is laudable, but Gaga's genderqueer persona should not be confused with activism that can truly challenge oppression, and her ability to inhabit a performance of queerness hinges, in many ways, on the privilege that comes with her fame, wealth, and whiteness. Rejecting gender is often impossible and, for many, is not desirable, and Gaga Feminism's deracinated nature, rather than being inclusive, inherently excludes the intersectional. Gaga Feminism offers a radical but incomplete imaginary of feminism's fourth wave.

Though perhaps imperfectly realized, Halberstam's use of celebrity as a focal point for a radical movement is particularly fascinating. By focusing on the mainstream, Halberstam explores a feminist movement that exists outside of institutions of education, which are often the houses and the prisons of such movements. Halberstam uses Gaga only as inspiration, though; I would argue that the dialectic relationship between the famous and the fan, rather than simply the image of the celebrity, is the ground from which the most meaningful movement can grow. Rather than accidental catalysts, celebrities are sometimes conscious actors in this kind of movement, not only influencing their followers but influenced by their followers. Celebrities are constructs of those who market and brand and profit off of them, of the market for which they perform, and of their own performed personal and artistic identities. A celebrity is a slave to the public but also must masterfully manipulate that public. The persona of the celebrity is crafted between their person and the persons watching, a being both meticulously constructed and larger than what either body could imagine.

Beyoncé Knowles is uncommonly meticulous in crafting her public persona and is notoriously guarded about her private life; this essay will deal with the public persona, Beyoncé, because definitive statements about Beyoncé Knowles cannot be confidently made. Although she is a conventional, mainstream superstar, Beyoncé is also a political actor on the public stage. She embodies the point of contact between public and individual property that is so interesting as a focal point of modern ideology. Beyoncé has grown and evolved beyond and outside of Beyoncé Knowles, but she does nothing by accident, and through her, Beyoncé Knowles has entered the political conversation with purpose and calculation. For better and worse, Beyoncé's feminism is no Gaga

Feminism. It does not abandon institutions of marriage, nuclear family, heteronormativity, gender, or capitalism. Beyoncé is a wife and mother, participates with great skill in a capitalist economy, and officiates the sale of female sexuality. She also illuminates the systems within which she works, challenging and redefining even those roles she inhabits conventionally.

Beyoncé's resistance is vividly literal and connected to the real, and from that place it finds a level of nuance and specificity that the more whimsical and sometimes gimmicky Lady Gaga has not achieved. While Gaga Feminism does not seem equipped to contend with intersectionality, Beyoncé's feminism may not escape gender- and hetero-normativity, and perhaps Beyoncé's relationship to gender performance is the most problematic to feminist critics. That performance of the feminine, though, is self-aware, and that relationship to queerness is not unexamined. This ability to embody and simultaneously critique sociocultural roles allows her access to a unique demographic and makes her work into rich texts that can inform the social imaginary. Her most recent work in *Lemonade* is a masterful artistic collaboration that speaks to the most relevant contemporary social issues of race and gender. Part of its genius is its incredible facility with artistic collaboration, one made possible by its cultural context.

In 2010, Instagram was launched, garnering 100 million users by 2012. Twitter, too, had 100 million users by 2012, and Facebook had over a billion. Reddit, BuzzFeed, blogs, and clickbait articles designed to be absurd and sentimental enough to attract attention became sources of news and information for millions of Americans (Digital Trend). As British feminist Kira Cochrane writes in *All the Rebel Women*, fourth wave feminism “feels distinct from the third wave announced by Rebecca Walker in 1992—the

technological possibilities have changed and grown exponentially since then, enabling women to raise their voices, bring feminist issues into the mainstream, and organize powerfully across borders” (Location 611). While this democratic exchange of opinion and claims has made real facts difficult to discern from unfounded feelings, it also means that a college prep high school student might come across a definition of feminism that differs from her teacher’s, a pop star might discover Chimamanda Adichie’s TED Talk on feminism, and a kid in rural Montana might listen to Adichie’s definition of feminism while watching the VMAs. Beyoncé could take a word that was an insult in middle school halls in 2013 and make it a popular t-shirt on etsy. Beyoncé could watch the growing Black Lives Matter movement and bring it to a stadium packed with football fans through her half-time performance of “Formation,” some of whom associated the movement with dangerous criminals inventing racism out of resentment for justice. The cultural moment in which Beyoncé publicly claimed a feminist and anti-racist identity was a moment of conversation, information, and exposure, and Beyoncé represents a nexus of worlds, one born of this interconnection and also shaping it.

Beyoncé’s feminism is a feminism that bridges the once marginal feminist movement and mainstream popular culture. It demands acknowledgement of intersectionality from feminism, includes queerness without rejecting femme, establishes difference without losing mainstream appeal, and resists objectification while capitalizing on the cultural currency of female sexuality. It navigates the capitalist patriarchy through what some critics consider genius and others consider compromise. Beyoncé’s feminism is not more important than the great feminist voices before hers, but its power cannot be discounted. It is a fourth wave feminism that rejects the exclusion of race from the

feminist conversation and demands that femme, heteronormativity, and sexuality be included in the feminist identity without making these things necessary to the female identity. It is a feminism that lives in the tension between disparate and sometimes irreconcilable voices, says to race, rage, forgiveness, heteronormative love, the voices on the edges and those in the center of our popular imagination: “Pull me in, pull me in, pull me in” (Lemonade).

Formation

Beyoncé’s “Formation” is an *ars poetica*, a product of years of her own evolution and of the larger cultural conversation around feminism and the Black Lives Matter movement. When she first performed the song, she did so surrounded by 100,000 mostly white men, high on winning or livid on losing, at the 2016 Super Bowl Halftime Show. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the Black Panthers, and Beyoncé and her dancers dressed in a Black Panther motif. At one point, she raised a fist over her head in the sign of Black Power. In an interview for the *New York Times*, Jon Caramanica noted that “the halftime show is usually a locus of entertainment, but Beyoncé has just rewritten it — overridden it, to be honest — as a moment of political ascent” (1). In the same interview, Jenna Wortham said, “It’s also not insignificant that she’s electing to parade her substantial wealth and ability to outearn most men in the music industry (including her husband, Jay Z) during the Super Bowl — the flagship event of male virility and violence in this country. That’s incredibly meaningful. It’s a moment where the entire country will be watching, and forced to sit up and pay attention. We can’t overlook the audacity of that”

(2). Beyoncé’s access to this platform forces an often-marginalized conversation—about race, about gender—onto the main cultural stage. More than that, her 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. Unlike these modes of communicating radical politics, Beyoncé’s artistic performances are hybridizations of intellectual and academic conversations, mass-consumed entertainment, media representation, political activism, and identity performance. Unlike singularly academic or political modes of communication, Beyoncé’s performances have access to demographics that traditionally ignore or dismiss political argument. Beyoncé has cultural capital and a platform that allow her to challenge the power structure that often silences non-white and non-cisgendered male voices. In so many ways the ultimate insider, Beyoncé can place white American men (and men, and white America) in a temporary position of outsidership that forces them to contend with issues of race and gender. This discomfort sparked controversy immediately after her Super Bowl performance. On the video clip “Fox and Friends Slam Beyoncé’s Super Bowl Performance,” former mayor of New York City Rudy Giuliani told the press that Beyoncé used the Super Bowl “as a platform to attack police officers, who are the people who protect her and protect us, and keep us alive.” This statement was emblematic of a deeper American fear: that the system that keeps white people in the position of oppressor might be revealed, indicted, and destroyed.

On the day she dropped the video, Beyoncé and Jay Z donated 1.5 million dollars to the Black Lives Matter movement. After some time away from the public eye, during which her silence on the protests against police brutality was widely criticized, Beyoncé

reappeared with a brilliantly crafted, if problematic, argument. Caramanica asserts that “Beyoncé shrewdly positions herself as a good pop buffer between the country’s bad and ugly” (3). She neither exploits nor ignores the political movement, but she also does not enact a political performance that is separate from her other public presentation. She understands these as inextricable. Instead of tweeting about Black Lives Matter and continuing to sing about single ladies, she integrates what could appear to be disparate categories. This integration of mass entertainment and political conviction facilitates her entry into the cultural political conversation, creating a new voice for the movement on a central stage. Caramanica adds that “Beyoncé renders her politics both literally and colloquially. Her radicalism is both overt and implicit — she knows that creatively drawn statements of black identity and pride are as powerful as any direct social-political statement” (2). The rhetoric of art and of popular culture are effective because they are able to subvert or bypass the traditional routes of rhetoric. They directly reach audiences on emotional rather than only intellectual planes.

The “Formation” video does much to illuminate the machinations of racism, the lack of protection for black bodies, the violence enacted against people of color, the whitewashing of celebrities, the appropriation of black culture, and the misogyny that defines gendered roles in public and private spheres. It does not just shed light on these systems of oppression, though. It performs a celebration of black female life as an act of resistance. It holds up education as a source of power and black female identity as a challenge to the social order. Unlike so much of mainstream music, it is not aimed a white, male audience. “Formation” addresses a black, female audience, in a call to action,

a celebration of a marginalized group, and a disruption and subversion of the white male heteronormative imperialist patriarchy.

“Formation” opens with a sound bite that asks, “What happened at New Wil’ins?/ Bitch, I’m back by popular demand” (1-2). The lyric references Beyoncé’s return to the scene after a hiatus, asserting and owning her power in the simple acknowledgement of “popular demand.” Beyoncé has consistently employed traditionally male arrogance and cockiness in her work, an act that both conforms to mainstream heteronormativity and subverts it. In “Diva,” she sings, “A diva is the female version of a hustler.” This coopting of the term “hustler” and repossession of the slur “diva” is both an appeal to the institutionalized gaze—she is winning, rather than rejecting, the game—and a radical subversion of it. In this line, she shows how what is impressive in a man—confidence, arrogance, extreme and even violent power—is derided in a woman. In her online Ban Bossy campaign, *Lean In* author and Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg explains that “when a little boy asserts himself, he’s called a ‘leader.’ Yet when a little girl does the same, she risks being branded ‘bossy.’” The campaign attempts to combat the same double standard Beyoncé calls out in this song: essentially, that female power is stigmatized and male power is idolized. Beyoncé joined Sandberg’s campaign, ending a Ban Bossy YouTube video by telling the camera, “I’m not bossy, I’m the boss.” Diva has the connotation of self-importance, neediness, difficultness, self-involvement, unappealingly demanding personality, and aggressiveness. These same qualities in a man, though, are considered a sign of confidence and power. By reclaiming the word, Beyoncé illuminates this double standard and also shatters it, making room for herself in that space of self-congratulatory fame. In the intro of “Formation,” she calls back to this

reclamation of her power, accepting the admiration of her audience and rejecting the misogynist expectation of demure humility.

The intro, “What happened at New Wi’lins,” is a clip from a video by youtube personality Messy Mya, a young black genderqueer man from New Orleans who was gunned down outside his girlfriend’s baby shower. Messy Mya’s voice represents southern black culture, but also the violence rampant in New Orleans and the lack of protection for black bodies. Beyoncé is celebrating marginalized voices and illuminating the lack of platform and resources for those voices. In a New York Times interview, Wesley Morris notes that “This song is remarkably gay. She takes bounce music — which is pretty gay to start with — and repeats the word ‘slay’ in different ways... an amazing word here... It’s violent, obviously. But, in a gay context, it’s also triumphant: *He slayed*. I’m moved by her use of that word, knowing that she knows how to use bounce music to have it work both ways: funereally and as fun” (4). Most music in popular culture is a collaboration between many invisible artists, culminating in a performance piece that bears the face of only one celebrity. As Kristin Lieb articulates in *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars*, a female celebrity is a kind of commodity and “We feel like we know her . . . But what we really know is her constructed advertised brand. . . the end product of myriad professional authors, all struggling to select the brand meanings they presume will work best with her intended audiences” (p. 31). Beyoncé changes that model by giving the voices in her work names, by orchestrating a collaboration that is collage rather than something closer to plagiarism or artistic appropriation. In her visual album *Lemonade*, Beyoncé collaborates with over fifty artists, sampling songs and

poems, employing writers and producers, highlighting the voices of singers and public personalities, showing images of unknown women and famous athletes. Not only does this collage generate dynamic, moving art, it also makes space for incredibly diverse experiences and bodies. It opens and deepens a conversation about racism and sexism by showing women like Lezley McSpadden, who lost her son Michael Brown when he was shot by a police officer in the street in Ferguson, and Serena Williams, a tennis star accused of looking “masculine.” Part of why Beyoncé’s work is not merely the “product of myriad professional authors” is that she invites their participation as peers rather than invisible puppeteers. Instead of allowing the popular narrative to rewrite hers, she writes space into the popular narrative for new stories.

She is also challenging her audience, which blindly consumes the images she produces, to be uncomfortable, to be excluded. A white or non-southern person is going to be left out of this and many other inside references. Beyoncé wants viewers to respect the reality of southern black culture rather than pretend it is their own. She is speaking to an audience that indiscriminately consumes black culture that has been altered and repackaged by white mainstream pop, and she is not allowing them to appropriate the image of her that has been made safe by media. She wants them to confront the racism shown to people of color in America instead of simply liking the parts of her culture that are easy to digest. To most Beyoncé fans, the voice of a genderqueer black victim of violence is silent, his body is invisible, and in this moment she is not allowing that audience to look away. At the same time, the moment is an inside reference to those members of the audience who do know Messy Mya’s voice. The song in that instant is

directed at that person: the genderqueer, the female, the black, the southern body, the invisible body radically reflected here in the mainstream.

As the intro plays, the video shows an image of Beyoncé standing on a cop car as it sinks into water. The image echoes the images in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, a time when FEMA and the American government ignored the suffering of impoverished black victims. The car that sinks with her is a nod to the horrible history of police brutality against people of color in America and the recent visibility of this issue. Both Beyoncé and the car sink towards an underwater oblivion. Rather than posing antagonistically in this frame, they are submerged together. Both the institution of the police and the black body are being subsumed, and the image implies that both will be destroyed by a failure to fix to the problem of racism in the police force.

Worthom points out that “This video feels like the ultimate declaration from Beyoncé that the tinted windows are down, the earrings are off and someone’s wig might get snatched, judging by the scene in the hair store about 1:22 minutes in...As always, a Beyoncé surprise drop operates across multiple vectors, and ‘Formation’ isn’t just about police brutality — it’s about the entirety of the black experience in America in 2016, which includes standards of beauty, (dis)empowerment, culture and the shared parts of our history” (1). The hybridity, both through collage and through an assertion of identity that the mainstream views as incompatible, is the medium of the piece’s message. In the first words of the refrain, Beyoncé sings: “Ya’ll haters corny with that illuminati mess” (3). This is a nod to the conspiracy theory posed by some that she is a member of the secret society, the Illuminati. In *The Week’s* article “Who Are the Illuminati and Do They Control the Music Industry?” it is explained that the name Illuminati was first used with

the Bavarian Illuminati, but has since been assigned to fictitious groups supposedly comprised of the rich and famous. Conspiracy theorists believe that the group secretly controls the world. The suggestion that Beyoncé is a member degrades her in two modes. First, it suggests that her power was not earned and is not hers, that she was placed in her position by a magical male-dominated club. Second, it exhibits white fear of black power by suggesting that she is controlling the world from behind some evil silkscreen, inches from taking over your Norman Rockwell dining room.

She continues with, “Papparazzi, catch my fly and my cocky fresh,” recalling that empowered confidence, that claim over male arrogance, a proclamation of her power. She explains, “I’m so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress/ I’m so possessive so I rock his Roc necklaces” (5-6). She wore the Givenchy dress to the Met Gala and was met with controversy over its revealing cut and fabric. She owns her sexuality in a way that challenges the concept of female sexuality as objectifying or vulgar, and adds that she wears Jay Z’s brand necklace out of possessiveness. In this moment, she takes that objectified image and subverts it. Instead of possessed, she is possessive, traditionally the role of the male. She wears the necklace not because she is owned but because she wants you to know that she owns him. In her article “Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism,” Maxine Zinn argues against the concept of “So much feminist scholarship [which] assumes that when we cut through all of the diversity among women created by differences of racial classification, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation, a ‘universal truth’ concerning women and gender lies buried underneath” (17). Rather than ignore these differences, “Formation” contends that the feminist identity is necessarily intersectional. It does not aim for the “universal truth” and instead responds to Zinn’s

question, “But if we can face the scary possibility that no such certainty exists and that persisting in such a search will always distort or omit someone's experiences, with what do we replace this old way of thinking?” (17). Rather than attempt to formulate a single feminist or anti-racist identity, “Formation” insists on the cooperation of vastly different identities. In her article “Is There a Fourth Wave? Does it Matter?”, Jennifer Baumgardner defines a new wave as “both connected to and different from what [has] come before.” She claims that a fourth wave of feminism began in 2008 and that its most significant difference is its “experience of the online universe [as] just a part of life.” That experience “of social media has once again transformed politics and feminism.” It has not only allowed for feminist information and debate to be brought to the virtual doors of almost every American, it has allowed the people behind those doors to enter and change the conversation. True to Baumgardner’s technology-driven fourth wave feminism, it draws on voices and information from a plethora of mediums and sources. “Formation” makes space for a new feminist identity.

Lieb argues that a female celebrity seen as a “provocateur” or “temptress” who wants to continue her career has “six possibilities they (and their handlers) can try to develop. These are: ‘change of focus’; ‘diva’; ‘whore’; ‘exotic’ (often a place, as would be expected in a racist culture, for women of color); ‘provocateur’; and ‘hot mess’ (a label for a star engaging in ‘public self-destruction’)” (90–91). Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Sexual Politics*, writes, “White Western normality becomes constructed on the backs of Black deviance, with an imagined Black hyperheterosexual deviance at the heart of the enterprise” (120). The identities assigned to women of color (“exotic”) are seen as mutually exclusive with the “good girl” or the “virgin,” who is, in the Western

imagination, the white girl. Claiming an identity that successfully contains motherhood, celebrity, non-white race and culture, and sexuality, among other things, is inherently subversive.

After this line, she moves from her female identity to her cultural identity: “My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana/ You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas Bama/ I like my negro nose with *Jackson Five* nostrils” (8-10). This celebration of her black roots is radical in its simplicity and unflinching explicitness. It is popular to be black only in a particular way, and she is abandoning that cultural norm, that pressure to whiten her appearance and person. She uses each word and reference to its fullest potential. She does not pick any example of a “negro nose.” She chooses Michael Jackson’s nose, one he destroyed in an attempt to narrow and whiten it. In that single line, she calls up the trajectory of so many celebrities, the way that Hollywood consumes and erodes black culture, appropriating what it deems “cool” and erasing what is inherently black about it.

The word Bama is also carefully chosen. During the Great Migration, Bama was a derogatory term used to describe working class black individuals who were escaping the south after emancipation to seek work and opportunity. As Rend Smith explains in her article, “Who You Calling Bama?” the word was used for southern persons of color who did not act “white” enough or whom northern whites considered “uncivilized.” Beyoncé is not just owning black culture, she is specifically owning the part of black culture that is feared, loathed, and condescended to by white Americans. This is not exactly an anthem of universal solidarity; this is a challenge to the white person who is listening to deconstruct their understanding of her, to look at her not as a celebrity who is also black

but as a black woman, to examine what part of her female black identity they are rejecting or erasing. She is telling her listeners that they do not own her, that she has agency over her image, and that they cannot love part of her and reject the rest. She is also speaking to her black, female audience, celebrating their shared identity and resisting pressure to alter it to fit pop culture.

As she sings, Beyoncé stands in front of a formation of female dancers in the hall of an antebellum house. The walls of the hall are lined with shelved books, a hybrid of hall and library. The antebellum clothes and architecture and the incongruent presence of the books recall a time before emancipation, when slaves were not permitted to learn to read. The image that replaces that image of suffering and subjugation is one of empowered female blackness. Her arms pump at right angles, her legs stomp in a wide stance; the dance is powerful and, though it is sexy, it is not seductive. It is not aimed at the male gaze. The women are surrounded by books, empowered by education, taking the access they have and turning it into a source of success and independence. The history of slavery and of the fight for civil rights becomes the force that drives the dancers into formation, standing off to protect what has been won and to fight for a better future.

In the final lines of the refrain, she sings “Earned all this money but they never take the country out me/ I got hot sauce in my bag, swag” (11-12). She refers to her economic success as a source of power. She refuses to be subsumed by the capitalist economy. No matter what image of her it idolizes or sells, she retains her Black country roots, profiting from but not succumbing to the capitalist system. Her celebration of her southern country heritage is reiterated in the reference to hot sauce, a particularly southern country cultural reference, one that someone from Louisiana would understand.

She makes no attempt to make this reference clear or relatable to any northern or white audience. One of the radical acts of the song is that it does not make itself accessible to all audiences—by which most people mean white, northern and middle-America audiences.

The interlude is sung by Big Freedia, a genderqueer artist who shared the Bounce label with Messy Mya. Beyoncé contacted Big Freedia to ask for a sound bite for the song, a voice of New Orleans underground. Beyoncé, who was essentially raised in the spotlight of Hollywood, cannot offer the voice Big Freedia can. She does not have the reach to enter queer and genderqueer spaces, urban underground, or contemporary southern country, so she supplies a voice that does inhabit those spaces. Big Freedia, having never heard the song, recorded a number of lines. In Lambe’s interview, “How Big Freedia Helped Beyoncé Return to her Roots in ‘Formation’” Freedia tells the camera that when Beyoncé heard the recordings she immediately sent a text stating: “My favorite line is when you said, ‘I like cornbreads and collard greens, bitch.’ Why did you say that?” Her ability to be comfortable in an outsider space and to give a platform to a voice that is in contact with but is not her own is another radical action. She makes room for a voice that is more marginalized than she is, neither pretending to have claim to that identity nor turning away from it.

She opens the chorus with, “I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow-bone it/ I dream it, I work hard, I grind til I own it” (26-27). Again, she exhibits that anomaly of female cockiness, owning her power and success. She also employs “yellow-bone” as an empowered verb. The phrase refers to a person of color who is light-skinned, something that can put the person at the edge of both worlds, not white and not black, living in a

hyphenated space. Instead of attempting to move in either direction, she owns and celebrates that space as a source of talent, skill, and work ethic. She owns and uses her identity to cultivate her success, rather than changing it to fit another model of success. She follows with “I twirl on them haters, albino alligators” (28), a reference to an object of New Orleans style, extremely rare and expensive due to the scarcity of albino alligators (there are so few that nothing is now made of the material). The line also speaks, subtly, to a past controversy over the King-Beys, a shoe by Beyoncé’s brand made of a compilation of water creatures that was met with extreme anger by PETA and similar groups. It triples as a reference to her haters as albino alligators, white, violent, and lacking their own culture or power outside of simple, brutal force.

Later in the chorus, she says, “Okay, okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation” (36). In this moment she explicitly (and exclusively) addresses black females, inciting them to take a stance of resistance. The phrase “in formation” is also a wordplay on “information.” The education of females as a source of power is a theme in the song. As her dancers make a circle around her, clad in jean shorts and shirts and kicking out powerful rather than seductive dance moves, she demands, “Slay, trick, or you get eliminated” (39). Not only does she establish that her space is a space of uncompromising power, she also refers to the fact of living as a person of color in a racist society. Passivity is not an option. Without strength and resistance, and, of course, even despite these in many tragic cases, marginalized bodies are subsumed, altered, erased, and murdered. Formation is a stance of (collective and organized) resistance. It is a display of black female culture that challenges the white male imperialist patriarchal claim to ultimate power and achievement. It carves out a space of black, female power.

In the following verse, Beyoncé sings, “When he fuck me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster” (40). Here, she subverts the gender paradigm. Sex is transactional and she reverses the transaction. Instead of selling her sexuality, offering sex in return for his power, she deigns to bestow gifts on him in return for his pleasing her. She names female desire, something absent from most of mainstream American culture, and demands that he fulfill that desire. In the essay “Gender, Race, and Media Representation,” Dwight Brooks and Lisa Hebert discuss “how popular culture has commodified the black female body as hypersexed. Some theorists (Guerrero, 1993; Iverem, 1997; Manatu, 2003) contend that black women are portrayed only as sexual beings and not as romantic characters... Others assert that the habitual construction of a subversive woman’s sexual image may come to define women culturally (Kennedy, 1992; Nelson, 1997). While the black jezebel mythos is not new to film and television studies, it has found a home in music videos” (300). This hypersexualization, however, does not represent acceptance of female sexuality. Instead, the black female body is objectified and exoticised as a site of desire for the male gaze. Though they tempt and satisfy, women are not portrayed as capable of their own autonomous desire. Instead, women are represented as wanting men and the fruits of male power—money, affection, protection—but never wanting sex. By changing that template, Beyoncé introduces female agency and reimagines a female sexual role that is neither controlled by nor indebted to her male counterpart. She has all of the power in this relationship, while he only hopes to serve and be close to her. She disrupts the popular image of the female gold digger, painting a relationship in which she is independently powerful and attached to a man by choice and not by need.

On the screen, a black boy, maybe six years old, dances in an alley in a black hoodie. He is both innocent and a mini image of the young, black men who are being shot down across the country. He is Tamir Rice, a child perverted by the media into an image of aggression, criminality, and threat. Across from him, a line of riot police stand behind their plastic shields. His hoodie recalls Trayvon Martin's hoodie, an article of clothing that transformed a frightened boy into a monstrous villain in the racist eyes of George Zimmerman. When he is done dancing, he raises his hands over his head in the pose of protest employed by the Black Lives Matter movement, echoing the raised hands of the innocent men gunned down by police. The riot police, in turn, raise their own hands over their heads, and there is a silent truce, a mutual respect in a moment of quiet in the alley. The boy has no weapon, no physically threatening attribute at his disposal. The surrender of the police comes at the catalyst of his talent, his innocence—the value of his life. The suggestion is that the valuing of black life is the vehicle through which America could progress. It shows with stark simplicity the reality of the problem of police brutality and the systematic protection of badged murderers, which is not a question of how we value or interpret police but a question of how we, as a country, devalue black lives.

In the bridge, Beyoncé stands between the columns of a plantation house, wearing period clothes. Behind her stand men in tuxedos, at attention. She has taken the position of the male slave owner, not by becoming him but by reclaiming his power; she has reclaimed the plantation and taken her place at its head. The image both reminds the viewer that slavery is our recent history and the foundation on which America was built and that she is in that place of power now. She ducks her head, then looks at that camera and says, “You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation/ Always stay

gracious, best revenge is your paper” (59-60). She is hyperaware of her own image, something over which she employs complete and constant control. She is aware, too, of the ways in which she has risen within the rules of capitalism, gaining financial success. Halberstam might suggest that this is a compromise, making her a part of the capitalist machine and accepting the institution that is built on the exclusion and exploitation of the marginalized, but Beyoncé suggests that economic success is an exploitation of the capitalist system, not the other way around, and that that success is what has put her on the plantation porch, elevated her voice, and given her the power to elevate other voices. In her essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Audre Lorde argues, “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support” (3). Though Beyoncé capitalizes on her conventional beauty and mainstream appeal, “Formation” argues that she does not depend on that house as her “source of support.” She has taken the house. She owns it. Rather than serve the game, she uses her cultural currency to begin to dismantle it. Her success is revenge against rather than acceptance of the rules.

The outro says, “Girl, I hear some thunder/ Golly, look at that water, boy, oh lord” (61-62). The tide of racism is still rising and the country is still facing a major battle for equality. The image of a brick wall sprayed with graffiti reading, “Stop Shooting Us” flashes, then Beyoncé, lying on her back on the cop car, sinks under the water. This is both a gesture at the reality we are facing and functions as a nod at the larger conversation she is igniting. The video is discussed in high school hallways and graduate

school classrooms, by feminist theorists and TMZ, and Beyoncé’s suggestion that the water is rising is both warning and welcome. Though she is not beginning the conversation, she is beginning an iteration of the conversation, entering a public dialogue that is not finished when she leaves the set. The piece remains dynamic, shifting as the public receives and reacts to it, releasing fan videos of new dances choreographed to the track, criticizing and defending it, teaching and consuming and relating to it.

This is one of the best-crafted and most radical pieces of art in mainstream media, and it has none of the “naïve nonsense” or lack of awareness Halberstam suggests is part of Lady Gaga’s performance. This is the *ars poetica* of a movement that does not dabble in the fantasy of anarchy but stands solidly in the reality of America, facing a tangible violence that does not exist on the plane of, and therefore cannot be challenged by, masquerades of “naïve nonsense.” Beyoncé does employ the tools of many institutions—including racist and sexist mass consumerism, capitalism, and sexual ideals—but she also challenges them. It could be argued that her use of these tropes is a compromise of her radicalism, a degradation of her identity, but it could also be argued that it allows her to inhabit a space that Lady Gaga’s white non-heteronormativity does not address.

Halberstam finds a model for disrupting gender and sexuality norms and expectations in Gaga’s performance of difference, despite the celebrity herself being limited by her need for mass approval, her place in a heteronormative lexicon, and her limited, if still valuable, political awareness. The idea of Gaga far outstrips the person; it is in the public’s willingness to celebrate and emulate her difference that Halberstam finds hope. Similarly, Beyoncé does not escape prescribed gender roles or oppressive institutions, but she does present a possibility of celebrating invisible and marginalized

identities. Despite her mainstream appeal, she makes room on her stage for outsiders and through this she gives the public a chance to engage with these voices and challenge their exclusion.

It is that point of contact between the public and a public persona that contains the most possibility. Artists like Beyoncé are amalgams of their PR teams, the artists writing their lyrics and music, the producers and directors of her videos, and all of her collaborators. The team that creates her persona and her art also integrate the cultural conversation, responding to the demands and interests of fans and to the events of the cultural moment. Wendy Griswold describes this intersection as a “cultural diamond” consisting of “the social world, cultural object, creator, and receivers” (2). Beyoncé is a creation of those behind the scenes and those watching the scene as much as she is her own creation. But what makes Beyoncé so particularly important as a public figure is the presence of her art in culture after it is released. When a video like “Formation” is released, it does not emerge as a finished, static text. The responses on Twitter and Instagram become a part of the video just as the essays of critical theorists and the reviews of cultural critics do. What cannot be fully articulated in the span of the video is part of the conversation ignited by the piece. In that way, Beyoncé’s work intimately involves the audience. Not only does she highlight new voices within the song itself, she ignites voices in the public sphere and the dialogue continues beyond and outside her.

When Beyoncé puts down the baton, theorists and teachers and activists pick it up. What makes her voice so important is that it is audible to a majority of the American public and that the public responds to it. Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, BuzzFeed, and *The New Yorker* all react to her work at once. Bloggers, artists, and critical theorists find

common ground in her work. She shows an image of Michael Brown's mother or a soundbite of Messy Mya and begins, rather than scripts, a conversation. Beyoncé's text offers a number of pedagogical opportunities because she is both relevant and accessible, but her art pushes rather than repeats the mainstream conversation. In particular, I want to explore a number of ways in which a pop cultural text can be effective in a juvenile detention center classroom

Female Sexuality: Claiming Feminist

In a 2013 interview with British *Vogue*, the magazine asked Beyoncé whether she thought of herself as a feminist. "That word can be very extreme," she answered. "I do believe in equality and that we have a ways to go and it's something that's pushed aside and something that we have been conditioned to accept...but I'm happily married. I love my husband" (O'Conner). The misunderstanding of feminism, which Beyoncé seems in 2013 to want to replicate, as connected to hating men is extremely common. That association, having little to do with actual feminists, was imagined by men who feared challenges to the system that privileged them. The pop star had already been singing anthems about surviving breakups, female financial independence, and strong, single women for many years, but the question seemed to catch her off guard. Her answer was unexamined and misinformed.

Beyoncé was not the only pop star distancing herself from the term in 2013. In a 2012 interview with Taylor Swift, Ramin Setoodeh asked her whether she considered herself a feminist. Taylor responded with a statement that had even less to do with the question than Beyoncé's answer had: "I don't really think about things as guys versus

girls. I never have. I was raised by my parents who brought me up to think if you work as hard as guys, you can go far in life,” (Setoodah) Taylor had opened that same interview by stating hopefully, “in the last year [there have been] lots of guys in [my] audience, which is good to see,” so it makes sense that she would try to avoid alienating that supposedly burgeoning Swift demographic. What doesn’t make sense is that she believes that feminism is alienating to men.

In a 2009 interview with a Norwegian journalist, Lady Gaga responded to the same question with, “I’m not a feminist - I, I hail men, I love men. I celebrate American male culture, and beer, and bars and muscle cars” (“Lady Gaga Feels Pre-Judged”) Not only did Gaga’s response show no understanding of the term feminism, it showed a lack of understanding of gender performance; all this is highly ironic for a woman who took her name from a Drag Queen. All three women reflected the cultural moment to which they spoke; all three projected a fear of alienating a fan base that misunderstood the word. Even in 2015, Emma Watson was advised against using the “alienating” word in a speech about gender equality she gave to the UN (Dockterman). The pop stars’ public personas live in a dialectic identity performance with their audiences, and in this cultural moment, they perceived mainstream popular culture as hostile to a person identifying as “feminist.” That fear, rather than being the celebrity’s fear, is a reflection of the apparent public fear.

In 2014, Beyoncé broke that commitment to avoid owning the label, and her audience followed suit. At the VMAs, Beyoncé stood in front of a massive projector displaying a transcript of the definition of feminism as Chimamanda Adichie’s voice read it over the sound system. Her performance brought an informed advocate’s voice from

the academic to the public sphere, pulling a sound bite from Adichie's TEDtalk on feminism. Beyoncé's new attention to the word feminist occurred at a moment when it was beginning to appear more prominently on the mainstream screen. In many ways, she brought it into a pop conversation before pop culture had assimilated it. In other ways, she reflected the cultural tide, which was beginning to turn towards a more profeminist direction.

Closely following Beyoncé's performance, Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift changed their stances on feminism. In a 2015 interview with Maxim, Taylor Swift explained, "I think that when I used to say, 'Oh, feminism's not really on my radar,' it was because when I was just seen as a kid, I wasn't as threatening. I didn't see myself being held back until I was a woman." Perhaps unwittingly, she admitted that her privilege had prevented her from feeling affected by misogyny, and because of that she had distanced herself from feminism in order to maintain an appealing image for a male audience. Despite this, she elaborated, "I didn't have an accurate definition of feminism when I was younger...misogyny is ingrained in people from the time they are born. So to me, feminism is probably the most important movement that you could embrace, because it's just basically a word for equality" (Kreps). The pop star's evolution mirrored a change in the larger conversation and in the very public Hollywood conversation, but even if it followed a path paved by other celebrities, it wasn't insignificant. She also pushed that conversation, if not forward, then onto more people's "radar."

In the fall of 2014, a few months after the VMAs, Lady Gaga also recanted, updating her response to:

I'm certainly a feminist. A feminist to me is somebody that wishes to protect the integrity of women who are ambitious. A feminist in my opinion is somebody that regards that women have a strong intelligence and wisdom. That we are just as great as men — and some of us can be even better. I want to fight for the female performer, the female artist, the female musician. This is the type of feminist that I am: that women can be tremendous artists. (Russoniello)

Like Taylor, Gaga speaks about a feminism particular to herself and her experience. If feminism protects her right to fame, then it must be good. At the same time, the statement showed a somewhat more accurate understanding of the word and contributed to its movement into the mainstream.

These celebrities acted as images of their fan bases; when they feared alienating a part of their demographic, they mirrored their audience's perceived misogyny, and when they believed there was cultural capital in claiming a stronger political stance, they performed a feminist identity. The platform for instant reactions to public statements facilitated by the internet meant that blogs and magazines could post criticism of Beyoncé's denunciation of the title "feminist" within a day of her interview going public. In a Rutgers University conference panel, "Feminist Digital Pedagogies Conference: Beyoncé," one professor showed a video of an interview with Beyoncé, in which she explains that she discovered Adichie's definition of feminism while scrolling through videos on feminism in YouTube. "What does it mean," the professor asked, "if Beyoncé is getting her ideas about feminism from YouTube?" In the case of the VMAs, Beyoncé was the torch that touched the flame of the less visible feminist movement and lit the public sphere with those embers. Her action was neither the arbiter nor the simple

product of the larger conversation; it was a dynamic, integral, and singular element of that conversation, shifting, driving, and disseminating it. Subversive acts on the mainstream stage can lead, rather than reflect, the political climate of their market. In the case of Beyoncé's use of the term "feminist," the public was moved to reconsider a political concept. Her reclamation of the term brought it into the popular culture vocabulary in a new way.

Beyoncé's VMA performance came less than a year after her *Vogue* interview and consisted of an over-15-minute medley of Beyoncé's hits. The performance met with mixed responses from feminist critics, though. About nine and a half minutes into her performance, Beyoncé crossed the stage to a row of poles and began the clip of her song, "Partition." Opening with verse three, she sang, "Driver roll up the partition please/ don't need you seeing Yonce on her knees/ daddy, daddy, didn't bring a towel/ baby, baby we better slow it down/ took 45 minutes to get all dressed up/ we ain't even gonna make it to this club," as she pole-danced in a sequined leotard (2014 VMAs).

Nothing about this performance looked feminist, and the lyrics to the song (though this verse was not sung on stage at the VMAs) include a verse about looking good at the club and "boy, this all for you, just walk my way/ just tell me how it's looking babe...take all of me/ I just want to be the girl you like/ the kind of girl you like" (Beyoncé, "Partition"). Transactional language like "take all of me" employs the lexicon of misogyny and the patriarchal rape culture model of sex in which the man takes it from the woman and the woman gives it, out of gratitude, in an attempt to gain his love, or in return for a piece—usually monetary—of his power. She gets on her knees for him, even though it might mess up her outfit, a concern that reflects acceptance of a consuming

focus on female appearance. She very clearly plays into the gendered stereotypes surrounding relationship roles and sex, and in her performance she appeals to the male gaze directly, expressing the desire to be what that male gaze desires rather than inhabiting her own autonomous identity.

This mimicry of the misogynist beauty standard brought criticism from radical feminists like bell hooks. After Beyoncé modeled in (rather modest) underwear for the cover of *Time 100*, bell hooks argued that you cannot “recoup the violating image and use it...even if it serves you to make lots and lots of money” (hooks, New School Interview). She claimed that Beyoncé probably had little control over the image and was allowing her black, female body to be exploited and commodified by an imperialistic capitalist patriarchy. Hooks went on to state, “I see a part of Beyoncé that is, in fact, anti-feminist, that is assaulting, that is a terrorist...especially in terms of the impact on young girls...the tirades against feminism occur so much in the image-making business” (Sieczkowski). When Beyoncé sings about wanting to be “the kinda girl you like,” about getting on her knees for her husband and only worrying about her outfit, young girls are paying attention. When she arches her back and hooks her leg around a stripper pole, she is selling an image that has been used to oppress women for decades. Hooks argues that you can’t play to the male gaze and also subvert it, that just because Beyoncé calls herself a feminist, that doesn’t mean that she is one.

In a 2014 interview between Laverne Cox and bell hooks, the two women discussed visibility and whether Cox was playing into the white cis heteronormative patriarchal imperialist male gaze in an effort to not be erased. During the conversation, bell hooks brought up Beyoncé, asking, “the long blond, or near blond, locks speak to a

larger audience. Would white people be following after Beyoncé if she was up there bouncing with her nappy locks or her short afro? We can't dismiss how certain representations allow us greater visibility within the existing social structure" (hooks and Cox New School Interview). Cox explained that for her, approaching what hooks called a "traditional female image" that feminists had been "working to get away from," was about being authentic to herself, about performing her authentic self and being visible as that person. The increasing visibility of trans issues is bringing contentious relationships to femme into the spotlight. In this interview, bell hooks' arguments veer close to femmephobia, conflating performing femme and conforming to misogynist expectations and assigning qualities like superficiality and self-objectification to femme identities. In Cox's case, it may not be reasonable to claim that the currency hooks is suggesting she gains from adhering to that racist patriarchal standard is really available to her. The more Cox adheres to that feminine beauty ideal, the more subversive and revolutionary and vulnerable her body becomes. Cox can never become a submissive white woman; the male gaze will always view her violently, and that violence will only increase as the volume of her gender performance increases.

Yet what hooks is saying does also apply. Our existing social structure may have more capacity to make room for Cox as a major celebrity than one of her less conventionally attractive costars, and by imitating the image of the cis heteronormative celebrity, Cox may have accessed a larger platform. Beyoncé, too, has marketed her ability to inhabit traditionally white and female spaces, and has made her sexuality into an empowering asset. But, in monetizing her ability to adhere to that racist, misogynist standard, has she disempowered herself and her fans? Are women like Cox and Beyoncé

strengthening that system of oppression that rewards white and objectified female bodies and silences others when they exploit a loophole in the system, modeling and reaping the benefits of an image built to shut them out? What if, after they turn their capacity to mirror an idealized identity into access to a platform, these women use that platform to raise up voices and bodies that cannot gain access or visibility themselves?

Female sexuality is a foundational currency of capitalist economies. Men sell it to men through body spray commercials, car commercials, and all varieties of things that promise successful courtship. It is a symbol of male power to possess an attractive female, and a source of male competition. In movies, TV, and music, sex sells. The fashion and beauty industries sell female sexual attractiveness back to women they've socialized to hate themselves. Fear of female sexuality sells political propaganda and feeds political agendas. Selling sex, and teaching girls to value themselves based on the male gaze's assessment of their sexual value, is what created and sustains the wage gap, what makes women vulnerable to control and violence by men, and what gives men a monetizable advantage over more than half of the population. In all of these cases, men sell and profit from female sexuality and women do not. The patriarchy situates men in the position of the pimp. But when Beyoncé recognizes the value of her sexuality and decides to sell it herself, rather than letting a man define it and profit from it, it is a subversive and not a submissive act. She is not compromising herself to gain approval from that patriarchal model; she is acknowledging and capitalizing on the value of that commodity of female sexuality without allowing it to consume her identity.

In the introduction of *Black Looks*, bell hooks writes that in magazines, books, television, film, we are “most likely to see images of black women that reinforce white

supremacy. These images may be constructed by white people who have not divested of racism, or by people of color/ black people who may see the world through the lens of white supremacy—internalized racism” (*Black Looks*, 1). Certainly Beyoncé exploits the objectifying male fantasy on the VMA stripper pole, yet her hair is neither straight nor blond and her body is not the weak, rail-thin image of whiteness. Her hypersexualized performance is one she has consciously crafted and one she is wielding with purpose, and she revels in the power of her sexuality as she presents it to the audience.

In the introduction to *Ain't I a Woman?* bell hooks hypothesizes that “black activists defined freedom as gaining the right to participate as full citizens in American culture; they were not rejecting the value system of that culture” (5). This idea suggests that artists like Beyoncé believe that beating the game, which is to say playing and, against odds, winning by the racist patriarchal rulebook, is the goal, rather than dismantling the game entirely and rewriting the rules. This concept echoes Halberstam’s anti-institutional argument in *Gaga Feminism*. Both Halberstam and hooks would likely argue that by performing traditional female tropes, by presenting her body as an object of male sexual desire, Beyoncé is becoming a powerful player in, rather than destroying, that patriarchy.

In *Ain't I a Woman?* hooks writes that white colonizers feared their own sexuality and because of that, “placed the responsibility for sexual lust onto women” (30). In the antebellum South, slave owners “forced white women to deny their physical beings [in] an expression of hatred of women,” and that same hatred of women “motivated and sanctioned white male brutality against black women” (32). As white women were expected to be pure and virginal, black women became the symbols of male primal

sexual desire and were forced to carry the hatred and lust white colonizers possessed for the female body. This paradigm meant that black women were assigned the identity of the “fallen, the whore, the slut, the prostitute” (55). As hooks suggests, performing a hypersexualized identity might not represent an act of agency; rather, it might be an unconscious surrender to the exploitation of the racist patriarchy. Performing this identity publicly takes that act from individual subjugation to what hooks refers to as the act of a “terrorist.” By presenting this image, is Beyoncé simply cementing it as the identity young black females must accept?

It would be a mistake, though, to imagine that Beyoncé’s use of the stripper pole was unexamined. Though the early verse of the song is about being subsumed by a male partner, wanting only to be “the kind of girl you like,” the final verse is in French. Because of time constraints, the VMA mash-up did not contain the final, but its presence in the song proves that she is aware of the way she is representing herself and that she is doing so with great calculation and agency. Translated, the verse reads: “Do you like sex?/ Sex. I mean, the physical activity./ Coitus. Do you like it?/ You’re not interested in sex?/ Men think that feminists hate sex./ But it’s a very stimulating and natural activity that women love” (Beyoncé, Partition). This final verse sheds new light on the whole song, overturning assumptions that the sex in the backseat of the car was an act of generosity. The verse subversively names and owns female desire, replacing Beyoncé in a place of sexual agency rather than sexual exploitation. She suggests not that a woman should give sex to a man, but that she should enjoy it, that rather than only hoping to please him, she should enjoy the power she has to please him. Her sexuality is not an object of his desire, it is a source of her power.

As the bass fades in the transition after Beyoncé's VMA clip of "Partition," the dancers pause and the lights go dark, casting the women in hypersexual silhouettes, their bodies indecipherable from the dark except where the last of the low light hits them, bordering them in blue. Then the stage goes completely black and brightens again, lit by letters projected on a neighboring screen as the dancers line up in front of it and file off, leaving Beyoncé standing, her legs apart, shoulders squared, and her arms hanging straight, alone in front of the screen. Chimamanda Adichie's voice reads as the words appear, one by one, behind Beyoncé: "we teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings the way that boys are. We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man. Feminist: a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes" (VMAs 2014). Rather than as an image in or a subject of the conversation, Beyoncé is entering it with purpose, is responding directly to accusations of anti-feminist objectification. Whether she is perpetuating a negative ideal or not, she certainly is not unconsciously allowing herself to be manipulated or exploited. Should she have to give up her particular female identity and her sexuality in order to be a feminist? Just because her relationship to the feminine looks like traditional female sexuality, is she reinforcing the narrow definition of womanhood that requires that performance of sexuality?

What is the "impact on young girls" of seeing Beyoncé dance on a stripper pole, stand in front of the word feminist, and then sing a ballad to her daughter? What model is that giving them? Is Beyoncé offering them permission to be all things—mother, artist, powerful, sexy, sexual, successful? Is she proving that these identities are all available,

that they do not exclude one another? Or is she devaluing bodies that do not fit the beauty standard she performs, that do not appeal to the white male gaze? Bell hooks argues that rather than show them that they can be all things, she is reinforcing the system that requires them to be sexual objects in order to be famous or successful, to be mothers in order to be feminine or valuable, to be desired in order to be allowed desire. Beyoncé, though, rejects the demand that she choose between feminism and desireability. It is a destructive and powerful resource of the patriarchy that girls are taught that they must perform for the white male gaze in order to have value, that they cannot choose whether or when to be sexual objects. However, as long as we ask women to choose between being sexual beings and being feminists, we are maintaining a false dichotomy that shames females for their sexual identities, that reinforces the idea of female sexuality as so dangerous and deviant that it must be hidden and repressed, that it is responsible for the reaction it receives from that white male gaze.

Beyoncé pushes back against the fact that “we teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings the way that boys are.” Male performances of sexuality are not considered disempowering, yet policing Beyoncé’s body is considered by some to be a feminist act. In *We Should All Be Feminists*, Chimamanda Adichie explains, “I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femininity. And I want to be respected in all my femaleness...It's nice to be complimented by both men and women (although I have to be honest and say that I prefer the compliments of stylish women), but I often wear clothes that men don't like or don't ‘understand.’ I wear them because I like them and because I feel good in them. The ‘male gaze,’ as a shaper of my life's choices, is largely incidental” (28). Beyoncé’s performance argues that it is not inherently anti-feminist to desire “to be

complimented by [men].” Rather than reproducing a misogynist image, she is taking agency over her body and sexuality. Women should not have to hide the fact that they are sexual beings, should not have to imitate masculine imagery, to be taken seriously as feminist, powerful women.

The fact of Beyoncé’s agency does not entirely deproblematize her performance of sexuality, because, while it gives permission to be both sexual and powerful, it gains access to that permission by performing a sexuality that is desirable to men, and that access is not available to or desired by all women. It reproduces in image of black females that could be interpreted as “the fallen, the slut, the whore,” but it also reimagines that sexuality as positive, beautiful, and empowered. Bell hooks writes in *Black Looks* about Madonna’s supposedly subversive overtly sexual identity performance. She explains that the performance does not empower black women because women of color cannot “‘work’ the image of ourselves as innocent female daring to be bad. Mainstream culture always reads the black female body as a sign of sexual experience...the very image of sexual agency that [Madonna] is able to project and affirm with material gain has been the stick this society has used to justify its continued beating and assault on the black female body” (160). Yet Beyoncé takes, and makes positive, that very sexual agency for black females. She makes the black female body desirable, and demands the right to inhabit that body fully while also portraying a public persona of motherhood and feminism.

Once Beyoncé performs that identity, her image becomes public property, shaped not only by her intentions but by the public gaze that receives it. Since Saartje Baartman was named and marketed as the Hottentot Venus in nineteenth-century Europe, the

European and Euro-American racial imaginary has identified black, female physical characteristics as deviant and vulgar, while simultaneously eroticizing and degrading the black body as a site of violent, animalistic, and repressed white male desire. In her essay, “AKA: Sarah Baartman, The Hottentot Venus, and Black Women’s Identity,” Carol Henderson writes: “the black woman’s body is always public—always exposed. This positioning complicates any attempt on the black woman’s part to assert agency over her life, her person, her body... the effort to profit from the exploitation of their selves play right into the racist imaginings of a mass culture intent on reshaping their public image” (952). Henderson points to attempts by Nicki Minaj and Lil’ Kim to gain agency over their sexuality as examples of “impotent self-actualization.” By making the choice to present themselves as sexualized, they play into the social imaginary that stigmatizes and confines black and female bodies. She writes that these “antics” “run the risk of perpetuating the very thing one hopes to reuse to reclaim one’s agency” (115). Taken entirely out of context, the image of Beyoncé on the stripper pole becomes recontextualized by the image projected onto the female body by the male gaze, which is one of subjugation, degradation, objectification, and disempowerment. Beyoncé contains this risk by directly juxtaposing the provocative dancing with the stance of power and proclamation of feminism. She refuses to allow the public to tear the images apart, to distort them in the process of consuming.

In her book *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Pop Culture*, Janell Hobson suggests a different reading of the performance of sexuality. Rather than suggesting that an image interpreted by the white male gaze as sexual object should be reformed by its source, Hobson argues that the gaze itself—the public reaction to the

image—should be revised. She cites the Jamaican legend of Nanny of the Maroons, a fugitive slave “who is credited with defeating English armies by catching their bullets in her behind and hurling back their ammunition” (87). She writes that Nanny “suggests possibilities for the black female body as a site for decolonization...[that counter] oppression through embodied and encoded signs of disrespect” (88). Hobson uses the example of Janet Jackson’s “wardrobe malfunction” at a Super Bowl Halftime show, during which Justin Timberlake accidentally disrobed her. She cites the public fascination and outrage as an example of “difficulty in women's self-representation, as well as the racial undercurrents that shape the public condemnation and fascination for her duplicated image” (113), but she is careful not use that condemnation as an impetus for policing Jackson’s body. Instead, she argues against the social imaginary that facilitates that policing and possessing and argues that “celebrations of flesh and sexual energy...[challenge] colonial constructs of ‘decency’ and ‘white supremacy’” (87). If the performer retains agency over the image she projects, if she celebrates rather than degrades her body, then that performance can challenge rather than perpetuate the racist and sexist interpretation of that body.

As Halberstam so simply puts it in *Gaga Feminism*, “why are feminists...so wary of new figures of feminist fantasy, women like Lady Gaga or Lil’ Kim or Rihanna or Nicki Manaj or Jenni Rivera or even Ke\$ha, women who use sex boldly in their music, who flaunt their bodies but who also remain insistently in charge of their mass images.” Halberstam concludes that the wariness stems from the fact that these feminists “are committed to a reform feminism as a politics built around stable definitions of (white) womanhood and as a ladies’ club of influence and moral dignity” (7). She makes a salient

point in asking the rhetorical question, why can't a woman "use sex boldly" and be a feminist?

I would argue that the question is more nuanced than the passage suggests, as evidenced by the recent civil lawsuit Ke\$sha brought against Sony producer Dr. Luke, who raped her during her time performing for the label, after which the label refused to release her and denied the allegations (Dresdale and McKenzie). Her case is a sobering example of young female artists not being in control of the reproductions of their image and instead being violently exploited and sold as commodities by the industry. Where Halberstam's point rings truest is not in its suggestion that all sales of sex are equally empowering, but in the idea that women should not be policed in their presentations of sexual identity. A female role model who presents herself (or is presented) as a sexual object is not empowering. But a female role model who presents herself as an independently wealthy, powerful, talented woman who is also a sexual agent can be. As Adichie says, "we teach girls they cannot be sexual beings the way that boys are." The distinction is important between sexual being and sexual object, but that distinction is made clear by Beyoncé. She is the arbiter of her sex life and the agent of her "bold use of sex." She is no object.

Beyoncé's feminism is not just about the fact that she says she is an empowered feminist, and it is not just about reclaiming an identity that has been stigmatized and distorted. It is not just about monetizing a commodity or about profiting off of something that has historically been a source of monetary gain for the male buyer, seller, and controller of the female body. It is not only about agency in the narrow sense that Beyoncé actively makes the choice to dance provocatively and it is not about Beyoncé

being hot. Men want her, women want her, nonbinary gendered folks want her, and she knows this. In whatever form, she is desired, idolized, and emulated, and she does not repress or shrink the part of her that elicits this response. Instead, she refuses to shrink or to alter the parts of her that don't fit into the social imaginary, that challenge the colonial and misogynist projection of the white male imperialist gaze.

Any sexual politics that demand that she be ashamed of her sexuality or that she hide it, that police her body for being “anti-feminist,” is also in some way itself anti-feminist. If our culture objectifies her, she celebrates the object of her body. When they police Beyoncé's body, feminist critics are identifying her performance as pandering to a misogynist system. The fact that that system places such a high value on conventional female sexuality is what is problematic, though, not the fact of her sexuality itself, and repressing that part of her identity would be the real pandering to the system.

Respect and artistic integrity should not be predicated on making a performer's sexuality invisible any more than it should be predicated on her value as a sexual object. She performs as a subject rather than an object, as a person who pursues rather than simply sells sex. She flaunts, but she is not her body. She may gain access with performances of heteronormativity, but she does not perpetuate the privileging of that heteronormativity; instead, she opens the door for the queer and marginalized and celebrates what is different in herself. Just as voices like Messy Mya's make Beyoncé's feminism dimensional, so too does its tension with bell hooks' feminism. The work of Beyoncé's collaboration and the nonstatic nature of her public persona, the way the public can react to and influence her performance, and the constantly changing global conversation into which she enters are all a part of the fourth wave feminism she

represents. Beyoncé's feminism does not strictly diverge from earlier waves of feminism, nor does it attempt to reconcile with them. Instead, Beyoncé's feminism is a part of a constantly shifting political movement, one that relies not on synthesis but on difference, not on reconciling voices but on the tension between those voices, on the very fact that bell hooks could write a criticism of *Lemonade* within weeks of its launch, that Janet Mock could come to Beyoncé's defense almost instantly on Twitter, and that, one day, Beyoncé might craft her own reaction to that conversation in a new album. Beyoncé does not finish the conversation; she expands it. She stands in front of the word "Feminist," she owns her sexuality and her power, and she commands her audience and her critics to "Bow down, bitches" (Bow Down, Beyoncé).

Beyoncé in the Institution: Slay, Trick, Or Get Eliminated

Since she became a member of Destiny's Child at nine years old, Beyoncé has been both a product and a favorite of Hollywood. From girl band to solo artist, her career followed a formulaic arc, and she rose to fame by playing by the Hollywood rules. Despite singing empowering breakup ballads and lyrics praising "single ladies," Beyoncé married rapper Jay Z and gave birth to their daughter, Blue Ivy. As the matriarch of a heteronormative nuclear family, a conventionally beautiful Hollywood superstar, an extremely wealthy celebrity, and a musician hoping to break into the film industry with films like *Dreamgirls*, Beyoncé projected an image of the institution's archetypal female. Beyoncé gained access to the institution by fulfilling its conception of a woman, but what makes her interesting as an icon of radical or semi-radical politics is the fact that once the

door was opened for her, she left it open. With her heteronormative identity performance and class status, she brought her southern, country, and black heritage and her feminism and she kicked open the door for bodies without access to the wealthy, famous, heteronormative, deracinated, and visible spaces she inhabits.

In *Gaga Feminism*, Halberstam writes that “queer anarchism would extend the critique of institutions to the family” (136), rejecting the concept of marriage. Halberstam argues, ““In fact, I would take this point further: the participation of LGBT couples in state-sanctioned marriages lends credibility to the very institution that has acquired meaning precisely through excluding gays and lesbians” (100). Halberstam’s stance is that radical politics do more than advocate for inclusion in the institution; they dismantle and reject the institution entirely. This stance, though, excludes those people who seek the basic legal rights attached to marriage and who want, by choice rather than because of socialization, to celebrate their personal decision to make a commitment to monogamy. Should a mother and wife be banned from feminism any more than a woman who “uses sex boldly” in her art?

Beyoncé fails to reject the institution and instead consistently advertises her devotion to her husband and daughter, without any critique of either the role of wife or of mother. However, she doesn’t do so without examining those roles. In her song “Who Run the World (Girls),” Beyoncé sings, “smart enough to make these millions/ Strong enough to bear the children then get back to business.” Rather than a role to which she is relegated, her motherhood is a sign of her power, and instead of making her dependent on her husband it proves her independence. She doesn’t reject the institution, but she does

conquer it, and her success, rather than her absence, aligns with her claim that “best revenge is my paper” (Beyoncé, Formation).

Beyoncé is very much a part of the capitalist machine. She understands it intimately and profits greatly from it, something Halberstam would likely, at least in part, object to. They argue for carnival as protest and take issue with philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who told Occupy Wall Street protestors that “carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal life” (135). Halberstam neatly addresses the warning with a radical critique of the institutional language and compromising undertones of Žižek’s speech: “carnivals are precisely protests, and they are protests that never envision a return to ‘normal life’ but see normal life as one of the fictions used to bludgeon the unruly back into resignation” (135). This refusal to accept a negotiation with the system of oppression that might make it more inclusive and less oppressive but can’t directly challenge the system itself in its entirety certainly imagines a much less compromised future than the one Žižek accepts.

If we quit revering wealth and designating it for only the smallest percent of the population, if we quit labeling gender and sexuality and desire, if we quit assigning constructed qualities of masculinity and femininity to individuals, and if we quit expecting to return to “normal life” that relies on these systems, we would dismantle much of the machine of oppression. However carnivalesque our protest, though, and however different a future we can forge, we cannot ignore that we are living now in what Žižek refers to as “normal life.” We are not living in a post-racial (or post-misogynist) world. Young black men are being shot. Women are, by choice or circumstance, becoming pregnant. People are finding joy and fulfillment in nuclear families. Perhaps it

is possible, or even necessary, to begin some of the dismantling from inside the institution.

Beyoncé's voice has incredible reach, but it cannot represent the queer, the genderqueer, the impoverished. Her wealth and celebrity are what provide the platform she uses, but when her voice reaches its limits, she brings other voices in. She gives Adichie, whose voice has its own platform in the largely cultural sphere, a place on the popular culture stage. She gives voices like Messy Mya's and Big Freedia's, genderqueer and queer voices that experienced Katrina, New Orleans underground culture, violence, and invisibility, space in her work. When the institution opens the door for her, she does not let it close behind her.

In some cases, the radical anti-institutional, anti-categorizational stance Halberstam takes in *Gaga Feminism* is the one that could emancipate us from the definitions that facilitate persecution and exclusion. In some cases, though, that queer anarchy can only form in the safe-house of at least some privilege. In Beyoncé's "Formation," she uses categorized identity as a source of resistance, a necessity of it. As Paulo Friere explains in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "But almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or "sub-oppressors."... during the initial stage of their struggle the oppressed find in the oppressor their model of "manhood." ... [they are] conditioned by the myths of the old order" (2). It is necessary to write a new story, and the one Beyoncé is writing is of black strength rather than black subjugation, black innocence and talent rather than black criminality.

Friere writes that “Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people” (8). Where Lady Gaga may be able to pursue a different political agenda, being not-woman and woman, not-pop and pop, using her image of irreverence and difference to flirt with a fantasy, or perhaps an ideal, of queer anarchy, Beyoncé must label herself, must be particularly black and female, must in fact be more black and more female than her fans believe her to be, must announce the definition of her identity, must assert that it is not what the public believes it to be. Lady Gaga can push the boundaries of public expectation, making outrageous statements with her wardrobe or her implications of queerness, because she can also inhabit a public persona of a cis-gendered, heteronormative, white female. She can say, “I love men,” and can play to the white male gaze, and this protects her. She can live in a deracinated political “radicalism” in a way that no person of color can. In this sense, Gaga Feminism cannot be truly intersectional, because while it rejects many of the rules of institutions of racism and sexism, it can do so in part because of the protection of white privilege. Beyoncé’s feminism, though, does not exclude Gaga’s. In fact, both public identity performances are necessary because they each provide models for resisting normative identity constructs. Like Messy Mya, Gaga provides genderqueer possibilities Beyoncé’s cisgendered femme identity cannot. Beyoncé’s feminism, though, seems to make more room for Gaga than Gaga Feminism makes for other ideations of intersectionality and difference.

Beyoncé cannot pretend to be “outside” of race or gender because American is not “outside” race or gender, because her body will not become less vulnerable to the

violence perpetuated against black females because she denies her blackness or her femaleness and because to deny those parts of herself would be to deny their power, their beauty, and by distancing herself to allow them to be interpreted, as they so often are, as criminal, or as weak, or as undesirable, or as overly sexual, or as without value. She cannot be so individual that she is released from her racial or gender identity; instead she must imagine herself and her identity as it is unaltered by the oppressor's imagination. Paulo Friere writes that, "liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one...." In order to achieve that birth, and to redefine the black, female identity, she must acknowledge and claim that identity.

A week after Beyoncé released the video for "Formation," SNL did a skit titled, "The Day Beyoncé Turned Black." It opens with a voiceover saying, "For white people, it was just another great week. They didn't see it coming." Then, a newscaster on a TV screen announces that Beyoncé "released a new video that embraced her black heritage." The white actor watching the news begins to panic as her husband comforts her. In a work office, a white guy says with disturbed confusion, "maybe this song isn't for us." Behind him, a white woman exclaims with horror, "But usually everything is." The scene shifts to a post-apocalyptic setting in which white people are fleeing America while black people watch and judge them (SNL). The skit parodies the reality that most of American media is aimed at white people and that celebration of black culture is inherently subversive. Part of the humor and brilliance of the skit is that it illuminates evidence of American racism that is usually hidden and denied. Part of what made "Formation" so impactful is its audience. Beyoncé is synonymous with American pop. She is wildly popular among, as bell hooks points out, white people who

might not “follow her without the near blond locks... if she was up there bouncing with her nappy locks or her short afro.” So when she appears on screen in long braids hanging out of an El Camino or slave-owner-reminiscent antebellum clothing singing about her “negro nose,” the effect is of an insider—the Queen—making her white, mainstream audience into outsiders. It is her position within the institution that gives her power and visibility. It is also this position that makes her so powerful as a text in the classroom. She is already a part of the student lexicon and holds cultural capital with them. Beyoncé is so disruptive because she is disrupting from the inside. She sums it up when, at the end of “Formation,” she stands under the pulled-low brim of a black antebellum hat on the porch of a plantation style house, snaps, and tells the camera, “You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation” (Beyoncé, Formation).

Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda. *We Should All Be Feminists*. New York: Random House, 2014. Print.
- Baumgardner, Jennifer. "Is There a Fourth Wave? Does it Matter?" *Feminist.com*. Perseus Books Group, 2011. Web. 29 May 2016.
- Brooks, Dwight and Lisa Hébert. "Gender, Race, and Media Representation." *The SAGE Handbook of Gender and Communication*. Bonnie J. Dow and Julia T. Wood. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2006. 297-318. *SAGE Knowledge*. Web. 8 May. 2016.
- Caputi, Jane. "The Real 'Hot Mess': The Sexist Branding of Female Pop Stars." *Sex Roles*. 2014.
- Caramanca, Jon, Wesley Morris, and Jenna Wortham. "Beyoncé in 'Formation': Entertainer, Activist, or Both?" *The New York Times*. Feb. 6, 2016. Web. 1 May 2016.
- Castillo, Ana. *Massacre of Dreamers*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2014. Print.
- Cochrane, Kira. *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave of Feminism*. England: Guardian Shorts, 2013. Kindle.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Diaz, Junot. "Junot Diaz: Immigrants, Masculinity, Nerds, and Art." Online Video Clip. *Chicago Humanities Festival*. 16 October 2013. Web. 1 April 2016.

- Digital Trends Staff. "The History of Social Networking." *Digital Trends*. 14 May 2016. Web. 28 May 2016.
- Dockterman, Eliana. "Emma Watson Says She Was Advised to Not Say the Word Feminism in U.N. Speech." *Time Magazine*. 1 December 2015. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Dresdale, Andrea and Joi-Marie McKenzie. "Sony Responds to Kesha's Lawsuit Against Dr. Luke." *ABC News*. 25 February 2016. Web. 1 April 2016.
- "Fox and Friends Slam Beyoncé's Super Bowl Performance: She Saluted Black Lives Matter and Attacked Police Officers." Online video clip. *YouTube*, 8 February 2016. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Gottesman, Tamar and Beyoncé Knowles. "Exclusive: Beyoncé Wants to Change the Conversation." Interview. *Elle*. 4 April 2016. Web. 1 May 2016.
- Griswold, Wendy. *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2004. Print.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal (Queer Ideas/Queer Action)*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012. Print.
- Henderson, Carol. "AKA: Sarah Baartman, The Hottentot Venus, and Black Women's Identity." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. 2 October 2014. Web.
- Hobson, Janell. *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Pop Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- hooks, bell. New School Interview. *New School*. 9 May 2014. Web. 1 April 2016.
- and Laverne Cox. "bell hooks and Laverne Cox in a Public Dialogue at The New School." *New School*. 13 October 2014. Web. 1 April 2016.

- . *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End Press, 1992. Print.
- . *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. South End Press, 1981. Print.
- Knowles, Beyoncé. "Bow Down." March 2013.
- . "Formation." *Lemonade*. Parkwood Entertainment, 6 February 2016.
- . "Partition." 2013.
- . VMA 2014. *Vimeo*. Web. 1 April 2016.
- . "Who Run the World (Girls)." 2011.
- Kreps, Daniel. "Taylor Swift Talks Feminism, Misogyny in Maxim." *Rolling Stone*. 19 May 2015. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Lambe, Stacey. "How Big Freedia Helped Beyonce Return to Her Roots on 'Formation.'" *ET Online*. 10 February 2016. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Lean In. "Ban Bossy—I'm Not Bossy, I'm the Boss." Online video clip. *YouTube*, 9 May 2014. Web. 29 May 2016.
- Lieb, Krisin. *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 110-114. 2007. Print.
- Myincome88. "Lady Gaga Feels Pre-Judged by Norwegian Journalist." Online video clip. *YouTube*. 9 August 2009. Web. 1 April 2016.
- O'Connor, Maureen. "Beyoncé is a Feminist, I Guess." *The Cut*. 4 April 2013. Web. 1 April 2016.

- Roschke, Ryan. "10 Things You Might Not Know About Beyoncé's 'Formation.'" *Popsugar*. 8 March 2016. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Russoniello, Matt. "Lady Gaga on Other Female Pop Stars, Feminism, Abuse in the Music Industry, and That Dancing Diva Kid." *Celebuzz*. 16 October 2014. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Rutgers University. "Feminist Digital Pedagogies Conference: Beyoncé." Online video clip. *YouTube*, 30 April 2014. Web. 29 May 2016.
- Sanberg, Sheryl. *Ban Bossy*. Online campaign. Web. 29 May 2016.
- Setoodeh, Ramin. "Taylor Swift Dishes on her New Album, 'Red,' Dating, Heartbreak, and 'Grey's Anatomy.'" *The Daily Beast*. 21 October 2012. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Sieczkowski, Cavan. "Feminist Activist Says Beyoncé is Partly 'Anti-Feminist' and 'Terrorist.'" *Huffpost Women*. 9 May 2014. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Smith, Rend. "Who You Calling Bama?" *Washington City Paper*. 20 August 2010. Web. 1 April 2016.
- SNL. "The Day Beyoncé Turned Black." *YouTube*. 14 February 2016. Web.
- "Who are the Illuminati and do they Control the Music Industry?" *The Week*. 27 January 2016. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Zinn, Maxine Baca, and Bonnie Thornton Dill. "Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism." *Feminist Studies* 22.2 (1996): 321 *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 May 2016.

Queen of the Halls: Beyoncé in Juvenile Detention Centers

Introduction

I teach in Montana juvenile detention centers through an organization called *Free Verse*. Some friends and I founded the organization in 2014; now, in 2016, we have fiscal sponsorship by a nonprofit with 501(c)(3) status, a modest budget raised through grants and individual donations, and an ongoing partnership with *The Beat Within*, a national publication of art by incarcerated youth.

This essay will address pedagogy in a youth detention center classroom, particularly through the example of teaching Beyoncé. When I taught “Formation” to my incarcerated students, it was one of the first texts that all of my students had already heard and watched. Both “Formation” and Beyoncé’s greater body of work provide ample opportunity for critical analysis and for pedagogical application. For incarcerated youth, Beyoncé is a point of access to social and political conversations that are extremely relevant, to empathetic and imaginative connection, and to modes of self-expression. Beyoncé’s work is by no means singular in its utility in the detention center classroom, and it does not offer more, necessarily, than any other text, whether literary or pop cultural, canonical or obscure, written or visual. However, I consider it a good example of a text with rich pedagogical possibility, and I hope to use it to describe larger questions about our juvenile justice and education systems.

All personal experiences referenced in the essay are anecdotal. My students were never the subject of any research on my part, and the evidence and writing collected in this essay were incidental to the work we were doing. I have taken care to remove any

identifying information and all of the student writing is anonymous. Work quoted here was submitted by students for publication. Both my students' confidentiality and their rights to agency and respect are incredibly important to me. I do not want to exploit or sentimentalize their experiences. My hope is to give voice to what I have seen behind the walls of these prisons, to repeat what my students have said to me, because it is important and it should be heard.

Identity Politics, Beyoncé, and Incarcerated Youth

When I was living in San Francisco, I volunteered for an organization called *The Beat Within*. We visited a juvenile detention center near my house once a week, meeting with groups of kids to write and share poetry, and the organization published and disseminated a journal of work by incarcerated youth around California, Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii.

When I first heard about *The Beat*, a boy I knew was serving time in San Quentin. We were 21. Before he was incarcerated, he had a lot of friends. He was a sweet kid, always at the center of circles at parties. Except for his family, I was the only person who visited him in prison.

What I remember: his mom asking me what to do as we drove over the bay, and me wishing I had an answer; how the guard yelled indifferently for him to let me go when we kissed at the end of visitation; how his letters filled up with rap lyrics. He'd

never written before, that I knew of, but now he promised to record everything once he was out.

I think that for him, writing was a way to reclaim an identity washed down to orange. It was something positive he could do, some way to grapple with his life. It was something to do.

I think the word that best describes my youth is lucky. Still, like so many young people, I spent a few years thinking I wouldn't make it past 21. When I did, there was a lot of reckoning to do. I often feel I've lived two lives as two different people.

When this boy got out, he was changed. I know he's doing fairly well now. I know he's still a good person. I know he had only once gotten in a fight before he was incarcerated. In one of his first letters to me, he told me how much he hated it when new guys arrived. Because he was still new, it was his job to initiate them.

He is an anarchist now, and charged with a consuming anger so incongruous with the boy I knew. I imagine it was harder for him to create a second life, a life he chose.

The girl I remember best from my time with The Beat wore her hair in a bun twisted against the back of her head. She was slender and her wrists swept in spirals when she spoke. She made the other kids laugh and talked constantly. She had a picture with her that she pulled out to show me just after I met her. I look good, huh, she said. The girl in the picture stood in front of a mirror beside her friend. She wore eye shadow and her jeans were studded with rhinestones. Her hipbones and midriff showed below the tiny strip of her shirt. She looked so much older than the girl in front of me, who was so recklessly confident, so hopelessly anxious to find approval in my face.

I met her in the boys' wing. She, like the cisgender boys, was placed there. They made her keep her hair tied back. Her orange T-shirt hung loose and shapeless over her skinny frame. Some of the guards called her by her given name, Chris, but the kids told me her name was Christina.

What she wrote about: the violence she faced when a John or a man hanging out of a car window realized she had a penis. She had acquired the attitude of all the kids inside, a performance of unapologetic procriminality. The cops arrested her, but they did not protect her, and she knew that their role was to hurt her, to strip her of her identity, and that her job was to survive.

For so many convicted kids, criminality becomes conflated with their identities. This problem is compounded by the racism and classism in which our justice system is entrenched. The tropes of mainstream media mean that children do not see positive images of themselves reflected back to them and, in many ways even more problematically, the mainstream insiders, the white men for whom the system was built, also see only negative stereotypes. The cops who arrest them, the judges who sentence them, the teachers who discipline them all see them as images of those tropes. Works like "Formation" enter identity politics by insisting on new representations of mis- and under-represented identities. For anyone, but especially for kids, being seen is incredibly important, and being allowed to manifest an identity and a destiny unlike the one assigned to an incarcerated child is a huge component of reducing recidivism. If Jasmine could have been Jasmine, if she didn't have to fight so hard for that right, if she didn't have to battle against a world that thought her identity was ugly or bad, I doubt very much that she would have been where she was.

When I left for graduate school, *The Beat* was one of the few things I regretted leaving. I arrived in Missoula, MT, to begin my MFA in Fiction at the University of Montana. I had never lived anywhere but SF, the east bay, and LA. The 70,000-person city in a valley was a culture shock. Everyone was nice, everyone looked the same, and everything was in biking distance. There weren't neighborhoods, there were hardly restaurants, and there were only a handful of bars and stores, all strangely sporting keno machines and shake-a-day, a Missoula tradition I grew to love. There were mountains and rivers and waterfalls and the hugest sky I'd ever seen, as advertised. I love Missoula, even though I miss SF.

I wanted to volunteer for an organization like *The Beat*, but I found there wasn't one. I started *Free Verse* with a few of my writer friends. At first, it was just four of us, figuring it out as we went. Over time, we grew, started going every week, all year, got to know the kids, and built a relationship with the hall here. We were awarded a grant, fundraised successfully through individual donors, and gained fiscal sponsorship from a nonprofit.

Our Juvenile Detention Center only houses a handful of kids at any given time. The homogeneity and the smallness of Missoula make incarceration especially isolating here. The fact that there are so few kids means that being labeled a criminal is particularly stigmatizing. The more we wrote with them, the more we heard how many stories they had that challenged that constructed identity. They wanted to share their sides of their stories, why they did what they did, the millions of things they felt and had experienced that seemed invisible.

In her book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Angela Davis explains how prisons have become a part of the collective unconscious, accepted almost universally as a necessary component of a functioning society. She argues that prison abolitionists are seen as “unrealistic...impractical...mystifying and foolish” (10). Most people “think about imprisonment as a fate reserved for others, a fate reserved for the ‘evildoers,’ to use a term recently popularized by George W. Bush” (16). The social imaginary understands convicts as criminals and criminals as “evildoers.” It constructs imprisonment as necessary to the protection of “good” citizens and justifies mass incarceration with false claims about the efficacy of punitive measures and notions of inmates who “deserve” punishment. Davis notes that the “collective imagination, fantasize[s inmates] as people of color. The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities” (16). There is little available information on demographics of youth offenders, but according to the Montana Department of Corrections 2015 Biennial Report, 80% of adults incarcerated in Montana are white, 17% are Native American, and 3% have other racial identities (A-16). According to the census, Montana is 92.2% white and only 7.4% American Indian or Alaska Native. Davis explains the disproportionate incarceration of people of color as partly a function of that social imaginary that criminalizes people of color. She further hypothesizes that “This is the ideological work that the prison performs-it relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism” (16). Because the prison industrial complex has privatized and made profitable the prison system, and because mass incarceration is a tool

of oppression that reinforces and facilitates the unequal distribution of wealth and power to the white, male, and already wealthy, our social imaginary has constructed collective fantasies of criminality that justify the incarceration on which our society relies.

Our kids live with that stigmatization and with the resulting indifference of society. They're insightful, kind, talented kids, and we think their writing shows that. Their guardians are their guards. Their families are one another. Detention centers in Montana are scarce and often situated in rural, isolated areas. Young people have little connection to the outside world or to other juveniles grappling with similar adversity. Because of the location of these detention centers, and because of the stigmatization of incarceration, children living in these centers lack a voice and have no control over the ways they are perceived.

The intention of teaching English and writing in detention centers is to foster positive expression and to listen to that expression. Our incarcerated students have incredibly important things to say, and there are limited opportunities for them to be heard. Angela Davis writes about a variety of rehabilitation initiatives that have been defunded and finds that "The contemporary disestablishment of writing and other prison educational programs is indicative of the official disregard today for rehabilitative strategies, particularly those that encourage individual prisoners to acquire autonomy of the mind" (57). Our justice system is not a system of rehabilitation; it is one of oppression. One incredibly powerful arm of that oppression is the stripping and distorting of inmates' identities.

Beyoncé's "Formation" contends with identity on a number of levels. What is both particularly interesting and teachable and particularly difficult about the text is that

it decenters the students' expectations about who the insiders are and who the outsiders are. So many mainstream and academic texts reflect a single identity. The white, male, cisgendered, heteronormative identity is interpreted as universal, while experiences of women and minorities are pushed to the side and tokenized. In literature and art there is a constant battle for women and people of color and other marginalized voices to be given space. Beyond simply fighting to gain a voice, though, or a space in—or at the edge of—the canon, artists are fighting to inspire a collective reimagination of the canon and the dominant or central culture. The white male experience is taught as the universal experience. A play by Shakespeare is about love, a book by J.D. Salinger is about coming of age, and a book by Carver is about the gritty “American” experience. Yet when interviewed, Junot Diaz is asked whether he is “the voice of the Dominican immigrant experience” (Chicago Humanities Festival Interview). When Ana Castillo writes, her novel is about the “Chicana experience” and Native folklore. As Ana Castillo writes in her essay collection *Massacre of Dreamers*, “Throughout the history of the United States, ‘I’ as subject and object has been reserved for white authorship and readership, [but] within the confines of these pages, ‘I’ and the mestiza/Mexic Amerindian woman’s identity become universal” (220). Beyoncé also coopts the “‘I’ as subject and object,” taking a medium usually aimed at white, mainstream America (pop music) and redirecting it towards black women.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Friere asserts that “The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not ‘marginals,’ are not people living ‘outside’ society. They have always been ‘inside’...the solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure” (23). In reading texts like Beyoncé’s, students

should become aware of what is often accepted without being acknowledged. They must ask who the text excludes or includes, for whom the text is intended, from whom or what the text emerges, and they must see these things as subjective elements of the text rather than as objective givens. They must understand that the text is manipulating them and that its context is manipulating it.

Many of the allusions in “Formation” reference inside information about southern black culture that a white student would not understand. Rather than ignoring what excludes them, students can investigate it. This pushes white students to inhabit a space of exclusion and outsidership that is unusual for them and asks students to consider the “universal I” as subjective, shifting, and only artificially white or male. By examining their exclusion from the text, if they are excluded, or their inclusion as the intended audience, if that is the case, they can begin to think about the canon as exclusionary, as written in a particular rather than a superior language. For incarcerated youth, the process of decentering the mainstream protagonist, of rewriting the artist’s identity—in this case, the black, female identity—is one of possibility. Imprisoned kids can relate to her anger at being misrepresented and her fierce and impeccable rhetorical rebuttal of those prejudiced misrepresentations.

For a criminalized and stigmatized population, emulating agency over identity is an extremely important exercise. So, too, is witnessing a person reject her socially assigned role and take a position of power. In one of *Free Verse*’s early classes at the juvenile detention center, one of our kids wrote about skateboarding in the park and how the police watched him like “bait.” The first lesson we taught, two years ago, was on cosmogony. We read Native American and Norse creation myths, and talked about some

of our own—those of our country, our religions, and our families. Then we gave the kids a chance to write their own. One kid, testing the boundaries, wrote a fake story about his family being Muslim terrorists. I told him it was interesting that he had chosen to tell a xenophobic story that some Americans had written about Muslims. I asked him to think about other stories we are told about ourselves, other narratives we are forced to live out, even when they are lies. I think he caught himself off guard when he blurted, “Like that we’re f**k-ups.”

Humans manifest qualities they are told they possess, and that kind of stigmatization can make kids feel helpless and angry. Bringing art and creative writing to youth can help to break this pattern of identification and self-identification as an outsider and a criminal. One of our students once wrote, “The thing I don’t like is people judging me because of who I am/ and what I do/ because most of the people I meet don’t like me because of my color/ and race/ and it hurts when you walk into a room/ and everybody stares at you and hates you for who you are/ and what skin color you are.” Giving kids a space to discuss these experiences and allowing them to analyze the intricate argument of a video like “Formation” gives them a chance to articulate something that is easily internalized. That process of analysis and articulation can be one that is both a way for those children to educate their peers and the “teachers” and a way for them to take some of the power to define them out of those experiences.

In a recent lesson, we had a discussion about identity politics and Beyoncé’s reclamation of the word “Bama,” then wrote on a prompt inviting writers to redefine a word they had been called or that held particular meaning to them. One of our students redefined “end” as “beginning:” “Money is a Hoax/ Momma told me put down toke/

Sittin in court don't fuckin choke/ Get caught in some shit/ Telling myself put down the dope/ This isn't the end, you just gotta hope/ You're too important/ To be hanging from a rope/ Cryin in my cell, / Screamin at the meth to get off my breath/ It's time for change/ Quit doing what other people think is cool/ Hop in your own lane." His creative approach to the assignment illustrated another perspective on agency and identity. Rather than challenge a perception, he directly challenged the track of his life. He used that poem to challenge the narrative of his life, a narrative written not by him but by his circumstances.

Education and the arts are extremely effective in reducing recidivism. A national study on recidivism by Rozalski, Deignan, and Engel showed that 57% of non-participants in correctional education were re-arrested, 35% re-convicted, and 31% re-incarcerated. Among participants in correctional education, 48% were re-arrested, 27% were re-convicted, and 21% were re-incarcerated. A 2002 study on the effects of creative writing in juvenile detention centers by Sharon K. McDonough found that writing improved participating youths' abilities to manage and express their emotions, positively influenced their senses of identity, and empowered them. Angela Davis writes that

"Schools can... be seen as the most powerful alternative to jails and prisons. Unless the current structures of violence are eliminated from schools in impoverished communities of color-including the presence of armed security guards and police-and unless schools become places that encourage the joy of learning, these schools will remain the major conduits to prisons. The alternative would be to transform schools into vehicles for decarceration." (108)

Education can be an alternative to prison that provides students with safe learning environments, tools for future success, and resources for positive emotional and behavioral change.

In their study, “The Prison Arts Resource Project,” Gardner and Hager recorded data from various prison writing and education programs. Emerson College’s program, *Writing for Our Lives*, found that participants in the writing class in the adult men’s prison “appeared to demonstrate increased prosocial behavior” and “enabled offenders to begin (or continue) the process of changing their self-identities from procriminal to prosocial” (151). The study also noted increased problem-solving abilities and social skills.

Gardner and Hager also found that the Dartmouth program *Changing Lives Through Literature* had significant data to support the efficacy of literature in prisons. They found that “reconviction rate of 18.75% in study group compared with 45% in control group. Participants self-reported that the program had a long-term positive impact on their lives.” Each study found that recidivism was reduced and that one specific outcome integral to that reduction was that the students’ sense of their identities changed. Rather than teach students about themselves or the pop text, discussion allows room for students to articulate what they already know—that they aren’t bait. That they are dynamic, complex, and valuable. That they are not defined or erased by their circumstances or the people around them. Beyoncé reclaims an identity American culture suggests she disown. By discussing that act, students gain permission to repeat it.

Effective discussion and classroom dynamic follows the instruction of Paulo Friere in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Friere suggests that the teacher must be aware that

“the pedagogy of the oppressed...must be forged with, not for, the oppressed” and even if the system of oppression is recognized by the oppressor, “Discovering himself to be the oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity with the oppressed. Rationalizing his guilt through paternalistic treatment of the oppressed, all the while holding them fast in a position of dependence, will not do” (10). This is especially poignant in a prison classroom. Teachers in detention centers must work to combat the existing paradigm. Teaching that relies on policing is inherently ineffective and silences students. No matter how meticulous, the teacher remains a part of the system, must follow the center’s rules, and has complete control over the students. In this type of classroom, the teacher’s constant work is to hand back some piece of the power that has been unfairly stacked in their favor.

Friere describes institutionalized education as “banking education,” a model of education that attempts to deposit information from the teacher to the student. He suggests that this should be replaced by a problem-posing model of education, which uses “dialogue [so that] the teacher-of-the-student and the student-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student and student-teacher...they become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (26). The exercise of questioning, rather than defining or categorizing, the text as a class hopes to achieve a communal and unpredictable growth of understanding and thought rather than a prescribed task and goal.

Particularly with the technology that has been invented since Friere’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was first published, and of course in relation to the different classroom context of a modern American college, the concept of text (which today is more dynamic than static printed texts of the past) has become even more central. That text springs from

the availability of literature and also all other mediums of art and expression, from video to video game to social media, from the constant interconnectedness and availability of information and interaction made accessible by forums like Twitter, and from the new form of globalization and collaboration rising from that interconnectedness. The so-called teacher and the so-called student are both themselves texts, part of a dynamic larger conversation, and that larger conversation is present as a non-static player in the dialogue. There can be a place in formal education for personal experiences, for global events, for readings of texts that involve the voices of readers outside the classroom. Rather than teaching and learning the text, the classroom can participate in the text and become changed by it in a way that affects their engagement with their real, lived realities.

Friere explains that “in problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as static reality but as reality in process” (28). In the process of questioning the text, the class can use a diversity of resources, from blogs to academic articles to dictionaries to social media to news articles to interviews and so on, to explore and understand not only “Formation” but the cultural conversation surrounding it. A discussion of “Formation” could lead to watching an interview in which Stephen Colbert gives his seat to Black Lives Matter activist DeRay Mckesson to “check his white privilege,” a discussion of Hillary Clinton’s revised stance on the justice system after Black Lives Matter protestors interrupted her speech, a reading of twitter or blog reactions to the video, a debate on the controversy over the Black Panthers homage, or a comparison of Beyoncé’s celebrity with the characterization of Madonna’s in bell hook’s *Black Looks*.

My job in the juvenile detention center classroom is to bring as many texts as I can to my students and then to facilitate their discovery of and responses to those texts. I am not there to teach my kids about race; in fact, it would serve me to remember that my students know much more about both race and social justice than I ever could, and that they know, certainly, much more about disempowerment and oppression. The voice that adds to the conversation is the voice of the text, and not my voice, and my (rarely achieved) goal is to follow Friere's model of teacher-student. In their article "Hip Hop, Critical Pedagogy, and Radical Education in a Time of Crisis," Christopher Tinson and Carlos McBride warn about the dangers of teaching black artists as a white educator. Though the article focuses on Hip Hop scholarship and this essay is focusing on Beyoncé as a single example of a cultural text with pedagogical currency, I believe that the authors make a relevant point when they "recognize the obvious limitations in Hip Hop only being taught in the United States by white professors and educators who have not been marginalized in the history of... The best Hip Hop scholarship embraces questions of privilege, racial discrimination, social isolation, and cultural fetish [,and,] like critical education in general, confronts these issues with attention to complexity and nuance... whiteness in Hip Hop Studies must be interrogated as much as questions of essentialized blackness" (15). In the case of our particular detention center curriculum, we bring a different text every day, teaching everything from experimental fiction to music to poetry, and attempting to teach artists who are each different from the next. However, a white teacher necessarily replicates the imperialist paradigm against which Friere warns, and because of that must be vigilant in attempting to mediate that effect.

Our students are also hyperaware of the roles they are expected to perform in the classroom, and that, too, can take time to dismantle, if they choose to do so. Students who have been stigmatized and identified as criminals have very few chances to perform any other identity. Many students in youth prisons are resistant to public displays of interest or engagement in academics. Incarcerated youth are also constantly witnessing and listening. Writing is an opportunity to tell their stories. A writing prompt following discussion of any text gives students an opportunity to relate more fully and engage more honestly, without self-consciousness. Judges, guards, and teachers often function based on preconceptions and assumptions about youth, and the youth have little or no opportunity to explain their own sides of the story. Rather than understanding its cause, authority figures punish the symptoms—such as violent or delinquent behaviors—of the child’s actual problems. This traps students in an identity defined by these maladaptive behaviors. Writing is a way for students to redefine their own identities and to feel heard and seen. It is also a way for them to process the problems at the root of their criminal behavior.

Our incarcerated students are fully imprisoned, literally and figuratively, within the system. They have no power to rewrite the scripts of their lives, or to change policies affecting decisions about their fates, or to even decide what to eat for breakfast. Through art, it is possible to give youth a small amount of control over the ways their identities are represented, and through that shift in public and interpersonal representation begin to affect larger change.

Free Verse is publishing a literary magazine of art and writing by Montanan youth. The magazine will be a collaboration between incarcerated youth across Montana

and non-incarcerated youth in their communities. This collaboration has the potential to combat some of the stigmatization of convicted children. By teaching the students to edit, curate, and write submissions, teachers can give the students control over the final product and skills that apply beyond the project. By having students respond to the same prompts inside and outside the halls, teachers can help students to relate to one another and connect across the borders of prison walls. By disseminating the chapbook to the larger public, teachers can help to raise awareness of this important social issue and to change the community's misconceptions about incarcerated youth. Angela Davis writes that "To understand the social meaning of the prison today within the context of a developing prison industrial complex means that punishment has to be conceptually severed from its seemingly indissoluble link with crime. How often do we encounter the phrase 'crime and punishment'? To what extent has the perpetual repetition of the phrase 'crime and punishment' in literature, as titles of television shows, both fictional and documentary, and in everyday conversation made it extremely difficult to think about punishment beyond this connection? How have these portrayals located the prison in a causal relation to crime as a natural, necessary, and permanent effect, thus inhibiting serious debates about the viability of the prison today?" (85). Often, when I talk about my students, the person to whom I am talking will make a comment about the innocence of children, how they couldn't have done anything "that bad." It's true that punishment disproportionate to crimes is a rampant problem in the prison system, especially with the "war on drugs" systematically criminalizing millions of nonviolent citizens. It's true, too, that my kids are not responsible for the circumstances which brought them to prison. However, I cannot commit to an ideology that believes kids should be released because

the punishment is “disproportionate” or because the crimes were “minor” or “not their fault.” Some of my kids did their crimes. Some of my kids have been involved in beatings or murders. None of my kids will become better people or better citizens because of being incarcerated. No crime justifies incarcerating a child and incarceration does not serve the community, the inmate, or the victim of the crime.

Though it has limited scope—and sometimes, it seems all we can do for our kids is offer a break in their monotonous days—writing with youth can be an opportunity for agency, healthy expression, and deep connection, all integral elements of “rehabilitation.” Beyoncé is an example of a voice that brings together the mainstream and the marginalized, that makes visible the invisible, and that offers insight into a particular experience that proves that experience to also be universal. Through her, students can connect to someone who might be very different from themselves or who might reflect their identities in ways that media usually does not.

Empathy, Prosocial Behavior, and the Study of Art

One afternoon, when I was working for *The Beat*, I was paired with a boy who pushed the limits of the volunteers’ patience. One by one, they left the table where he sat, and only I remained. Mostly I listened to him, but when he wrote unapologetically about gang rape, I stopped his pencil. This boy’s predominant social skill was to push people away, to take a stance of aggression outrageous enough that he would always be left safely alone. I stayed, and maybe that meant something. He wrote a poem. He apologized

for the mention of rape. I did exactly what he knew I would. I left and never saw him again.

We went to the girls' wing after that. The girl I sat with wrote and wrote, her looped letters filling two pages. She wrote about the trauma that happened to her when she was unimaginably young, that put her on the road to jail she couldn't seem to walk away from. This girl's trauma was the thing the boy I'd met was writing about. Maybe he read her piece in the next issue. Maybe he thought about what it meant, what he had claimed to have done. Maybe he didn't.

I thought a lot about how to reconcile this. While I felt prison was only exacerbating this boy's maladaptive tendencies and ignoring rather than addressing his own trauma, I also deeply felt the need to protect this girl, the fact that we had already failed to do so.

In teaching any text, whether English literature or pop culture, a number of pedagogical opportunities present themselves for modeling alternatives to aggressive behaviors. Reading creative writing is an exercise in empathy. Dan Johnson's study, "Transportation into a Story Increases Empathy, Prosocial Behavior, and Perceptual Bias Towards Fearful Expression," showed that "participants who were more transported into the story exhibited higher affective empathy and were more likely to engage in prosocial behavior"(1). In his article "Empathy and Fiction," Keith Oatley describes Johnson's experiment, in which students who read and connected with a story were more likely to help the experimenter pick up dropped pens and were better able to identify fear in photographic depictions of facial expressions. Helping students empathize with fictional

characters not only allows them to challenge their biases against others, but to increase their compassion for themselves.

If that boy read that girl’s poem in *The Beat*, he learned more from it than any of the volunteers could have ever imparted on him. Whatever we did or said, we were going to leave. We were not going to be there when he was alone in a gang of older men, trying to fit in, to survive. We would not be there to protect him or to provide him approval. We could not understand what that space felt like to him, what it asked of him, and so whatever we could offer him wasn’t enough. We did not know what that space—of violence, of need—was. But this girl knew.

By naming the emotional root of their behavior, students can sometimes find forgiveness for themselves where they had harbored guilt. Engaging with a text means enacting the work of connection, in many cases with artists or characters who are distant, dissimilar, or unfamiliar to the audience. The text of “Formation” offers space for that practice because it requires so much work of its audience to fully understand it. The imagery and lyrics can be dissected and researched, with each discovery creating a new understanding of the text and each deeper understanding eliciting a more vivid and complex connection with it. The ability to connect empathetically to a text is an ability that translates to the outside world.

Agency: Education Versus Discipline

The National Research Council Report on Violence, described in “Prevention and Treatment of Adolescent Violence” by Guerra, Tolan, and Hammond, discovered a

number of factors that contributed to higher incidences of bullying in schools. Large populations in limited spaces were positively correlated with aggressive behaviors among students. The reduced ability to avoid confrontation was also strongly correlated with violence (41). One of the most dangerous social components of prisons is that lack of capacity to remove oneself from violent situations. When my friend entered San Quentin, he had never exhibited aggressive behavior; inside, he was forced to overcome his aversion to aggressive confrontation in order to survive, and this replaced adaptive with aggressive social skills.

Another factor identified by the National Research Council Report on Violence was “the imposition of behavioral routines and conformity” which “contribute to anger, resentment, and rejection” (41). Students who feel disempowered and silenced naturally rebel. Indiscriminate enforcement of arbitrary rules causes feelings of helplessness. Studies have found that “With regard to the imposition of behavioral routines, the incidence of aggression has been related to the heavy and inflexible use of school rules in the classroom” (41). At the same time, inconsistent classroom management also contributed to aggressive behaviors. Structure, rather than rigidity, was most effective in reducing violence. Structure necessitates respect; rigidity necessitates subjugation (Guerra, Tolan, and Hammond).

In a classroom in which teachers must rely on policing to control students, those students who exhibit disruptive behavior are often met with resentment by the teacher, and that resentment sets up “negative social perceptions and interactions at school” (41). Students who feel disliked by a teacher are far less likely to attempt to improve their behavior. Anger from a teacher causes students to feel that obtaining approval from the

teacher is impossible, and students seek other ways to get attention or protect themselves from disapproval. Positive interventions include “cooperative learning, conflict resolution training, the constructive use of controversy in teaching particular subjects, and the creation of dispute resolution centers in schools” (Guerra, Tolan, and Hammond 41).

Angela Davis explains that the infiltration of draconian prison-model schools offer:

“even more compelling evidence about the damage wrought by the expansion of the prison system in the schools located in poor communities of color that replicate the structures and regimes of the prison. When children attend schools that place a greater value on discipline and security than on knowledge and intellectual development they are attending prep schools for prison.” (38)

School systems that control rather than educate students ultimately limit students’ resources, leaving them with fewer social and intellectual tools and making them more likely to resort to instrumental maladaptive behaviors such as violence. The feelings of powerlessness brought on by such conditions only exacerbate the culture of violence, and a paradigm of antagonism is established between youth and authority that carries on into the child’s interactions with law enforcers.

Peer context is also extremely important in the development of aggressive behavior in youth. A child who is aggressive will quickly establish negative relationships with their peers, thereby reinforcing maladaptive social patterns. However, aggressive youths’ aversive relationships with their less aggressive peers and authority figures are contrasted by positive relationships in “coercive cliques” (43). Aggressive children are only accepted by peers with similar behavior patterns and “as such, they become members of the ‘outgroup’ rather than the ‘ingroup’ and their socialization experiences

are further imbalanced in the direction of negative behaviors... This limited opportunity for positive peer interaction places rejected children at risk for continuing to learn and use aggressive behaviors. The deviant peer group is presumed to provide a training ground for delinquent behaviors and drug and alcohol use” (Guerra, Tolan, and Hammond 43).

In my experience, our kids are disproportionately smart, but their self-worth is largely predicated on approval from their peers—for most of them, their peers are their almost exclusive sources of approval, and they gain that approval by acting out. They see authorities only as disciplinarians. Their sociocultural environment dictates that openly showing interest or emotion is deviant, whereas disruptive or resistant behaviors are expected and rewarded. By acting out, they are actually behaving as directed.

One of the reasons that teaching art from popular culture can be effective in a detention center is that it means teaching a text already written in the students’ cultural vocabulary and, sometimes, already accepted by them. Though Beyoncé might not be a universal unifier, “Formation” is more readily accessible and more interesting to many youth than the state’s high school English core curriculum. It speaks directly to them, about their world. Whether they like it or hate it, they usually find it relevant. Our kids also love Dennis Johnson, Chad Simpson, Amy Hemple, James Baldwin, and many more traditional literary authors, but “Formation” offers a new opportunity for them to connect to and identify with art. Unlike some of the more common academic texts, “Formation” is more likely to exclude me than my students, and that empowers them to engage on their own terms and to inhabit the teacher-student and student-teacher roles described by Friere.

In his book *Teaching Popular Culture: Beyond Radical Pedagogy*, David Buckingham explains that there are two competing pedagogical approaches to and justifications for teaching popular culture in the classroom: “on the one hand, there is a familiar critical view of the media, which emphasizes their role in sustaining relationship of oppression and domination...as purveyors of ‘dominant ideology,’ while children in particular are regarded as passive victims of their influence...” (8). Buckingham says that Masterman (1980) proposes that the teacher and student look objectively at popular art, using semiotic methods to reveal underlying and previously invisible ideological function. Buckingham goes on to describe the competing pedagogical approach to popular culture:

“On the other hand, it is possible to regard teaching about popular culture...as an authentic part of students’ experience, and hence as something teachers should seek to validate and even celebrate. This must, it is argued, necessarily entail a change in the dominant power relations of the classroom; students are now the ‘experts,’ and the teacher’s knowledge is no longer privileged.” (8)

In reality, the experience of teaching culture is partly both and partly neither of these pedagogical constructions. When we teach “Formation,” we bring facts about the text (who sings on the track, what cultural or historical references are being made, what contributors said in interviews), but we don’t teach the kids to consume them in a particular way. Instead, we try to work with the kids to understand them and to use them to understand the text. In most cases, teaching is about bringing vocabulary to a student so that that student can teach what they already know. We can bring those facts and that language to our kids, but once we have, we have to listen to what they say with it. My

kids know more than I do about marginalization, stigmatization, identity politics, the justice system, powerlessness, and trauma. As a teacher, I want to give them permission to explain what they know, to add vocabulary and information to the resources they call on in telling their truth.

Buckingham describes two driving forces behind teaching popular culture: to defend kids against brainwashing by media and to democratize curriculum. I don't necessarily find pop music to be more inherently effective as a classroom text than a great story or poem, and my kids don't always prefer one over the other. However, bringing pop culture to the discussion does have particular benefits. Usually, our kids are already thinking about work like "Formation." The popular cultural stage is a place where their own political and personal beliefs play out. They are perfectly capable of relating to a Melanie Rae Thon character, but there is also a certain potency in their ability to connect with public figures with whom they have grown up.

A large part of the job of an educator in a classroom like this is to avoid arbitrary enforcement of the existing power structure. We teach from the front of the class, but we sit cross-legged or on one bent knee on chairs identical to theirs. If they don't want to talk about a piece, we briefly tell them what we think and move on. If they want to talk, we do not control the direction of their conversation. We try to avoid policing the classroom. After we give them a prompt, before they write, we tell them that we have only one rule: be quiet for a few minutes. They don't have to write; they can draw, or think, or work on something else, but they have to respect their peers who are writing. During those ten or so minutes of silence, the kids who angled their shoulders during the lesson, laughed when a story mentioned girls or drugs, and refused to read aloud often suddenly pick up

their pencils and bend over their papers. Rather than forcing them to write, we want to give them the space to write if they choose.

The reason I want to come away from a class with a stack of filled pages is that if they're writing, it means they connected to something, it means they felt safe enough to express themselves, and it means they got a chance to say something that they felt the need to say. In the classroom, we are not looking for a result. As soon as teachers in a program like this go into a classroom thinking about what donors will think of the student chapbook or what lesson they hope students will learn that day, they have abandoned the true purpose of the project: to serve the kids. As soon as a teacher wants to impress the kids, seem cool to the kids, or obtain gratitude from them, that teacher has abandoned their job. As soon as a teacher enters a classroom with the intention of teaching a particular lesson and the hope that kids will regurgitate that message in their writing, that teacher has lost the opportunity to connect with and hear their students.

I get lost when teaching all the time. I doubt my lesson when students are too quiet and am surprised when they write prolifically at the end. I am caught off guard by a student's description of a violent crime he committed, or I am unable to respond articulately to a child's guilt over something out of his control. There are days when they don't seem to connect, when we come too early or breakfast was bad, when too many had court that morning and can't stand the sight of the prison classroom, when we just aren't on our game. We can't do anything to improve their circumstances. We aren't lawyers or policy makers. We are more a part of the system than dismantlers of the system, no matter how much we wish that weren't true.

Though teaching is a performance, we aren't there to perform. We are there to listen and engage and collaborate. Sometimes, we're just there to break up their day. I always leave feeling lucky that I got to spend time with these kids. Every day, however it goes, I end the lesson with the same phrase: Thanks for hanging out with us today.

Confidence and Role Performance: Art and Identity

During one of our classes, a new student was acting out. He was taller than most of the kids, lanky, with dark eyes and a child's voice, something he constantly made up for by growling and barking and moving his limbs like lead, shoving his chair, angling his shoulders, passing at his turn to read aloud, laughing when a peer stumbled or the text mentioned drinks or drugs or girls. Once or twice, when I asked him a question, he said something that accidentally revealed his incredible intelligence and sweetness. He would goof off, then make some sharply insightful comment about the text, then make an inappropriate comment. At the end of the lesson, we gave the kids a prompt and they all began writing. I was surprised to see that rather than roll his eyes, he picked up his pen. I was surprised again when he agreed to share his piece aloud. I stopped after he read, pointed out how he had employed craft, meter, rhyme, assonance, how he had used a volta to subvert our expectations and how he had created contrast from that twist. His posture straightened and softened and he became suddenly attentive and earnest. "I didn't know I was good at this," he said.

Literature and creative writing can create the opportunity for positive academic experiences for young people, can validate their voices, and can influence their senses of identity. The article “National Endowment for the Arts The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies,” a meta-analysis of a number of existing comprehensive longitudinal studies, and found that the arts significantly improve life outcomes for at-risk youth. The study found that participants who had low exposure to the arts between 8th grade and age 26 attended college at a rate of 48%, while 71% of participants with high arts exposure attended. Participants with higher exposure to the arts also had better grades, received higher degrees, and completed college at higher rates.

Overall, the analysis found that students from low socioeconomic status experienced significant improvement from participating in the arts, more so than high socioeconomic status students. NEA states that “Teenagers and young adults of low socioeconomic status (SES) who have a history of in-depth arts involvement show better academic outcomes than do low-SES youth who have less arts involvement. They earn better grades and demonstrate higher rates of college enrollment and attainment.” The correlation between participation in the arts and student success for students with high socioeconomic status was also positive; however, the statistical significance was much higher for students with low socioeconomic status. The implication of these findings is that the arts can combat some of the disadvantages faced by students of low socioeconomic status.

In Nancy Guerra, Rodney Hammond, and Patrick Tolan’s “Prevention and Treatment of Adolescent Violence,” the authors suggest that “bolstering prosocial

competencies should relate to reductions in antisocial and aggressive behavior” (383). Teaching the arts provides an opportunity to reward talent and success. This feeling of accomplishment can translate into confidence in the classroom and the desire for approval from positive role models. The authors add that programs that attempt to accomplish this are often aimed at elementary schools students, and fewer programs exist that foster positive reinforcement for adolescents. Artistic expression is an adaptive and prosocial activity and provides a positive model for processing negative affect and for social problem-solving. Academic success and recognition by an authority figure is incredibly important, especially for young people. The humanist Carl Rogers hypothesized that “unconditional positive regard” was an essential human need and that people often suffer from having to dissemble in order to gain conditional regard. He suggested that a healthy personality requires “genuineness, acceptance, and empathy” (Rogers). Humanists believe that this acceptance and validation are necessary for self-actualization and that they are the foundation of any effective therapeutic relationship.

We had seen that tall, lanky boy four times a week for the last month of summer. On our last day, he came into the classroom having just returned from court. He and a friend, a slight boy who liked to draw letters like graffiti, high fived. “We’re both being transferred to the adult detention center,” he told us. “I got sixty years.” He was sixteen years old. His demeanor was hardened that morning, his fear calcified into pretended indifference. At the end of the lesson, he filled a page, but he wouldn’t share it. We told them, as we always did, that the work was theirs. We would love to see it, but they could throw it out, keep it, or hand it in if they wanted. When I passed his desk, he put his folded-up paper into my hand and looked hard at me for a moment. “I want you to read

it,” he said. I thanked him. The prompt had been to write a letter to someone that you would never send. He’d written to his grandparents, apologizing for where he had ended up. He wrote that he would escape prison and live “off the grid.” He had a child’s need to run away and a child’s belief in a world where he could do that, where more is possible than what is really possible. He ended the letter by writing, “please, be happy. Learn to forget me.”

That was one of the only days of teaching that I couldn’t shake. By now, he has been transferred to an adult detention center, where he will live out a longer span of life than he can imagine at his age. His cellmate might be forty. His grandparents might visit. There is nothing that a writing class could do for him, and I remember thinking that: I was useless to him. But there was some reason we were there every day. There was nothing I could do with his grief, his fear, his dream of another life. But he needed me to know about them. It mattered to him that I read that letter. Maybe he needed a witness, someone on his side. Maybe he writes now, in prison. Maybe he knows that he doesn’t deserve to be there.

Social Skills: Classroom Applications of Theories Behind Youth Aggression and Criminality

Freud hypothesized that aggression and delinquent behavior are innate individual qualities, to be controlled or obeyed. The theory does not give adequate weight to the reality that both qualities are learned. In her essay “Theoretical and Developmental

Perspectives on Youth and Violence,” Debra Pepler describes a number of theories on what drives youth violence. The Freudian instinct theory, which hypothesizes that aggression is part of thanatos, a negative energy innate in all of us, and must be released in some way suggests that transferring that anger onto a safe target will prevent violent performance of it. Instinct theory birthed practices like scream therapy, which proved ineffective and even counterproductive. Pepler points out that the theory neglects the socio-cognitive components of aggression; rather than innate, violent and deviant behaviors are learned (28).

Drive theory suggests that aggression presupposes frustration and that the solution is to remove frustration; Pepler argues both that frustration and aggression are independent, though related, and that removing frustration is impossible (28). Cognitive neo-association theory admits that aggression is sometimes a means to end, and “proclivity to use aggression instrumentally can be learned much as other instrumental behaviors are learned” (29). As described by earlier theories, stimuli that cause strong negative affect or that are associated with negative affect can trigger violence. The concept of learned instrumental aggression suggests that it is also true that any stimuli associated with rewarded aggression, such as an act of violence that was rewarded with acceptance by a gang, safety from harm, or monetary gain, also instigate aggression.

Social learning theory takes cognitive neo-association’s understanding of aggression as a conditioned behavior even further, hypothesizing that people aren’t born with aggressive behavior and that all aggressive behaviors are learned. Social learning of aggression can occur through observational learning, direct experience, and self-regulation; interventions seek to address all of these learning models through reward/

punishment, modeling, performance feedback, and self-monitoring (30). The social-cognitive model states that “Cognitive factors are hypothesized to (a) be acquired through learning and development; (b) contribute to an individual’s own proactive exposure to and interpretation of social experiences that foster aggression; (c) mediate an individual’s aggressive response to particular social experiences; (d) account for individual continuities and consistencies in patterns of aggression, victimization, and bystander support for violence; and (e) be amenable to change in ways that prevent or reduce aggression” (31). Learned aggression creates a pattern that is then reinforced in the subject’s interior and exterior life.

Social information-processing model studies aggression as it is learned during a five-step sequence of information-processing skills. It adds a new variation on the cognitive neo-association model of instrumental (means to an end) versus emotional (reaction to negative affect) aggression. Social information-processing theory describes two types of aggression, reactive (similar to emotional) and proactive (such as instrumental). Increasing a child’s social information-processing skills (replacing violence with new instrumental social skills) and challenging their biases (influencing their processing of negative affect) are treatments prescribed by social information-processing theory (32).

The cognitive-script model builds on the concept of aggression as adaptive, explaining it as “the product of learned cognitive schemas... programs or ‘scripts’ regarding aggression that ... affect children’s emotional reactions to social situations and control their behavior” and adds that “children’s behaviors are also influenced by their beliefs about what is normative” (32). A child’s script is a learned social model that

prescribes violence in particular situations, so that the child learns that nonviolence is inappropriate or deviant. Treatments attempt to change the child's scripts and revise their learned model of normativity. Other social-cognitive formulations elaborate that aggressive behaviors are often learned at home and are "internalized cognitive mediators for social interactions. These mediators include strategies for solving social problems, beliefs that support aggression, hostile attributional biases, and social scripts" (33). These cognitive mediators cause the child to view the world as hostile and to react with aggression, which in turn begets rejection and aggression from the world, thereby reinforcing the child's conception and establishing maladaptive patterns. Pepler writes that "a wide variety of procedures have been used to help young children build both the cognitive and social skills involved in solving social problems in effective and nonaggressive ways, including solving hypothetical dilemmas, 'thinking aloud,' role playing, transferring training from hypothetical to real life situations, and providing performance feedback" (33). Essentially, children are exposed to new social interaction patterns in which nonaggression is rewarded and adaptive social skills result in positive outcomes.

Patterns of aggression and criminal behavior can be broken by replacing instrumental aggression with other tools, but simply policing aggression will leave the aggressor without resources. By incarcerating and disempowering young people who commit crimes, the system temporarily removes their ability to engage in criminal behavior such as drug use, acts of violence, or theft. However, the system fails to replace those behaviors with new, healthier ones. Once released, the children will quickly return to old behaviors because they have not been offered an alternative. Writing can help to

teach prosocial behaviors that can do the work that criminal behaviors once accomplished for these kids.

Writing can be a positive processing tool through which young people can examine and work through difficult emotions. Children are often able to write what they cannot say. Equally important, reading literature can model alternatives to aggression and criminal behavior. Students can play out social scenarios in the imagined world of the story. Allowing them to write about their own lives afterwards gives them the opportunity to apply their interpretation of the text to their lived experiences. Stories from *The Beat* give our kids models from their peer group—children who have suffered and acted out in similar ways—of youths trying to improve and change their lives. The fact that these young people are living in prisons across the United States lends credibility to their struggles and their hopes for a new path. It gives permission to our kids to honestly acknowledge their own aspirations, which in other contexts might be uncool to peers and dismissed by authority figures.

“Formation” models positive resistance to dehumanization and prejudice. All of our kids can relate to being unimportant to those who control their lives. Beyoncé models art as a tool for self-actualization and regaining agency over identity.

Teaching Art as Social Justice

In the classroom, teaching feminist theory in the context of pop culture is a way to make relevant what might otherwise seem dead. Students can be assigned bell hook’s essay on Madonna from *Black Looks*, the introduction of Janell Hobson’s *Venus in the Dark*, Carol Henderson’s “AKA: Sarah Baartman, The Hottentot Venus, and Black

Women’s Identity,” and Chimamanda Adiche’s *We Should All Be Feminists*. They can watch New School interviews with bell hooks and Laverne Cox alongside music videos by Beyoncé. Armed with these resources and with the time to do further research, students can be split into two groups and assigned a position in a debate responding to the question: can women be empowered by hypersexual performances, or are images of women dancing and dressing provocatively necessarily objectifying and degrading?

Debates teach students to develop arguments using evidence rather than opinion. They also give students an opportunity to use “dead” texts to shape an argument about the “live” one, helping them understand theory as engaged with their realities. In the context of a detention center classroom, debate allows students to think critically and to use their own voices. In this context, the structure of a college classroom debate does not function efficaciously. Instead, a juvenile detention center classroom functions better with minimal imposed structure and non-mandatory participation. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Friere explains that in traditional, institutionalized education, “the teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students...disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity” (21). This process erases individuals and strips students of their humanity because they have no access to inquiry outside of praxis. Education “mirrors oppressive society as a whole” because of the one-directional transaction of the teacher, the subject, bestowing—or forcing—knowledge on the passive recipient of that knowledge, the student, the object (22). In debate, students must rely on

objective evidence, including research and theory-based texts, but there is also room for personal anecdote, pop cultural reference, and student inquiry and thought. What is particularly useful about a debate on a question like this is that there is no “right” answer. The educator should not approach the debate with an agenda for the students to arrive at a particular answer, regardless of their own opinion. Equally powerful and salient arguments could be made for either side.

Debate is also particularly useful for youth because it gives a productive channel through which students can focus their opinions. Teaching writing and art as social justice is a powerful tool, especially for young people who are so deeply affected by political and social injustices beyond their influence. Teaching art as political activism can help model positive and powerful ways to resist and articulate injustice, reducing feelings of helplessness and, ideally, giving students a platform to challenge those injustices.

Last, teaching English and creative writing allows for decentering both student and teacher expectations of insider/ outsider status. This gives students the chance to connect positively with characters, peers, or teachers by breaking oppressive paradigms or challenging preconceptions. It also gives students the opportunity to challenge their own statuses as insiders or outsiders in particular groups. For example, their honest expression of positive intention might challenge their status as social outsiders or as insiders in the criminal community. Their success in the classroom might establish their status as insiders in an academic community.

Children are so much more open-minded and adaptable than adults. When I am surprised by a boy who acts out at the beginning of class sharing his heartfelt poem at the

end of class, he has no trouble at all going from resenting me to seeking my approval over the course of a forty-five minute lesson. An authority figure, inherently oppressive, who takes interest in him is immediately forgiven. Kids don't actually hate you for boring them. They hate you for ignoring that they are bored.

Kids do not care, really, whether you are cool. They will invite you into their world if you neither demand that they do so nor impose yours on them.

At the end of one lesson, one of our kids put out his fist for me to bump. I laughed because I am well into the age bracket that cannot perform the gesture without being ridiculous. He shrugged at his hand. "Because we aren't allowed to hug you," he said. I bumped his fist.

Works Cited

- Buckingham, David. "Teaching Popular Culture." *Teaching Popular Culture: Beyond Radical Pedagogy*. New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- Bullock, Steve. "Montana Department of Corrections 2015 Biennial Report." 2015. Web. 8 May 2016.
- Catterall, James, Gillian Hampden-Thompson, and Susan Dumais. "Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies." *National Endowment for the Arts*. March 2012. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories, 2003. Print.
- Friere, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th Anniversary ed.* New York: Continuum, 2006. Print.
- Gardner, Amanda and Lori Hager. "The Prison Arts Resource Project: An Annotated Bibliography." *National Endowment for the Arts*. Oregon: University of Oregon, 2014. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Griswold, Wendy. *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2004. Print.
- Guerra, N.G., P.H. Tolan, and W.R. Hammond. "Prevention and Treatment of Adolescent Violence." *Reason to Hope: A Psychosocial Perspective on Violence and Youth*. American Psychological Association, 1994. Print.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 110-114. 2007. Print.

- McDonough, Sharon K. "The View Up Close: Creative Writing in a Juvenile Correctional Facility." *Thesis; Auburn University, 2002*. Web.
- Oatley, Keith. "Empathy and Fiction." *Psychology Today*. 24 November 2011. Web. 8 May 2016.
- Pepler, Debra and Ronald Slaby. "Theoretical and Developmental Perspectives on Youth and Violence." *Reason to Hope: A Psychosocial Perspective on Violence and Youth*. American Psychological Association, 1994. Print.
- Pineau, Elyse. "Performance Theories in Education: Power, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Identity." Mahwah, N.J.: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Rogers, Carl. "The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change." *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*. 2007: p. 240-248. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Rozalski, Deignan, and Engel. "The World of Juvenile Justice According to the Numbers." *Reading and Writing Quarterly*. April 2008: p. 143-147. Web.
- Tinson, Christopher M and Carlos REC McBride. "Hip Hop, Critical Pedagogy, and Radical Education in a Time of Crisis." *Radical Teacher: A Socialist, Feminist, and Anti-Racist Journal on Theory and Practice of Teaching*. Fall 2013.